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Original Research Paper-Social Sciences

Examining the Effects of Instagram Usage on Customer Experience Sharing, Audience Engagement, and Behavioral Shifts Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT:
Objective: The purpose of this study is to explore how Instagram usage influences the sharing of customer experiences, audience engagement, and the alteration of purchasing behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Method: Employing a descriptive-analytical cross-sectional approach, this research focuses on active Instagram users in Tehran during 2022. A total of 392 participants were randomly chosen using Morgan's table and completed the research questionnaire. Subsequently, data analysis was performed utilizing statistical methods such as t-test, chi-square (x^2), and ANOVA within SPSS software, version 22.
Results: The findings suggest that the nature of an Instagram social media page has an impact on users' capacity to share experiences, engage with the audience, and influence changes in purchase intentions. Moreover, the underlying motivations for using Instagram also affect these aspects. Additionally, the duration of time spent on Instagram and the number of followers one has can influence the sharing of customer experiences, audience engagement, and changes in purchase intentions.

Keywords: Marketing, Instagram, Knowledge Sharing, Customer Experience, Audience Engagement, Purchase Intention Change, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION:

The proliferation of information technology globally and its swift assimilation into everyday life have given rise to novel challenges and requirements. Currently, social media stands out as a pivotal instrument that has profoundly reshaped the world and its interconnections (Farhangi et al., 2021).

The constraints imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic have prompted individuals, even those with no prior experience of online shopping, to embrace and experiment with e-commerce for the first time. Conversely, enterprises traditionally dependent on physical sales have been compelled to transition to digital channels due to the shutdown of their brick-and-mortar operations, thereby underscoring the significance of online retail within the international e-commerce domain (Bahrainizadeh et al., 2021).

Within this framework, social media has evolved into a predominant marketing channel, exerting a substantial impact on contemporary commerce and proving its utility across diverse commercial sectors. The advent of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram has had a profound effect on our social and economic existence, catalyzing a significant metamorphosis in the spheres of business and marketing (Khanzadeh et al., 2018).

Instagram's usage has surged by 40% during the Coronavirus pandemic. Distinguishing itself among social media platforms through its visual orientation, Instagram facilitates consumers to engage meaningfully with brands and empowers brands to cultivate public consciousness. Furthermore, Instagram's appeal among younger demographics is noteworthy, given that over half of the global population is below the age of 34 (Sharma et al., 2022).

In the wake of the triumph of renowned social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram emerged in 2010, offering marketers an additional appealing platform to interact with their clientele. Instagram represents a multifaceted social media network with a global reach, utilized by countless international businesses for marketing purposes. It stands as a vital marketing tool that facilitates commercial dialogue. Marketers leverage Instagram to engage with customers through the sharing of photos and videos and the posting of comments, which serves as a conduit for information exchange. The reception of comments and likes on the platform acts as a mechanism for obtaining customer feedback (Sook Huey Lim et al., 2014).

In conversations about social media as contemporary marketing instruments, it is imperative to acknowledge online marketing as a pivotal marketing advancement. This can be characterized as the utilization of the internet to create a virtual marketplace where goods are sold directly to end users, the consumers. In the present day, consumers are turning to the internet in

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growing numbers to locate their preferred products or services, prompting advertisers—those tasked with marketing specific companies—to undertake the responsibility of attracting and retaining customers (Gardasevic, 2020).

As marketing strategies evolve from conventional approaches to social media marketing, numerous companies are engaging in brand advertising across various social networking platforms. Modern marketing represents an innovative approach where businesses aim to showcase their products and services globally, utilizing the internet and social networks, and leveraging new technologies. Reflecting on marketing endeavors on social networking websites, companies can establish novel marketing models that include crafting dedicated brand profiles, initiating online customer services, disseminating product information, and presenting special promotions with simplicity, cost-efficiency, and sustainability. It is recognized that social media marketing initiatives have a substantial influence on fostering distinctive brand value, augmenting positive eWOM (electronic Word of Mouth) among stakeholders, and reinforcing consumer loyalty (Matak Aji et al., 2020).

The adoption of social media marketing is gaining traction as a favored strategy among business professionals. Numerous studies have underscored the significance of this topic; (Tomas Ric, Dragan Benazic, 2021) the global proliferation of Instagram highlights the necessity to investigate its multifaceted nature and effects. In the current business landscape, this social network is an indispensable component, with companies endeavoring to amplify their renown by expanding their follower base. This not only elevates the company's popularity but also bolsters brand recognition, stimulates interest in the brand, drives purchases, and cultivates customer allegiance to the brand (Azizi et al., 2020).

This study investigates whether Instagram, amidst the considerable transformations it is undergoing, can effectively contribute to modern marketing practices. Given the dearth of research on this subject, such an inquiry appears warranted, as we can anticipate numerous analogous changes in the future. Consequently, this research is crucial in assessing whether Instagram, in light of marketing evolutions, can assume a role in modern marketing, prompting us to expect further comparable changes ahead.

RESEARCH METHOD:

This investigation adopts a descriptive-analytical cross-sectional approach. The study population is comprised of active Instagram users based in Tehran during 2022. Utilizing Morgan's sampling table for a population of 5,000, the necessary sample size was determined to be 357 individuals. To accommodate a projected 10% dropout rate, this figure was increased to 392 participants, who were chosen at random based on the following selection criteria:

- Age exceeding 16 years.
- Active use of Instagram applications and its virtual environment.
- Participation in online shopping activities.
- Absence of business ownership on Instagram, such as an online shop or employer status.
- In the event of a participant's unwillingness to continue with the study, they were replaced by another individual.

The questionnaire was completed through personal interviews conducted throughout the city. Following the selection of participants and the explanation of the study's objectives, informed consent was obtained both verbally and in writing, after which the participants filled out two questionnaires: one covering demographic information and the other assessing the role of Instagram in modern marketing.

In this investigation, the instruments for data collection were two questionnaires: one for demographic information and the other for evaluating the role of Instagram in modern marketing, which is detailed as follows:

The questionnaire on the role of Instagram in modern marketing is composed of 37 items and covers seven aspects: cost reduction (items 12-16), advertising assessment (items 17-22), interactive customer communication (items 23-27), sharing of customer experiences (items 28-34), audience engagement (items 35-40), adherence to physical distancing (items 41-44), and customer transformation (items 45-48). The questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "very low" to "very high." The scoring system is as follows: option A is assigned a score of 1, option B a score of 2, option C a score of 3, option D a score of 4, and option E a score of 5. The aggregate score can range from 37 to 185, with scores from 37 to 86.33 suggesting a low level of modern marketing, 86.33 to 135.66 indicating a moderate level, and 135.66 to 185 signifying a high level of modern marketing within the community. The questionnaire's validity was established by five professors in the relevant field. Its reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha, with a sample size of 40, resulting in a value of 0.91.

For the analysis of data in this study, SPSS statistical software version 22 was employed. Preliminary data analyses, including frequency tables, were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the data entered. Based on the data's normal or non-normal distribution, parametric or non-parametric tests were applied accordingly. Descriptive statistics encompassed measures such as mean, standard deviation, percentage, frequency, and range of variation. For inferential and analytical purposes, t-tests, chi-square (x^2) tests, and ANOVA were utilized. Pearson's correlation coefficient and regression analysis were employed to investigate relationships between variables.

RESULTS:

Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Gender	Count	Percentage
Male	199	50.7%
Female	193	49.3%
Age	Count	Percentage
20-25	45	11.4%
25-30	71	18.0%
30-35	78	20.0%
35-40	76	19.3%
40-45	55	14.1%
45 years and older	67	17.3%
Marital Status	Count	Percentage
Single	181	46.2%
Married	211	54%
Employment Status	Count	Percentage
Employee	196	50.0%
Freelancer	78	20.0%
Student	63	16%
Housewife	45	11.3%
Unemployed	5	1.3%
Retired	5	1.3%
Educational Level	Count	Percentage
Below Diploma	8	2.0%
Diploma	94	24.0%
Associate's Degree	68	17.3%
Bachelor's Degree	123	31.3%
Master's Degree	83	21.3%
Doctorate and Higher	16	4%

Table 2 presents further descriptive details regarding the study participants.

Table 2: Descriptive Information of Respondents

Type of Page	Count	Percentage
Private	298	76%
Public	76	19.3%
Commercial	18	4.7%
Number of Motivations	Count	Percentage
1 item	67	17.3%
2-4 items	252	64.4%
5-7 items	70	18%
7-9 items	3	0.7%
Respondents could choose from a range of motivations including entertainment, staying updated with news, following celebrities, and educational purposes, with the option to select anywhere from 1 to 9 items.		
Time Spent	Count	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	105	26.7%
1-3 hours	140	36%
3-5 hours	89	22.7%
5-7 hours	29	7.3%
7 hours or more	29	7.3%
Number of Followers	Count	Percentage
1-500 people	246	62.7%
500-1000 people	52	13.2%
1000-1500 people	29	7.3%
1500-2000 people	15	4%
2000 people or more	50	12.7%

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH VARIABLES

Table 3: Mean of Modern Marketing and Its Dimensions Among Instagram Users

Number of Followers	Count	Percentage
1-500 people	246	62.7%
500-1000 people	52	13.2%
1000-1500 people	29	7.3%
1500-2000 people	15	4%
2000 people or more	50	12.7%

Table 3 indicates that the mean score for overall modern marketing was 2.62, with a standard deviation of 18.09. The mean scores for the specific dimensions were as follows: cost reduction at 3.28 ± 16.83, advertising evaluation at 4.61 ± 19.66, interactive customer communication at 3 ± 17.56, sharing of customer experiences at 4.8 ± 22.52, audience engagement at 3.62 ± 19.82, education on physical distancing compliance at 3.3 ± 13.90, and influence on customer purchasing behavior at 2.81 ± 16.38.

INFERENTIAL FINDINGS:

Table 4: Correlation Between Instagram Page Type and Modern Marketing Variables via Pearson's Test (Correlation Coefficient c)

Variable	p.value	R
Overall Modern Marketing	0.00	0.82
Sharing Customer Experiences	0.01	0.60
Audience Engagement	0.02	0.55
Change in Customer Purchasing	0.01	0.42

Table 4 reveals that the type of Instagram page maintained by individuals is positively and very strongly correlated with modern marketing practices, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Furthermore, there is a positive and strong correlation between the type of Instagram page and the sharing of customer experiences, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.6$ and a significance level of $p < 0.05$, indicating a robust positive relationship. Similarly, audience engagement is positively and strongly correlated with the type of Instagram page, with an R-value of 0.55 and a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Lastly, the type of

Instagram page is positively and moderately correlated with changes in customer purchasing behavior, with an R-value of 0.42 and a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Table 5: Correlation Between Motivation for Using Instagram and Modern Marketing via Pearson's Test (Correlation Coefficient c)

Variable	p.value	R
Overall Modern Marketing	0.21	0.1
Sharing Customer Experiences	0.67	0.35
Audience Engagement	0.57	-0.04
Change in Customer Purchasing	0.07	0.14

Table 5 indicates that the motivation for using Instagram does not significantly correlate with modern marketing practices ($p > 0.05$, $r = 0.1$). Likewise, there is no significant correlation between the motivation for using Instagram and the sharing of customer experiences ($p > 0.05$, $r = 0.35$). Additionally, the data shows no significant correlation between the motivation for using Instagram and audience engagement ($p > 0.05$, $r = -0.04$). Finally, the motivation for using Instagram does not significantly correlate with changes in customer purchasing behavior ($p > 0.05$, $r = 0.14$).

Table 6: Correlation Between Time Spent on Instagram and Modern Marketing via Pearson's Test

Variable	p.value	R
Overall Modern Marketing	0.00	0.392
Sharing Customer Experiences	0.00	0.22
Audience Engagement	0.02	0.18
Change in Customer Purchasing	0.00	0.25

Table 6 demonstrates that there is a positive correlation, albeit of low intensity, between the time users spend on Instagram and the practice of modern marketing, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ and a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.39$. Furthermore, there is a positive yet weak correlation between time spent on Instagram and the sharing of customer experiences, denoted by a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.22$ and a significance level of $p > 0.05$. A similar positive but weak correlation is observed between time spent on Instagram and audience engagement, with an R-value of 0.18 and a p-value greater than 0.05. Additionally, time spent on Instagram is positively and weakly correlated with education on maintaining physical distance during the Coronavirus disease period, as indicated by an r-value of 0.25 and a p-value exceeding 0.05.

Table 7: Correlation Between the Number of Instagram Followers and Modern Marketing via Pearson's Test

Variable	p.value	R
Overall Modern Marketing	0.00	0.35
Sharing Customer Experiences	0.00	0.30
Audience Engagement	0.02	0.18
Change in Customer Purchasing	0.07	0.14

Table 7 indicates that there is a moderate positive correlation between the number of Instagram followers and the practice of modern marketing, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ and a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.35$. This correlation extends to various aspects of modern marketing, such as advertising evaluation, interactive customer communication, and the sharing of experiences, all of which exhibit a slight positive direct correlation. Additionally, there is a weak yet significant positive direct correlation with the reduction of costs associated with audience engagement ($p < 0.05$). However, no correlation is observed between the number of Instagram followers and changes in customer purchasing behavior.

Furthermore, Table 7 shows a positive correlation of moderate intensity between the number of Instagram followers and the sharing of customer experiences, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ and a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.30$. There is also a positive correlation, albeit weak, between the number of Instagram followers and audience engagement, as indicated by a significance level of $p < 0.05$ and a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.18$. No correlation is found between the number of Instagram followers and changes in customer purchasing, with a p-value greater than 0.05 and an R-value of 0.14.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

The objective of this study was to explore the effects of Instagram usage on the sharing of customer experiences, audience engagement, and the facilitation of change during the Coronavirus disease outbreak. The findings, after the analysis of relevant hypotheses, are delineated as follows:

1. The nature of an Instagram social media page influences the capacity for sharing customer experiences.

The data indicates a p-value of 0.01, suggesting that with 95% certainty (or an error margin below 5%), there exists a robust, positive, and statistically significant correlation between the motivation to use Instagram and the capability to share customer experiences. Consequently, the proposed hypothesis is confirmed. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this relationship was calculated to be 0.60, a positive value

that approaches unity, thereby signifying a strong link between the variables in question and implying that the sharing of experiences is enhanced by the type of page utilized.

2. The nature of an Instagram social media page has an impact on audience engagement.

The data reveals a p-value of 0.02, indicating with 95% confidence a positive and statistically significant correlation of moderate magnitude between the type of Instagram page and audience engagement, thereby supporting the proposed hypothesis. The Pearson correlation coefficient, calculated at 0.55, is positive and signifies a moderate, significant, and direct association between the variables about the type of Instagram page and audience engagement. It suggests that audience engagement is enhanced by the specific nature of the Instagram page.

3. The nature of an Instagram social media page exerts an influence on alterations in customer purchase intent.

Statistical evidence, with a p-value of 0.01, indicates a positive and significant correlation of moderate magnitude between the type of Instagram page and shifts in customer purchase intent, leading to the acceptance of the hypothesis with 95% confidence. The Pearson correlation coefficient, at 0.55, signifies a positive, moderate, and direct association between the variables of the Instagram page type and customer purchase intent, suggesting that such alterations are amplified by the page type. This conclusion concurs with the observations of Izadi et al. (2018), who noted that engagement with various types of Instagram pages can enhance relationship quality and subsequently influence customer buying habits. It also coheres with the research conducted by Dashti and Sanayei (2016), entitled "Factors Influencing Consumers' Social Purchase Intentions in Social Commerce," which revealed that interactive comprehension and the frameworks of social commerce significantly affect social support, trust, and commitment within the virtual community. The caliber of the website or application impacts trust in the virtual community. Conversely, social support shapes customers' purchase intentions and trust in the virtual community. Trust within the virtual community, in turn, influences customers' purchase intentions and their commitment to the community, with the commitment to virtual trust ultimately exerting a positive and significant effect on social purchase intentions.

4. The motivation behind utilizing the Instagram social network impacts the capability to share customer experiences.

Statistical analysis reveals a p-value of 0.67, which, with 95% confidence (or an error margin below 5%), exceeds 0.05. Consequently, there is no positive and statistically significant correlation between the motivation for using Instagram and the ability to share customer experiences, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis. This suggests an absence of a relationship between the variables of Instagram usage motivation and the capacity to share customer experiences. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this hypothesis is 0.35. In contrast, Kousha et al. (2020), in their study titled "Modeling the Impact of Social Media Attractiveness on Individual Engagement with Social Commerce: A Study of Instagram Social Commerce Pages," found that both the level of motivation and the attractiveness of the Instagram page contribute to heightened user engagement, a finding that diverges from the outcome of our hypothesis.

5. The motivation behind utilizing the Instagram social network has an impact on audience engagement.

Statistical evidence indicates a p-value of 0.57, which, with 95% confidence (or an error margin below 5%), exceeds 0.05, suggesting no correlation between the motivation for using Instagram and audience engagement. Consequently, the hypothesis is not supported. The Pearson correlation coefficient calculated for this hypothesis is -0.04.

6. The motivation behind utilizing the Instagram social network influences alterations in customer purchase intent.

Statistical analysis suggests a p-value of 0.07, which, with 95% confidence (or an error margin below 5%), exceeds 0.05, indicating no significant correlation between the motivation for using Instagram and effecting changes in customer purchasing behavior. Consequently, the hypothesis is not supported. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this analysis is 0.14. In contrast, Seifollahi and Eskandari (2021), in their study entitled "Social Media Marketing and Consumer Purchase Intent, the Mediating Role of Image and Brand Awareness," posited that social media marketing does indeed impact consumer purchase intent by reinforcing and enhancing brand image and awareness, a finding that stands in opposition to the outcome of our hypothesis.

7. The duration of time invested in the Instagram social network impacts the capability to share customer experiences.

Statistical evidence indicates a p-value of 0.00, which, with 95% confidence (or an error margin below 5%, 0.05>0.00), establishes a positive and statistically significant correlation between the time spent on Instagram and the ability to share customer experiences, suggesting a weak association. The hypothesis is therefore accepted. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this hypothesis stands at 0.39, which, being positive yet distant from one, denotes a weak relationship between the variables in question. This outcome aligns with the research conducted by Khanzadeh et al. (2018), entitled "How to Develop Brand-Consumer Communications in New Social Networks (A Study of Instagram Users in Tehran)."

8. The duration of engagement on Instagram has a significant impact on audience attraction.

The statistical analysis reveals a p-value of 0.02, suggesting with 95% certainty (or an error margin below 5%, as 0.05 exceeds 0.02) that there is a positive and statistically significant correlation between time spent on Instagram and audience attraction. This

indicates a mild association, thereby supporting the hypothesis. The Pearson correlation coefficient calculated for this relationship is 0.18, which, while positive, is not close to one, signifying a modest correlation between the variables in question.

9. The duration of engagement on Instagram has an impact on altering consumer purchase intentions.

Statistical data reveals a p-value of 0.00, suggesting with 95% certainty (or an error margin below 5%, as 0.05 exceeds 0.00) that there is a positive and significant correlation between time spent on Instagram and shifts in consumer buying behavior, indicating a modest relationship, thereby supporting the hypothesis. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this relationship is calculated at 0.25, which, while positive, is not close to one, signifying a mild correlation between the variables in question. This outcome aligns with the research conducted by Safavi et al. (2021) in Ardebil, entitled "Examining the Influence of Online Marketing via Social Media on Consumer Purchase Intentions for Apparel." Their findings suggest that each of the six dimensions of social media engagement—emotional appeal, empathy tool preference, credibility, awareness, and information value—positively and significantly affects consumer purchase intentions.

10. The follower count on Instagram influences the capacity for sharing customer experiences.

Statistical analysis reveals a p-value of 0.00, suggesting with 95% certainty (or an error margin below 5%, as 0.05 exceeds 0.00) that there is a positive and significant correlation between the number of Instagram followers and the ability to share customer experiences, indicating a modest relationship, thus supporting the hypothesis. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.30, which, while positive, is not close to one, signifying a mild correlation between the variables in question. Various features, including comments, direct messages, mentions, story question stickers, and story highlights, can facilitate answering customer inquiries, offering support services, and sharing customer experiences. A growth in followers and increased engagement with an Instagram page's posts by a broader audience can significantly and positively contribute to the sharing of customer experiences related to the purchase of services or products. This outcome aligns with the research findings of Khanzadeh et al. (2018), who explored "How to Develop Brand-Consumer Communications in New Social Networks" with a focus on Instagram users in Tehran.

11. The follower count on Instagram influences audience engagement.

Statistical data reveals a p-value of 0.02, suggesting with 95% certainty (or an error margin below 5%, as 0.05 exceeds 0.02) that there is a positive and significant correlation between the number of Instagram followers and audience engagement, indicating a modest relationship, thereby supporting the hypothesis. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.18, which, while positive, is not close to one, signifying a mild correlation between the variables in question. Growing a follower base on Instagram is a priority for individuals aiming to monetize their presence. An increase in the number of followers on an Instagram page correlates with higher audience engagement, contributing to the success of the individual's business. This outcome aligns with the conclusions drawn by Madadnic et al. (2022) in their study "Changing Consumer Intentions to Purchase Green Products: The Role of Social Media," which highlighted the substantial impact of social network usage on customer attraction, consumer purchase intention levels, and interactive customer communications.

12. The follower count on Instagram influences shifts in consumer buying intentions.

Statistical analysis indicates a p-value of 0.07, suggesting that with 95% confidence (or an error margin below 5%, yet above the 0.05 threshold), there is no positive and significant correlation between the number of Instagram followers and alterations in consumer purchase intentions, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.14. This finding is at odds with the conclusions drawn by Shekarchizadeh and Valikhani (2021) in their research titled "The Impact of Social Media Influencers' Traits on Online Purchase Intentions via the Mediating Effect of Attitudes Toward Advertising and Brand (A Study of Leather Clothing Page Followers on Instagram)." They posited that, due to the substantial market presence of social networks, their use significantly affects consumer purchase intentions. Presently, these platforms serve as the primary income source for numerous users. Nonetheless, a rise in the number of followers on an Instagram page does not inherently boost consumer purchase intentions, particularly amidst the Coronavirus disease pandemic. This study concurs with the investigation by Abzari et al. (2014), "Analyzing the Influence of Social Media on Attitudes and Purchase Intentions: A Case Study of Iran Khodro Company."

In light of the findings from this study, the following suggestions are put forward:

Considering the influence of the Instagram page type on contemporary marketing strategies, such as cost minimization, advertising assessment, interactive customer engagement, instruction on physical distancing, sharing of customer experiences, audience involvement, and shaping consumer buying decisions, it is recommended to transition the Instagram page to a professional format to amplify marketing effectiveness.

Instagram's significance is underscored by several factors, including its facilitation of swift business growth, demonstration of brand authenticity, expansion of the customer pool, sales enhancement, seamless customer interaction, provision of creative tools, variety in marketing approaches, and ease of product sales. Consequently, it is advised to customize

the content and posts for the professional Instagram page to resonate with the diverse characters, moods, and tips of the user base, to draw in followers, and thereby intensify marketing efforts for the product or service, ultimately aiming at revenue enhancement.

Furthermore, it is proposed to consider the active hours of the audience and users, as well as to determine the optimal times and days for posting content to maximize audience reach.

For additional research, scholars are encouraged to investigate the effects of prominent channels in modern marketing, including blogs, websites, or search engines, through an independent study.

The outcomes of this research are specific to the Coronavirus disease period in Tehran. As such, applying these findings to other time frames, locations, or post-pandemic scenarios should be approached with caution.

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