

The Effects of the SARS-Cov-2 Pandemic on Consumerism and Online Shopping

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Abstract: *Humanity has been confronted with pandemics all throughout history, but the SARS- Cov-2 pandemic has highlighted a series of unprecedented changes in society. The emergence of a health crisis, such as a pandemic, can affect consumer behaviour significantly. This research focuses on the underlying effects of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic on consumerism and online shopping in the Romanian society. Our main objectives were to examine the potential correlation between a change in consumer behaviour and the pandemic, and to determine what purchases were prioritised before and after the pandemic, predominantly in e-commerce. Our early findings suggest that Romanian people had a rational approach to shopping, by buying strictly essential products. Furthermore, they were preoccupied with their health, choosing to consume healthy products for fear of infection, and also to buy online more frequently due to necessity, comfort and available offers. Although this research is still in its early stages, it seems that Romanian consumers speculate that they will shop more online than before the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic.*

Key words: *consumerism, consumer behaviour, COVID-19, e-commerce, online shopping, pandemic crisis, SARS-Cov-2 pandemic.*

1. Introduction

Society has entered an era in which the modern consumer has gone through an unprecedented crisis, which has led to a shift in attitude towards and in perception of the products placed on the market, which has temporarily taken second place. Although in the past humanity has faced difficult situations with social, political or economic consequences, the juxtaposition of the excessive consumerism characteristic of the 21st century society and the return to the essential needs imposed by the pandemic has created a paradox worth exploring in more depth.

When it comes to consumer behavior, the literature indicates that, until the pandemic, consumers were motivated to purchase for social affiliation and validation, for hedonism and for the subconscious intention to live the same experience as other people who perpetuated consumer culture. With the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, consumer culture has been curbed, people becoming more responsible in consumption, being restrained and rational, the reasons mentioned previously disappearing from the intention to buy. At the same time, online commerce has expanded on a larger scale with the pandemic, as consumers felt something new towards shopping, namely fear. Whether shopping for utilitarian (comfort, safety) or hedonistic (consumer pleasure) reasons, the fear of buying from physical stores due to the uncertainty triggered by the pandemic has made online shopping a very common tool.

For more complex research, we decided to use both quantitative and qualitative methods, which allow us to explore the topic from several valuable perspectives so as to reach in-depth findings. As a first research method, we chose to use a questionnaire to gather data on consumer behavior from the general public. The questionnaire was uploaded on the isondaje.ro website, which is a free online survey platform. The data were collected in April 2021, from 108 responses. The respondents are

Romanian, aged between 16 and 52, the average age being 25.9. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions, all closed questions, 5 of which being factual questions aimed at collecting demographic data.

Afterwards, we conducted three individual interviews with people who had gone through the experience of the SARS-Cov-2 infection and who had direct contact with online shopping platforms, in order to analyse whether the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic has had an impact on their consumer behavior after going through the disease, and to interpret their personal input so as to find out what online purchases other people made during the pandemic.

After correlating the quantitative and qualitative data to identify the different facets of the issue, we compared our results with the data obtained by other researchers as well as with official statistics and reports on consumer behavior issued by institutions and research agencies. The literature review was an extremely important step, allowing us to obtain meaningful results that would lead to well-grounded findings.

2. Results

Following the quantitative analysis, some general conclusions can be drawn on the impact of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic on consumerism and online shopping. Generally speaking, during the pandemic, the respondents chose to shop either online or at big retail stores such as hypermarkets. When asked about their reasoning behind the buying process, the respondents claimed that efficacy, product availability and diversity were the three main attributes that mattered to them most as consumers. Thus, it is essential for the respondents that the products they usually buy be available and that they have a plethora of options to choose from. Their consumer behaviour has also changed in terms of frequency, the respondents stating that there has been a decrease in frequency and amount of money spent.

The people who participated in the survey prefer to be thoughtful and prudent in these unstable times and do not shop excessively, most remaining neutral to buying more, while a significant percentage refrains from shopping more often than they can afford. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that the respondents buy rationally rather than out of panic, despite the fear of not having enough supplies during the pandemic. Considering that the experience was strictly individual for each respondent, the fear of infection and shopping nervousness are the two emotions that stand out subtly among the responses. Also, the results suggest a slight tendency to buy both food and cleaning products. There is a noticeable increase in the consumption of over-the-counter medicine, vitamins, health supplements and disinfectants among the Romanian consumers who participated in the survey. Other changes in their behavior include eating more fruits and vegetables, eating more at home and avoiding junk and convenience food because of health worries.

Another aspect worth investigating was determining the effects of the pandemic on e-commerce. When the pandemic emerged, people started to rely considerably more on e-commerce, compared to in-store shopping. There were subtle increases in online sales across all products, clothes and accessories, makeup, gadgets and furniture being some of the highlighted categories that were bought more online rather than at the store. Surprisingly, a significant percentage of respondents did not buy fitness products before or during the pandemic, so their athletic behavior did not change in a positive manner. Making predictions about their future consumer behaviour, the respondents expect to make balanced purchases between the e-commerce and physical stores. Online shopping has become increasingly common due to necessity, convenience and offers available, people adapting to the current health crisis.

Afterwards, we conducted three individual interviews in order to explore the attitudes, feelings and opinions of someone infected with and

subsequently cured of SARS-Cov-2 about the influence of the pandemic on online shopping and consumer behavior. Two of the interviewees are e-commerce professionals, while the third works in the medical field. We chose these three persons because we wanted to see their perspective on the situation both through the personal filter of someone recovered from SARS-Cov-2 and through the professional filter of someone who often interacts with many Romanians. According to their answers, the three interviewees have noticed changes in the way they buy in physical stores, but they have taken different measures: Valentina V. and Ionuț S. prefer shopping online, whereas Adina P. mentions the reduction of costs for non-essential products. At the same time, they mention in passing that some professional aspects are taken into account, the workplace influencing them to be aware of others, to avoid congestion during peak hours and to rely on couriers. The interviewees admit trusting online purchases prior to the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, but also admit making more online purchases during this period. Safety, convenience and more customer-friendly prices were highlighted as advantages.

Romanians seem to have turned to delivery applications to receive food, hygiene and disinfectant products. This tendency to buy online products that are usually found in supermarkets may reflect the fear and insecurity felt by society as a whole. There was a considerable number of people who used delivery apps, such as Tazz or Glovo, to receive medicine or supplements at home. In short, prioritizing essential expenses and giving up on consumerism were two general trends observed both during the interviews and in the survey answers, which reveals that the information can be correlated.

Last but not least, early studies in this field show that consumption trends have been changing from the beginning of the pandemic to the present. Therefore, a comparative analysis of our results and those obtained by other researchers is required.

Recent literature emphasizes that a perceived shortage of products can significantly affect consumer choice (Hamilton et al., 2019; Laato et al., 2020; Pantano et al., 2020). Pantano et al. (2020: 26) point out that “consumers have revised their shopping habits and at the same time discovered benefits from services they had not used before. For example, some consumers switch to online shopping, discovering the safety and benefits of home delivery, in-store pickup and cashless payments. In addition, these authors noted the fact that unexpected government regulations requiring social distancing have a greater impact for buyers on preferred channels of consumption”.

Laato et al. (2020) argue that “the government’s decision to establish a national quarantine, closing schools, restaurants, some shops and public services, could have caused fears about future disruptions and triggered behavioral responses in people. The intention to self-isolate was a strong predictor of unusual acquisitions, suggesting that a major reason people made unusual acquisitions during COVID-19 was to prepare for isolation and quarantine. In retrospect, the panic buying phenomenon was short-lived, and consumer markets quickly stabilized on unusual purchases and then on the new COVID-19 consumer status quo.”

Eger et al. (2021) conducted a study in the Czech Republic on consumer behavior and their research indicates that “medicines, pharmaceuticals and food products were bought more both in brick-and-mortar stores and online stores. The frequency of purchases was statistically significant related to health concerns for the following items: pharmaceuticals and hygiene products, medicines and medical supplies, while there was a decrease in the purchase of sporting goods and hobbies. Due to economic fears, there was a decrease in purchases of two items, electronics and household equipment.”

The results of Fanelli’s (2020) study on consumer behaviour in Italy

indicate “an increase in home cooking during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants began to prepare more food at home, reduced their purchases and consumption of ready-to-eat food. At the same time, they strictly adhered to the Mediterranean diet and ate healthier, including more fresh fruits and vegetables in their diets. A good diet has always been important for respondents, but during this pandemic, it was given even more importance.”

A study issued by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNTCAD: 2020) indicates that the share of online sales has increased in all sectors, especially pharmaceuticals and health (especially at the beginning of the pandemic), food and electronic products that are used for work at home and home entertainment. Average consumer spending, however, has declined as those on low incomes have turned to online shopping. Many consumers report postponing more expensive purchases until revenues become more predictable.

At the moment, studies on consumer behavior and e-commerce are constantly evolving globally, but the data collected so far is similar to our own study in terms of the results obtained. Regardless of region or culture, people bought in a similar way, reducing excess shopping and stocking up on essential products. The research is promising and indicates a potential to continue the analysis of this topic from an economic, social and political perspective.

3. Discussion: Research implications and limitations

There are some limitations to this research study, as it deals with a novel subject. First of all, the study was conducted in the context of the pandemic in Romania in April 2021, which indicates what the Romanian society thinks at that moment. Further investigation should be carried out as the pandemic evolves. Also, the number of respondents for the quantitative analysis is not evenly distributed across all age groups, the

average age being 25.9 years, which presents the information from the perspective of a predominantly young audience. Finally, as the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic is still ongoing, data need to further investigated in the future and confirmed by studies conducted on a larger scale. Subsequent research should show whether consumers will permanently change their buying behavior at the end of the pandemic, or they will return to their old habits.

Conclusion

The measures imposed by the government, such as the national lockdown and social distancing, as well as the fear of the unknown have changed Romanian consumer behaviour. We have entered an era in which the modern consumer has gone through an unprecedented crisis. Consumers were previously motivated to buy for social validation, out of hedonism and due to the intention to live the same experience as other people who perpetuated consumer culture.

In conclusion, with the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, consumer culture has been curbed, people becoming more responsible in consumption, being reserved and rational, the reasons previously presented disappearing from the intention to buy. At the same time, online commerce has boosted with the pandemic, as consumers developed a new feeling about shopping, namely fear. Whatever utilitarian (comfort, safety) or hedonic (consumer pleasure) reasons were present, the fear of buying from physical stores in the uncertainty generated by the pandemic has made online shopping a tool used very often by consumers. The negative feelings felt during the pandemic were panic, fear of infection and anxiety, which can be the source of the changes in consumer behavior. Health concerns have caused a spike in e-commerce, especially among people who have been infected with the virus, despite the fact that all the participants in our study took care of their health, taking vitamins and

medicine and eating more healthy food and less junk food. The fact that many consumers have been financially affected by this pandemic may provide a further motivation for changing long-term consumer behavior, with some studies showing frugality as a new buying attitude.

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