

DID GOING BACK TO SHOPPING MAKE YOU HAPPY? CONSUMER BEHAVIORAL CHANGES IN THEIR PURCHASE DECISION AND PREFERENCE OF SHOPPING EXPERIENCE AFTER COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

It's time to reflect back. The global pandemic resulting from the COVID-19 is regarded as one of the greatest health crisis in WHO records. Many countries came to a halt as a result of the pandemic: businesses, employees, and markets have been dealing with a variety of difficulties ranging from spread of the disease to various social-human-economic impacts. In India, the crisis started in March 2020 and the consumers were confined to homes like the rest of the world. The individuals became skeptical of all their purchase decisions whether related to essentials like grocery items or high priced lifestyle products. There was indeed a paradigm shift in consumer psychology although the same may not last post covid era. However, the pandemic phase did influence the consumers' mindset although for a brief stint. This phase gave a valuable insight about how purchase making decisions changes because of the changes in the macro-environment. The purpose of this research is to document and assess how these external shifts in the marketplace impacted consumer behavior overall. The pandemic era may have also created different consumption traits and opportunities for new business patterns that fit in better with changes. An in-depth study was conducted to determine the changes in customers buying perceptions for shopping various products. It also assessed whether the consumer preferred a different shopping environment in terms of inclination towards online shopping; and whether their perception of going back to shopping malls for their purchases have altered a bit.

Keywords: Covid-19, Lockdown Phase, Consumer Behaviour, Safety, Convenience, Online Shopping and Offline Shopping, Delight To Shop, Post Pandemic Retail.

INTRODUCTION

The current pandemic has disrupted the way of doing business. Education, healthcare, tourism, retail, manufacturing, logistics, and other commercial and organizational areas are all affected by the impact of the virus. The impact was visible with stores selling grocery and essentials, garment shops, and hotels & eateries. Similarly, their respective supplies were impacted by the changes and there were new operating procedures for all of them. This health epidemic resulted in limited availability of various items in several nations, with production and resources costs increasing substantially and forcing fluctuations in supply and demand as a result of lockdown regulations (Fazel & Nasr, 2021). These events also impacted the consumption patterns and consumption habits even after the restrictions were reduced or laid off (Sheth, 2020). For example, consumers' price sensitivity was affected and there were cases of the panic hoarding. People were making odd purchases and sacrificing their old shopping interests. Even when the lockdown regulations were relaxed, there were individuals who self-isolated themselves as an extra caution. Another significant purchase recorded worldwide during the start of the pandemic was hoarding of tissue paper rolls. With the access to abundant online information about the disease and the precautions to take, the sale of masks, sanitizers and other cleaning products also increased tremendously.

The customers bought essential products in greater quantity and avoidance of discretionary purchases was also observed (Knowles, 2020; Knowles & Olatunji, 2021). The major attributes chosen by consumers while purchasing were focused on the price, availability of the products, and possibility of home deliveries. Also, hygiene became an utmost priority. With obvious reasons the sale of medicines, recreational games for children, fitness related goods increased sales due to the pandemic and situation of stay at home order. Researchers observed that the purchase rate had decreased and that savings had increased. Consequentially, there were fewer moments of impulsive purchases, and more evidences of planned purchases (Dou et al., 2020)

Various organizations had to realign their business strategy to maintain and attract consumers. Most of countries' movements of people and products were restricted and it caused disruptions in market due to changes in economic and social functions. The manufacturers strive hard to reduce the production and even marketing costs. There were opportunities explored to get better rates through new suppliers within the country and even abroad. The restrictions on transportation within certain regions added to their woes. At the positive side, the local manufacturing business got a boost to sell their products as the demand for certain products was more than what existing companies could supply (Gu et al., 2021).

The pickup facility and queue system to avoid excessive crowd in stores became a norm. Several grocery merchants were actively providing information regarding product availability and allocating time slots and even limiting the amount of goods per consumer that may be purchased. The big stores selling fashion and lifestyle were also implementing catalogue services and home delivery modes. Many stores created an online queue management process to reduce the number of customers who can be served at the counter (Pantano et al., 2020). There may emerge long-term consequences on purchase behavior and passing some of the traits to future generations (Vlontzos & Duquenne, 2013). According to Kirk & Rifkin (2020), crisis may be considered as an important phase for self-introspection and societal growth. The crisis can make the consumer go through three distinct phases: Reacting, coping with the change, DIY behavior (efforts from consumer to do activities on his own rather than take professional help), and the last phase can be permanent adaptation of certain behavior. The present pandemic would also affect the life in general as well as purchase motivations of the people around the world.

Consumers and Their Purchase Journey during Covid-19

Consumer behavior is the “*the mental, emotional and physical activities*” than any consumer would indulge in when he selects and purchase the products in order to satisfy a need or desire (Wilkie, 1994). There is internal and external stimulus which influence consumer’s buying decisions and shopping channels. Due to present pandemic and the subsequent government measures and the emergence of public fear, the consumer’s sentiments have shifted across countries. Their lifestyles, purchases, aspirations, and consumption of goods and services had changed drastically during the lockdown. There are various researches which examined how consumer behavior changes in the times of events like adverse events (like earthquake or flood) or socially disturbed trends like unemployment or financial depression (Liu & Black, 2011; Liu, 2012). The consumption pattern is either disturbed or changed completely. Several epidemics like Ebola, swine flu, and dengue fever had a significant impact on the civilization. It’s been observed that people change their life perspective and purchase behavior during these times and also see an inclination towards health proactive behavior (Miri et al., 2020). The consumers purchase more of those products that promise health, immunity and protection from virus. Although when the situation

becomes better, consumers are keen to purchase lifestyle products and outside food & beverages.

The consumer's attitude about the pandemic crisis also varied as per the gender, age, and income. It was observed that females were more careful during the pandemic, and therefore took precautions and safety measure to avoid the spread of disease. Similarly, the elderly people were more threatened by the pandemic and were following extreme precautions. On the positive side, these older consumers discovered the values of online shopping, and enjoyed the convenience offered by technology. A study about American and British consumers found that younger generations became more concerned after pandemic. Thereby they were ready to modify their shopping behavior towards for sustainable purchases. In few cases, males shopped online to avoid crowd more than females (Hesham et al., 2021). The restrictions along with the uncertainty of life brought the consumers to the basic level of food, clothes and shelter related to Maslow's primary needs along with the social need of love and belongingness. Health and wellbeing became the driving force for all consumption patterns. Even affinity to spirituality and mental health rose which led various health-tech innovations (Dwivedi, 2016; Brough & Martin, 2021). A survey conducted by Mckinsey in 2020 on Indian consumer sentiments stated that most of the respondents strongly agreed upon the fact that they are spending their money judiciously during pandemic. The spending was restricted at the initial phase under the pretext of loss of work or break in the regular income flow in majority of households. Flatters & Willmott (2009) defined this mindset as simplification of demand when there are fewer opportunities during crisis. People postpone their expensive indulgences and focus on simple basic consumption to survive. In few cases, the elite class which may not have succumbed to financial turmoil may also start questioning their excess consumption and start favoring as well encouraging more sustainable purchases. The situation was unpredictable and thus customers postponed some of their expensive purchases. For example, in most of the countries, during festivals, the purchase spree is higher. However, during pandemic, the shopping rituals unique to the festive seasons underwent significant transformations and expenses were significantly reduced (Hesham et al., 2021).

During crisis, a distinct attitude towards various product evaluations evolves as a result of the emotional changes in the people. An example of this can be a consumer shifting to healthy food choices sacrificing fancier and tastier options. Similarly, consumer shift to the online orders and home delivery was also a trend seen worldwide. Thus, pandemic taught the individuals to confine to simple and value driven purchases and they displayed caution in believing in the marketing communications by big brands. It was observed that consumers were more price sensitive for the products they buy, and also evaluated the attributes carefully while choosing products. Also with the help of internet search, they could research more about the desired products and their availability in the market.

The Retail changes during Pandemic

In the initial phase of the Covid outbreak, Retail, hospitality, and tourism were severely impacted (Dolnicar & Zare, 2020; Fernandes, 2020). Most of the retailers shift to online platforms to gain some advantage during pandemic (Griffith et al., 2020). There were other ways to either stir or maintain revenue streams. Supermarkets in the UK and France established virtual queues to take orders in a planned manner. Online orders were in fact a boon for the retailers: an online retail brand in China, reported a huge increase of the users who were 40 years and above, to have accepted the mode to buy through internet (Nielsen, 2020; Naeem, 2021). In fact, the internet had provided ample opportunities to manage the

purchases during pandemic. There was huge increase in shopping through devices like mobile and laptops along with the acceptance of mobile-payments (Alaimo et al., 2020).

Whether it was the distance or (un) availability of products during, customers preferred stores near to their residences rather than going to a faraway branded supermarket. This was a positive trend for the local stores and they hope that customers may continue to patronize them in future. It was also observed that customers perceived those brands to be reliable which were proactive in altering their business process during pandemic. The customers became skeptical of the brands that were unable or unwilling to provide adjustments during pandemic for their loyal customers. This crisis not only gave lessons to consumers but also various brand who starting actively contributing in social welfare and causes. The sentiments for the public inconvenience and consumers, vulnerability were acknowledged by the Retailers. Brands like Gucci, Ralph Lauren, Armani and Ferragamo participated in various donation and charities. Burberry and Prada, reconfigured their productions for medical kits and masks. Bulgari distributed sanitizers, while Ferrari provided ventilators and other equipment to hospitals (Pantano et al., 2020).

Shopping & Happiness

Can we correlate happiness with shopping experience? Although happiness is a relative emotion and each individual perceives it differently, it largely is dependent on the person's needs, desires, values, and experiences. A person is said to be happy when he considers his life on a favorable ground. The evaluation can be on hedonic or sensory factors, emotional or materialistic. In the modern context, few purchases are based on this pleasure of material acquisition or even the process to enjoy the shopping experience. For example, people who tend to buy lifestyle products feel that they seem happy after the purchase. This feeling may vary from culture to culture but is a significant feature of the capitalist economy (Veenhoven et al., 2021). Thus the pursuit to acquire a more lavish life and buy certain product to achieve that has become a universal trend. There are consumers all around the world who take credit facilities to achieve certain standards like a big house, a car or even exotic vacations (Veenhoven et al., 2021). For the same reason, it would be worth knowing whether the consumers who became devoid of such experiences during the pandemic became unhappy? Or whether after pandemic when the consumers were allowed to visit shopping malls, movie theatres or vacation, they felt the missed happiness? It would be worthwhile to study whether the purchases had the same evaluation points for the consumers or their need gratification has evolved post pandemic. How might these changes affect consumption behaviors?

Research Gaps

With the study of the relevant research on consumers during pandemic and discussion with marketing professionals and academia, this paper strives to examine the changes in consumers after the lockdown period. Most of the research delved into the lockdown impact on consumers and the post pandemic behavior is still not validated. Also the researcher wants to examine the factors which drive the consumer to purchase certain products like grocery and electronics. Both the categories are although different, there was a surge in the demand during pandemic.

The Research Questions

1. Are the consumer's expectations from the product has changed?
2. Is the consumer's overall spending altered during shopping?
3. Whether after stay-at-home period, consumers have changed the way they experience stores offline?

4. Should companies now maintain the same Omni channel strategy (as in lockdown) to enhance consumer's satisfaction with the shopping?

Rationale of the Study

The pandemic moved beyond being just a health crisis. Supposedly, it has changed the relationship between a company and consumers and also how a business is conducted. The current study attempts to examine consumers' responses to the shopping experience post COVID-19 global pandemic and see whether it tilts towards online more or there still a possibility of them enjoying the offline retail to feel good after pandemic. Also, an attempt has been made to understand the parameters to evaluate the products by consumers.

Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to the selected cities in India. The scope of this study is limited to food, grocery and electronics. The other kinds of retail stores are excluded from this study Figure 1.

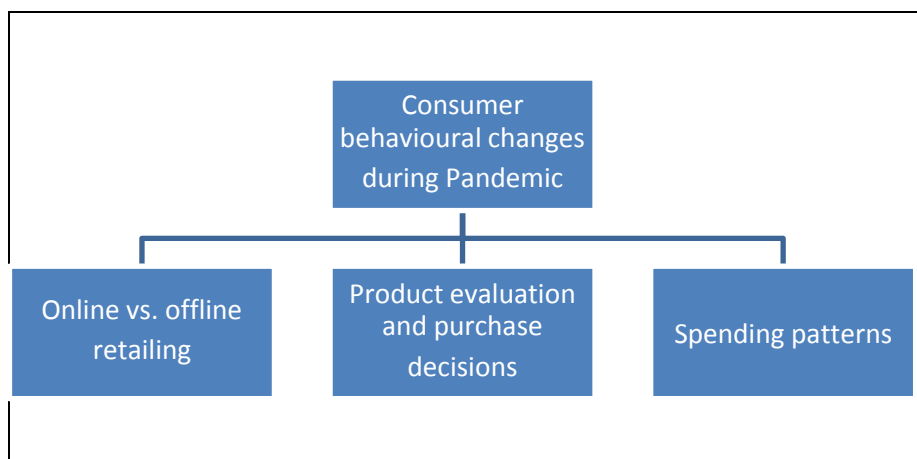


FIGURE 1
THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The questions of the survey were based on the following objectives.

1. To study the change observed in consumers buying behaviour with reference to offline and online stores in the post covid -19 era.
2. To study the specific factors which consumers consider to buy products
3. To study whether the consumer look forward to shopping experience and delight of shopping offline
4. To study whether the consumer spending on selected products have been altered?

Hypothesis

On the basis of above mentioned research objective following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: In Post COVID -19 era customers' frequency of shopping trips to physical destinations have reduced

H₂: In Post COVID -19 era Customers are looking forward to experience the delight of shopping in physical destination

H_{3a}: In Post COVID -19 era Customer expects product quality for final purchase decision

H_{3b}: In Post COVID -19 era Customer expects product design & aesthetics for final purchase decision

H_{3c}: In Post COVID -19 era Customer expects product's durability for final purchase decision.

H_{3d}: In Post COVID -19 era Customer evaluates price points of a product for final purchase decision.

H₄: In Post COVID -19 era Customer trust brand for final purchase decision.

H₅: In Post COVID -19 era Customers overall spending has reduced.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted in July 2021. The Primary Data was gathered using google survey forms using structured questionnaire. The sampling type used was Non Probability-judgmental sampling method (Sneath et al., 2009). The sample size after data cleaning is 1200. The sampling frame includes male and female in the age group of eighteen to fifty years, residing in the major metro cities of India. The cities which are selected are major hubs of retailing activities in India. The cities are Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad. The researcher has used structured questionnaire with close ended questions, Likert scale questions and the data analysis was done using frequency table, means and t test using SPSS 18.0 Version Figure 2.

Analysis

Statements pertaining to Customers Perception on Change in Shopping behaviour Post COVID -19 era	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Frequency of shopping trips to physical destinations have reduced post Pandemic	391	33	301	25	250	21	170	14	88	7	1200	100
I am looking forward to experience the delight of shopping in physical destination post Pandemic	133	11	185	15	91	8	371	31	420	35	1200	100
I emphasize on product quality in post COVID era	211	18	191	16	311	26	255	21	232	19	1200	100
I emphasize on product design and style in post COVID era	217	18	201	17	342	29	219	18	221	18	1200	100
I emphasize on product price in post COVID era	212	18	199	17	351	29	211	18	227	18	1200	100
I emphasize on product durability in post COVID era	201	17	171	14	211	18	255	21	362	30	1200	100
I emphasize on Brand in post COVID era	181	15	152	13	201	17	252	21	414	34	1200	100
My overall spending has reduced post pandemic	399	33	378	32	101	8	211	18	111	9	1200	100

FIGURE 2
CUSTOMERS PERCEPTION ON SHOPPING BEHAVIOR AFTER COVID -19 ERA

The above table reflects that 58% of the respondents do not agree to the fact that they have reduced the visits to the physical stores after pandemic; also 66% of the respondents are keen to experience the delight of shopping offline after the pandemic period. Although the emphasis on brand is still dominant in product evaluation with 55% agreeing to check brands before buying products, the other parameters are also given importance. Durability of products is an extremely important trait with 51% of respondents giving importance to it. It is followed by quality, design and then price. The perception that consumers are spending less after pandemic is negated by the respondents with 65 % of them disagreeing that spending is reduced Figure 3.

Statements pertaining to Customers Perception on Change in Shopping behaviour Post COVID -19 era	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Frequency of shopping trips to physical destinations have reduced post Pandemic	1200	2.1	1.01
I am looking forward to experience the delight of shopping in physical destination post Pandemic	1200	3.8	1.06
I emphasize on product quality in post COVID era	1200	3.2	1.01
I emphasize on product design and style in post COVID era	1200	3.1	1.04
I emphasize on product price in post COVID era	1200	3.1	1.01
I emphasize on product durability in post COVID era	1200	4.1	1.03
I emphasize on Brand in post COVID era	1200	4.2	1.03
My overall spending has reduced post pandemic	1200	2.1	1.02

FIGURE 3
MEANS OF THE CUSTOMERS PERCEPTION ON SHOPPING BEHAVIOR AFTER COVID -19

In the table above only in three cases the mean value is less than 3 which indicates disagreement towards the following statements (Kim, 2016).

1. Frequency of shopping trips to physical destinations have reduced post Pandemic
2. My overall spending has reduced post pandemic
3. I have less disposable income compare to before the outbreak

The highest mean value for evaluation of product attributes is given to Brand elements followed by the durability of the product (Balinska & Rizzo, 2009). In case of Product quality, design and price the agreement is slightly above mean value which indicates close to neutral opinion with mean value ranging for these statements from 3.1 to 3.2 (Laato et al., 2020; La Torre et al., 2009). The mean values are then tested statistically using t test and the results are summarized in Figure 4 below.

Test Value =3			
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
In Post COVID -19 era customers frequency of shopping trips to physical destinations have reduced	-11.2	1199	.001
In Post COVID -19 era Customers are looking forward to experience the delight of shopping in physical destination	13.1	1199	.011
I emphasize on product quality in post COVID era	12.1	1199	.002
I emphasize on product design and style in post COVID era	12.2	1199	.001
I emphasize on product price in post COVID era	12.3	1199	.011
I emphasize on product durability in post COVID era	14.1	1199	.002
I emphasize on Brand in post COVID era	14.2	1199	.011
In Post COVID -19 era Customers overall spending has reduced post COVID	-12.2	1199	.002

FIGURE 4
T TEST CUSTOMERS PERCEPTION ON CHANGE IN SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR POST COVID -19

On the basis of the T test results above, the following can be interpreted for the hypothesis.

H₁: *In Post COVID -19 era customers' frequency of shopping trips to physical destinations have reduced: Hypothesis rejected.*

H₂: *In Post COVID -19 era Customers are looking forward to experience the delight of shopping in physical destination: Hypothesis accepted.*

H_{3a}: *In Post COVID -19 era Customer expects product quality for final purchase decision: Hypothesis accepted.*

H_{3b}: *In Post COVID -19 era Customer expects product design & aesthetics for final purchase decision: Hypothesis accepted.*

H_{3c}: *In Post COVID -19 era Customer expects product's durability for final purchase decision: Hypothesis accepted.*

H_{3d}: *In Post COVID -19 era Customer evaluates price points of a product for final purchase decision: Hypothesis accepted.*

H₄: *In Post COVID -19 era Customer trust brand for final purchase decision: Hypothesis rejected.*

H₅: *In Post COVID -19 era Customers overall spending has reduced: Hypothesis rejected.*

CONCLUSION

The key findings of the study are summarized and examined against the background of previous research. Although there was a greater use of ecommerce touch points during

lockdown phase, this has not discouraged consumers to go back to normal shopping mode. There were discussions that increase in digitalization of consumer shopping journey will weaken the development of traditional offline stores. The lockdown restriction has created a new motivation among consumers to visit shops in order to revisit the old charm of shopping experience. This research highlights that consumers still prefer the offline shopping delight. However, the technology platforms may still be instrumental in spreading awareness about various brands. Although the crisis taught the people the lesson of being frugal and calculative with their purchases, consumers may not entirely forgo the pleasures of shopping. At the same time, the expectations of consumers are more towards the genuine attributes of products rather than be swayed just by promotional tactics. As the economy around the world is reopening, retailers may still need to follow certain crowd control mechanisms yet be more concerned about the new found expectations of the consumers. There need to be better offerings in order to engage the customers and drive loyalty. The new changes may have made the consumer behaviors complex, yet the desires, and experiences around shopping are still very dominant.

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Received: 04-Mar-2022, Manuscript No. AMSJ-22-11679; **Editor assigned:** 05-Mar-2022, PreQC No. AMSJ-22-11679(PQ); **Reviewed:** 19-Mar-2022, QC No. AMSJ-22-11679; **Revised:** 22-Mar-2022, Manuscript No. AMSJ-22-11679(R); **Published:** 29-Mar-2022