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**A Study on Change in Shopping Habits of Consumers due to Outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Coronavirus (COVID-19) disease followed by prolonged lockdown and social distancing mandates has altered the consumer buying/shopping habits. The shopping and buying strategies of the consumer are time bound and location bound. With time flexibility, but location rigidity, the consumers have learned to improvise their habits in creative and innovative ways. The work-life boundaries of the consumers are now blurred as almost all people work, study and relax at home. Under the psychological distress created by COVID-19 pandemic the consumer is unable to go to the store, thus, the store has to come to the consumer. Under this pandemic crisis the consumers have remained house arrest for a prolonged period of time. They are learning to improvise and learned new habits. It is likely that the consumer have modified the older habits by new regulations and procedures, in the way consumers shop and buy products and services now. New shopping and buying habits of consumer have emerged with technology advancement, changing demographics and innovative ways, consumers have learned to cope with blurring the work, leisure, and education boundaries.*

**Keywords:** Corona Virus, Consumer Buying, Shopping Habits, New Regulations

**INTRODUCTION**

The buying behaviour of consumer helps the customers to decide on how, when, what, where, and why he/she purchase a specific product. The consumers show a change in buying behaviour with the interplay of macro and micro factors. The companies have been articulate in handling the challenges influencing consumer buying behaviour. The marketing researchers have been sensitive to the factors influencing the consumer buying and shopping behaviour in changed circumstances. The products preferred for the consumer's satisfaction are location and time bound. The shopping and buying behaviour of a consumer is predictable and directional for which many researchers have developed predictive models for consumer shopping and buying behaviour. With the lapse of time the consumers develops the shopping and buying habits (Sheth, 2020), which cannot be only habitual but also contextual. Since context can govern or disrupt consumer buying and shopping habits.

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The different contextual factors which influence the consumer buying and shopping habits are a) change in social context b) technology c) rules and regulations, and d) the natural disasters like earthquake, flood, war, nuclear accident, pandemic including COVID-19. All of them significantly disrupt both consumption as well as production and supply chain. The contextual factors directly or indirectly interfere in the shopping and buying habits of consumer.

### **Consumer Shopping Behaviour**

Consumer shopping behaviour refers to the selection, purchase and consumption of goods and services for the satisfaction of their wants. There are different processes involved in the consumer shopping behaviour. Many factors, specificities and characteristics influence the individual in what he is and the consumer in his decision making process, shopping habits, consumer shopping behaviour, the brands he buys or the retailers he goes. A shopping decision is the result of each and every one of these factors. Initially, the consumer tries to find what commodities he would like to consume, then he selects only those commodities that promise greater utility. After selecting the commodities, the consumer makes an estimate of the available money which he can spend. Lastly, the consumer analyzes the prevailing prices of commodities and takes the decision about the commodities he should consume. Sharma and Sharma (2020) have developed a conceptual model to describe the consumer buying behaviour. Meanwhile, there are various other factors influencing the purchases of consumer such as social, cultural, economic, personal and psychological.

### **Factors Influencing Consumer Buying and Shopping Habits**

The consumer buying and shopping habits are influenced by several factors or forces, which are described as following;

1. **Internal or Psychological factors:** The buying habits of consumers are influenced by a number of internal or psychological factors. The most important are Motivation and Perception.
2. **Social factors:** The social context includes workplace, community, neighbors, and friends. So any change in the social context of the consumer by such life events as marriage, lockdowns, social distancing and moving from one city to another brings change in the shopping and buying habit
3. **Cultural factors:** The consumer buying and shopping habits are largely the result of a learning process and as such individuals grow up learning a set of values, perceptions, preferences and behaviour patterns as the result of socialisation both within the family and a series of other key institutions. From this consumer develops a set of habits, which determine and drive behavioural patterns of consumer to a very large extent.

4. **Technology:** When any breakthrough technologies emerge, they alter the buying and shopping habits of a consumer. The most dramatic technology breakthroughs in recent years are smart phones, internet and ecommerce. Online search and online ordering have dramatically impacted the way we shop and consumer products and services.
5. **Economic factors:** Consumer behaviour is influenced largely by economic factors. Economic factors that influence consumer behaviour are personal Income, family income, income expectations, savings, liquid assets of the consumer, consumer credit and other economic factors.
6. **Personal factors.** The personal income of a person is determinant of his buying behaviour. The gross personal income of a person consists of disposable income and discretionary income. The disposable personal income refers to the actual income (i.e. money balance) remaining at the disposal of a person after deducting taxes and compulsorily deductible items from the gross income. An increase in the disposable income leads to an increase in the expenditure on various items. A fall in the disposable income, on the other hand, leads to a fall in the expenditure on various items.
7. **Natural disasters:** The natural disasters like earthquake, flood, war, nuclear accident, pandemic including the Covid-19 pandemic we are experiencing today etc, as all of them significantly disrupt the consumer buying and shopping habits as the natural disasters alter both consumption as well as production and supply chain.

### **COVID-19 Disease**

The outbreak of corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic in Wuhan (China) in early January 2020 spread rapidly across China and brought 200 countries across the globe under threat with highly tragic consequences. By the end of April 2020 over 2.6 million cases were reported and 182,000 people died (WHO, 2020). The lockdown throughout the contaminated regions had a major impact on the consumers and the retail sector across the globe (Feng and Fay, 2020; Evans, 2020). As a response to the COVID-19 outbreak, India reached at the third place in the world in terms of infected cases. Thus, it became essential for the Government of India to impose a mandatory nation-wide self-quarantine between 23<sup>rd</sup> March and 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020. Many other countries in Europe followed suit by issuing restrictions to their citizens' movements in order to stem the spread of the virus (Chinazzi et al., 2020; Hedgecoe et al., 2020).

### **COVID-19 Disease and Consumer Behaviour**

The shopping behaviour of a consumer before and during the COVID-19 outbreak is an important factor for the commerce and business sector of the country. Understanding the shopping behaviour during the time when the consumer is passing through a transition phase of tension and depression will be a great achievement for the marketing researchers and policy makers. But, it needs a kind and intensive attention. Building on earlier retail studies with a similar theoretical framework (Spence and Townsend, 2006; Lobb *et al.*, 2007; Hansen, 2008). The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) was adopted to analyse planned changes in consumers' shopping behaviour during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, in line with research published recently on the impacts of this pandemic on food supply chains, where authors speculated with major potential changes to consumer behaviour (Richards and Rickard, 2020).

In India, the major development in terms of consumer shopping behaviour which took place by the outbreak of COVID-19 disease was the nation-wide government-imposed lockdown, which resulted in a general shortage of goods and services. We can see the food retailer outlet closure at an increase rate. The social, physiological, cultural, economic and personal factors which orient the consumers shopping pattern were totally customized and resulted in a new consumers buying practice. Consumers are responding to the crisis in a variety of ways. Some feel anxious and worried, fueling panic-buying of staples and hygiene products. At the other extreme, some consumers remain indifferent to the pandemic and are continuing their business as usual, despite recommendations from government and health professionals. The goods companies will need to understand how their own consumers are reacting, and develop customized and personalized marketing strategies for each.

A particular characteristic of consumer shopping for basic needs at the nearby stores rather than supermarkets and shopping malls can be observed by the outbreak of the pandemic. The online shopping during the present COVID-19 crisis was seen getting priority than the offline one. Since this deadly pandemic gave rise to the job losses at an alarming rate in India, which directly influence the shopping capacity of a consumer. We can observe that the consumer is trying to shop least according to their genuine requirements. The market structure has changed by COVID-19 outbreak. Though further research is required to explore the longer-term implications of this behavioural change and whether it will remain in place once the COVID-19 crisis is over. The online retail will go from strength to strength globally as a result with early movers most likely to benefit. This could offer a tentative explanation for the lower expressions of stress displayed by survey respondents with a higher level of educational attainment, though further research is required on this front to establish whether job security and expendable income may play a key role in the shopping behaviour of a consumer.

### **Immediate Impact on Consumer Shopping and Buying Behaviour**

With lockdown and social distancing, consumers' platform to buy or shop is restricted. This has resulted in location constraint and shortage. We have mobility shift and mobility shortage. Working, schooling and shopping all have shifted and localized at home. At the same time, there is more time flexibility as consumers do not have to follow schedules planned for going to work or to school or to shop or to consume.

#### **1. Stockpiling**

Stockpiling is a common reaction to managing the uncertainty of the future supply of products for basic needs. It's a practice when a country goes through hyperinflation or psychological depression due to any war or pandemic. In the present COVID-19 outbreak the consumers are stockpiling essential products for daily consumption resulting in temporary stockouts and shortages. This includes bread, food, rice, pulses, water, toilet paper, meat, disinfecting and cleaning products. This is the first immediate effect of the pandemic outbreak in India on consumer purchase behaviour.

#### **2. Improvisation**

Consumers learn to improvise when there are psychological constraints. In the process, the old habits of doing something are discarded and new habits are invented by the consumers. The corona virus unleashed the creativity and resilience of consumers. Now the consumer who use to buy and shop offline are preferring online shopping process. Improvisation to manage shortage of products or services is another area of future research. The closest concept on improvisation is "Jugaad" in India. It means developing solutions that work by overcoming constraints imposed by social norms or government policy.

#### **3. Pent-Up Demand**

It's a situation in which demand for a product rises precipitously. This may occur during the times of pandemic, war and uncertainty in any region. Under such conditions the consumer tries to purchase more goods and services rather than in normal days, thus there is stimulation in the demand of any product. Under such conditions the consumer shopping and buying behaviour is newly habited than its older habits of shopping and buying.

#### **4. Embracing Digital Technology**

During pandemic, the consumers have adopted several new technologies and their applications. These technologies have lightened the consumer at the most forefront position. Under the current COVID-19 scenario of India we can see and observe that the consumers use different applications to purchase products

online from the shopping malls, supermarkets and general stores. The obvious example is Zoom video services. Consumers with the internet purchase products by Zoom conferencing.

**5. Store Comes Home**

Due to complete lockdown in India and other nations, consumers are unable to go to the shopping malls, supermarkets and general stores. Instead, the store comes home. This reverses the flow for work, purchasing and consumption of consumers. Now the consumers prefer to purchase the products online through home delivery of everything including streaming services such as Disney, Netflix, and Amazon Prime. Which is breaking the odd habits of physically going to brick and mortar places? Thus, it is enhancing convenience and personalization in consumer behaviour.

**6. Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries**

By the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic consumers are prisoners at home through mandatory lockdown and social distancing. This has limited the space for discrete activities such as working, shopping, learning, and socialization at the same place. Thus, it has given rise to the blurring of the work-life of the consumers. This is analogous to too many needs and wants with limited resources. Consequently, there is blurring of boundaries between work and home and between tasks and chats. Some sort of schedule and compartmentalization are necessary to make home more efficient and effective.

**7. Discovery of Talent**

With more flexible time at home, consumers have experimented with recipes, practiced their talent and performed creative and new ways to play music, share learning, and shop online more creatively. With some of them going viral, consumers are becoming producers with commercial possibilities. YouTube and its counterparts are full of videos which have the potential for innovation and commercial successes.

**Transformation from Old to New Habits**

In a short period of time, the present scenario of Coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the lives and livelihoods of people around the globe and has forced the marketing analysts to understand the impact on their business and how to react. The corona virus fear has penetrated the consumer's mind and psychology which has significantly altered the consumers shopping and buying habits locally and globally. The main problems which consumers are facing and has altered their shopping habits are:

- Financial problems facing the consumers during the pandemic have restricted the consumer to enter into the product buying process.
- The mental health of the consumer during the pandemic has created panic across the consumers.
- The activity development during crisis period was also the noticeable problem for the consumers
- The social interactions have been limited to the maximum during the pandemic.

It is expected that most of the shopping and buying habits of a consumer will return back to normal. However, it is inevitable that some shopping and buying habits will die, because under the lockdown and social distancing conditions the consumers have discovered alternatives that are more convenient, affordable, and accessible. In short, what was a peripheral alternative to the existing shopping and buying habit now becomes the core and the existing habit becomes the peripheral. As the universal law of consumer behaviour holds that when an existing habit or a necessity is given up by a consumer, it always comes back as a recreation or a hobby. It will be interesting to notice that what existing consumers shopping habits which are given up by adopting the new ways will come back as hobbies for the said consumers. Thus, the shopping habits of the consumers get modified with the lapse of time. In the present scenario of COVID-19 disease we observe some modified and new habits of consumers.

**Modified Consumer Habits:** In most cases, under the COVID-19 pandemic existing shopping habits of grocery and delivery will be altered by the new guidelines and regulations such as wearing masks and keeping the social distance by the consumers. This is now noticed in India that consumers wear masks before they go for shopping or use the public transit systems. Modified habits are mostly observed in service industries especially in personal services like beauty parlors, physical therapies, and fitness places. Also the modified habits have become a reality for parks, recreation centers, attending museums, and concerts and social events. These modified habits of the consumers have now become a need under the current pandemic situations.

**New Consumer Habits:** There are three main factors which are likely to generate new consumer habits. The first one is the public policy. There will be more screening and boarding procedures including taking the temperature, testing for the presence of the virus and boarding the flight. All major airlines are now putting new procedures for embarking and disembarking passengers as well as meal services. As mentioned before, government policy to discourage or encourage consumption is very important to shape future consumptions. As mentioned earlier the second major driver of consumer shopping and buying habits is technology. It has transformed consumer habits significantly since the Industrial Revolution with the invention of automobiles, appliances, and airplanes. This was followed by the telephone, television, internet and now the social media and the user generated content. The digital technology is translating wants into needs. The third context which generates new habits is the

changing demographics (Sheth and Sisodia, 1999) at family level as well as regionally and globally. In conclusion, changing demographics, public policy and technology are major contextual forces in developing new habits as well as giving up old habits.

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

COVID-19 outbreak has given rise to the change in consumers buying and shopping habits. There are three main managerial implications from the impact of Covid-19 on consumer shopping and buying habits. The consumers have learned to improvise and have become more resistant during the pandemic crisis.

A second managerial implication is matching demand and supply. At each retailer ranging from the supermarkets to hyper stores to drug stores, there were chronic shortages due to hoarding and “run on the bank” mentality of consumers in a crisis. Supply chain, logistics, and warehousing operations are critical functions which need to be integrated with the volatile fluctuations in demand.

The consumers will not go back to their old habits unless they learn the technology to use such as Zoom video services and online ordering which can bring significant changes in their lives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past several months, the emergence of corona virus (COVID-19) has disturbed the economic stability, business and livelihood of people. The deadly virus has taken lakhs of lives across globe. The Business sector from whole seller to retailer has been on back-foot due to this deadly virus. The COVID-19 disease has totally changed the business strategies throughout the world, by influencing the consumer purchase behaviour. Consumers shopping and habits are changing, and many of these new habits will remain post-pandemic. While purchases are currently centered on the most basic needs, people are shopping more consciously, buying local and are embracing digital commerce. To manage isolation, consumers are using digital to connect, learn and play and they will continue it in the same way. Moving forward, we will see an increase in the virtual workforce as more people work from home and enjoy doing so.

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