Consumer Behaviors Post COVID-19

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the new consumer behaviors post the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey resulted in a total of 464 participants. The results yielded important findings into how consumer behavior has changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 65% of participants share their purchases and activities with friends and relatives, especially consumers who are younger, female, and have lower income. Around 75% of participants, especially younger consumers, ask others for their recommendations and share their reviews about products and companies. Consumers are more concerned with the shopping environment than before. Planned shopping and shopping alone are less practiced behaviors, but when they are practiced, it is older consumers more often than younger consumers. 65% of participants see online shopping as an easier option, with 50% of participants finding it faster than normal shopping and believing that it enables them to get lower prices. Female and younger consumers were more positive toward online shopping. More than 65% of consumers tried new products during the COVID-19 pandemic for several reasons, with 50% of consumers still using the products that were first tried during the pandemic. 85% of the new habits acquired during the pandemic are still practiced by around 40% of the participants post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: consumer behavior – Post COVID-19 – new hab

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic first appeared, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia took many measures to minimize negative health and financial effects. These measures included closing airports, lockdown, moving to online work and online school, introducing government financial incentives for people and businesses affected by the pandemic, and providing free health access to all citizens and foreigners who were within the Kingdom from the first day of the pandemic. Within a few months, the Government announced a return to normal life again. This allowed stores, cinemas, and hotels to reopen, restaurants to provide dine in service, employees to go back to their offices, and airports to reopen. Back to normal has been in place since the end of June 2020.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many changes have occurred in different areas of people's daily life. The effect of COVID-19 is not limited to people's health, but it also affects social behavior generally and consumer behavior in particular (OANA, 2020).Many studies have been undertaken since the start of the pandemic to research consumer behavior during the pandemic: impulse buying behavior (Ahmed el at, 2020), panic buying behavior (Addo, et at, 2020),new behaviors during the pandemic (Sheth, 2020), stockpiling behavior (Wang, et al., 2020), supply chain and its effect on consumer behavior (Rejeb, Rejeb, & Keogh, 2020), prosocial consumption behavior (Terres, 2020), and household wasteful behavior (Principato, 2020). However, the implications of COVID-19 on marketing and consumer behavior post-pandemic-induced restrictions have not been covered and need to be studied (Addo, et al, 2020; Sheth, 2020). To fill this gap, consumer behaviors post COVID-19 restrictions are investigated in this study.

2. Literature review

2.1 Context

Consumer behavior refers to all thoughts, feelings and actions that the consumer has or had before or during the buying of a product, service or idea (Puška, Berbić & Bečić, 2019). The great changes that are being experienced across the world are challenging consumers' perceptions and behaviors in retail to the point that they might leave a mark even after the pandemic is over (Pantano, el at, 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, consumers have modified habits or started new habits. According to Sheth (2020), in many cases, current habits related to grocery shopping and delivery will be modified by new guidelines and policies, such as wearing masks and maintaining social distance.

He added that new habits are likely to be generated by three factors: public policy, such as new flight boarding procedures including taking temperature; technology, such as online shopping and many other activities; and changing demographics, such as shared consumption giving way to individual consumption as is convenient for individual family members. Some changes are considered to be modified behaviors and others to be new behaviors. The following sections discuss expected new behaviors after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Social commerce

Since the start of the pandemic, constraints such as lockdown, quarantine, and social distancing have forced consumers to find alternative ways to continue their socializing activities and sharing them with family and friends. Social commerce, which is an integration of social media and e-commerce, provides opportunities for consumers to talk about their ideas and share their experiences about product related information on online shopping platforms (Shahbaz; Ying; & Wenli, 2020). The availability and importance of social commerce has significantly increased as consumers become more connected (Kapur, 2020). Social commerce has moved to a new level since the beginning of COVID-19. In social commerce, consumers share shopping information with their online friends, and make buying decisions based on recommendations from online friends (Qiu, Li & Lin, 2020). Product-related information in social commerce communities is usually considered to be more reliable and significant because of interpersonal communication between the members who exchange this information (Hu, Huang, Zhong, Davison, Zhao, (2016); Lin, Li, Yan, & Turel, 2018).

This has significantly changed the nature and scope of word-of-mouth advice and recommendations as well as the sharing of information (Sheth, 2020). According to Kim & Su (2020), consumers adapt to expectations of peers about purchasing decisions and derive product appropriateness by perceiving the purchasing behavior of others around them. In a situation like COVID-19, individuals follow the purchase patterns of friends in both online and offline purchases (Ahmed et al, 2020). Consumers are mostly influenced by the level of their social interactions with others when making purchase decisions (Zhang et al., 2019). Consumers trust their friends more than unknown users, which results in the purchase behaviors of their friends playing a significant role in their purchasing decision making (Qiu, Li & Lin, 2020). The e-word of mouth, via ratings, comments, and reviews on both products and providers, has been an integral part of consumer daily life in interacting with family and friends since the beginning of the pandemic. Social media platforms and reviews of online products and services appear critical in influencing the purchasing decisions of today's consumers (Kapur, 2020). Influencers in social commerce have three main features: they have many friends, they are keen on writing reviews on businesses, and they have received support from others (Qiu, Li & Lin, 2020). Members in a social commerce community communicate with each other and receive information by surfing and reposting published reviews. The information acquired from members within the same community is very influential and it affects online buying behavior (Zhao &Li, 2020)

2.3 Increased sensitivity towards the shopping environment

During the pandemic, consumers modified their personal shopping behaviors and activities in different ways. According to Eriksson and Stenius (2020), these new activities may be seen in hand hygiene, safety distances, planned and speedy shopping, shopping during less busy hours, shopping without family members, reducing shopping frequency and using contactless payments. In Saudi Arabia, these activities can be classified into two types:(1) measures imposed or recommended by government agencies and/or stores such as hand hygiene and/or wearing gloves when entering a store, wearing a mask, maintaining safe distance, contactless payments and/or providing online services; (2 precautionary measures taken by consumers themselves such as planned and fast shopping, avoiding busy hours and/or days, shopping individually, reducing shopping frequency, hiring another person for shopping, and shopping online. Moreover, due to the pandemic, some new shopping trends arose resulting from consumer concerns about product safety. These trends included seeking risk-free products by focusing on local products, cleaning products and supply chains. Consumers were willing to pay more for products with assurances of high-quality and provable safety standards (Melo, 2020).

2.4 Online shopping

The pandemic was a turning point in the everyday life activities of many consumers. On some occasions, consumers had no choice but to order food, groceries, and other goods online. This extended further to accessing services, such as medical consultations, via online means. This shift was driven by demand from both consumers and providers of goods and services. Consumers demanded home delivery or pick-up services to fulfil their needs and wants safely. On the other hand, providers of goods and services had to satisfy their consumers and maintain market position with competitors by introducing these services. According to Eriksson and Stenius (2020), shifting to online shopping was possibly the greatest change in the market since the pandemic started, especially with respect to families with children and people with greater health risks. The future desires of the COVID generation could result in this shift being permanent (Jeżewska-Zychowicz, Plichta, Królak, 2020).

Indeed, thereis increasing evidence that online grocery shopping is being gradually accepted by consumers because of its convenience, information availability, greater selection, and the absence of physical contact that is associated with decreased risk of infection (Rejeb, Rejeb, & Keogh, 2020). The higher rate of consumers purchasing food online appears to have been maintained, compared with pre-pandemic rates. Companies can benefit from this change to achieve better customer-brand relationship by making use of technologies to obtain more knowledge about customer preferences and shopping patterns. Studies found that using artificial intelligence in the retail sector, through extreme personalization and increased engagement based on contextual and behavioral data, can further engage the top 1% of customers, who are worth 18 times more than average customers (Ameen, at el., 2021).

2.5 Consumer loyalty

As the pandemic started around the world, the practice of pantry loading and maintaining an inventory of medical supplies and shelf stable supplies started too (Jeżewska-Zychowicz, Plichta, and Królak, 2020). Consumer loyalty to a specific brand has fluctuated due to the consumer tendency to stock up on products from any brand as a response to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic (OANA, 2020). Consumers started both online and offline shopping to stock up on their necessities. The shift to different brands came as a result of restrictions on travel imposed during lockdowns and quarantine that led to fewer store or brand choices or to running out of stock for some brands. Melo (2020) mentioned other reasons such as company exits from the market due to recession, consumer needs and motivations due to the pandemic (e.g., anti-bacterial soap), and deliberate delay of purchases (e.g., big-ticket items).

All the above reasons gave less popular or new brands a chance to be tried and consumed by consumers and this may become an exit moment for some consumers from their old brands. Consumers also could keep patronizing, after the pandemic, those stores that assisted them during the pandemic. Consumers may develop a relationship with them and reduce or remove their attachment towards other stores who are perceived to not have assisted (Pantano, el at, 2020).Business's ability to retain loyal customers raises profits within the range of 25% to 95% (Gallo, 2014), which encourages businesses to maximize their effort towards not losing a loyal customer.

2.6 New habits

Many businesses have faced many problems in providing their products since the beginning of the pandemic, especially those who provide their product to many consumers at the same time, such as airline companies, restaurants, and the tourism industry. This was due to government regulations such as lockdown, quarantine, social distancing, or to consumer's own self-protection precautions. When constraints are present, consumers learn to improvise by replacing existing habits with new habits (Sheth, 2020). According to Radjou, Prabhu and Ahujo (2012) improvisation means developing ways that work by overcoming constraints enforced by social norms or government policy.

"Do it yourself" became common among businesses to encourage consumers to acquire their products in a different form. Some examples of this include restaurants preparing ready-to-cook menus, consumers buying coffee-making machines with ingredients to prepare coffee at home, and home delivery via websites and online applications for services that were believed to be done personally such as buying a whole lamp (which is common in many households in Saudi Arabia). New habits that consumers may maintain when normal life returns have been listed by Romeo-Arroyo et al, (2020) as sport, cooking, healthy habits, reading, baking, consuming fruit/vegetables, and planning groceries/meals.

3. Method

3.1 Hypotheses

Consumer behavior is affected by consumer characteristics, including demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, occupation, income, education level (Alooma & Lawan, 2013) and social status(Iqbal, Ghafoor & Shahbaz, 2013). These factors are widely used and are considered good indicators for the study of consumer behavior, assisting in understanding consumers and their needs (Kotler & Armstrong, 2007). The present study measured the occurrence of some of Romeo-Arroyo et al's (2020) activities and two additional habits, online shopping and family activities. These habits were added due to the spread of mobile technology and the time spent with family during the COVID-19 lockdown, respectively.

For this reason, consumer behaviors, considered highly likely to have changed from pre-covid to post-covid, were studied in the context of four demographic factors: gender, age, monthly income, and education.

This led to the following hypotheses:

H1**-** there is a significant statistical difference in social commerce behavior with regard to gender, age, monthly income, and education level.

H2- There is a significant statistical difference in new shopping behaviors with regard to gender, age, monthly income, and education level.
H3- There is a significant statistical difference in the online shopping behavior with regard to (gender, age, monthly income, and education level.
H4- There is a significant statistical difference in customer loyalty with regard to gender, age, monthly income, and education level.
H5- There is a significant statistical difference in practicing new habits with regard to gender, age, monthly income, and education level.

3.2 Research methodology

An electronic, self-administrated questionnaire was used to acquire the data required to test the hypotheses of this research. The questionnaire was sent via social media applications to reach more consumers with different demographic backgrounds and locations. The questionnaire was designed to be accepted only if all questions were answered. The questionnaire was built to meet the purposes of this research in describing consumer behavior after COVID-19. The first part of the questionnaire was designed to collect demographic data from the participants, including their gender, age, education, monthly income, and whether the participant or any relative had been diagnosed with COVID-19.

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to elicit the five new anticipated behaviors. Different types of questions were asked: the first two predicted new behaviors, namely social commerce and sensitivity towards the shopping environment, were explored using five levels of occurrence questions with choices of always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely, and never. The third behavior, relating to online shopping behaviors, was explored using five-point Likert scale questions, varying from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The fourth behavior, customer loyalty, was explored with participants being asked questions with possible answers of agree, neutral, and disagree. Lastly, the adoption of new habits that were acquired during the time of COVID-19, were answered through five choices: practicing it with the same level or higher, practicing it but less than before, stopped, never practiced, and old habit and never changed.

The questionnaire items were built by the author based on the literature for the purpose of this study. Therefore, the validity and reliability of the questionnaire was analysed to ensure the accuracy and consistency of this study's tool. First, validity was confirmed using content validity and construct validity. Content validity was confirmed by two experts in the field. Construct validity is the degree to which the questionnaire measures the theoretical construct it is intended to measure, and was confirmed using factor analysis. Factor analysis assesses the strength of correlation of each individual questionnaire item with respect to a set of constructs (factor) and is broadly used for questionnaire construct validation (Sacristán, 2013).

The principal components estimation resolved in six iterations and four factors were extracted as was assumed (Table 1). One Item was found to have less than 0.4 loading and was eliminated. Together, these factors accounted for 57% of the variance in scoring after extraction. The observed KMO was 0.749. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi 2 = 884.67$; $df = 153$; $p<.000$), indicating good factorability of the correlation matrix. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. The Cronbach's Alpha results were as follows: social commerce = 0.785, new shopping environment = 0.672, shopping online = 0.767, and customer loyalty= 0.701which are all good levels. Thus, the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were confirmed.

4. Results

A total of 464 consumers participated, completing the questionnaire. Around 13% of the participants were female, making most respondents male. The demographic data showed that around two-thirds of participants were within the 26 to 35 and the 36 to 45 years of age groups, and one-fifth of participants were older in the 46 to 55 age group. The four groupings based on average monthly income were roughly equal at 25% for each group. These groups were: less than 10,000 Saudi Riyal (SAR) per month, 10,001–15,000, 15,001–20,000, and more than 20,000 (1 USD = 3.75 SAR). Half of the participants held bachelor's degrees, the remainder holding no degree, lower degrees, or postgraduate degrees. The final, important, demographic question was whether the participant, or one of his/her family members, had tested positive to COVID-19. Around two-thirds of respondents answered this question in the negative.
The following subsections explore these results in more detail.

4.1 Social Commerce

Social commerce behavior of participants was first to be explored. The participants were asked to respond to four items with one of five choices: always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely, and never.

The first item was "I share with friends and relatives my purchases or activities that I do through social media apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook or Twitter". Less than 60% of the participants shared their purchases or activities with others and the rest never shared. Gender was a significant demographic factor for this item with female participants practicing this behavior more than male participants.

Moreover, sharing with others was significantly affected by the participant's age. Sharing increased as age decreased, meaning younger participants practiced this behavior more than older participants. This item was also significantly related with the monthly income of participants, where participants with lower incomes shared their purchases and activities more than higher income participants.

The second item was "I ask friends or relatives for their evaluation of the products I want to buy". More than 70% of the participants practiced this item. Younger participants were more likely to practice this than older participants.

The third item was "I share with others my reviews of products that I bought or used". More than 75% of participants shared their reviews of the products that they purchased or used. Sharing reviews with others was significantly affected by their age, where younger participants practiced sharing reviews more than older participants.

The fourth item was "I think evaluating products and companies is important to me and others". Almost 95% of the participants think evaluation is important for them and others. There were no significant differences across the demographic groups.

4.2 New Shopping Environment

The second part of the questionnaire explored the participants' new behaviors during in-person shopping. There were five items and participants responded with one of five choices: always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely, and never. All the items were designed to explore their behaviors before and during shopping from retail stores.The first item was "Using antiseptic liquid soap or an alcohol-based hand gel or wash hands after shopping". Around 99% of participants did this and half of them always did this. The second item was "Obeying social distance rules during service" and almost all the participants obeyed this with the majority practicing this most of the time or always. The third item was "Wearing disposable mask during shopping" and almost all participants practiced this with two-thirds always wearing a disposable mask.

The fourth item was "Reducing the time of shopping by using planned shopping" and most of the participants did that although only one-third always practiced this item. Interestingly, the older age group practiced this significantly more often than the other age groups. The fifth item was "Shopping alone without the company of an at-risk family member" and only one-third of participants always practiced this, with a minority of participants never doing this. Older consumers practiced this significantly more than younger consumers. There was a significant difference between male and female participants with females less likely than males to undertake this practice.

4.3 Online Shopping

The third part explored online shopping practices with five items measured by participant's level of agreement on the items.

The first item was "Online shopping is easier" with more than two-thirds of participants agreeing. There was a significant difference between the age groups where younger consumers agreed more than older consumers. The second item was "Online shopping is faster" and around half of the participants agreed with no significant difference between groups. The third item was "Online shopping enables me to get lower prices" with more than half of the participants agreeing and around one-third neutral. There was significant difference between male and female participants with females agreeing online shopping enabled them to get lower prices more than males. There was a significant difference between participants based on their age where agreement to getting lower prices decreases as age increases.

The fourth item was "Online shopping reduces health risks" and around 75% of participants agreed. There was a significant difference between male and female participants where females agreed online shopping reduces health risks more than males. Remarkably, there was no significant difference between participants who had themselves, or had a family member, been diagnosed with COVID-19 and participants who had not been diagnosed. The fifth item was "Online shopping gives me more options" and around 67% of the participants agreed. There was a significant difference between age groups regarding this item where participant agreement decreased as age increased.

4.4 Customer Loyalty

The fourth part was to explore customer loyalty with four items in the questionnaire. The first item was "COVID-19 pandemic has given me the opportunity to try some new products" and more than 63% of participants had tried new products during the pandemic. There was no significant difference between the demographic groups.

The second item was "There are some products that were first tried during COVID-19 and I still consume them" and around half of the participants had tried new products for the first time during the pandemic and they still consume them.
This indicates that the majority of the participants (around 75%) from those who tried new products for the first time still consume them, which is very important finding. There was a significant difference between male and female participants where females tried new products and still consumed them more than males.

The third item was "Inappropriate behavior from some stores during COVID-19 forced me to leave them forever" and less than half agreed with that. The fourth item was "Stores that neglected the precautionary measures during COVID-19 have been replaced or changed" and more than half of the participants agreed with that. There were no significant differences between demographic groups for the third and fourth items.

4.5 New habits

The fifth and last part from the survey was to explore the habits that were practiced during the time of COVID-19 and whether they were maintained. Table 2 summarizes results related to the continued practice of habits acquired during COVID-19 restrictions.

Around 40% of participants were still practicing 6 out of 7 of the new habits, but less often than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online shopping and family activities are the most practiced habits, at the same level or higher, of around one-third of participants. Sport was the most practiced habit that was stopped, and cooking was never practiced by around one-third of participants. Only a small percentage of the participants (4–8%) had these habits prior to the pandemic and never changed during and after the time of COVID-19.

The online shopping habit was the habit most practiced, by 75% of the participants, during and after the time of COVID-19. Online shopping was the second lowest habit that participants indicated they had stopped or never practiced. This indicates the importance of online shopping and points to a way of adapting business to an important consumer habit. Half of female participants were found to be practicing online shopping post-pandemic at the same level or higher than during the pandemic. Around 34% of female participants indicated they continued online shopping but less than before. On the other hand, 35% of male participants were still practicing online shopping at the same level or more with less than half still purchasing online but less than before.

Family activity was practiced by less than three quarters of participants. It is the second highest stopped habit, and it was the lowest never practiced habit. Healthy lifestyle was still practiced by around two-thirds of the participants, but the majority practiced it less than during the time of COVID-19. Cooking and personal development were still practiced more than before by around one quarter of the participants. Sport and reading were less practiced habits after COVID-19 with only around one-fifth of the participants practicing them at the same level or higher.

4.6 Hypotheses tests

Table 3 summarizes the hypotheses test. H1, H2, H3, and H4 were partially supported and H5 was rejected. Gender was significant in social commerce, new shopping environment, online shopping, and customer loyalty. Age was significant for social commerce, new shopping environment, and online shopping. Income was only significant in social commerce and specifically in sharing purchases and activities with others.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research explored consumer behavior after COVID-19. The findings demonstrate that consumer behavior has changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sharing purchases and activities with friends and relatives is practiced by around two-thirds (65%) of the consumers, especially younger, female, and lower income consumers. Around 75% of consumers, especially younger consumers, ask others for their recommendations and share their reviews about products and companies with others. This is crucial because of the effect of e-word of mouth on purchase decision making. This implies that businesses need to interact effectively and engage with consumers on a personal level via social media and to be part of consumer’s live comments and reviews.

Consumers are more concerned with the shopping environment, and this was clear via the precautions that consumers are taking such as hand washing, wearing masks, and social distancing. Other measures, such as planned shopping and shopping alone are less practiced and, when they are practiced, it is more often by older consumers. This may be due to the consumers feeling that it is their personal responsibility to follow safety measures and keep their daily life as normal as possible. Businesses need to ensure that consumers coming to their physical stores are safe by providing the needed measures. Businesses can also support consumers who view physical stores as a potential threat source by providing pre-order or home delivery choices.

Around 65% of participants, especially younger consumers, see online shopping as an easier way of shopping, although only half of participants find it faster than normal shopping. This may be because there is a delay in delivery of products purchased online in comparison with normal shopping where the consumer acquires the product immediately. Businesses need to insist that there is a benefit to purchasing online by adding value to the consumer such as online discounts or exclusives. More than half of the participants believed that online shopping enables them to get lower prices. This belief was held more strongly by female and younger consumers in comparison with male and older consumers. Businesses need to target male and older consumers with online discounts in order to change their behavior as these demographics are very important members of the family purchasing decision making. Generally, businesses need to enhance the online shopping experience by minimizing delivery time and providing competitive prices. The new healthy lifestyle and spending more time in family activities need to be integrated in any new marketing plan in the post COVID-19 consumer environment.

More than 65% of consumers tried new products during the COVID-19 pandemic for several reasons. The important finding is that around half of consumers still consumed new products that were first tried during COVID-19. Consumers also changed from stores that neglected precautionary measures during the pandemic. These findings are very important. Businesses need to be ready with their products (online or in stores) when consumers need them because trying a new product may lead the consumer to not return to a long-time used product. Moreover, businesses need to show consumers that their safety and happiness is assured inside their stores. It is very important for small or new businesses to market their products to consumers as the consumers are ready to try new products after their experience during the pandemic. 85% of new habits are still practiced by around 40% of the participants after the time of COVID-19. The new habits that were practiced during and after the time of the pandemic showed that consumers are willing to modify their lifestyle and engage and/or practice new activities that satisfy them, keep them safe, and connect them with others. This is an important finding for businesses to integrate this dimension into their marketing plans.

As with other studies, this study has its limitations. For instance, the sample was for Saudi citizens and the findings may not be generalizable to other consumers. Future research can confirm and establish the findings of this research. Therefore, it is suggested that future research can be carried out on a larger scale, including other countries, to have a better understanding of consumer behavior after COVID-19, especially as the world becomes a global village.

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