

# Impact of the Pandemic on Consumer Behavior and Business Strategy in India

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that engulfed the entire world since the beginning of 2020 forced consumers to learn the new ways of life and unlearn the existing habits within the paradigm of time flexibility but location rigidity. As consumers adapt to the 'new normal' of life, they embrace new digital technologies to facilitate work, study, and consumption in a more convenient manner. These newly adopted habits are visible not only at the home front but also in public places in the form of using safety gears (masks, sanitizers) and using digital platforms (to ensure social distancing). The COVID-19 protocols have led to significant disruptions in consumer behavior and consequent responses of companies in the form of their preparedness for new norms of consumer behavior. This, in turn, is posing a challenge for the future sustainability and viability of businesses, necessitating strategic changes in the business model and the marketing strategies to remain apt to consumers' current and future needs. Companies that were unable to adjust and adapt to these sudden changes posed by the pandemic perished very soon. The present paper investigated the impact of the pandemic on the behavior of Indian consumers and their consumption habits. Though there are many studies on epidemics and pandemics, their focus is mainly on the macro-issues of the economy. The present study tried to fill this research void by analyzing the behavior of consumers in India during the pandemic, as pointed out in the market research reports by prominent research analyst firms. The paper also highlighted the implications of the changed consumer behavior for marketers in the future.

**Keywords :** COVID-19 pandemic, disruption, response, consumer behavior, marketing strategy

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An unprecedented crisis being witnessed globally by humankind that has a strong bearing on lives and livelihoods across the world is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has not only led to economic and health crises at the macro-level but also for the micro-unit of the economy, that is, the consumers in the form of disruptions in their consumption and day-to-day living (Engle, 2020). Today, the difference between work-space, study-space, home-space, shopping and leisure space has thinned, if not phased out. Home has become a pivotal unit fulfilling all the needs of each family member (Chakraborty & Altekar, 2021). As a result, it is of utmost importance to study this unit, that is, the consumers in detail about their consumption behavior during the pandemic and their health safety behaviors as recommended by WHO and different governments. The aim of international and government agencies during a pandemic is to bring about an aggregated behavior change of the entire population and not just a group of people. This behavior change can be evaluated in terms of product adoption and use, accessing services, or adopting health-protective/preventive behaviors. In fact, it's a herculean task to implement behavior change programs for a country at large (Lefebvre & Flora, 1988) that leads to the adoption of new patterns of behavior among the population. This change becomes easy to adopt if the required

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changes in behavior are believed to add some tangible or intangible benefits in the target audience's mind, that is, the consumers or users (Sutton et al., 1995).

## **Importance of the Study in the Indian Context**

The impact of a pandemic varies from country to country. India witnessed one of the longest and strictest lockdown periods compared to even countries like the US and Britain. The pandemic scenario in India has led to a surge in demand for packed and staple food products, but at the same time, it has decreased the demand for beverages (cold), alcoholic, and deep freeze items like ice-creams, etc. There is a huge demand for previously less demanded products like sanitizers, masks, disinfectants, laundry, home and personal hygiene products. At the same time, visits to restaurants, shopping complexes, malls, and cinema halls have declined sharply. Similarly, demand for digital products such as smartphones and laptops has surged (to ease online education or work from home scenario), and so has the demand for electrical appliances that ease domestic work (such as washing machines, dishwashers, etc.) (Svajdova, 2021; Van Der Wielen & Barrios, 2021). The demand for e-commerce, e-banking, and e-wallets skyrocketed, but brick and mortar stores or offline stores witnessed a steep decline in footfalls — some were even on the verge of closure or were merged.

Research by Flatters and Willmott (2009) also pointed towards a change in consumer behavior and purchase pattern during crises in demand simplification and value for money purchases across different income groups and ages. Their study further reported that such changes in behavior and consumption pattern of consumers continued even during the post-crisis period. Such changes in consumer behavior during the crisis periods have instigated the current study's interest, given the COVID-19 pandemic crisis the world is facing today.

## **Literature Review**

Baker et al. (2020) studied the impact of pandemics and epidemics on consumers' purchase and consumption behavior and concluded a negative relationship between the two. Bounie et al. (2020) concluded that online shopping increased in comparison to offline shopping during the early pandemic crisis. This, in fact, reduced the devastating impact of the pandemic on consumers as well as businesses. Chronopoulos et al. (2020) studied the demographics of consumers for their spending during the pandemic time and concluded that male, older, and higher-income consumers tended to spend significantly more across all product categories than female, younger, and lower-income consumers. Eger et al. (2021) studied the effect of the pandemic on the shopping behavior of different consumer cohorts based on generation. Their study also revealed that fear appeal was a prominent reason causing changes in consumer shopping behavior. Fanelli (2021) studied the impact of the pandemic on shopping for food, eating habits, and food-related shopping behavior of Italian consumers and concluded shifts in consumers' consumption and shopping behavior during a health crisis. Kumar and Abdin (2021) investigated the impact of epidemics and pandemics on the consumption pattern of Indian consumers. They studied the behavior of rural and urban consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded differences in their spending and consumption patterns.

Laato et al. (2020) investigated the disruptions in consumer behavior during the current pandemic through the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework where exposure to online information sources acted as stimuli resulting in two behavioral responses among consumers: unusual purchases and voluntary self-isolation. Sehgal et al. (2021) concluded that consumer shopping buying behavior in India got mutated by shopping safety practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in alternative modes of shopping being adopted by consumers and a preference for businesses that adhere to safety protocols. Sheth (2020) examined the impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior as well as changes in consumer habits and concluded that changing demographics, public policies, and technology are future market-defining forces. Van der Wielen and Barrios (2021) concluded that the

pandemic has caused economic hardships, and it will take a long time for economies to be back to the normal level. The study also discussed the negative economic sentiments on households as a result of the current crisis and ensuing lockdowns that affected the labor market and consumption deeply.

The market analysis reports of Accenture (2020), Boston Consulting Group (2020), IBM (2020), and McKinsey & Company (2020) suggested towards changes in consumer shopping priorities in terms of more conscious, healthy, safer, and locally produced shopping through digital platforms. These studies concluded a long-term impact of COVID-19 on consumers worldwide. The Deloitte report (2020) concluded that India would witness a negative GDP growth rate coupled with unemployment spiraling up and a dip in the growth rate of many crucial sectors in times to come. The Kantar report (2020) pointed towards a shift in consumers' preferences towards more savings, health, and well-being and postponement of unimportant planned expenditure to the future.

## **Research Gap**

Though there are many studies on epidemics and pandemics, their focus was largely on the macro-economic issues and not on the micro-constituents of the economy per se. This study tries to fill this research void by analyzing the behavior of consumers in India during the pandemic as pointed out in the consumer market research reports of prominent research analyst firms. The paper also highlights the implications of the changed consumer behavior for marketers in the future.

## **Objectives of Study**

The objectives of the paper can be summed up as :

- ↪ The study highlights the strategies adopted by the government for the new normal way of life.
- ↪ The study discusses the process of consumer adoption to new norms of behavior.
- ↪ The study dives into the changing demand patterns and behavior of consumers in India due to the pandemic.
- ↪ The study provides insights into the changed marketing strategy adopted by companies during different phases of the pandemic in the country, from lockdown to unlocking phase, in response to consumers' behavior.
- ↪ The study suggests future business strategies for marketers to tap the markets in any future epidemic/pandemic.

## **Research Methodology**

The present study is based on secondary data on consumer behavior during the pandemic time, that is, from the beginning of the year 2020 till date. The secondary data were gathered from the reports of the prominent research analyst firms and published papers to investigate the changing demand pattern and behavior of consumers in India. This study also provides insights into the marketing strategy adopted during different phases of the pandemic in the country, from lockdown to unlocking phases, where it was observed that consumers had initial inhibitions to spend on non-essential purchases (during the first lockdown). Post-lockdown, this behavior changed to switching to alternative modes of shopping & spending that became a 'new normal.'

## **Discussion**

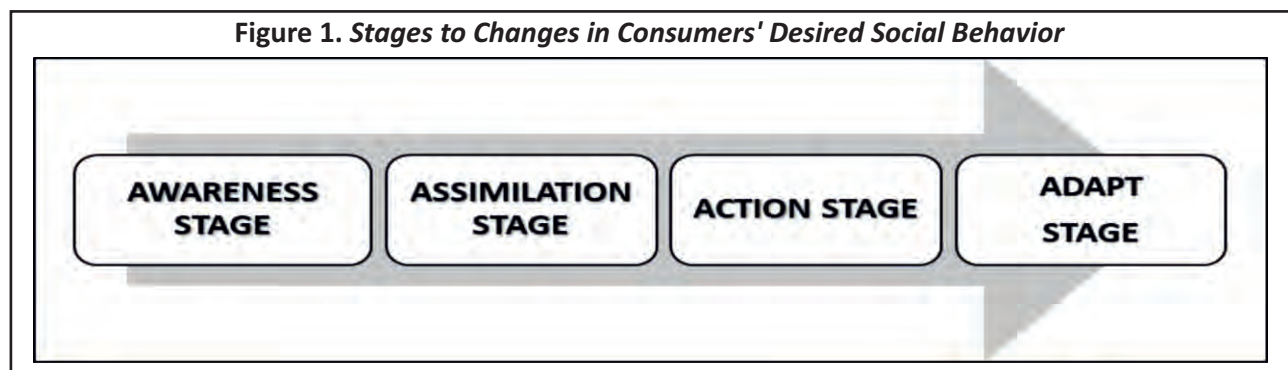
### ***India's Reaction to the Pandemic***

The impact of the pandemic varied from country to country depending on its geographical spread, the

concentration of people, the promptness of the government in its control measures like days of lockdown, strictness in implementation of COVID-19 safety norms, as well as medical preparedness. India witnessed one of the longest and strictest lockdown periods compared to countries like the US and Britain (Perappadan, 2020). Yet, its geographical spread coupled with the concentration of people did not harness the expected results of lockdown. The crucial aspect for the success of governments' efforts is how fast people adapt to the new way of behavior since lockdown cannot be a long-term solution for any economy, given its financial implications for the governments and the people at large (Malviya, 2020).

The pandemic situation has led to many shifts in the behavior pattern of consumers. The gravity of the situation is a strong impetus for gradual or sudden shifts in behavior (Andreasen, 1994; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). The four stepping-stones that mark the journey of the changes in consumers' behavior through the pandemic to the new normal of life (desired behavior) can be studied with respect to four stages (refer to Figure 1) :

- ↪ Awareness stage
- ↪ Assimilation stage
- ↪ Action stage
- ↪ Adapt stage



- ↪ The movement from awareness stage to assimilation stage to action stage and finally adapt stage was faster in the current pandemic than any other crisis witnessed in the past. This is so because the crisis was at the global level and not just at the national or regional levels.
- ↪ The government's 360-degree campaign using different media was pivotal in spreading massive awareness about the novel coronavirus, coupled with 'Janata Curfew' and long lockdown periods, which created a significant buzz about the gravity of the pandemic.
- ↪ Yet, the reason for people's inhibition towards complying with social distancing norms was because they go against our basic social and cultural ethos.
- ↪ Nevertheless, the government and media's 360-degree awareness campaign on the dos and don'ts of public behavior led to the percolation of desired changes in the target audience, as was visible during the unlocking phase. This was also possible with stricter enforcement laws being passed to punish the offenders. As a result, there was quick assimilation of the information disbursed in the campaigns, which became visible in the changed behavior pattern of the consumers.

↳ So, when the government started relaxing the lockdown in May 2020 and finally unlocking in June 2020, it was observed that people were largely observing the new pattern of conduct in public places (i.e., social distancing, wearing a mask, using sanitizers). Though flounders were also there, but they were seriously taken to task by law and enforcement in the form of fines, reprimands.

↳ The combination of voluntary and forced measures led the consumers to the action stage during the unlocking phases. They started exhibiting the desired behavior in public places.

↳ Finally, the consumers are said to reach the adapt stage when they show the desired behavior automatically when they step out of their homes with masks and sanitizers and maintain social distancing in public places on their own.

### ***Consumer Response to the Disruptions Caused by the Pandemic***

The current pandemic crisis that the world is facing globally has paved the way to the life of austerity among people irrespective of class, age, gender, occupation, or income levels. Continuous cuts on spending on non-essentials (such as clothing, cosmetics, furnishing, shopping visits, etc.) to shift to stock-piling of edible items as well as essential non-edibles (such as soaps, sanitizers, handwash, home-care products, etc.) was a trend witnessed globally by research firms (IBM, BCG, Kantar, McKinsey & Company reports 2020) at the beginning of the pandemic. A survey of the Indian consumers by prominent research analyst firms also pointed towards a similar trend:

↳ Indian consumers became more penny-wise and drastically curtailed unnecessary purchases (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

↳ The negative growth rate of GDP and increasing unemployment together with a negative growth rate of many sectors was a worrisome trend witnessed by the Indian economy in the first quarter of the financial year 2020 (Deloitte, 2020).

↳ Consumers were more inclined towards saving for the future and health of the family and were also postponing planned expenditure to a future date, given the uncertainty posed by the pandemic (Kantar, 2020).

↳ Accenture (2020) also confirmed the above trends. Their report also revealed that buying locally was viewed as a sustainable option by the consumers.

↳ According to the Nielsen report (2020), Indian consumers are spending more on products and services that provide safety from viruses, be it personal care-home care products, immunity booster products, and online platforms for education, entertainment, or payments.

### ***The Behavior of Indian Consumers During Lockdown***

Based on the research reports of prominent analyst firms, that is, Accenture, BCG, Deloitte, Ernst & Young India, Kantar, McKinsey & Company, and Nielsen reports (2020), the following are the prominent changes observed in consumer behavior in India:

↳ Increased interest in health, wellness, and ayurvedic products.

↳ Increased demand for masks, sanitizers, hand-wash soaps, disinfectants.

↳ Priority given to public safety products.

↳ Stockpiling of essential and day-to-day items.

- ↪ Restricted offline shopping.
- ↪ Increased online shopping.
- ↪ Work from home became an alternative for office.
- ↪ Online education and learning became a viable alternative.
- ↪ DIY for home chores became a fad.
- ↪ Medicines and medical supplies became crucial.

### ***The Behavior of Indian Consumers Post-Lockdown (Unlocking Phases)***

Based on the market research reports of Accenture, BCG, Deloitte, Ernst & Young India, Kantar, McKinsey & Company, and Nielsen (2020), the following are the prominent changes observed in the consumer behavior in India during the post-lockdown period :

- ↪ Consumers' new behavior trends during the lockdown period continued in the post-lockdown phase.
- ↪ Increased focus of consumers on saving for the future and to be prepared for future uncertainty.
- ↪ Increased preference for contactless delivery as well as home delivery.
- ↪ Increased use of digital wallets as a mode of payment.
- ↪ Drastic reduction in demand for labor from the unorganized sector during the initial unlocking phase.
- ↪ Pent-up demand for washing machines and dishwashers as DIY for home chores continued.
- ↪ Home cooking became a trending thing.
- ↪ Increased connectedness with local products.
- ↪ Movements in public places allowed only for those following COVID safety norms.
- ↪ A slow increase in demand for non-essentials.
- ↪ Offline shopping showed a minor revival.
- ↪ Increased investment in digital technologies to facilitate work and education from home.
- ↪ Increased spending on health and medical essentials.

In this pandemic time, the agility of businesses has emerged as a prominent success mantra. Marketing professionals are now focusing on catering to the basic needs of consumers for their own survival. This is well presented in Maslow's need hierarchy, that is, the primary level needs, that is, food, clothes, shelter, safe indoors, social love, and belongingness, are what count the most in the fight for survival in a crisis situation. Accordingly, the marketers are adapting to consumers' new normal way of living to remain in the market (Chakraborty & Dash, 2022). For example, online food-delivery platforms started delivering essentials such as fruits, vegetables, and groceries for their existence in the market. Since a large number of consumers are financially affected by this pandemic, frugality has been the new trait exhibited by most customers and is slowly becoming a part of long-term behavioral change in the form of responsible buying given the increasing length of the pandemic. This, in fact, even provides an opportunity for the smaller brands to compete with the big, established brands by providing their offerings as a value for money in the niche market.

### **Managerial and Theoretical Implications**

Some of the changes exhibited by the consumers in their purchase and consumption pattern will be a part of the

permanent behavior in the future post-pandemic scenario, that is, using digital platforms for shopping, buying, as well as payments. There was no urgency and emergency to use digital platforms in the pre-pandemic time. But, as it is aptly said, ‘necessity is the mother of all invention,’ so those consumers who had so far inhibitions in sailing into the digital world have now tested the waters at least once and will continue to frequent them given the length of the pandemic crisis and will even adapt to at least one digital platform (Dash & Chakraborty, 2021; Pillania, 2020a; Ting et al. 2020). The survey results of research analyst firms have given a glimpse of the changing consumer sentiments and behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic and the way this behavior is still being shaped and reshaped in the view of the crisis and uncertainty the world is witnessing today. This offers an immense opportunity to the marketers to adapt and change their business and marketing strategies as per the requirements of the current circumstances and future norms of businesses, which is digitalization (Accenture, BCG, Deloitte, Ernst & Young India, Kantar, McKinsey & Company, and Nielsen reports 2020).

The purpose of getting insights into the changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic is to help businesses adapt to the new normal of the market so that they not only survive the current pandemic but remain agile and can withstand any future disruptions with ease. Based on the observed behavior of Indian consumers during the initial COVID-19 pandemic, the following businesses were the game-changers due to their agility to outperform in the current scenario (Accenture, BCG, Deloitte, Ernst & Young India, Kantar, McKinsey & Reports, and Nielsen reports 2020):

- ↪ The online health care sector has come up to take care of urgent but routine ailments.
- ↪ Contact tracing apps to help the government map the contacts of COVID infected patients.
- ↪ Robotic technology to disinfect larger areas in a short time, such as hospitals, public places, etc.
- ↪ Mobile money wallets to do away with the hassles associated with manual cash handling.
- ↪ Boost to research in drugs as well as vaccine development.
- ↪ Boost to local and ayurvedic products as a result of Atmanirbhar Bharat and Vocal for Local campaigns.
- ↪ Boost to online education and conferencing platforms like Zoom, Meet, Teams, etc., to help easy shift of schools, colleges, and offices to home.
- ↪ Boost to online learning and tutoring apps.
- ↪ Boost to investment in businesses related to digital platforms, big data analytics, AI to get real-time data about consumers.
- ↪ Boost to e-commerce businesses such as Amazon, Big Basket, etc., to facilitate contactless deliveries as well as shopping.
- ↪ Boost to food aggregator apps to facilitate in-home dining.
- ↪ Boost to cab aggregator businesses to facilitate contactless essential travels by avoiding public transport.

## **Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research**

Though this study provides insights into the effect of the pandemic on consumers’ lives by diving into the survey reports for market research firms across the globe, this study suffers from providing a primary perspective of consumers, specifically Indian consumers. Further, marketers’ response to the pandemic is also based on secondary sources. Future research in this area can explore and investigate consumer and business sentiments and response to the pandemic through survey research.

With continued pressure on costs and uncertainty prevailing around businesses, the need is to make strategic decisions that ensure the business's current and future sustainability (Pillania, 2020b). The current pandemic situation is just one of the instances of the unpredictability of the future and an eye-opener for businesses to see their preparedness for the future. Agility and investment in disruptive technologies are the twin mantras for businesses' future survival and success. Only then will the businesses be able to shape their destiny independently rather than be shaped by uncertainty. Companies that were unable to adjust and adapt to these sudden changes posed by the pandemic perished very soon.

## Author's Contribution

Reetika Jain is the sole contributor of this paper, from the conception of the research idea to putting it in the final form.

## Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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