

COVID-19 AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: A REVIEW OF RECENT LITERATURE

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COVID-19 has impacted all areas of our lives. It has caused an increase in the mortality and morbidity rates of countries around the world, and an increase in domestic violence and mental health issues, among others. It has also made an unprecedented – and likely lasting – impact on the economy, particularly on the behavior of consumers.

This article provides an excellent review of recent data, research and literature into how COVID-19 is contributing to changing consumer habits in Russia and around the world. Among others, our research found a profound shift in the buying habits of Russian customers, who not only shopped online at historic levels, but also significantly increased their online purchases of things like food, drinks, cosmetic products, etc.

This article is relevant for entrepreneurs, business leaders, policy makers and everyone seeking to understand the changing preferences of consumers.

Keywords: consumer behavior, COVID-19, e-commerce, Russian economy, pandemic, review paper, online shopping, e-tailing.

Introduction

Pandemics and epidemics have always influenced all spheres of human society. Le Goff (1988) argued that the Spanish Flu and Cholera outbreak was directly responsible for the destruction of food distribution and economic activity, eventually leading to famine. And when making forecasts for the risks associated with a future pandemic and its economic impact, Fan et al. (2017) estimated annual losses of about \$500 billion, totalling about 0.6 % of global income. In a similar earlier study by the Commission on a Global Health Risk Framework for the Future led by Sands et al. (2016), researchers found that a future pandemic would cost the global economy over \$6 trillion in the 21st century. Research from the US Institute of Medicine (2004), estimated the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic to have caused a \$40 billion dollars loss to the global economy, while the MERS virus – Middle East Respiratory Syndrome – caused a 54 % drop in South Korean tourism (Czosnek, 2018). The real impact of COVID-19 was far more devastating than most experts predicted. It was socially, economically and psychologically disruptive, and its impact has far outweighed the impact of any modern virus.

Coronavirus or COVID-19 has changed our entire lives in unprecedented ways. It was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (2020), and countries around the world – including Russia – resorted to lockdowns and strict social distancing measures to counter the spread of the virus. These measures significantly affected the lives of people in different ways. Horsesh and Brown (2020) reported a spike in mental health problems and traumatic stress. This was buttressed by the findings of Holmes et al. (2020), Brooks et al. (2020), and Retti

and Daniels (2021). COVID-19 is also poised to impact population growth, and the mortality and morbidity rates of countries (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). And there has been a marked increase in domestic violence and disagreements between neighbours as a result of the pandemic (Campbell, 2020).

Moreover, COVID-19 also created a state of uncertainty across the global economy and in the financial condition of people (Rettie & Daniels, 2021). During the first and second waves of the virus, many businesses were forced to temporarily or permanently close down, forcing them to layoff workers. This in turn created a situation in which neither the employers nor employees were in good financial condition (Akkermans et al., 2020; Gallup, 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). This lack of excess disposable income, alongside economic uncertainty and a lack of social interaction, all contributed to changing the consumption behaviour of people in Russia and around the world.

This paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on buying behaviour by synthesising the recent literature on the subject.

COVID-19 and Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is the sub-field of marketing concerned with studying the decision making process of consumers, including the factors influencing the decision to buy, use and dispose of goods and services. Consumer behaviour doesn't just study what a consumer buys, but the reason behind the purchase and the frequency of purchase (Schiffman, et al, 2007). The internal and external environment has always played a significant role in the decision making process of consumers (Wright, 2006), and Howard and Sheth (1969) argued that human consumption is always influenced by the time and location of every

consumer. Therefore, it is only fitting that an event as monumental as the coronavirus pandemic would reshape consumer behaviour.

All around the world, there were massive shifts in the buying habits and preferences of consumers. Surveys from consumer data firm, Numerator (2021) showed that in April 2020, more than 90 % of consumers reported a change in shopping behaviour due to the pandemic. Accenture (2020) reported a shift in the purchasing priorities of consumers, with consumers prioritising the most essential needs such as food and hygiene products. While nonessential products experienced a slump. Research from PwC (2020) also found a notable increase in the purchase of essential goods such as frozen foods, perishable and non-Perishable groceries, beverages and household supplies. Consumers also overwhelmingly began to prefer online purchases with home delivery. A similar survey by McKinsey (2020) in India showed that 76 % of Indians were willing to cut back expenses and focus on essential purchases because of the pandemic. This type of behaviour is consistent with the earlier findings of Ragnan, Clyde and Kasturi (2010) who found that in the face of a crisis, consumers usually become more careful with spending and develop a better value for money. In China, Chen et al. (2020) conducted a detailed study into the impact of COVID-19 on consumption by looking at transaction data across hundreds of cities. In Wuhan, which was initially the epicentre of the pandemic, there was a 70 % drop in consumption during the first 3 months of 2020. While in the overall Chinese economy, restaurants experienced a 64 % drop, and travel saw a 59 % contraction in sales. These show that consumers prioritised cooking their own food, likely because they could not go out to eat due to the lockdown.

Data from Accenture (2020) also showed that during the earlier waves of the virus, 73 % of consumers preferred socialising in their homes or in the homes of friends and family, and people began to develop a preference for social media and other online entertainment platforms. According to the New York Times (2020), Facebook experienced a 27 % increase in user traffic, while Netflix and YouTube saw a 16 % and 15 % increase respectively. Furthermore, apps for social interaction like Houseparty and Nextdoor saw 79 % and 73 % increases respectively. The New York Times (2020) also reported an increased preference for video games and a reduced preference for sports. For example, while ESPN saw a 40 % drop in viewership, apps like TikTok and Twitch saw user increases. All of these happened during the earlier waves of the virus.

The rebirth of e-commerce and online businesses

As stated in the previous section, during the height of the pandemic, there was a drastic change in the consumer preferences of people around the world. Online entertainment and social media usage reached

historic levels, and videoconferencing apps like Zoom and Google Meet achieved total dominance. Zoom in particular became one of the world's leading pandemic success stories with a 326 % increase in sales in 2020 alone (BBC, 2021). Additionally, due to the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of the pandemic and a fear of contracting the virus, global consumers began to buy everything online including groceries like food and drinks. In Russia, e-retail giants like Yandex Lavka, Sbermarket, Ozon and Wildberries all introduced 'safe delivery' systems to meet the desires of consumers. In the United States, e-grocery was projected to have grown by 52.9 % in 2020 (eMarketer, 2020). This was similar in countries all over the world.

Furthermore, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development – UNCTAD (2021), global e-commerce rose by 4 %. For example, in South Korea, e-commerce sales increased from 1 in 5 people in 2019, to 1 in 4 people in 2020. It was the same in the United Kingdom where e-commerce sales reached 23.3 % and in Australia where it reached 9.4 %. Canadians also increased e-commerce purchases to 6.2 %, while China and Singapore reached 24.9 % and 11.7 % respectively. However, not all e-commerce companies experienced growth. People began shopping online more than ever before, but they could not travel or move around freely due to governmental restrictions. Therefore, transport and travel companies like Airbnb, Expedia and Booking all suffered huge losses (UNCTAD, 2021).

Fig. 1 below is a table showing the performance of the world's leading e-commerce companies by looking at their Gross Merchandise Value (GMV).

How COVID-19 reshaped Russian consumer behaviour

According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic affected every area of the Russian Economy. Unemployment reached its highest level in eight years at 6.3 % and the national poverty rate reached 13.2 % in the second quarter of 2020. Furthermore, about 500 thousand jobs were lost in the manufacturing, construction and retail/hospitality sectors, and like many other countries in the world, the Russian economy experienced a recession in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). However, when compared with other countries, the Russian economy performed relatively better, even in the heights of the pandemic. While Russia experienced a GDP contraction of 3 % in 2020, the world economy contracted by 3.8 %, and advanced economies by 5.4 % (World Bank, 2021).

Similar to other countries around the world, COVID-19 completely changed the consumption habits of Russian consumers. And like other countries, the first notable shift for Russian consumers is a significant increase in online activity. Russian e-commerce sales reached historic levels as an increasing number of Russians – including elderly consumers – began to buy more things online. Euro monitor projected Rus-

Rank by GMV		Company	HQ	Industry	GMV (\$ billions)			GMV change (%)	
2020	2019				2018	2019	2020	2018-19	2019-20
1	1	Alibaba	China	E-commerce	866	954	1,145	10.2	20.1
2	2	Amazon	USA	E-commerce	344	417	575	21.0	38.0
3	3	JD.com	China	E-commerce	253	302	379	19.1	25.4
4	4	Pinduoduo	China	E-commerce	71	146	242	104.4	65.9
5	9	Shopify	Canada	Internet Media & Services	41	61	120	48.7	95.6
6	7	eBay	USA	E-commerce	90	86	100	-4.8	17.0
7	10	Meituan	China	E-commerce	43	57	71	33.0	24.6
8	12	Walmart	USA	Consumer goods retail	25	37	64	47.0	72.4
9	8	Uber	USA	Internet Media & Services	50	65	58	30.5	-10.9
10	13	Rakuten	Japan	E-commerce	30	34	42	13.6	24.2
11	5	Expedia	USA	Internet Media & Services	100	108	37	8.2	-65.9
12	6	Booking Holdings	USA	Internet Media & Services	93	96	35	4.0	-63.3
13	11	Airbnb	USA	Internet Media & Services	29	38	24	29.3	-37.1
Companies above					2,035	2,399	2,890	17.9	20.5

Source: UNCTAD, 2021. GMV = Gross Merchandise Value, also known as Booking Value.

Fig. 1. GMV for the world's top e-commerce companies

sian e-commerce sales to have grown by more than 40 % in 2020 (Reuters, 2020). For example, in the Far Eastern region of Chukotka, Wildberries – Russia's leading e-commerce store, reported a growth of 490 % between April to October in 2020. In the same time frame, consumers in Ingushetia had increased orders by 385 %, and by 239 % in Buryatia.

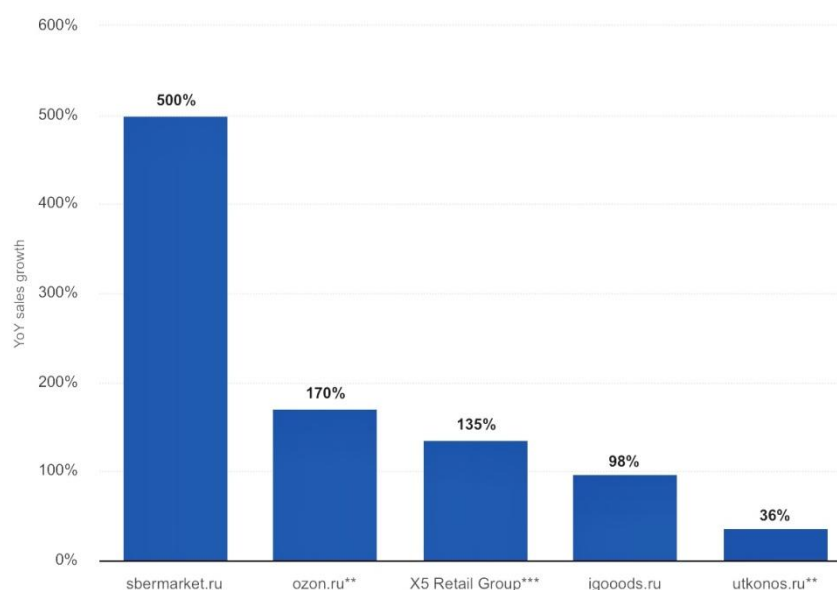
While e-retail stores like Shopify and Walmart saw 95.6 % and 72.4 % growth respectively, travel and transportation companies like Airbnb and Booking Holdings experienced losses.

In fact, in the first 9 months of 2020, Wildberries had attracted 12 million new customers, while existing customers began to spend more money on the website. But it was not only Wildberries. Ozon experienced an 84 % increase in new active buyers between April-May 2020, while Yandex Lavka, a firm specialising in the sales of groceries surpassed 1 million orders, from

about 50 thousand less than 1 year ago. Another online grocery shop, Utkonos, reported a quarterly increase of 65 % from the same period in 2019 (Reuters, 2021). And Sbermarket reported a 500 % increase in food orders in the first quarter of 2020 (Statista, 2021).

Russia's extraordinary e-commerce growth did not only happen in specific months or quarters of 2020. The entire year was a historic one. According to figures from Data Insights (2021), Russian e-commerce grew by 58 %, reaching 2.7 trillion rubles, and sales of groceries online grew by 250 %. Furthermore, about 10 million new customers began shopping online in 2020.

All of these show that a large number of Russians became comfortable with buying groceries like food, drinks and vegetables online. While in previous years Russians felt the need to feel the quality of food prod-



Source: Statista, 2021.

Fig. 2. Impact of COVID-19 on growth of online food sales in Russia in 2020 Quarter 1

ucts in physical stores before buying them, the quality of online shops, backed by huge companies like Sberbank and Yandex, alongside the threat of COVID-19, have made online grocery shopping an increasingly favourable alternative.

Nevertheless, it was not only grocery shopping experiencing astronomical growth. Russians also developed a keen taste for buying other products, particularly cosmetics. In a survey by Migel, 69 % of Russian women between the ages of 18 and 40 reported buying cosmetic products online, and 70 % said they would continue to do so (Migel, 2020).

Ozon reported extraordinary growth of cosmetic sales including a 185 % increase in the sales of lipgloss in 2020 (VC.ru). Wildberries also reported a 3 times increase in its sale of general cosmetic products in April 2020. In the same time period, kits for making cosmetic masks at home increased 44 times year-on-year growth, and thermal water 11 times (Retail.ru).

Conclusion

This paper succinctly reviewed contemporary research and data into the impact of COVID-19 on the consumption habits and patterns of people. We found that all around the world, including in Russia, people turned to online companies and services to meet basic needs. Consumers turned video conferencing and social media apps like Zoom and TikTok into overnight successes. In Russia, consumers also began to develop a preference for ordering food, drinks and other groceries online. For example, Sbermarket saw a 500 % increase in sales, while Utkonos and Yandex Lavka also experienced astronomical growths.

This paper is relevant for policy makers, business leaders and entrepreneurs looking to understand the

ever shifting nature of consumer preferences. However, because this is only a review paper, there is a big opportunity and need for further research on the topic.

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		Online sales volume in million rubles		Number of orders In thousands		Average order value in rubles	
		2020	γ-o-γ	2020	γ-o-γ	2020	γ-o-γ
1	Wildberries.ru General online store	413 200	96%	305 000	100%	1 350	-2%
2	Ozon.ru General online store	197 000	144%	73 800	133%	2 670	5%
3	Citilink.ru Electronics & household	132 730	47%	12 390	23%	10 710	19%
4	Dns-shop.ru Electronics & household	116 760	117%	12 370	82%	9 440	20%
5	Mvideo.ru Electronics & household	113 200	100%	8 900	71%	12 720	17%
6	Eldorado.ru Electronics & household	53 760	95%	6 400	80%	8 400	8%
7	Lamoda.ru Fashion & accessories	52 970	32%	14 550	28%	3 640	4%
8	Apteka.ru Online pharmacy	50 070	46%	32 240	48%	1 550	-2%
9	Aliexpress.ru General online store	49 000	171%	19 060	218%	2 570	-15%
10	Yandex Market General online store	44 090	136%	15 490	159%	2 850	-9%
11	Petrovich.ru DIY, items for the home	44 010	50%	3 820	119%	11 520	-32%
12	Vseinstrumenti.ru DIY, items for the home	42 520	58%	7 830	106%	5 430	-23%
13	Ikea. DIY, items for the home	40 800	175%	2 550	240%	16 000	-19%
14	Detmir.ru Children's goods	38 700	142%	24 300	136%	1 590	3%
15	Leroymerlin DIY, items for the home	37 780	217%	4 460	254%	8 470	-10%
16	Sima-land.ru General online store	37 400	62%	4 280	63%	8 740	-1%
17	Svyaznoy.ru Electronics & household	23 650	18%	1 840	4%	12 850	12%
18	Onlinetrade.ru General online store	23 050	22%	3 560	0%	6 470	22%
19	Sportmaster.ru Sports & leisure	20 110	55%	6 370	74%	3 160	-11%
20	Shop.mts.ru Electronics & household	19 550	106%	1 070	81%	18 270	14%

Source: East-West Digital News

Fig. 3. Russia's top-20 e-commerce websites

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**COVID-19 И ПОВЕДЕНИЕ ПОТРЕБИТЕЛЕЙ: ОБЗОР
НОВЕЙШЕЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ****М. Олумекор, С.Н. Полбицын***Уральский федеральный университет, г. Екатеринбург, Россия*

COVID-19 повлиял на все сферы нашей жизни. Это привело к росту показателей смертности и заболеваемости в странах по всему миру, а также росту насилия в семье и проблем с психическим здоровьем, среди прочего. Это также оказало беспрецедентное и, вероятно, длительное воздействие на экономику, особенно на поведение потребителей.

В этой научной работе представлен отличный обзор последних данных и исследований о том, как COVID-19 способствует изменению потребительских привычек во всем мире. Среди прочего, в процессе работы над статьей мы обнаружили фундаментальный сдвиг в покупательских привычках российских потребителей, которые не только делали покупки онлайн на исторически рекордном уровне, но и значительно увеличили объем своих онлайн-покупок, в частности, продуктов питания, напитков и косметических средств.

Эта статья актуальна для предпринимателей, бизнес-лидеров, политиков и всех, кто стремится понять меняющиеся предпочтения потребителей.

Ключевые слова: поведение потребителей, COVID-19, электронная коммерция, российская экономика, пандемия, обзорная статья, интернет-магазины, электронная торговля.

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