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**IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR**

In order to provide a clear view of what this topic entails, it is necessary that I explain the key terms used in the heading. One of such is "impact". Impact means having a marked effect or influence on something. Thus, this topic requires me as the writer to examine the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced the purchasing behaviour of consumers around the world. According to the World Health Organisation, COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The disease causes mild to moderate respiratory illness in those infected and many recover without requiring special treatment. However among the aged population and those who already have underlying health issues like cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease are more likely to develop serious illness or even die.

Consumer buying behaviour refers to those actions which a consumer takes, both online and offline, before buying a product or service. Consumer behaviour is also the decision processes and acts of potential customers in buying and using products. Many times, we make buying decisions without even knowing it or giving it much thought. For example, during a typical work day, one may ask himself: Where do I want to eat lunch today? or Do I want to relax somewhere after work? This decision-making process is what affects the level of the consumer's consumption of goods and services.

Studying consumer behaviour especially during a global pandemic like the covid-19 is necessary so that marketers can understand what influences consumers' buying decisions. Understanding how consumers decide on what product or service to use will help marketers to fill in the gap between demand and supply and to identify the products that consumers need at a point like this.

Demand is the desire of a consumer to purchase goods and services and the willingness to pay a price for the specific good or service. Demand also refers to the quantity of goods consumers are willing and able to buy at various prices during a given period of time. On the other hand, supply describes the total amount of a specific good or service that is available to consumers. It is the amount of goods and services which producers or sellers are willing and able to sell at a specific price during a given period of time. The demand of consumers for certain goods and services has risen during the pandemic and it has declined for some others.

Just as there are factors that affect consumer demand, there are factors which also affect consumer buying behaviour. These factors can be grouped into three categories. They include personal factors like an individual's interests and opinion that can be influenced by demographics (age, gender, culture, etc.); psychological factors such as the perceptions and attitudes of consumers which influences them to purchase; and social factors like family, social media. All these come into play during a pandemic such as this. For instance, the perceptions of people will determine whether they can prepare adequately for the period of restricted living we are in. Also, it may seem as if everyone is overly concerned about their health during this pandemic, but many do not even care. So while some are stocking up their houses and buying face masks and hand sanitizers to keep safe, others are just living life as normal. Social media also influences what we see as essential to buy during this lockdown period.

The consumer buying behaviour keeps changing as covid-19 which was declared a pandemic by The World Health Organisation (WHO) continues to spread. The change in spending patterns of customers has and is still drastically changing. This new pandemic took the world by surprise and many are still trying to adapt to the reality of this pandemic. It is no longer considered safe for thousands, hundreds and even tens to gather in a single place. With the shutting down of non-essential businesses like bars, restaurants, movie theatres, gyms, churches and other religious buildings, the reality of a defining event such as this, is beginning to take root in the minds of consumers all over the world.

Many people have been overtaken by a fear of uncertainty of the future. With no idea as to how long the pandemic will last or how long we will be on lockdown, many customers are trying to stave off these uncertainties by stocking up on food and general household supplies. The idea of prolonged indoor stay in which going to stores to purchase items has been reduced to the barest minimum, has changed the approach of consumers around the world in purchasing goods. Most people now only step out to purchase essential items.

The reactions of consumers to the isolation and uncertainty caused by the pandemic has resulted in people changing what they are buying, when and how. The market research company Nielsen conducted research on consumer behaviour right from the beginning of the pandemic in China and extended the research to other affected countries. As they monitored consumer trends, they discovered that consumers go through six behavioural stages based on the awareness of the spread of the coronavirus in their communities. They are:

1. Pro-active health-minded buying: At this stage, there is an increased interest of members of the public in the purchase of products that maintain or prevent a breakdown of health and well-being such as....
2. Reactive health management: In purchasing products, people begin to prioritize those products that help to contain the infection such as face masks and hand sanitizer. The Market for fashion items and luxury items begins to decline.
3. Pantry Preparation: From the time more and more people prepare to isolate themselves from the outside world to prevent themselves from contracting the viral infection, they increasingly visit the store and stock up on pantry-safe groceries and household essentials such as bottled water and toilet paper.
4. Quarantined Living Preparation: With the shutting down of physical stores, people increasingly turn to online shopping and decrease their visits to the store. The supply chain also begins to experience some strain with the increase in demand for certain products.
5. Restricted Living: At this stage, people make fewer shopping trips and there is limited online fulfilment.
6. Living a new normal: People return to their typical daily activities and routines with an increased health awareness. There could be a permanently altered supply chain.

**CHANGES IN HOW CONSUMERS SHOP**

When consumers are faced with restrictions on their shopping at their favourite grocery and departmental stores, they usually find newer ways to shop for what they need through technology. From bulk buying, many have changed to online shopping. Many more people are replacing their in-store trips with online purchases and click-and-collect purchase options where they order items online and pick them up in the physical stores. The key message from the government authorities to keep washing our hands in a way, necessitates a need to avoid using cash to pay for goods and services. Cash changes hands frequently and is exposed to all sorts of bacteria and viruses. the WHO reports that the virus can remain on cash for days after being exposed to it. Contactless payments has been very halpful especially in Africa, the Middle East, and some countries in Europe where using cash is almost part of the culture.

As at last year, it was mainly the younger population segments in countries across the world that engaged in online shopping. However, as a result of the pandemic, older generations are starting to see online shopping as a valid and safe option to obtain groceries. For instance, Alibaba reported that in China, online grocery orders placed by those born in the 1960s were for times higher than normal during the period when China was still discovering new cases of Covid-19 each day.

During a time of crisis like this, people are panic buying which helps us respond to our psychological needs of feeling in control of our actions, feeling that we are doing something for the benefit of our families and feeling that we are competent buyers making the correct choice. In addition, with a lot of false news travelling around about how this virus spreads, we typically tend to over-prepare or even prepare for the worst. Crowd mentality also plays a huge role. When we see those around us stocking up their houses and the resultant scarcity of necessary items, it validates our desire to stock up so as not to be left behind without what we need.

**CHANGES IN WHAT PEOPLE BUY**

The market for certain categories of products and services has increased while the market has declined for many others. People are making buying choices based on the new and ever-changing local and global circumstances. As people go through the behavioural stages due to the coronavirus pandemic, they demand more of certain items and demand less of others.

1. **Health Products:** People are becoming more conscious of their health habits and take extra precaution for their safety at this time. Products that maintain health and safety are being purchased much faster than they can be produced or restocked. More and more people are purchasing hygienic and medical masks and hand sanitizers. This puts a huge strain on the supply chain.
2. **Entertainment and Media:** With nearly the whole world on lockdown, and almost every country in the stage of restricted living, people are finding ways to keep themselves occupied and stave off the worries that surround them. This is because the external entertainment options like bars, spas, restaurants and cinemas have been closed due to the pandemic. As such, there has been an increase in digital streaming services like Netflix, Amazon, YouTube, TikTok, Hulu and Disney+. More people are subscribing to these services than ever before. Staying home has increased the amount of content people watch. Many now use virtual reality for gaming and for virtual travelling as they seek more human interaction. We are moving to virtual reality social platforms like Skype, FaceTime and Rec Room. In the parts of the world where people usually communicate via WhatsApp chats, voice and video calls, Instagram and other platforms, there has been a huge increase in the purchase of data from mobile network providers like 9mobile, Globacom, Airtel and MTN. Whereas many people stuck to monthly data plans prior to this period, since everyone tries to keep themselves engaged during this period, the visits to these social media platforms have increased and so consumers spend more on data. These platforms are also sources of current information of the spread of the pandemic. Thus, many keep checking for updates. E-book buying and subscriptions for book-reading apps have also increased.
3. **Groceries or Shelf Items:** There has been a huge spike in the quantity of groceries that consumers purchase. Since people no longer leave their houses daily to go to work or attend school, there will be an increase in the consumption of food items and household supplies. People have also stocked up on items that are durable like canned sauces, noodles, chips, milk, eggs, yoghurt and the likes, as well as toilet paper, soaps and creams, and baby items like diapers, wipes, baby formula, etc.

Among the categories of goods and services which have taken the plunge due to the emergence of this global crisis and which may still suffer decline in demand in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic include airline services (due to restrictions placed on travelling within and outside the nation), hospitality services, luxury clothing, shoes and jewellery brands, restaurant services, hair salons and barbing shops, purchase of homes and cars, and many others.

According to Britton, consumers are focusing on two tiers of consumable products, which he deemed "Survival" tier and "Sanity" tier. 74% of people are buying more food and beverages, 50% are buying more personal care items, 47% are buying more household cleaning items and 33% are buying more off-the-counter medicines. These come under the Survival products. In relation to the Sanity products, 24% are buying more alcoholic beverages, 22% are buying more entertainment, 21% are buying more beauty products and 15% are buying more electronics. Some consumers are also skeptical about purchasing items made in countries like China due to health concerns.

No one knows how long this pandemic will last but it is during pandemics such as this one that consumers create new habits. The concerns of consumers are expected to rise or even change as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to spread. However, it may not greatly affect consumer buying behaviour in the weeks ahead. The essentials-only purchasing is likely to settle in until lockdown orders are lifted. In the aftermath of this pandemic, habits and buying behaviours exhibited by consumers during the period of the pandemic make settle in as the new normal. Consumers may just stick to online grocery shopping and using apps to pay for gasoline. It is now left to retailers and wholesalers to change their modes of providing goods and services to consumers so as not to fall behind.