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**CHANGING CONSUMER HABITS IN THE CONDITIONS OF A PANDEMIC IN THE
REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

ABSTRACT

The pandemic has caused unprecedented changes in the lives of people around the world. The new habits of people in the way of life that have been created could be maintained even after the existing crisis, which indicates a permanent change in the habits of consumers in shopping and consumption. The focus of marketing research in such conditions becomes changes in priorities in purchasing and consumption, the dynamics of changes in established patterns and criteria of purchase and their persistence in the post-pandemic period. An important segment of marketing research in a pandemic is the changed habits in terms of the use of sources and ways of informing consumers about products and services and the use of online shopping channels. This information is crucial for market segmentation and identification of consumer categories with respect to demand value and purchasing methods. Based on the above facts, the focus of this paper is to investigate the immediate and long-term effects of the Covid-19 virus pandemic on consumer behavior. The intention is to identify changes in the lifestyle of consumers as a consequence of the current pandemic, but also its sustainability after the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, Consumer Behavior, Consumer Habits, Online Shopping, Consumption

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life around the world, and is a challenge for the entire world. Covid-19 and its consequences have led to concerns, fears and apprehension among individuals around the world. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all aspects of our lives have changed dramatically. A large number of consumers are facing disruptions when it comes to shopping channels, which was affected by the sudden appearance of Covid-19. Adherence to social distancing measures, which was subsequently rebranded as physical distancing, significantly influenced changes in consumer habits (Sorensen, et al., 2021:10). Thanks to information technology, catastrophic trade losses were avoided by switching to e-commerce. The true extent of e-commerce was determined during the duration of Covid, and its emergence accelerates the unfolding revolution in business. Covid-19 undoubtedly changed consumer habits, so many customers used e-commerce services for the first time, while others only reinforced this pattern of behavior. The key part of electronic commerce is internet commerce, which enables the purchase of products at any time of the day or night. Buying is possible both in the country and abroad, it is possible to compare the price and quality of the product, so it is considered the fastest and most efficient way of buying.

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The needs and habits of consumers determine their consumption system. However, consumer habits and needs are dynamic categories that change under the influence of numerous factors. The most important are: changes in consumer life, technological development, legal restrictions and natural disasters. The first group of factors is related to changes related to: age of the consumer, marital status, birth of children, change of job and place of residence, acquisition of new friends. Another factor is technology, which continuously changes people's lives, existing habits and creates new ones. The mass use of smartphones, the Internet and e-commerce have fundamentally changed the process of informing, communicating and purchasing consumers. Searching for information and ordering through online channels have become the dominant way of purchasing products/services for many consumers. The third factor that affects the change in consumer habits are legal restrictions related to the way and conditions of using certain products/services (regulations related to traffic, behavior in public and closed spaces, use of unhealthy products-alcohol, cigarettes). The fourth and less predictable factors refer to natural disasters such as: earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, global pandemics, including the current pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus.

The current pandemic has caused unprecedented changes in people's lives all over the world. Restrictive measures regarding the movement of people and goods across national and international borders, changes in the way of doing work, education, shopping, etc., forced people all over the planet to adapt to new life circumstances [9 and 14]. Starting from the prohibition of movement outside the national borders of their countries, through the introduction of a state of emergency, limiting freedom of movement, and up to changes in daily habits such as eating habits, engaging in sports or physical activities, fulfilling business obligations, going to stores and other facilities. Repercussions are most visible in the behavior of consumers in shopping and consumption, ie. in the change of their needs, desires, information and purchasing methods. Based on the above facts, the focus of this paper is to investigate the immediate and long-term effects of the Covid-19 virus pandemic on consumer behavior. The intention is to identify changes in the consumer's lifestyle as a consequence of the current pandemic, but also its sustainability after the pandemic.

2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

An important segment of marketing research in a pandemic is the changed habits in terms of the use of sources and ways of informing consumers about products and services and the use of online shopping channels. This information is crucial for market segmentation and identification of consumer categories with respect to demand value and purchasing methods. Based on the above facts, the focus of this paper is to investigate the immediate and long-term effects of the Covid-19 virus pandemic on consumer behavior. The intention is to identify changes in the lifestyle of consumers as a consequence of the current pandemic, but also its sustainability after the pandemic.

Highlights:

- To investigate the immediate and long-term effects of the Covid-19 virus pandemic on consumer behavior
- Identify key changes in the way of information and application of online channels for purchasing products/services
- Implications for companies in order to implement an adequate marketing strategy



3. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 VIRUS PANDEMIC ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The lives of people around the world have been significantly changed during the current pandemic. People live differently, work differently, buy differently and think differently. Apart from the negative consequences for people's physical and mental health, the Covid-19 virus pandemic has led to a huge drop in economic activities at the global level [12 and 19]. There was a change in the movement of people, goods and capital, losses in tourism, air traffic, catering [3, 4 and 8]. Consumers are more than concerned about the impact of Covid-19, both from a health and economic perspective. The new habits of people in the way of life that have been created could be maintained even after the current crisis, which indicates a permanent change in consumer buying and consumption habits. Changes in purchasing and spending have changed throughout the pandemic. According to the Nielsen agency, these changes can be structured in six stages:

- Proactive shopping with an emphasis on health,
- Reactive health management,
- Creation of stocks,
- Preparation for life in quarantine,
- Limited life,
- Life in the "new normal".

Proactive shopping with an emphasis on health is characteristic of the beginning of the pandemic when consumers were focused on buying groceries, hygiene products, supplements and medicines. In the second phase, consumers were directed to purchase products that will help them prevent contracting the virus and spreading the virus to other people. Such products were: protective face masks, gloves, disinfectants for hands and space. Bearing in mind these two phases, it can be concluded that in addition to basic needs, consumers tried to satisfy new needs that were not given much importance until the beginning of the pandemic. The third phase refers to the creation of stocks, that is, focusing consumers on buying large quantities of products. Life in quarantine resulted in less frequent trips to the so-called larger purchases and inventory creation. The fifth phase, the so-called limited life, is best described through the growth of "on-line" shopping, while the sixth phase implies the acceptance of adopted habits and new consumer needs as a "normal" state.

Looking at the way of living and working in the new circumstances, Sheth (2020) identified eight immediate effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on consumption and overall consumer behavior: product hoarding (stockpiling), improvisation, delaying purchases, embracing digital technology, blurring the lines between business and private life, shopping from home, talent discovery and virtual gatherings with friends and family [21].



Figure 1. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on consumer shopping behavior [21]

Accumulation of products, ie stockpiling of everyday consumption products is a common reaction of consumers in situations of uncertainty regarding the supply in the near future. This kind of consumer behavior has led to temporary shortages of some products in certain countries (toilet paper, bread, bottled water, meat, disinfection and cleaning products, medicines). Improvisation of real situations becomes a normal consumer behavior in situations where there are certain limitations physical, economic, legal. In the process of improvisation, existing habits are gradually lost and new ones are created, new ways of consuming and buying products/services are adopted. In such situations, virtual visits to churches, liturgies, museums, concerts, and schools become a necessary reality.

In times of crisis and uncertainty, the general tendency is to postpone the purchase and consumption of non-existential products or services, which are purchased from discretionary income. It is primarily about the purchase of durable consumer goods such as: cars, real estate, technical products, clothes and shoes, the purchase of services such as: cosmetic and hairdressing services, concerts, sports, restaurants, cafes, entertainment. In the pandemic situation, consumers adopted new technologies and their application more intensively. An obvious example is product delivery services, the use of Zoom and other communication platforms that were used for private purposes at the beginning of the pandemic, and later for remote teaching, meetings, forums, conferences. Also, the so-called telehealth for conducting virtual visits to doctors. The use of digital technology in the pandemic is becoming a part of people's daily lives, including the purchase and consumption of products/services. Shopping from home has become an inevitability due to the complete and limited lockdown. Over time, consumers realize that this way of shopping is more convenient and simpler, and that it provides the opportunity to receive personalized value.

With the introduction of restrictive measures in the movement of people and time and space limitations, the boundaries between private and business life become unclear, which led to changes in lifestyle and leisure time. One of the key issues during the pandemic is how to get in touch with distant friends and family. Communication technologies, especially social networks, have contributed to partially overcoming this problem. Given the restrictions on people's movement and the flexibility to use their free time while staying at home, people have been engaged in activities that were neglected before the pandemic. These can be activities of cooking and experimenting with recipes, focusing on training and playing sports, improving talent, virtual visits to museums, galleries. Content sharing goes viral, and many consumers



become so-called. producers who want to make money that way. For example, the YouTube channel during the pandemic was full of videos that have the potential to create innovation and business success. The question is whether people's new habits will be maintained after the pandemic?

The fear of infection with Kovid-19 manifested itself differently in different countries:

- In Serbia, the online purchase of organic food has increased to 66.67%, compared to the period before the Covid-19 pandemic. Changes in percentage terms from the aspect of online shopping can be explained by the increased fear of infection with Kovid-19, as well as fears for one's own health. Organic food was consumed the most by women, generation X (aged 25-40), consumers who completed higher education and those with an above-average monthly income [5].
- In China during the Covid-19 pandemic, food was mostly bought online by young people living in big cities [6].
- In the USA, 78% of women do not feel safe when testing cosmetic products, and about 2/3 of respondents have a reserved attitude when it comes to trying on clothes in changing rooms, or when consulting with sellers, which was not the case before the Covid-19 pandemic. Home delivery services have been used enormously by customers who do not want to leave their homes. After the curfew, 48% of respondents said they would avoid shopping in malls and 32% of respondents said they would avoid shopping in stores, so retailers were looking for solutions to find ways to interact with customers through online channels [20].
- In India, consumers have a specific attitude when making purchasing decisions. They need to see and touch the product before they decide to buy, especially if the value of the goods is higher [13 and 23].

Many customers are conservative and tend to make decisions based on promotions, eg. when discounts are offered if you buy online, free shipping and the like. The Covid-19 pandemic affected the growth of the number of users of online shopping, for whom such a way of shopping was unimaginable [24].

4. CHANGES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR CAUSED BY THE PANDEMIC

Changes in consumer needs and habits during the Covid-19 pandemic have motivated marketing researchers to focus on identifying specific changes in priorities and purchasing patterns, as well as predicting consumer behavior after the pandemic. One such survey was carried out by the auditing and consulting company EY on a sample of 1000 respondents in the territory of the Republic of Serbia in 2021, on the basis of which it established the so-called "EY Index of Changing Consumer Habits". Research has shown that 57% of respondents believe that the fear of the Covid-19 virus will stop affecting their lives no later than two years after the declaration of the pandemic. Few respondents (2%) believe that the fear of the pandemic will disappear only in 3-5 years from the beginning of the pandemic. The said survey also included changes in respondents' consumption. As expected, staples are a shopping priority both before and after the pandemic. Table 1 shows the results of research on the consumption of certain categories of products before and after the pandemic. Based on the results, it can be concluded that all investigated product categories have a tendency to increase in household consumption in the Republic of Serbia. Based on this, it can be concluded that such trends will continue and that even after the pandemic, consumers will take more care of their health and personal hygiene, which will affect their purchases. The biggest changes were observed in



the purchase of beauty and cosmetic products (change from 63% to 72%, before and after the pandemic respectively) and soft drinks (from 60% to 70%, before and after the pandemic respectively).

Table 1. Consumption in the Republic of Serbia before and after the pandemic [21]

Product Category/Consumption	Before Pandemic	After Pandemic
Items For Personal Hygiene	69%	73%
Fresh Food	68%	73%
Beauty and Cosmetics	63%	72%
Frozen Food	62%	67%
Non-Alcoholic Drink	60%	70%

Similar research was carried out by the GFK agency on the territory of the Republic of Serbia in 2021. The results showed that consumers in Serbia expect that after the pandemic the structure of consumption will be identical to that during the pandemic: fresh food (73%), canned and dried food (64%), frozen food (67%), household products and household chemicals (72%), personal care items (74%), beauty and cosmetics (63%). Grocery delivery services (61%) and online streaming platform services (59%), according to respondents, will be the categories on which consumers in Serbia will spend less financial resources after the pandemic. On the other hand, according to respondents' responses, consumers in Serbia plan to continue with adopted habits in the future and increase their budgets for fresh food (29% of respondents), vacations (32%) and 30% for recreation outside the home. Such results agree with the results of the same research at the global level.

The survey by the GFK agency also included respondents' preference for online shopping. The research results showed that online shopping in Serbia recorded growth in the first two years of the pandemic, but lagged behind the growth in developed economies. The number of online customers is growing, but delivery problems have been identified that have consequently affected the frequency of purchases. This is supported by changes in the field of advertising. According to the research results, according to the RetailZoom tool for monitoring online advertised leaflets Promotrack, it is noted that during the year, about 2500 brands are advertised in this way in the Republic of Serbia. However, from the beginning of 2020 to November of the same year, the number of leaflets was lower by 19% compared to the same period in 2019. Guided by this knowledge, it can be concluded that more intensive promotion of the company on digital platforms is necessary, in order to better position itself on the digital market. Also, it is necessary to eliminate identified problems in online delivery if companies want to use them in the sale of their products/services.

Research on differences in consumer lifestyles before and during the Covid-19 virus pandemic in the Republic of Serbia (specifically the city of Kragujevac) in 2020 showed that there are significant differences in consumer habits when it comes to travel, the use of online shopping and payment channels and leading a healthy lifestyle, while the way of eating partially changed during the pandemic compared to the period before it was announced [11]. In this regard, research in Poland showed that staying at home during the pandemic increased the consumption of unhealthy food, i.e. more frequent consumption of meat, fast food, alcohol, even overeating (Sidor & Rzymiski, 2020), which is in accordance with research by Ashby (2020) [1]. Authors Battle-Bayer et al., with their research conducted in Spain looked at the differences in dieting before and during the pandemic and found that the era of the pandemic is characterized by more frequent consumption of products with higher energy and lower nutritional value. They conclude that after the



pandemic, the way of eating will change in the opposite sense (returning to a healthier diet). On the other hand, Cheval et al., and Huang and Zhao identified in their research a greater intensity of leading a healthy lifestyle in the conditions of the Covid-19 virus pandemic [4, 10 and 22].

In addition to the change in consumer buying and consumption habits, it is indisputable that the criteria for purchasing products in pandemic conditions have also changed compared to the time before. Based on the conducted research, the respondents agree that for each product category that was the subject of the research (fresh food, packaged food, alcoholic beverages, non-alcoholic beverages, household chemicals, clothing and footwear, beauty and cosmetics) the price is the key factor on the basis of which they bring the final purchase decision. For all researched product categories, the percentage of respondents who agreed that price is the key criterion in the choice is 62-83%. In second place is health (what is healthy for me), especially for fresh and packaged foods. What usually ranks fourth/fifth when it comes to product selection criteria is availability and/or service quality (30-44% of respondents agree with that).

The pandemic that has affected the whole world has, of course, a long-term impact. The survey also included questions related to expectations for future life after the end of the pandemic. Table 2 shows certain long-term changes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in Serbia and globally.

Table 2. Long-term changes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic [15]

Items	Republic of Serbia	Global
The way I hang out	42%	41%
The way I approach medical care	30%	39%
The way I shop	30%	37%
Ways of traveling on holidays	30%	36%
The way I use my own transport	30%	35%

Based on the above data, we can conclude that there are no drastic changes in the comparison of Serbia with the world in the performance of daily activities. The biggest long-term changes are expected in the way of socializing in the Republic of Serbia 41%, while in the world 41%. Specifically, in the Republic of Serbia, the most pessimistic are the youngest (18-29 years old), among whom 71% believe that it will be worse than before the pandemic. At the same time, the long-term implications of the pandemic on the performance of daily activities, ways of doing business, traveling, using some services, dining out, etc., are also important. Namely, research by the EY company (2021) shows that the majority of respondents agree that in the future they will focus more on the hygiene of their home (66%), that they will use advanced technologies more intensively (74%), as well as online banking services (68%) and improve the way they buy or prepare food (42%).

The state of emergency led to the development of delivery services for food, beverages, supplements and other necessary products. Many of these delivery services started operating in 2019, but they have seen significant growth during the period of complete closure. A smaller number of respondents from the Republic of Serbia (4 out of 10 respondents) used product delivery services before the pandemic, but they noticed an increase in the number of their orders during the pandemic, while 20% of customers started using these services during the state of emergency (Smart Plus, 2021). These services served to bridge the limitation of the working hours of sales facilities and the movement of people, and when it comes to food, the restaurant experience, or at least part of the atmosphere, is transferred. Research conducted by the



Smart Plus agency, which is available on the InStore portal, shows that almost every tenth resident of Serbia, ie 8%, bought groceries through online channels in 2021. Most of them are the youngest customers, between 18-29 years old, in Belgrade and Vojvodina. At the same time, no differences were observed in online shopping preferences between female and male respondents [16 and 17].

5. CONCLUSION

The pandemic of the Covid-19 virus has raised new questions in researching the needs and habits of consumers and the current lifestyle. The goal of such research is a better understanding of consumer behavior and their segmentation into appropriate market segments and the creation of customized value. Familiarity of consumers with digital communication channels and online shopping is an important segment of such research and a criterion for consumer segmentation because their use becomes imperative in the new situation. Based on the presented research results, it is to be expected that such a trend will continue in the future [14]. In looking at the further trend of their use, it is necessary to bear in mind that the growth of digital communication during the pandemic is caused by physical distancing, on the one hand, but that people quickly adopt new ways of communication and shopping and can keep them in the long term, on the other hand [7].

At the same time, the long-term implications of the pandemic on the performance of daily activities, ways of doing business, traveling, using some services, dining out, etc., are also important. Namely, research by the EY company (2021) shows that the majority of respondents agree that in the future they will focus more on the hygiene of their home (66%), that they will use advanced technologies more intensively (74%), as well as online banking services (68%) and improve the way they buy or prepare food (42%). On the other hand, 65% of respondents from the Republic of Serbia indicated that they would permanently change the way they hang out/socialize, but in a negative context. What is worrying is the fact that this attitude is expressed among younger respondents (18-29 years old), among whom 71% of them believe that they will reduce the intensity of socializing compared to the period before the pandemic. There is the same percentage of respondents with a higher degree of education who agree with this point of view. When it comes to socialization, 80% of respondents who are in management positions also agree that in the future there will be less real socializing.

The results of the research presented in the paper indicate the need for companies to continue researching consumer buying and consumption habits, in order to establish the dynamics and intensity of changes. Such information is necessary in the strategic turn of the company, market segmentation and focusing on certain market segments in terms of the required value. This especially applies to the activities that were most at risk during the pandemic (travel agencies, hotels, banks, traffic, manifestations and events, restaurants, fast food, gyms).

NOTICE

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author have no conflicts of interest to be disclosed.



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DECLARATION OF ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author of this article declare that the materials and methods used in this study do not require an ethical committee.

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