

Consumer Behavioral Change Influence on Entrepreneurial Performance during COVID-19 From Selected Areas in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract: The world will never be the same again. Technology will change people's day-to-day activities and socio-cultural contacts, with green retailing and marketing following the new normal, while business economy methods and social security strategies will be forever changed. The focus of this research paper is to outline how consumer behavioral change influences entrepreneurial performance and the implications during COVID-19, with specific reference to selected areas of the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The aim of the paper is to examine factors influencing consumer behavioral change, their implications and to what extent these identified factors influence entrepreneurial performance. The collection of empirical data was done from 10 areas selected in the KZN province. The sample comprised 375 business owners/managers, chosen using quota sampling, where respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire with the help of a research assistant. Due to COVID-19 protocols, respondents were given six weeks to complete the questionnaire. Only a quantitative methodology was followed. Results of the study reveal that in many businesses customers were not visiting frequently. Many people were affected by new regulations and did not cope with social distancing rules. Much work done on COVID-19 addresses and focuses more on health-related issues, rather than societal behavioral change influenced by COVID-19 and its implications. An exploratory study of a quantitative nature, as well as a small sample, limited the study findings. Therefore, generalization should be done with care and further research is recommended to include other provinces with an increased sample.

Keywords: COVID-19; Consumer behavioral change; entrepreneurial performance; influence

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it has unpredictably changed our whole way of life. As suggested by the analysis of economic data on sales, this dramatic scenario has also heavily impacted individuals' spending levels (Di Crosta, Ceccato, Marchetti, La Malva, Maiella, Cannito, et al., 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has caused countless local economies to unravel in the face of severe challenges to survival (Korsgaard, Hunt,

Townsend and Ingstrup, 2020). According to Lim, Morse and Yu (2020), when a crisis affects the entire economy, the customer base for most firms will inevitably shrink, at least temporarily, as consumers and businesses tend to be more stringent in their purchase decisions. Consumer behavior plays an important role in maintaining profit and market reputation of any product and it has been impacted severely due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jha and Pradhan, 2020). As consumers around the globe adjust to the next normal, there is significant variance in consumer sentiment and behaviors across countries (McKinsey and company, 2020). Consumer sentiment and behavior continues to reflect the uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis. Parson and Vancic (2020) highlight that a global crisis struck the world in the shape of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020; as a result, supermarkets have experienced panic buying behaviors, empty store shelves, out of stock products in store, and a large increase in online sales. In addition, supermarkets, producers, marketers, and businesses have had to adapt to consumers' changed buying behavior in food consumption. In previous research, it was established that price and quality are two of the most influential factors in the consumer decision process; thus, increased price sensitivity and perceived quality of food products concern consumers in crisis situations. It was, however, noticed that COVID-19 threatens health-related products as prices begin to destabilize and thus affect consumer buying patterns of those products. The impact on businesses in these uncertain times may be significant (Truter, 2020).

CONSUMER BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced daily routines of individuals and has severely congested the work, socialization, and business activities of people; furthermore, it has altered consumer buying behavior for different products (Ursua, Weng and Barro, 2020). Critical situations push human behavior towards different directions, with some aspects of behavior being unalterable. This global pandemic is not a normal crisis, and to control the spread of the virus, various measures have been taken, including enforced complete and then partial lockdown levels (Mehta, Saxena and Purohit, 2020). COVID-19 moreover significantly impacts every aspect of life, including how people shop. Retailers around the world are facing new challenges, such as the sudden boom in e-commerce, specifically in grocery delivery, which means having a surge in orders to respond to, in coping with the drastic growth. Consumers have demands and with delivery windows full, and supply chain bottlenecks creating further delivery challenges, they remain more than ever driven by delivery options, visibility, communication, and the final mile retailer strategy (Tucker, 2020). People are shifting to digital platforms for day-to-day needs, resulting in less use of public transport, more remote working, and a move to value-based purchasing and online shopping. Additional challenges include wearing masks, increased hygiene, healthy eating and increased divorce, as well as increased pet adoption, and more (Puttaiah, Raverkar, and Avramakis, 2020).

Factors influencing consumer behavioral change during COVID-19

COVID-19 and its consequences have led to fears, worries and anxiety and has become one of the major factors impacting the health and wellbeing of individuals worldwide (Ahorsu et al, 2020). This indicates that health and wellness have inevitably become one of the most dominant factors influencing consumer decision-making during these uncertain times. The 2020 financial year was extremely challenging because of the COVID-19 pandemic that not only had a direct impact on the global economy but humanity as well (Senoko, 2021). Furthermore, COVID-19's rapid spread has changed everything we knew about consumer purchase patterns. For example, consumers quickly realized that ordering food through an e-transportation application could help them stay at home, was useful for fulfilling their culinary needs, and allowed this without actual physical contact with many people (Rahman and Fadrul, 2020). Additional changes have been brought about by increased social restrictions,

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unemployment, remote work, and limited access to products and services, while economic and societal shifts have had a drastic effect on consumer aspirations and purchase behavior. Some potentially long-term consumers are actively checking safety and hygiene measures taken while purchasing goods or services.

Mukherjee (2020) indicated that staying at home for extended periods of time has given rise to varying spending patterns among consumers. A vast majority made lifestyle changes and switched to value-shopping due to uncertainty. While the stockpiling mindset has calmed down since April 2020, people are buying more per shop than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies furthermore show that consumers continue to spend judiciously, shop locally, explore alternative brands, and are carefully researching products and comparing prices before spending. With global working-hours declining by 12% and nearly half the global workforce at the risk of job losses, many are postponing expensive purchases. They are also more mindful of what they are buying, reducing wastage, and researching “bang-for-the-buck” alternatives, often at the cost of brand loyalty. Not all consumers are in a state of retrenchment due to COVID-19. According to Nielsen Intelligence Unit (2021), higher income groups are spending on luxury products to compensate for unrealized vacations and other out-of-home experiences. Increased social restrictions and safety concerns have prompted consumers to go digital for everything from grocery essentials to healthcare. As a study by Bazaarvoice (2021) shows, being able to buy products online will be a major deciding factor in the way people shop. Data by Common Thread Collective (2021) show that e-commerce sales for certain categories, such as medical products, cleaning, and baby products, have increased 50% during the pandemic, versus the same time in 2019. In addition, these habits are expected to remain in the long run, making digital adoption indispensable for business success. As more consumers grow accustomed to doing things in the comfort of their homes, there is tremendous opportunity for brands to offer digitally enabled solutions to traditional needs. One of the best examples is the significant rise of telemedicine and online education in this environment. Similarly, brands in categories such as leisure, retail, and fitness are shifting to virtual business models to cater to this evolved, tech-savvy consumer. The coronavirus pandemic has landed most businesses in uncharted territory. To stay relevant in the post-COVID-19 world, keeping a pulse on changing consumer needs and demands is imperative. Continuous tracking of consumer sentiment and underlying factors that influence their behavior will be instrumental in helping businesses take proactive measures to navigate this crisis.

Consumer behavior refers to the study of individuals or groups searching to purchase, use, evaluate, and dispose of products and services to satisfy their needs (Rajagopal, 2020). Importantly, it also includes studying the consumer’s emotional, mental, and behavioral responses that precede or follow these processes (Kardes, Cline and Cronley, 2011). The spread of COVID-19 has led to panic buying all over the world (Schmidt, Benke, and Pané-Farré, 2021). Changes in consumer behavior can nonetheless occur for different reasons, including personal, economic, psychological, and contextual, as well as social factors. However, in dramatic contexts such as a disease outbreak or a natural disaster, some factors, more than others, more significantly impact consumer behavior. Indeed, situations that potentially disrupt social lives, or threaten individual health, have been proven to lead to strong behavioral changes (Leach, 1994). The spreading of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has led to worldwide stockpiling of food and hygiene products, which led to temporary shortages (Statista, 2021). An example is panic buying, a phenomenon occurring when fear and panic influence behavior, leading people to buy more products than usual (Lins and Aquino, 2020). Specifically, panic buying has been defined as a herd behavior that occurs when consumers buy a considerable number of products in anticipation of, during, or after a disaster (Steven, O’Brien, and Jones, 2014). A recent review on the psychological causes of panic buying highlighted that similar changes in consumer behavior

occur when purchase decisions are impaired by negative emotions such as fear and anxiety (Yuen, Wang, Ma and Li, 2020).

Perceived risk of infection, according to Bentall and colleagues, is a factor influencing scarcity vulnerability (Bentall, Lloyd, Bennett, McKay, Mason, Murphy, et al. 2021). Future studies ought to include threat due to scarcity to test whether *Perceived Threat of COVID-19* remains a meaningful predictor for changes in purchasing behavior, after controlling for threat due to scarcity. Unlike the rodents in the experiments by Fanselow, Lester and Helmstetter in 1988, participants did not experience an aversive event. Experimental studies (instructed fear paradigms) show that next to direct experience, fear and anxiety can also be acquired by informational transmission (Schmitz and Grillon, 2012). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, information regarding the virus and current numbers of new infections are reported daily. As determined elsewhere, regular media exposure is a predictor of fear of the coronavirus (Mertens, Gerritsen, Duijndam, Saleminck and Engelhard, 2020). In line with these findings, their analyses revealed that a greater extent of media exposure was associated with a higher level of *Perceived Threat of COVID-19*, suggesting its possible role as a form of verbal instruction of threat during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, media exposure has been associated with an increase in purchasing quantity and a decrease in purchasing frequency. Another study, using structural equation models, revealed that cyber chondria—that is, excessive information gathering about COVID-19 combined with feelings of frustration and anxiety—is positively associated with the intention to make unusual purchases (Laato, Islam, Farooq, and Dhir, 2020). A qualitative study on twitter content about toilet paper hoarding, established that nearly half of the analyzed tweets expressed negative feelings toward panic buying (Leung, Chung, Tisdale, Chiu, Lim, and Chan, 2021). The authors hypothesize this might lead to emotional distress, depression, and anxiety-driven panic buying (Yuen et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY USED

Empirical data were collected from business owners/managers in the selected areas in the province of KZN. Questionnaire formulation was based on reviewed literature, used to develop a 5-point Likert scale, with closed-ended questions. A quota sampling technique was employed in a quantitative approach to obtain data. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher with the help of research assistants. A sample of the questions used is summarized below (Table 1):

Table 1: Summary of key questions

Research area	Question
Customer store patronage during COVID-19	<i>Alternative response: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree</i> Customer store patronage during COVID-19 has influence on normal business operations
Customer buying behavior changed during COVID-19	<i>Alternative response: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree</i> Customer buying behavior changed during COVID-19
Authorities COVID-19 protocols	<i>Alternative response: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree</i> Authorities' COVID-19 protocols have changed customer buying behavior
Influence of different factors during COVID-19	<i>Alternative response: High quality products; green products; health related products; affordable priced products; easier to keep product</i> Visit of customers to the enterprises/retailers/stores influence different factors during COVID-19

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Shortage of products\service supply during COVID-19	<i>Alternative response: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree</i> Shortage of products/service supply during COVID-19 changed customer behavior toward retailers
Influencing of social media during COVID-19	<i>Alternative response: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree</i> Customer behavioral change towards enterprises influenced by social media during COVID-19
Store patronage and buying patterns.	<i>Alternative response: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree</i> Lack of knowledge and awareness of COVID-19 influence customer behavioral change towards stores patronage and buying patterns

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Previous sections presented an overview of the comprehensively reviewed literature on the specific variables regarding the stated research theme. Participant responses were received from 375 business owner/managers in selected areas (n=375) and results revealed as tabled below:

Table 2: Customer store patronage during COVID-19 influences normal business operations

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	272	78%
Agree	58	17%
Neutral	34	10%
Disagree	6	2%
Strongly Disagree	5	1%

A large number (272 and 58) of respondents (78% and 17%) agreed with the statement that store patronage by customers during COVID-19 influences normal business operations, while at the same time, 34 respondents (10%) remained neutral, with a few respondents who disagreed with the statement.

Table 3: Customer buying behavior changed during COVID-19

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	281	80.3%
Agree	62	18%
Neutral	15	4.3%
Disagree	10	3%
Strongly Disagree	7	2%

Table 3 reflects that most respondents, 281 (80.3%) and 62 (18%), agreed with the statement that “Customer buying behavior changed during COVID-19”, with 15 (4.3%) respondents that remained neutral, while less than ten percent of the respondents disagreed.

Table 4: Authorities' COVID-19 protocols has changed customer buying behavior regarding:

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
High Quality Products	82	33.4%
Green Products	45	13%
Health Related Products	174	50%
Affordable Priced Products	59	17%
Easier To Keep Product	15	4.3%

As shown in Table 4, most respondents, 82 (33.4%) and 45 (13%), agreed with the statement that authorities' COVID-19 protocols have changed customer buying behavior, however, 174 (50%) of the respondents indicated health-related products as a determining factor in customer purchasing.

Table 5: Visit of customers to enterprises/retailers/stores influenced by different factors during COVID-19

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Health security concerns	178	48%
Government COVID-19 lockdown protocols	68	19.4%
Lack of awareness and knowledge	20	6%
Economy declines	15	4.3%
Loss of jobs income	41	12%
Loss of self-businesses income	53	15.1%

Health security concerns were mentioned by 178 (48%) respondents, followed by government's COVID-19 lockdown protocols, as the main contributing issues in changing customer behavior during the global pandemic. There are also small percentages of respondents indicating other variables.

Table 6: Shortage of products/service supply during COVID-19 changed customer behavior toward retailers

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Travel ban	34	9.1%
Productivity decline	64	17.1%
Technology affordability	100	27%
Technology availability	82	22%
Poor supply chain network	95	25.3%

Table 6 shows that technology affordability and availability was indicated by 100 (27%) and 82 (22%) respondents, as well as poor supply chain networks, to have played a major role in the shortage of products/service supply during COVID-19, in changing customer behavior towards retailers.

Table 7: Customers' behavioral change towards enterprises influenced by social media during COVID-19

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	97	26%
Agree	58	16%
Neutral	72	19.2%
Disagree	103	27.4%
Strongly Disagree	45	12%

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Many respondents, 97 (26%) and 58 (16%), agreed with the statement that customers' behavioral change towards enterprises was influenced by social media during COVID-19, while 72 (19.2%) remained neutral, with 103 (27.4%) and 45 (12%) respondents that disagreed with the statement.

Table 8: Lack of knowledge and awareness of COVID-19 influence customers' behavioral change towards store patronage and buying patterns

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Strongly Agree	94	25.1
Agree	87	23.2
Neutral	61	16.3
Disagree	100	27
Strongly Disagree	33	8.8

As shown in Table 8, 94 (25.1%) and 87 (23.2%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that a lack of knowledge and awareness of COVID-19 influences behavioral change of customers towards store patronage and buying patterns. Disagreement with the statement was, however, indicated by 100 (27%) and 33 (8.8%) of the respondents.

CONCLUSIONS

This study intended to identify those factors that contribute the most to influencing consumer behavioral change during the COVID-19 global pandemic. We found people were overly concerned with health and safety and their buying behavior was much focused on health-related products. Shortage of products/service supply during COVID-19 changed customer behavior toward retailers due to technology infrastructure challenges. Furthermore, customers' behavioral change towards enterprises was influenced by social media during COVID-19, where people panicked due to unconfirmed information spread on various platforms. This issue was found to be more pronounced among those with a lack of knowledge and awareness of COVID-19 protective measures and protocols that influence their customers' behavioral change towards store patronage and buying patterns. It can be concluded that COVID-19 and its implications influence business operations and changed customers' behavioral buying patterns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Business operators should consider improving the use of modern technology that will limit physical store patronage by customers. Societal education is much needed regarding COVID-19 safety protocols, understanding and knowledge on how to live in this complex and turbulent environment. The study also recommends that new, well-planned building premises for business centers and malls are needed that will allow for wide spaces between customers during store patronage and the buying process.

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