The Impact of Covid-19 on Consumer Behavior in the Food VS Clothing Sectors

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Abstract: The global covid-19 pandemic situation has led to significant changes in consumption habits. Thus, the present work has as its main objective to analyze the impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior at the time of purchase, more precisely in the food and clothing sector. In order to carry out this investigation, we used a quantitative approach methodology, which was materialized in a questionnaire survey, having obtained a sample of 212 individuals. Based on the results, it was possible to identify that the changes that occurred due to the pandemic, indirectly or directly, affected the behavior of consumers at the time of purchase.

Key-words: Covid-19, Consumer Behavior, Purchase

1. Introduction

This work intends to carry out an analysis of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic may have on consumer behavior at the time of purchase, more precisely on consumers in the Food and Clothing sector and, consequently, carry out a comparative study between the two. This work aims to understand the impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior, more precisely at the time of purchase. The Covid-19 pandemic had a serious impact on consumer behavior as, due to the containment measures imposed by governments in favor of public health, consumers had the need to look for new forms of consumption. Thus, with the closure of physical stores, adherence to online purchases has become a reality for most consumers in order to circumvent this situation.

The truth is that, year after year, the online market has already withdrawn sales from physical stores due to its characteristics in the purchase process (Sahoo, Dellarocas, & Srinivasan, 2018). However, the pandemic provided an increase in this type of sales because people were literally forced to opt for this solution as a result of confinement. According to data from SIBS, “between January 15 and February 28, online shopping in Portugal grew by 46% compared to the same period in 2020, the highest growth since the pandemic began” (Vicente, 2021). It is important to note that, in this specific period, the population was in social confinement.

In this sense, the main question of this study aims to understand what impact the Covid-19 Pandemic had on consumer behavior at the time of purchase? Seeking to understand new consumer habits and trends triggered by the pandemic, namely in the food and clothing sector. As specific objectives, we intend to observe and understand whether consumers in the food and clothing sector started to buy more frequently in online stores during the pandemic; whether they will remain with the same preference, given the type of store, as well as to understand whether the decision-making process by consumers at the time of purchase has a more rational or emotional character.

2. Literature Review

The first studies on consumer behavior date back to the 60s of the last century. They emerged when companies realized that, in order to develop marketing strategies that were able to satisfy consumers' needs and desires, it was necessary to understand their attitudes and purchase decision behavior. There are numerous definitions found to qualify consumer behavior. Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (2000), define consumer behavior as that which comprises the activities directly involved in obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services, including the decision-making process.

Authors such as (Martins, 2013) and Solomon (1998) refer that motivation occurs when a need is awakened and the consumer wants to satisfy it, while perception for Kotler & Keller (2013) describe it as the process through which “ someone selects, organizes, and interprets incoming information to create a meaningful picture of the world". With regard to learning, it is through this that an individual changes his behavior as a result of previously lived experiences (Silva, Rocha, Bringel, & Filho, 2010) or, as Palma, Waneide de Sousa and Carneiro (2011) refer, learning it is the variable that allows companies to more easily retain their consumers.

Kotler & Keller (2013), see consumer behavior as the study of how individuals, groups and organizations select, buy, use and discard goods, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy their needs and desires. For these authors, cultural factors are those that exert the greatest influence on consumer desires and behavior, however aspects such as: culture, social class, social factors, reference groups, and family influence consumer behavior. They also refer that personal factors relate to people's own characteristics, that is, moments and experiences that an individual goes through and ends up interfering with their habits and their purchasing decisions.

Kotler & Keller (2007) present the delay in payment as a disadvantage of purchasing in this type of store. Regarding online stores Sara Moreira (2015) and Lima (2012), state that consumers turn to this type of store for its simplicity, autonomy, speed and convenience, the variety of offers, the payment methods and the availability of certain products. and also for the ease of obtaining information without leaving home. Vieira (2019), adds that the diversity of delivery methods provided by online stores, namely home delivery, are also a determining factor in the purchase process for the consumer.

In this way, it is possible to characterize digital consumers as consumers who are increasingly connected, informed, aware, independent, less impulsive and difficult to impress (Vieira, 2019). However, despite their superior level of curiosity and knowledge, according to Kotler (2017), consumers do not control what they want to buy and are essentially influenced by three factors: by marketing communications in various media (such as television, advertisements, public relations); are heavily dependent on the opinions of friends and family; have personal knowledge and attitudes towards certain brands based on past experiences.

Smart Shopping - Consumers make a more thoughtful purchase of food products, demonstrating intelligence and a greater degree of demand in their choices, such as: health and well-being - Consumers are more likely to buy organic and organic food products, that is, they try to avoid to the maximum extent harmful foods for health; trust - The consumer shows greater interest in the companies that produce food products. They seek to consume more consciously of the social and environmental impact, which originates their choices; convenience - With the pandemic, buying food over the internet is no longer seen as a convenience and has become a necessity, until then people resorted to online shopping and delivery options because it was a faster way and without much personal effort; experience - The consumer associates experiences with the consumption of the food product, that is, they try to buy food that has created good memories for them.

Currently, the world lives in the "Digital Age". This era, also known as the "technological era", began in the mid-twentieth century, when technology became a milestone in the modernization of industry. Over time, and given the constant technological evolution, there has been a change in consumer behavior as they have started to use the internet more frequently. Appel, Grewal, Hadi and Stephen (2019) argue that the growth of social networks, and digital platforms and media, was what impacted so much the change in consumer behavior.

In 2020, the coincident indicator for private consumption showed a negative evolution, while the savings rate increased from 6.8% in 2019 to 12%, this increase being justified by the restrictions that limited expenditure (Banco de Portugal, 2020).According to a study by EY (2020), around 91% of consumers surveyed in that same study say that this pandemic crisis has triggered new consumption habits and trends, namely due to economic pressures, store closures and changing priorities. With regard to the food sector, it is possible to mention five major consumption trends in Portugal: Smart Shopping, Health and well-being, Trust, Convenience and Experience.

The dynamics of the clothing market has always been quite peculiar and with constant challenges, largely due to the enormous influence of trends and fashions and consequent regular changes in the needs and tastes of consumers. Currently, the biggest challenges in this sector are imposed by the particular context of the pandemic that we are experiencing. The Clothing sector is, after tourism, the most affected, as with the restriction measures imposed by the government, people are less predisposed to consume (ANICEV/APIV, 2020).

Online consumption has increased significantly in several categories, with clothing included among the fastest growing. According to Falcão (2016), consumers' preference for purchasing in physical stores is due, fundamentally, to the possibility of establishing physical proximity to the product and having the opportunity to establish direct contact with employees in order to clarify any doubts. Still, according to the same author, going to the physical space can constitute a moment of leisure for the consumer, that is, a form of entertainment. In the words of Ho et al. (2019) in the standard learning hierarchy for example in the experiential hierarchy, consumers (e.g. Western consumers) act based on emotional reactions (“feeling”). This perspective focuses on the idea regarding intangible product attributes (e.g. aesthetics and brand) to shape consumers' attitude towards a product.

Regarding the evolution of markets, as well as the perspective of consumers, we can see that Philip Kotler (2019), in his commentary entitled 'The Market for Transformation', also describes that in modern times consumers are increasingly looking for hope, medicine and anchors that can change a consumer's persona (body/mind) and see value in being transformed. Also Thich (2019), in his commentary on ‘A Buddhist Approach to Consumption’ also elucidated on this spiritual dimension of behavior in which consumers break the habitual ways in which they consume and begin to see that they do not need anything else.

Recent studies interested in exploring the cognitive variables related to sustainable behaviors have highlighted, on the one hand, that social factors and technological knowledge that favor sustainable consumption, forming the basis of the sharing economy (Dabbous and Tarhini, 2019; Goyal et al ., 2022). Unusual consumer behavior was observed during the early stages of the pandemic (Covid-19), where consumers hoarded essential goods and foods so they could self-isolate due to cyberchondria (Laato, S. Et al., 2020). In this type of crisis, companies would not have anticipated and planned adequately (Reid et al., 2020). Food and food supply chain safety was the first emerging issue to be considered, requiring an increasing number of precautionary measures as we move from farm to plate (Rizou et al., 2020).

The current crisis can also teach us a lot about our recent history. Many companies have a limited view of what efficiency means. They focus primarily on short-term cost reductions at the micro level and pay little or no attention to the time, energy and (ethical background of) the factors of production used in their operational processes. This limited approach has been adopted excessively in some companies, resulting in large-scale outsourcing rather than in-house production, low stock levels, a high degree of dependence on foreign manufacturers (e.g. in China) and low prices (as as for groceries).

It should also be noted that the online market also plays an important role in offline consumers' decision-making, so they turn to online sites to compare prices and look for information about products before making a physical purchase. It is necessary to make it clear that online shopping creates the perception among consumers that it involves more risks than purchases made in physical stores. Therefore, the perceived risks of online shopping are: financial, psychological, social, lost future opportunity, temporal, physical, satisfaction and functional risk (Queiroz, 2019) Finally, it is important to emphasize that reason and emotion are not processes antagonistic, but complementary (Goleman, Mckee, & Boyatzis, n.d.), that is, emotional decision-making can be justified by rationalization mechanisms (Cardoso, 2019).

3. Methodology

In this study, a quantitative methodology was adopted, with data collected through the application of a questionnaire survey, to individuals residing in Portugal aged eighteen years or over. This method allows researchers to obtain answers, helping to support results, as well as their reflections. The questionnaire surveys used were designed exclusively for this study and sought to present questions that were clear, simple and short so as not to provoke doubts in respondents.

The questionnaire had closed or dichotomous and multiple-choice answers and was distributed between December 27th and January 16th, 2022. The questionnaire survey was carried out through Google Drive and sent through social networks to the contacts and connections of its authors. Therefore, non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used. According to Shaughneessy (2012), convenience sampling is characterized by selecting respondents based mainly on their availability and willingness to respond. The sample obtained was 212 responses.

3.1 Descriptive Analysis

As for gender, the sample has mostly female respondents 62.7%, and only 37.3% male. With regard to age, 48.6% of respondents are between 18 and 24 years old and 25% are between 25 and 34 years old, which makes these two age groups together represent 73.6% in the sample. The fact that the internet was used as a means of collecting responses may explain the higher prevalence of these younger age groups.

Soon after come the ages between 45 and 54 years old (13.2%), then the ages between 35 and 44 years old 8.5%, 55 and 64 years old (4.2%) and, finally, the over 64 years old (0.5%). In general, we can say that, although heterogeneous, our sample prevails at a young level. With regard to educational qualifications, shown in table 5, it appears that 63.3% of respondents have qualifications at higher education level - 0.5% at bachelor's level, 1% higher technical degree, 45.3% degree, 0 .5% post-graduate, 15.1% at master's level and 0.9% at doctoral level. Secondary education follows with a representation of 34.9% and finally basic education with only 1.9%.

Regarding marital status, most participants are single (71.7%), followed by married or in a de facto union (24.1%), divorced (3.8%) and widowed (0.5%). In terms of monthly income, it can be seen from Graph 3 that 37.3% of our respondents (79) do not have any net monthly income. This is followed by the income bracket between €1,001 and €1,400 (17.5%) and 16% in the income bracket between €665 and €1,000. With regard to professional status, respondents are mostly employed (44.3%) and students (35.4%). The self-employed represent 7.1%, the unemployed 3.8% and retired/pensioners 0.9%.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by professional occupation

		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage valid	Accumulating percentage
	Unemployed	8	3,8	3,8	3,8
	Employed on behalf of others	94	44,3	44,3	48,1
	Self-employed	15	7,1	7,1	55,2
	Student	75	35,4	35,4	90,6
	Retired/Pensioner	2	,9	,9	91,5
	Student worker	18	8,5	8,5	100,0
	Total	212	100,0	100,0	

Source: Own elaboration

As for shopping online in the food sector, more than half of respondents (68.9%) say they do not shop online in this sector. Contrary to what happens in the food sector, in the clothing sector most respondents (77.4%) claim to shop online.

Table 2: Purchase at an online store in the food sector

		Frequency	Percentage
	No	146	68,9
	Yes	66	31,1
	Total	212	100,0

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3: Purchase at an online store in the clothing sector

		Frequency	Percentage
	No	48	22,6
	Yes	164	77,4
	Total	212	100,0

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the food sector, we can see that, before the pandemic, within a period of one month, 42% of respondents made online purchases in this sector with a frequency of “1 time”. Already during the pandemic, only 12% of respondents assume to buy “1 time” in the same time frame. However, contrary to what happened before the pandemic, during the pandemic almost half of the respondents answered “4 and 5 times” (26%) and “more than 5 times” (19.7%). It should be noted that, both before and during the pandemic, the frequency “2 to 3 times” was the most answered by our respondents.

Regarding the clothing sector, it appears that before the pandemic, more than half of respondents (59.1%) claim to make online purchases in the clothing sector, within a month, “once”. During the pandemic, only 35.4% claim to perform “1 time”. However, as can be seen, during the pandemic there is a higher percentage of respondents answering “4 and 5” times (18%) and “more than 5 times” (15%).

Table 4: Frequency of purchases in the food sector

	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic
1 time	28	8
2 to 3 times	30	28
4 to 5 times	3	17
More than 5 times	5	13
Total	66	66

Source: Own elaboration

Table 5: Frequency of purchases in the apparel sector

	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic
1 time	97	58
2 to 3 times	48	53
4 to 5 times	10	29
More than 5 times	9	24
Total	164	164

Source: Own elaboration

As for the reasons that led our respondents not to make purchases in the food sector, as can be seen in Table 12, the need to evaluate the product (50%) and the preference for going to the physical store (63.7%) stand out. As can also be seen, and as expected, only a tiny percentage of respondents (1.4%) agree that the difficulty of accessing the internet is an impediment to online shopping in this sector.

Table 6: Reasons for not making a purchase at an online store in the food sector

	Totally disagree	Disagree	Partially Disagree	neither agree nor disagree	I agree in part	I agree	I totally agree	Answers
Lack of confidence in payment security	52,1%	17,8%	11,0%	11,0%	4,8%	3,4%		146
Need for evaluation. product face-to-face	11,6%	9,6%	11,0%	17,8%	9,6%	16,4%	24,0%	146
Difficulty internet access	87,0%	5,5%	1,4%	4,8%		1,4%		146
Lack of confidence in transportation	44,5%	17,8%	11,6%	9,6%	11,0%	3,4%	2,1%	146
Preference for traveling to physical store	8,2%	4,8%	7,5%	15,8%	8,9%	14,4%	40,4%	146

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the clothing sector, as seen in the food sector, the need to evaluate the product in person and the preference for going to the physical store are the main impediments presented by our respondents for not buying clothing online (66.6% and 56.3 %, respectively).

Table 7: Reasons for not making a purchase at an online store in the clothing sector

	Totally disagree	Disagree	Partially Disagree	neither agree nor disagree	I agree in part	I agree	I totally agree	Answers
Lack of confidence in payment security	35,4%	20,8%	12,5%	22,9%	4,2%	2,1%	2,1%	48
Need for face-to-face evaluation of the product	10,4%	10,4%	8,3%	4,2%	12,5%	20,8%	33,3%	48
Difficulty accessing the internet	68,8%	20,8%	4,2%	4,2%				48
Lack of confidence in transport	35,4%	20,8%	18,8%	10,4%	6,3%	4,2%	4,2%	48
Preference for visit to the physical store	12,5%	14,6%	8,3%	8,3%	14,6%	10,4%	31,3%	48

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the reasons that lead respondents to choose to buy from an online store, we note that regarding "saving time", the response given by respondents was on average 4.64, with the response option equivalent to partially agree.

It is also verified that the respondents partially disagree with the reasons "buying in an online store makes me feel better", "buying in an online store makes me relieve stress" and "buying in an online store I spend less money".

As for the reasons "buying in an online store is stimulating" and "most of the time I buy online when there are sales", the respondents answer neither agree nor disagree.

Table 8: Reasons for choosing to buy in an online store

	Average	Standard deviation
Buying in an online store is stimulating	3,99	1,774
Shopping online makes me feel better	3,06	2,014
Buying from an online store relieves stress	2,93	1,988
Most of the time I buy from an online store when there are sales	4,06	2,095
Buying from an online store saves time	4,64	1,896
Buying from an online store I spend less money	3,17	1,918

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to current consumer characteristics, we note that the response given by respondents was an average of 5.35, with the response option equivalent to partially agreeing with the statement "price is an essential variable to evaluate my purchase alternatives". It was also verified that in relation to the statement "Currently, I resort to the opinion of friends and family about a certain product" the response of the respondents was on average 3.32, with the response option equivalent to partially disagree. As for the remaining statements, our respondents answered the option neither disagree nor agree.

Table 9: Current consumer characteristics

	Average	Standard deviation
I currently invest a lot of time in looking for information before purchasing any type of purchase.	4,13	1,87470
Currently, I limit myself to the information and knowledge I have about the product	3,5	1,67066
Currently, I use the opinion of friends and family about a certain product	3,32	1,64335
Price is an essential variable to evaluate my purchase alternatives	5,35	1,78257
With the pandemic, I became a more rational consumer	4,32	1,86027

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the opinion of individuals about the place where they feel safer to shop, physical stores were the majority of the answers, with a total of 115, which makes a total of 54.2%. It should be noted, however, that the answer for both also has a good representation, with 38.7%. When it comes to choosing an online store, only 7.1% of respondents consider it to be a safer place to make their purchases.

The online store was the option with the highest incidence by our respondents (140 respondents), followed by google (86 respondents), social networks (67 respondents), physical stores (53 respondents) and finally Youtube (2 respondents).

Table 10: Where to look for information about the product

Product information search locations				
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Valid percentage**	**Cumulative percentage**
Google	20	9,4	9,4	9,4
Physical stores	27	12,7	12,7	22,2
physical stores, google	1	,5	,5	22,6
Physical stores, online stores	7	3,3	3,3	25,9
Physical stores, online stores, Google	9	4,2	4,2	30,2
Physical Stores, Online Stores, Social Networks	1	,5	,5	30,7
Physical Stores, Stores Online, Social Networks, Google	4	1,9	1,9	32,5
Physical stores, social networks	1	,5	,5	33,0
Physical stores, social networks, Google	3	1,4	1,4	34,4
Online stores	59	27,8	27,8	62,3
Online stores, Google	21	9,9	9,9	72,2
Online stores, social media	24	11,3	11,3	83,5
Online Stores, Social Networks, Google	15	7,1	7,1	90,6
Social media	6	2,8	2,8	93,4
Social media, Google	12	5,7	5,7	99,1

Product information search locations				
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Valid percentage**	**Cumulative percentage**
Social media, Google, YouTube	1	,5	,5	99,5
Youtube	1	,5	,5	100,0
Total	212	100,0	100,0	

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the act of purchase itself, as can be seen in Graph 6, 56.6% of respondents characterize their purchase as being partially planned, 31.6% as being fully planned and only 11.8% as purchasing on impulse.

In the question "Looking forward to the next year, how often do you see yourself shopping in physical stores and online stores?", which we consider to be a very valuable question to understand the consumption trend of respondents (49.1%) predict in the next year often buy in physical stores. It should be noted that, as expected, none of the respondents answered that they would never shop in a physical store in the next year. Thus, the remaining population is divided into sometimes (28.3%), followed by very often (15.6%) and always (7.1%).

Regarding the frequency of purchases in an online store, most respondents expect to buy from time to time (58%) through this channel. However, contrary to what was shown in the frequency of purchases in physical stores, 9 respondents (4.2%) said they would never shop online in the next year.

Table 11: Predicted frequency of purchases in physical stores

Predicted frequency of purchases in physical stores				
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Valid percentage**	**Cumulative percentage**
Sometimes	60	28,3	28,3	28,3
Often	104	49,1	49,1	77,4
Very often	33	15,6	15,6	92,9
Ever	15	7,1	7,1	100
Total	212	100	100	

Source: Own elaboration

Table 12: Predicted frequency of purchases in an online store

	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Valid percentage**	**Cumulative percentage**
Sometimes	123	58	58	58
Often	49	23,1	23,1	81,1
Very often	29	13,7	13,7	94,8
Never	9	4,2	4,2	99,1
Ever	2	0,9	0,9	100
Total	212	100	100	

Source: Own elaboration

4. Conclusions

As mentioned in the EY study (2020), around 91% of consumers surveyed in that same study stated that this pandemic crisis triggered new consumption habits and trends, particularly due to economic pressures, store closures and changes in priorities, such as guiding question of this study whose objective was to understand what impact the Covid-19 Pandemic had on consumer behavior at the time of purchase?

Thus, regarding online shopping in the food sector, more than half of respondents (68.9%) say they do not shop online in this sector, pointing out as the main reasons the preference for going to a physical store and the need for a face-to-face meeting facial assessment of product. As Falcão (2016) states, consumers' preference for purchasing in physical stores is fundamentally due to the possibility of establishing physical proximity to the product and having the opportunity to establish direct contact with employees to clarify any doubts. Contrary to what happens in the food sector, in the clothing sector most respondents (77.4%) say they shop online,

It was also found that the covid-19 pandemic was a major driver of e-commerce, as it was found that during the pandemic our respondents began to buy more frequently from online stores, both in the food sector and in retail and clothing. This unusual consumer behavior was observed during the early stages of the pandemic (Covid-19), where consumers hoarded essential goods and foods so they could self-isolate due to cyberchondria (Laato, S. Et al., 2020).

We found that there are partially discordant answers for the reasons “buying from an online store makes me feel better”, “buying from an online store makes me relieve stress” and “buying from an online store spends less money”. Still, despite the increase in online shopping having become a growing trend in the way of shopping, in this study we can conclude that the consumers observed will continue to prefer the physical store.

As limitations of this study, we can state that the convenience sample, which is quantitative in nature, does not represent all Portuguese consumers. We can list future studies that should have a more representative sample, as well as the incorporation of qualitative studies, for a better understanding of the topic.

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