

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CONSUMER PURCHASING DECISIONS

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Purpose: The main objective of the survey is to identify changes in consumer behavior and the determinants that influenced purchasing decisions during the Covid–19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach: An interview questionnaire was used in the survey. The survey was conducted through a random selection of a sample. The electronic survey was conducted in April 2021. The questionnaire was completed by 220 people. The media were the tools to reach the respondents social networking and the survey itself was made available on the facebook.com portal, on thematic groups associating consumers of various products. The research was of a pilot nature. This limited the sample size and scope of the research.

Findings: The analysis of the survey results shows that the COVID–19 pandemic affected the purchasing behavior of 76% of women and 62% of men. Surveys have shown how shopping habits have changed during the coronavirus pandemic. The respondents said they started purchasing more products online and that the frequency of shopping decreased, but they purchased more products at one go. The respondents bought only essential products and spent a larger portion of their money on protective measures than before. For 24% of women and 38% of men the pandemic had no impact on their consumer behavior.

Originality/value: The analysis of the literature leads to the conclusion that there is not much research on consumer behavior during the COVID–19 pandemic. The paper is addressed to representatives of the scientific world dealing with the topic of consumer behavior and all those interested in this issue.

Keywords: consumer, COVID–19 pandemic, purchasing decisions.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Consumer behavior in the market is the sum of activities related to obtaining and using goods or services, but also disposing of them. Consumer behavior arises from the individual's experience of needs and refers to the totality of impartial and biased, logical and emotional, responsible and impulsive actions in the process of preparation for decision-making in the market of consumer goods and during consumption (Liczmańska, 2015). The Covid–19

pandemic has changed consumer behavior. The restrictions that were put in place and the ubiquitous sanitation rules caused specific behavior in buyers. Safety has become a priority. The volume and frequency of purchases had changed. Sales of some products that previously had no sales fluctuations, except for holiday periods, increased over a very short period. This mainly concerned necessities, mainly food products, with a long expiration date. Consumers felt fear of the vision of empty shelves in stores, causing them to stockpiling.

2. Factors shaping consumers' purchasing behaviors

2.1. Psychological factors

The behavior of buyers in the market depends on psychological determinants, categorized as internal determinants. These include motives, needs, emotions, personality, learning process, perception, attitudes, and risk propensity when making a purchase decision (Rudnicki 2012).

It is believed that needs are the foundation of the consumer behavior in the market. Motives, in turn, are the main impulse for human behavior. A motive can be defined as any experience that either stimulates the buyer to act or inhibits their actions, supports or hinders their behavior. It occurs when a person experiences a characteristic internal state characterized by an awareness of unfulfillment and a desire to initiate action (Światowy, 2006). Emotions are also an important factor influencing people's behavior, which are defined as strong feelings of positive or negative tinge, preceded by some event. Another factor influencing buyers' behavior is personality. It can be defined as a relatively fixed set of mental as well as physical characteristics of an individual that decides on the characteristic forms of his/her behavior and adaptation to specific environmental conditions (Światowy, 2006). The next factor influencing consumer behavior is the learning process. Learning can be defined as a process based on the achievement and gaining of experiences, which leads to the relentless modification of a person's behavior or allows for a change in behavior that has been previously developed. The result of the learning process and constant repetition of the same actions are habits (Rudnicki, 2012; Zalega, 2012; Dushigg, 2019).

Among the psychological factors shaping consumer behavior, perception also plays a crucial role. Perception is understood as identifying, selecting, preparing and analyzing all types of impulses through which a person registers reality. The way market offers are perceived is influenced by opinions generated from previous experiences (Łodziana-Grabowska, 2015). Consumption behavior is significantly influenced by attitudes, that is, a kind of inclination to act in a particular way. Attitudes are influenced by external actions, such as marketing activity, but also by the experience of the individual. They can create themselves with the influence of information derived from other people, which is broadcast with the help of mass media (Rudnicki, 2012; Światowy, 2006).

Making a purchase decision is a risky activity, mainly when a consumer is buying a good or service for the first time. These risks have to do with making wrong decisions or the possibility of experiencing, for example, damage or loss. If the risk is identified by the buyer, it can be decisive in terms of the consumer behavior and greatly influence it. In a situation where buyers in the process of purchasing a particular product do not see the danger integrated into their decision, the fact of the real presence of this risk will not have any impact on consumer behavior (Rudnicki, 2007).

2.2. Demographic factors

Age has a special impact on the behavior of buyers in the market. People who belong to different age groups have different needs and shopping goals. The market for goods divided into goods intended for the youngest, teenagers or seniors in a simple way shows the characteristic activities of companies. At the same time, consumer preferences are changing over the years. Young people entering and exploring the world often purchase functional, low-priced and modern equipment, meanwhile, older people often search for durable, standard and reasonably priced items. It is not uncommon for young adults to visit furniture stores, electronics stores, bookstores, boutiques, cafes, etc. Older people, on the other hand, rather avoid shopping malls or hypermarkets, opting instead to shop at a small local store (Rudnicki, 2012; Gracz, Ostrowska, 2013).

Consumer behavior in the market is largely determined by gender. It is not uncommon for women to indicate that the appearance of goods has a huge importance for them when shopping, while men are more likely to follow a functional product. Women sometimes treat the acquisition of goods as a way to spend leisure time, and also buy more often on impulse, but also in order to be able to stand out with the purchased items. Men, on the other hand, tend to approach shopping more prudently. They go for shopping when the previously used product has deteriorated. When they decide to buy a new product they mostly already know what to buy and where (Rudnicki, 2012; Gracz, Ostrowska, 2014).

The set of demographic factors includes also education. Consumers, having reached a higher level of education, are much more demanding on themselves, but also on others around them. Higher-order needs are more strongly emphasized for them than for people with lower education. One cannot overlook the fact that usually with an increase in education, the social and professional position improves, and consequently a consumer earns a high income.

One important factor is the lifestyle chosen by buyers. Lifestyle is defined by clothing, diet, leisure activities, such as physical activity, cultural activities, form of work or values. (Łodziana-Grabowska 2015; Zalega, 2012). Lifestyle is often an important motive for purchasing processes. It is also a widely used criterion for dividing the buyer's market. Knowing more about customers' lifestyles makes it easier to match goods offerings to their requirements (Rudnicki, 2012).

2.3. Economic factors

Income is one of the most important economic factors affecting consumption. It is a major element in determining the quality of life, allowing to satisfy basic needs, but also those of a higher order. The amount of disposable income (the totality of current household income earned from various sources, reduced by direct taxes) affects consumption, especially in the long term.

The price level is another determinant affecting people's purchasing behavior. Price is a determinant of the decision to buy a product, unrelated to the consumer's age, place of origin, gender or occupational group. The level of price affects the consumer's perception of the characteristics of a particular good. Usually, the higher the price of items, the more valuable they are considered by people to be, having better quality, mainly when they carry a recognizable and reputable brand name. At the same time, expensive items or services are not in high demand. The more expensive the goods, the lower the demand. Expensive goods make the purchase decision more thought-out (Maciaszczyk, 2014).

2.4. Marketing factors

A product, in marketing terms, refers to a set of tangible and intangible characteristics, such as the form of packaging, price, brand, quality, color range, company reputation and services offered by the seller, which buyers may consider as proposals to satisfy their needs. The components of the product's design are its equipment. A product can specify a good, service, zone, person or concept. The main role of a product is to satisfy specific needs of buyers. Promotion is an important factor. It influences the buyers of a certain company by giving them information, which is designed to expand their knowledge of the company, its sales offer, as well as induce inclination in them. The fundamental premise of promotional activities is to popularize information so that it reaches likely new customers (Łodziana-Grabowska, 2014; Nowacki, 2006). One of the most widely used activities is advertising. It is defined as a large, paid and interpersonal form of transmission and support of concepts, goods and services by a specific sender. Its system of operation is multifaceted.

3. Research sample characteristics

An interview questionnaire was used in the paper. The electronic survey was conducted in April 2021. The questionnaire was completed by 220 people. The media were the tools to reach the respondents social networking, and the survey itself was made available on the facebook.com portal, on thematic groups associating consumers of various products. The research was of a pilot nature.

Due to the nature of the survey and the place of its performance, it was carried out through random sampling. The survey aimed to understand consumer behavior and the determinants that influenced purchasing decisions during the Covid–19 pandemic.

The survey included 119 women and 101 men. The level of education was matched with the gender of the respondents, as shown in Figure 1.

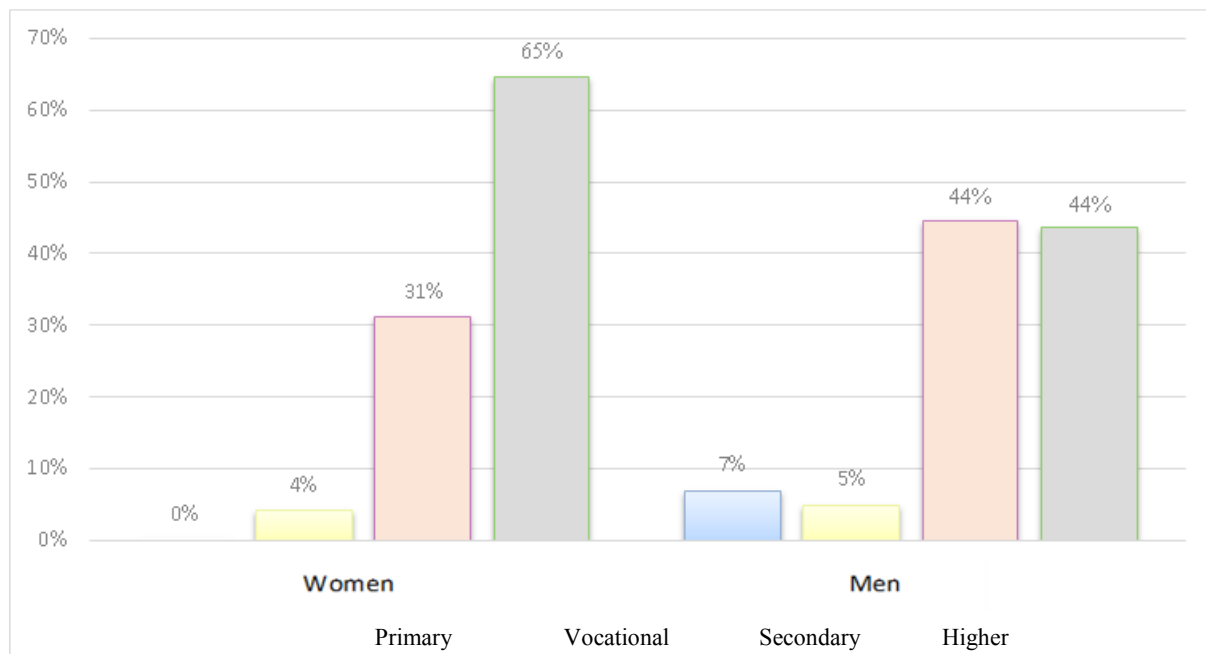


Figure 1. Gender versus education of respondents.

Source: Own elaboration.

65% of women and 44% of men had higher education, and 7% of men and no women had primary education. Due to the random research group, the level of education of the respondents does not reflect the level of education of the society in the country.

4. Shopping habits during the pandemic

The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic has led to many changes in society. It has influenced people's behavior and previous lifestyles. It has influenced consumer buying behavior.

The question “Has the pandemic affected your purchasing decisions?” was answered by the majority of respondents, including women (76%) and men (62%), in the affirmative (Figure 2).

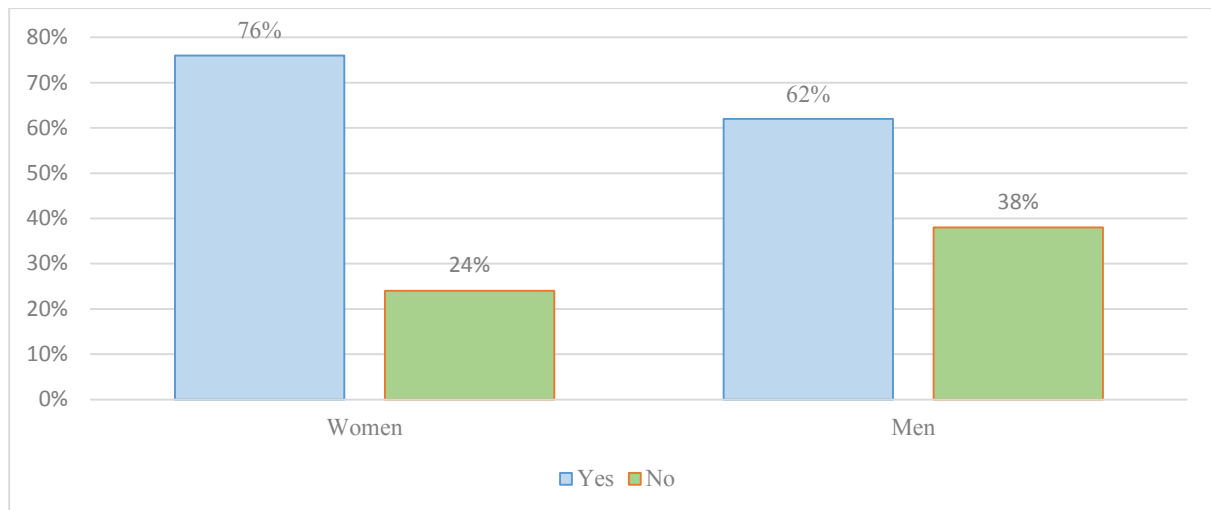


Figure 2. The impact of the pandemic on purchasing decisions.

Source: Own elaboration.

Women were more afraid of the pandemic. They also complied with pandemic restrictions. This also had an impact on purchasing decisions, size and choice of products.

During the pandemic, consumers making purchases valued their own safety the most (61%), which may have been due to a shaky sense of safety due to the spread of a potentially dangerous virus (Figure 3).

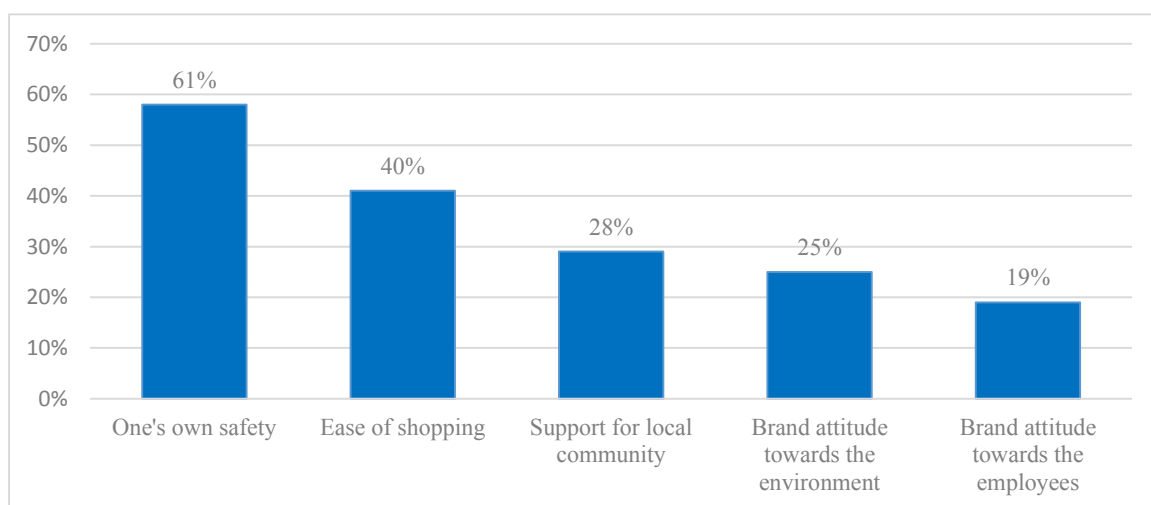


Figure 3. Increasing importance of determinants of consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Own study.

The second most frequently indicated answer regarding important determinants of consumer behavior was the “ease of shopping”, which amounted to 40%. The reasons can include limitation of the possibility to go out and new sanitary rules that made it difficult to access points of sale (e.g., limits on the number of people per m² in a room, shopping hours for seniors). Least important was the brand's approach to employees during this difficult time (19%). The fact whether the company tried to keep jobs or laid off employees for financial

reasons was not reflected in consumers' perceptions of the brand and thus did not affect their purchasing decisions.

The pandemic situation has forced changes in virtually every facet of human life. Respondents were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their behavior. More than 42% of respondents said they shopped online more often (Figure 4).

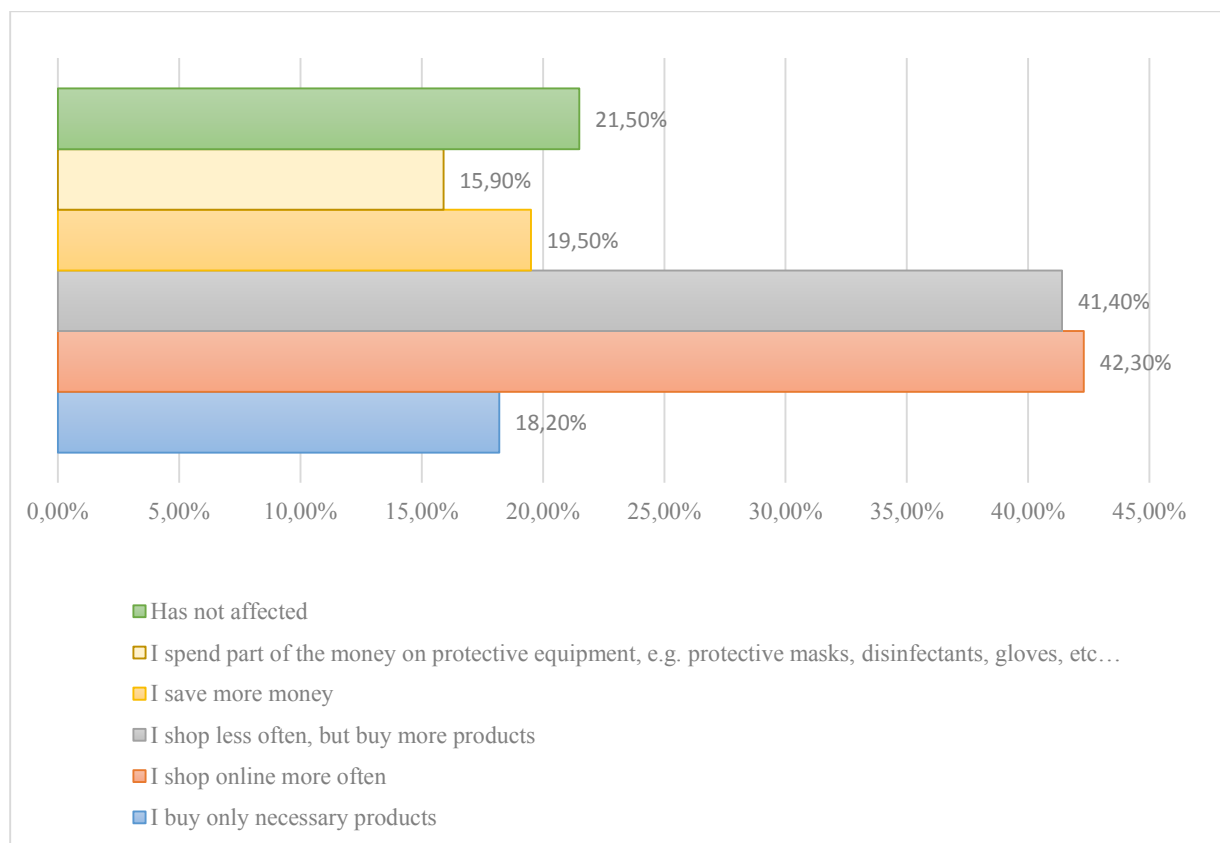


Figure 4. The impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior.

Source: Own elaboration.

41.4% of respondents said they purchased more products, but much less frequently. These results are consistent with data from a survey conducted in 2020 by M/platform, which reported a 20% decrease in the average number of receipts in April 2020, and the increase in the size of an average basket in small stores by 64% compared to reference months (<https://mplatform.com.pl>).

More than 21% of respondents believe that the pandemic did not affect their consumer behavior. Among those surveyed, 19.5% decided to save more on shopping. Having a financial reserve has become more popular, but for some it has also become essential. Due to sanitary restrictions, masks, protective gloves and disinfectants became new, but important, purchases. This was the answer indicated by 15.9% of respondents.

5. Determinants of purchasing decisions during the pandemic

The new market situation has caused many negative consequences on the financial level. Some people have lost their jobs, and many businesses have decided to cut salaries. Some smaller companies did not survive this test. And as a result, the economic situation for some people has deteriorated.

The majority of respondents (56%) believe that the pandemic did not affect their existing financial situation in any way. On the other hand, 39% of them assess its effects negatively. Less than 5% think that their financial situation had improved (Figure 5).

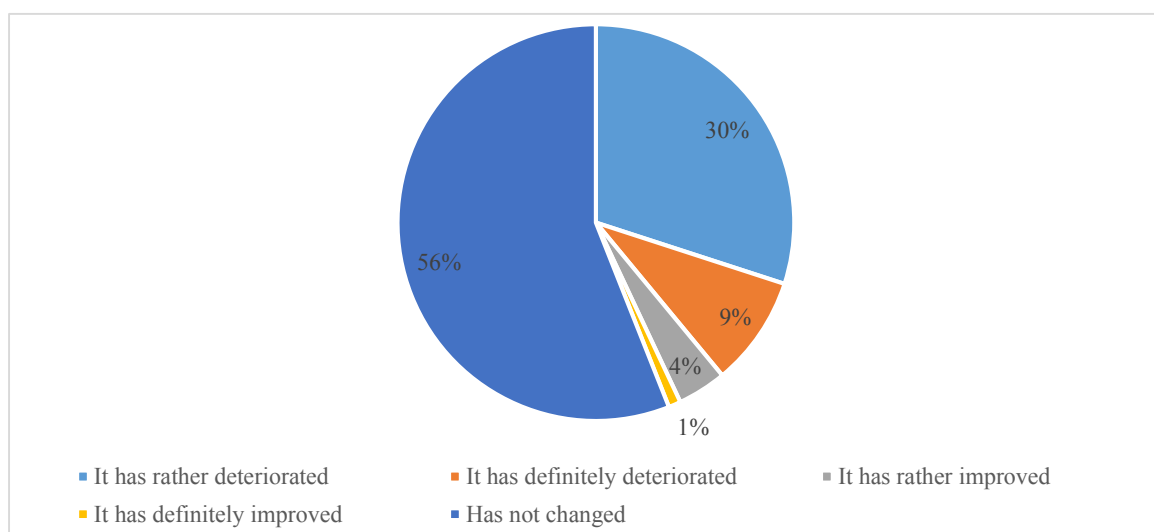


Figure 5. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the financial position of households.

Source: Own elaboration.

The survey showed that 30% of respondents spent more money than they did before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 6).

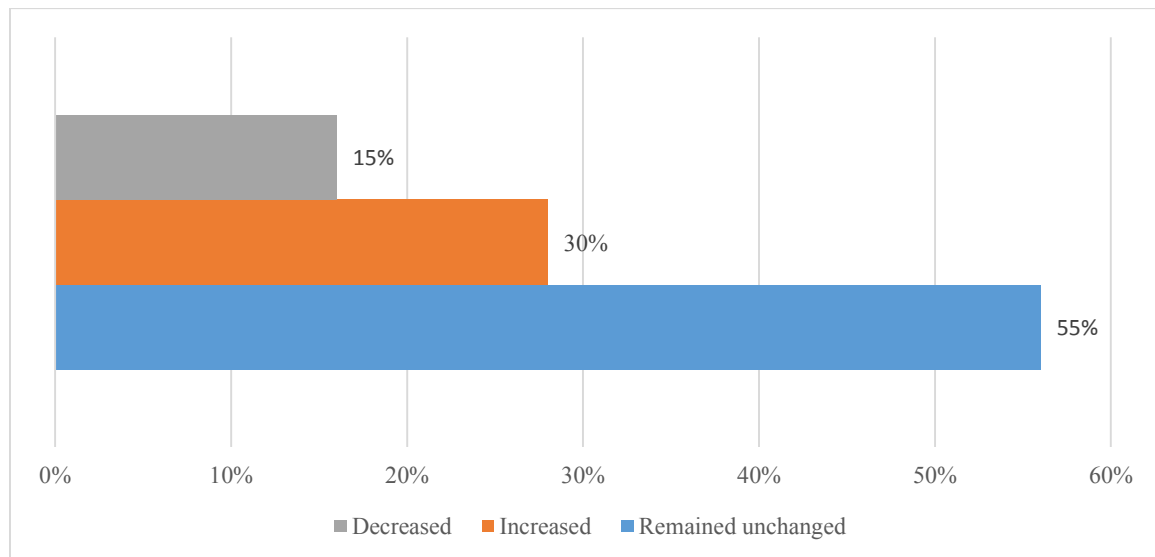


Figure 6. The impact of the COVID–19 pandemic on household spending.

Source: Own elaboration.

These could have been, for example, expenses for protective measures or for food and water supplies. In contrast, 55% say the pandemic had no impact on their financial situation. Among those surveyed, 15% think that their spending had decreased. This may have been caused by a desire to save money in extraordinary times.

At the same time, it should be added that the Polish Economic Institute estimates that the pandemic has not taught Poles to save money. Experts say that efforts made to save money were short-lived. The study, conducted by Corona Mood, showed that the number of people with savings at their disposal dropped by 17% between November 2020 and March 2021 (<https://businessinsider.com.pl>).

The restrictions that were put in place and the ubiquitous sanitation rules caused specific behavior in buyers. As the survey showed, 49% of respondents limited trips to the store to the bare minimum. Respondents were asked to indicate the inconveniences experienced during stationary shopping (Figure 7).

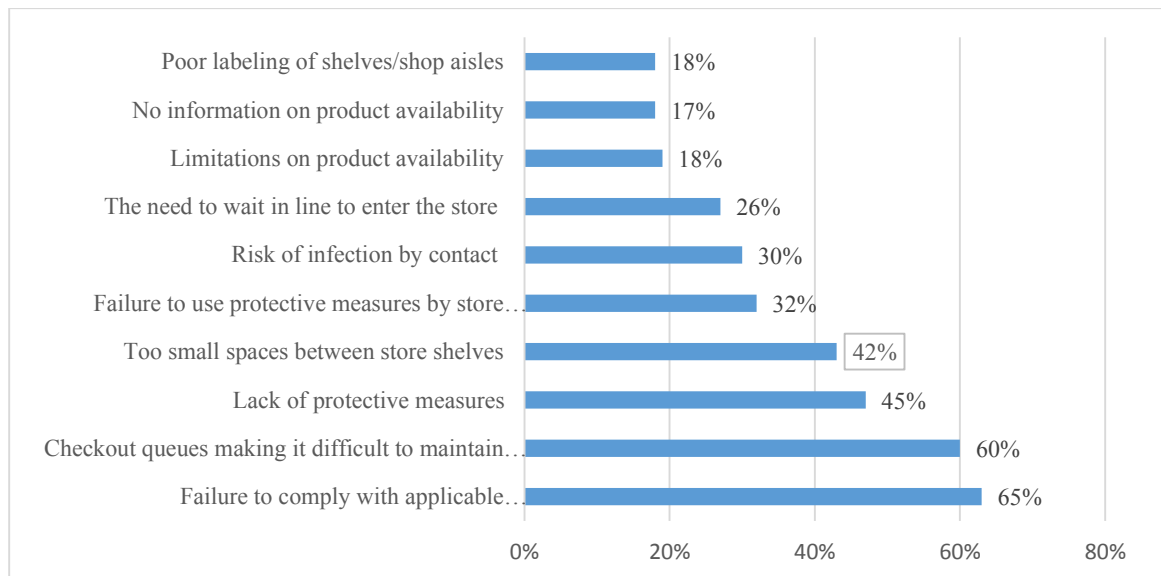


Figure 7. The impact of the COVID–19 pandemic on perceptions of stationary shopping.

Source: Own elaboration.

Among those surveyed, 65% of respondents felt that non-compliance with existing rules by other customers was a very significant impediment. A large number, as many as 60% of respondents, pointed to the problem of checkout queues as an obstacle to social distancing. Thus, the most frequently selected inconveniences concerned the lack of safety or partial violation of health safety of those interested in shopping. The least selected impediment had to do with product availability.

Nearly 70% of those surveyed, decided to abandon the idea of shopping stationary during the COVID-19 pandemic and shop online (Figure 8).

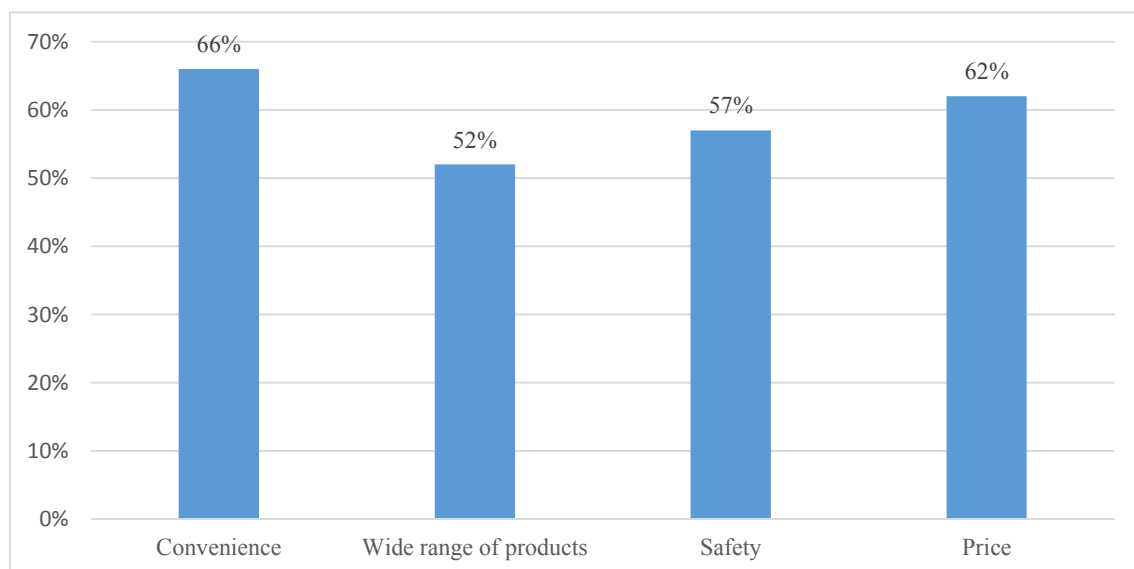


Figure 8. Factors affecting online shopping during the COVID–19 pandemic.

Source: Own elaboration.

65% of respondents shopped online because of convenience, with 62% of respondents citing price as the main determinant. In contrast, more than 50% responded that the safety of such purchases and a wide range of products was the reason for online shopping

The pandemic has changed consumer preference for Polish and global brands. It caused an increase in the share of local (38%) and national brands (40%) in the “basket” of respondents (Figure 9).

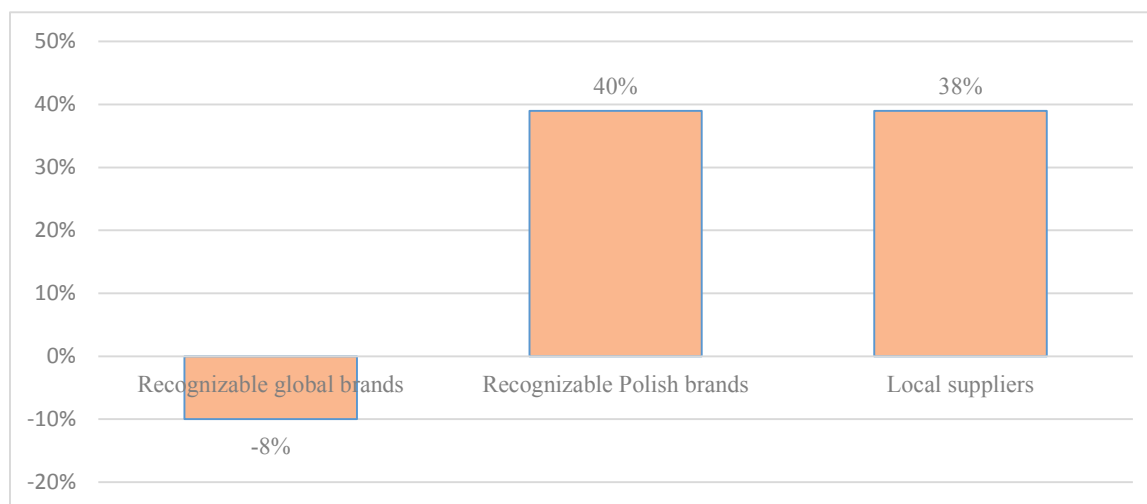


Figure 9. The impact of the COVID–19 pandemic on household brand preference.

Source: Own elaboration.

In contrast, recognizable global brands recorded a decline (8%). Given the scale of losses that also Polish entrepreneurs have suffered, this may indicate an act of solidarity towards them and support for domestic producers. This could also have been caused by border closures, which meant that many shipments did not reach their destination countries on time.

At the beginning of the outbreak of the COVID–19 pandemic, but also with its subsequent waves, certain behavior could be observed among buyers. Sales of some products that previously had no sales fluctuations, except for holiday periods, increased over a very short period. According to data from the M/platform portal, over a week, stationary sales of pasta increased by 127%, groats by 158%, soaps by 165%, flours by 175%, rice by 189%, toilet paper by 263% and spirits by 458%. These are necessities, mainly food products, with long expiration date. The purchase of these products was related to the fear of a complete lockdown and provided a protection against such an eventuality. Spirits may have acted as a disinfectant, which was in short supply at the time or was at unfairly high prices (<https://mplatform.com.pl>). Residents of other countries and continents made similar purchases.

After the outbreak of the pandemic, some countries applied the rules of a partial or complete lockdown. Operations of, for example, transportation, gastronomy and hospitality industry have been limited. The borders, initially, were also closed. The unavailability of goods has intensely affected the assessment of their importance or value. Consumers felt fear of the vision of empty shelves in stores, leading to stockpiling.

Summary

In conclusion, the article presents the most relevant and common factors shaping purchasing attitudes of consumers in the market. There are many of these determinants, and each of them has a greater or lesser impact on a particular person making purchasing decisions. That is why it is so difficult to classify a potential customer, because each person is a unique combination of different determinants.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the purchasing behavior of 76% of women and 62% of men participating in the survey. The survey showed how shopping habits have changed during the coronavirus pandemic. About 42% of respondents said they started purchasing more products online and that the frequency of shopping decreased, but they purchased more products at one go. The respondents bought only essential products (18.2%) and spent a larger portion of their money on protective measures than before (15.9%). For 21.5% of the respondents, the pandemic had no impact on their consumer behavior.

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