

# **Changes in Generations X and Y Consumer Behavior Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study analyses the changes in consumer behavior caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The emphasis is laid on the comparative analysis of respondents of highly active purchasing ages who represent Generation X (39-58) and Generation Y (18-38). The set of research methods used in this study consists of comparative descriptive analysis, qualitative content analysis, and Chi-square test of quantitative and qualitative data collected in an electronic survey of 982 respondents from different countries of Asia and Europe. It was revealed that the main changes in consumer behavior are conditioned by personal finances and safety & health related measures intensified during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** consumer behavior, COVID-19 pandemic, purchasing priorities, generations X and Y

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Consumer behavior is influenced by socio-demographic, cultural, social, economic, regional diversity, personal (age & life cycle stage, occupation & income, lifestyle, social class, motives, and attitudes), psychological, technological, environmental, political and many other factors [1; 2]. Changes in any of them might influence consumer behavior, which cannot always be predicted by marketers due to its complexity [3]. Nonetheless, during crises there are central trends in consumer behavior which include the demand for simplicity and value-oriented products and services [4]. With the economic instability, lockdown and social distancing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer behavior has been disrupted. In these times the chief essentials for happiness of family and society have been recognized to be health, well-being, and food [5]; significant proportion of consumers prefer to buy healthier, more sustainable food [6; 7] and form new priorities that include personal safety and social values [8]. If during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic the over-purchasing and hoarding of necessities was a common response to the crisis which was observed internationally [9], the later COVID-19 consumer behaviors can generally be

characterized as learning processes with the rethinking of life values, search for new solutions based on global digitalization and decrease of unnecessary consumerism. However, consumer demographic profiles are multiple, which means that also purchasing decision making, values and priorities as well as responses to the ongoing social, economic, political, epidemiological, healthcare, and ecological processes are multiple. To have more insight into the possibilities of responding to new behavior of different consumer groups and satisfying their needs, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being explored and comprehended regarding consumers of different generations, countries, genders [8], socio-economic status [10] etc. A special attention is to be paid to the changing features of today's consumers who are becoming very sovereign, more demanding, and who have a propensity for criticism more than consumers of the previous decades [11]. To meet these growing expectations of consumers, organizations are forced to look beyond their existing business strategies and innovate new services; the pandemic has catalyzed the managerial rethinking, emphasizing societal relevance of these services opposed to business viability alone [12].

This research is focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the consumer behavior and purchasing priorities of customers who represent Generations X and Y. This choice is conditioned by the significant weight of these two generational cohorts among the most economically active consumers who make more than half of the world population varying from 50% to 60% in different regions [13].

## **2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

### **Changes in consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The concept of consumer behavior can be encountered in many fields of science, but in each of them its matter is interpreted and studied in different ways. While psychology explains and explores consumer behavior from the perspective of biological, evolutionary, and cognitive processes [14], sociology studies the influence of society and social groups on consumer behavior

[15]. As for economy, consumer behavior in it is linked to people's dealing with scarcity when meeting their needs and selecting best alternative goods, services, and actions. It provides understanding of how the marketplace works, what consumers' role is in it and how their choices affect their lifestyles [16]. Broadly speaking, behavior is the expression of a person's inner mental state in action, choice of means, manners, interpersonal contacts, time, and space of self-awareness [17]. Consumer behavior is interpreted as a practice dealing with how and why consumers purchase or do not purchase products and services [18]. The "how" speaks of the character of the process in which a consumer is involved when purchasing and the "why" indicates consumer's internal mental path to the awareness of own needs, priorities, and desires for purchasing definite products or services. The phases of consumer behavior vary according to different scholars. Solomon (2020) and Kinnear et al. (1995) consider that consumer behavior is the process of 1) selecting, 2) purchasing, 3) using or 4) disposing of the products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires by individuals or groups [19; 20]. Also, Wilkie (1994) and William et al. (1995) define consumer behavior based on these four phases, but they emphasize that it is a mental and emotional processes and physical activities that people become engaged in [21; 22]. Shiffman and Wisenblit (2019) specify consumer behavior as the process of making choices by consumers during searching, evaluating, purchasing, and using products and services that they believe would satisfy their needs [23]. So, they substitute the phase of selecting by its sub-phases - searching information and evaluating products and services though they do not mention the phase of disposing products used.

As for the phase of disposing, Sheth speaks also about the post consumption waste disposal [24] which becomes especially crucial from the perspective of sustainability.

Consumer behavior is comprehended also as those acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision-making processes that precede and determine these acts [25].

There are also other views of consumer behavior with reduced number of phases but new accents on some specific aspects as seen in the following interpretations of consumer behavior as:

- the act of choosing and using products and services, including mental and social processes which consumer is involved in [26];
- human responses to products, services, and the marketing of these products and services [27];
- a process based on an individual's decision on what, when, where, and how to buy products and services [28];
- an individual's activity when purchasing products and services [29].

An important consumer behavior aspect has also become the sharing of post purchase word of mouth comments and reviews not only in local neighborhood, but also in global social media [30].

Thus, consumer behavior is a complex concept, involving mental, emotional, and social processes which an individual or a group is involved in for:

- 1) shaping the pre-purchase awareness and understanding of own needs, desires and priorities;
- 2) making decisions and carrying out the purchase itself (selecting through searching information and evaluating with the further buying of products, services, ideas and experiences to meet needs and desires);
- 3) post-purchase processes of using and evaluating the products and services and sharing post purchase comments and reviews;
- 4) disposing of the used products or post-consumption wastes.

All these four phases of consumer behavior have been affected during the Covid -19 pandemic as it has disrupted nearly every routine in day-to-day life forcing people to give up even their most deeply ingrained habits [31]. This has caused changes in household behavior in terms of costs and purchasing combined with uncertainty about the future [6] and proliferation of home-based activities [8].

*Phase 1.* The shaping of pre-purchase awareness and understanding of own needs, desires and priorities have been shifted towards main human essentials, like health, well-being [5], more sustainable food [6, 7], personal safety and social values [8].

*Phase 2.* The decision making and carrying out the purchase itself are realized with the lack of consumer confidence in the future [8], worrying about product and resource scarcity [32]. Consumers strive for saving money specifically seeking for more-affordable alternatives to the products and brands they usually buy [8]. Becoming more creative and flexible for improvisation [24, 32], many consumers have tried a new store, brand, or different ways of shopping during the pandemic [31]. The shift from physical to digital purchase is becoming more and more distinct with each day [24, 30]. Another new tendency is observed in the shift from purchasing products of large brands in favor of smaller brands which is related to the desire to support local businesses [8]. As for the food-related changes, the lowering of the frequency of shopping has decreased the consumption of the most perishable food products like fish and seafood including also non-perishable ready meals, most likely because of unhealthy related opinions. The consumption of fresh vegetables perceived as healthy, on the contrary has grown [7].

*Phase 3.* The post-purchase processes of using and evaluating the products and services and sharing post-purchase comments and reviews are inclined to become more oriented towards mindful consumption and sustainability [30]. Consumers tend to seek more efficient ways of utilization of products, for instance, through cooking at home and sharing best recipes and experiences to minimize wastes [10]. Another new trend in this regard is shared consumption which is increasing worldwide as people are becoming more aware of the key role of saving resources [30]. Consumer experience and engagement through post purchase comments and reviews matter a lot not only for other consumers but also for companies for reinforcing and shaping behavioral shifts to position their products and brands for the next normal in the post-pandemic period [31].

*Phase 4.* The disposing of the used products or post-consumption wastes is also becoming more thoughtful and sustainability oriented. For instance, in the face of shortages of face masks, some people managed to sew them using old T-shirts [10]. "The trash-to treasure" movement of repurposing or up-cycling wastes or old products is expanding all over the world educating and inspiring both individual consumers and companies to create new values out of trash [33, 34, 35].

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior has been systemized in multiple ways:

- hoarding of essential products for daily consumption, improvisation when there are constraints, postponing purchase and consumption of discretionary products or services, embracing digital technology, store coming home, blurring of work-life boundaries, reunions with friends and family, discovery of talents [24];
- stockpiling goods, coping with the lockdown and social isolation by maintaining social relations by virtual gatherings, longer-term adaptation by modifying individual and societal behavior and consumption [36];

- shift to value, flight to digital, caring commerce, shock to loyalty, homebody economy [9].

However, these general trends of the changes in consumer behavior do not provide specific differences among generations who respond to the crisis differently as they have different experiences. As concluded by Thompson and Banerji (2020), those individuals who had low childhood socio-economic status, exhibit more patience in handling the stress of COVID-19 emotionally despite the material disadvantages [37]. Generation X had lower childhood socio-economic status than Generation Y [38, 39]. That means that Generation X might have more patience and emotional stability in the face of the crisis than Generation Y. It was also revealed that trying new shopping behaviors are more prevalent among younger consumers [9]. That means that consumers of Generation Y have tried new shopping behaviors much more often than consumers of Generation X. It was stated that the ignoring of socio-demographic factors, including age, which is linked to the generational factor, makes it difficult to understand how the COVID-19 influences and will influence consumer demand for food products [2]. And what about the other products and services? To have appropriate information about consumers of different demographic groups and different stimuli that influence them is crucial both for producers and traders. The recognition of the changes in consumer behavior gives companies a big competitive advantage [40]. That means that new business models are to be elaborated to overcome the challenges of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Generations X and Y consumers' portraits**

Each generation has its own values, motives, and attitudes. Research has revealed a rich variety of naming and range of birth years of generations in different countries depending on the cultural situation, main values, current job status and life experiences. Therefore, it is impossible to create a single universal generation theory that could be applied to all over the world, as different regions of the world have experienced quite different events over time. However, the dominant tendency in intergenerational studies is to ignore the impact of peculiarities of national cultures formed in different countries [41]. Considering the heterogeneous national and cultural profile of the respondents who participated in this research, it was decided to keep to the dominant tendency just to call them Generation X (39 -58 years old) and Generation Y (18 – 38 years old) mainly being based on their age in 2020, although there is not a consentient opinion on the age ranges of generations, either.

Generation X is called also Gen X, Gen Xers, Post-Boomers, Twenty-Somethings, Baby-Busters, Disco generation [41; 42; 38]. Some scholars consider it to be a “lost” generation or an alienated generation unsuitable for change; this was the first generation of “latchkey” kids (their parents were Boomers), who had to fend for themselves after school until their parents returned home from work [43]. Gen X is often called the Protest generation as over most of their life they were overshadowed by the Boomers (their parents) [39] who dominated in politics, education, business and social arenas [44]. Perhaps that is the reason why Generation X also called as a “slacker generation” or the “forgotten middle child”, wanted to be independent of their parents who had always been at work and had never had time for them [39]. As a result, Generation X largely ended up going into technical fields, and were more introverted and became more pragmatic than their parents [38].

Generation Y is also referred to as Gen Y, Echo Boomers, Millennials or Millennials, Generation We, Internet Generation, Connect 24/7, and Leave No One Behind [45; 46; 47]. They

consider that they are distinctive because of their use of technology and social networking sites, watching and posting video online, and connecting to the internet wirelessly. That is why they are called Digital Natives vs. to the Generation X who is called Digital Immigrants [48].

As for Generation X, they do not mind fixed working hours in close offices avoiding other colleagues' interference, but Generation Y prefer teamwork in an open office with the opportunity of flexible working hours with conveniences such as ottomans, large screens, access to vegan and vegetarian food, etc. [49]. For Generation X it is important to be valued by their employer towards whom they experience higher loyalty than Generation Y who are demanding, self-confident and self-directed. Unlike Generation X, they are not afraid of making mistakes [49]. Generation Y never thinks they have enough money even if they work; they often depend on financial support from their families [44]. Though Generation Y has high ambitions related to the education, still, many of them say they cannot afford higher education because of lack of time and finances [50].

Generations X and Y have certain differences also in their purchasing priorities due to differences in their value systems, they make purchasing decisions in different ways, and have different consumer behaviors. Generation X tends to make purchasing decisions seeking different channels for saving money (Facebook, communication through email, getting coupons of better offers, loyalty programs and receiving awards for purchases) [44]. Generation Y is willing to pay premium prices for both goods and services and do not mind paying more for quality products that will last for years [51]. Nevertheless, they are thoughtful buyers and care more deeply than Generation X; they explore and can find a lot of information before making purchase decisions regardless of the object of their concern which depends on the segment of Generation Y. If they are keen on health and wellness, they research to find out what kind of food they consume or whether the product is organic with non-processed ingredients or not; if they are economizers, they study the offers to find the best opportunities for saving. Not like Generation X who can be influenced by brand directed marketing, Generation Y is more dependent of brand and product recommendations obtained via word of mouth, online reviews, and social media [51].

Generation X can be characterized as a “Work hard, play hard” generation; they struggle to save for retirement and are well positioned to become the wealthiest generation who prefers to invest in apartments, houses, furniture, etc. At the same time, they are financially supporting both their parents (Boomers) and children (Generation Y), thus making financial decisions that can affect all three generations [44]. Generation X makes significantly more money, consequently they spend for about one third more than their younger counterparts each year [44]. As for Generation Y, their priority is not investing their financial resources into expensive apartments and houses unlike Generation X, as they do not want encumbrances such as a mortgage. Living here and now could be the motto of this generation. To undertake activities which are in line with their current needs and interests is more important to them than to make investments into real estate for the future. That is the reason why some of them continue to live with their parents' families [49].

This brief comparative analysis of characteristic features of Generations X and Y as of workers, actors and consumers concerns the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. But the fundamental changes which the virus has caused across the globe, has made people of all generations live, think, and buy

differently, looking at products and brands through a new lens. The consumer goods industry is getting rapidly reshaped forming new consumer habits and behaviors which are believed to endure beyond this crisis, permanently changing values, ways, and places of shopping [52]. How has the pandemic impacted the consumer behavior and purchasing priorities of Generations X and Y is an important question to be studied to understand what businesses should do today to prepare for what comes next.

### 3. THE EMPIRICAL PART OF THE RESEARCH: THE MAIN FINDINGS

This study is a mixed quantitative - qualitative exploratory research realized through electronic survey conducted in the autumn semester of 2020 at Riga Technical University aimed to reveal the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior and priorities. The survey resulted in 982 responses received mainly from representatives of Generation Y (n=775) and Generation X (n=150) from different countries of Europe and Asia. The checkbox question with given options of answers (see in Table 1) was extended with an offer to express complementary views.

*Comparative descriptive analysis.* More than one fourth of the consumers of both generations have answered that nothing has changed in their purchasing behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 1).

Table 1  
The impact of the COVID-19 on purchasing behavior of Generations X and Y

Purchasing behavior	Gen Y	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen X
	N		%	
I have become more economical	287	36	37.0	24.0
Before buying something, I analyze whether I really need it	152	42	19.6	28.0
I compare prices to find a more optimal option	69	14	8.9	9.3
Nothing has changed	220	43	28.4	28.7
Other	41	14	5.3	9.3

A similar percentage of consumers of both generations (8.9% and 9.3%) compare prices to find more optimal alternatives to the products and services. However, more consumers of Generation X (28%) compared to Generation Y (19.6%) before purchasing things analyze whether they really need them. That could be explained either by bigger awareness of the older generation of the consequences of thoughtless shopping which brings to the accumulation of heaps of unnecessary stuff, or by their lower childhood socio-economic status and scarcity of resources they had which trained them even then to save resources and avoid unnecessary expenses. Therefore, the unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was a bigger shock to younger generation; consequently, in the face of uncertainty, a bigger number of them realized that they need to become more

saving (37%) and act accordingly while shopping compared to the older generation (24%).

*Chi-square statistic.* To analyze whether these differences in changes in purchasing behavior of both generations are statistically significant, Chi-square test was conducted. It shows that these differences are statistically significant as the asymptotic significance (2-sided) is  $0.008 < 0.05$  (see Table 2).

Table 2  
Chi-Square Test: differences in changes in purchasing behavior of both generations

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.810 <sup>a</sup>	4	.008
Likelihood Ratio	13.693	4	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	.694	1	.405
N of Valid Cases	925		

*Qualitative content analysis.* To disclose new dimensions of the impact of COVID-19 on consumer behavior, also the qualitative content analysis of the respondents' comments was conducted relevantly to the exploratory nature of the research. Not all the respondents gave additional comments concerning the first question after having chosen from the options proposed. This is a common situation as respondents avoid giving additional comments if that is possible. Therefore, frequencies of the 11 categories developed during the qualitative content analysis are not high compared with the number of the respondents (n=982) as seen in Table 3. However, they give insight into the tendencies of changes in consumer behavior.

Table 3  
Changes in consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic: categories developed in qualitative content analysis

No.		Category developed	Freq.	Sum
1.	Personal finances	More thoughtful attitude towards spending money	60	172
2.		Buying only necessary things	61	
3.		Seeking best alternatives for reasonable price	21	
4.		Making a shopping list, analyzing products & planning expenses	24	
5.		Planning meals & cooking for many days	6	
6.	Safety & health	Doing shopping more rarely	35	118
7.		Making bigger shopping baskets to reduce purchase frequency	27	
8.		Doing more on-line shopping	27	
9.		Avoiding crowded places for purchase making	8	
10.		Giving priority to purchasing food and hygiene products	14	
11.		Buying healthier food & higher-quality things	7	

The first three categories of Table 3 have meanings very close to the three options offered in the checkbox question (see Table 1):

- “More thoughtful attitude towards spending money” (n=60) is close to “I have become more saving”;
- “Buying only necessary things” (n=61) is close to “Before buying something, I analyze whether I really need it”;
- “Seeking best alternatives for reasonable price” (n=21) is close to “I compare prices to find a more optimal option”.

This closeness of the meanings reflects the distinctness of these three changes in the consumer behavior caused by the pandemic which indicates a lack of confidence in financial security or in the ability to continue to get resources necessary for living. The categories which show that respondents make shopping lists, analyze products & plan expenses (n=24) and plan their meals and cook for many days (n=6) have a complementary input into this conclusion. That is the reason why the first five categories were grouped within the domain of “Personal finances” (n=172) as shown in Table 5.

The rest of the categories made the domain of “Safety & health” (n=118), as all of them are measures undertaken to increase their safety through doing shopping more rarely (n=35) but with making a bigger shopping basket (n=27), doing on-line shopping (n=27) and avoiding crowded places for purchase making (n=8). The aspect of health is conditioned with the categories of buying healthier food & high-quality things (n=7) and giving priority to purchasing food and hygiene products (n=14); the latter is linked also to safety.

There were also some other changes in consumer behavior (n=14) indicated by some of the respondents: abolishing consumption of some products; using a bike as transport to save money; managing to buy all the necessary things before the curfew; buying food from local producers, etc.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The changes in consumer behavior are related to two main domains:

- *personal finances* - people have become more thoughtful buyers; they seek best alternatives for reasonable price, buy only necessary things, make shopping lists and plan expenses, plan meals and cook for many days to avoid spending money on unnecessary things;
- *safety & health* – people shop more rarely, make bigger shopping baskets to reduce purchase frequency, do more on-line shopping, avoid crowded places for purchase making, give priority to purchasing food and hygiene products, buy healthier food and things of higher quality (see Table 3).

These findings go in line with the conclusions made by other researchers, who argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted priorities towards main human essentials, like health, well-being [5] and personal safety [8] making people become more oriented towards mindful consumption [31] and buy healthier food [6, 7]. In addition, consumers strive for saving money [30] seeking for more-affordable alternatives for the products and brands they usually buy [10].

The difference between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior of Generation X and Y representatives is statistically significant,  $p < 0.05$  (see Table 4). Generation Y consumers have become more economical in comparison to Generation X consumers. This could be explained by the conclusion drawn by Woo (2018) that Generation Y never think they have enough money even if they work [44]. Living in the conditions of the crisis and facing uncertainty they might have become more cautious and thrifter. In their turn, Generation X consumers analyze more than Generation Y consumers whether they really need something and compare prices to find a more

optimal option before purchasing (see Table 1). This could be conditioned by the pragmatic nature of Generation X [38] and their disposition to make purchasing decisions seeking different channels for saving money [44]. However, about one fourth of the respondents of both generations stated that nothing has changed in their purchasing behavior (see Table 3)

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