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## THE NEW NORMAL IN CONSUMER PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOUR IN THE WAKE OF COVID 19: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Muhammed Salim K C<sup>1</sup>✉, G Deepa<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract:

The novel Corona virus later renamed as SARS CoV-2 is the causative agent for the pandemic Covid 19, which was first reported in a wholesale market at Wuhan city of China in December 2019. In the onset of March 2020, the virus had reached almost all corners of globe and had affected around 19 million people. By the end of July 2020, it claimed 6,75,000 lives. The declaration of the pandemic by the WHO has led to an unprecedented disruption of trade around the globe and global economies as a whole due to the scaling down of production and distribution. Markets in all parts of the world became a victim to the radical and fundamental changes in customer perception and buying behavior, marking a devastating transition from the pre-Covid era to the post Covid era. Consumer attitude, habit and consumption behavior have changed a lot with purchases being limited to the most basic needs and customers started spending thriftily. In most nations, people resorted to local purchases; e-commerce and digital payments to sustain themselves during lockdown. People faced life or death situation and were panic. The people around the globe had to take extreme steps to safeguard their health and wealth from the impact of the pandemic. As soon as the lockdown was declared, people were in the grip of fear that the resources would run out. This caused a surge to buy consumer goods and hygiene products which were storable. This surplus surge for goods eventually eased down. In this paper the researchers try to capture the transformation in the consumer sentiments as a direct impact of the global pandemic.

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### 1.0 Introduction:

Markets are highly efficient in this technological era and consumers are well informed and updated to the bulk of information accessible at their fingertips. This dynamic environment enables them to get a shot at the best deal even during the toughest of times. The report published by Mckinsey and Co. titled 'Impact of Covid-19 on consumer sentiments and buying behavior' on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020, analyzing the shopping behavior of customers on weekly basis cited a change in shopping behavior of 91% of the Indian population. A considerable portion of urban communities relocated to their home land in rural areas or were compelled to work at home. Others, who could afford to, kept themselves away from crowded markets or shopped online.

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor, Government College Madappally, Vatakara, 673102, Kozhikode, Kerala, INDIA. E-mail: salimmkc@gmail.com

2 [Author] Assistant Professor, J J College of Arts and Science, Shivapuram, Pudukkottai District, Tamilnadu, INDIA

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The demonetization that was implemented in India forced people to shift from cash to cashless payments likewise the pandemic made a similar shift from physical to digital shopping.

The pandemic and the restrictive measures like the worldwide lockdown and social distancing that followed, opened new doors to consumers. As consumption pattern and consumer behavior are contextual, the new pathways enabled people to quickly adapt to the new contexts that were emerging. There are some noteworthy factors or contexts that caused changes in consumption behavior. Changes in social contexts like the change in the place of living, change of work place, etc. may lead to change in perception and buying behavior. Other two contextual factors that influence buying behavior are technological revolution and modulations in the regulatory mechanism. Pandemics like Covid are included in the fourth context namely natural and other disasters. The figure given below explains the eight immediate changes that happened in consumer behavior due to the corona outbreak.



**Fig.1: Immediate Impact of Covid-19 on Customer Behavior**

(Source: Journal of Business Research)

The unpredictable nature of the Corona virus posed a threat in consumers mind and created a psychological change. Consequently, products and promotions which claimed to soothe this psychological impact caught attention amongst the consumers. The major reason for this behavioral change was the loss of job. It is estimated that more than 40 million people will lose their job by the end of 2021 and those who lost their jobs are completely clueless about rebuilding their career in an ever-changing market environment. Loss of job will definitely be accompanied by an uncertainty in the economic future of those families followed by a structural change in buying behavior. The nationwide lockdown has affected the Indian economy to a great extent than any other major economies in the world because the economy was already shaken before the waves of Covid hit the shores. The Government has declared a number of programmes to generate jobs and to ensure earnings to meet the basic needs of all classes of the society, but the system is not sound enough to provide the liquidity boom and the means to overcome the pandemic situation.

Covid has altered customer perception and preferences. The long history of marketing reveals that it is very difficult to make changes in customer preferences but the pandemic has made drastic changes despite our attempts to resist them. Markets evidently made a paradigm shift in the mode of shopping and within a couple of days and most of the traditional small shoppers and local retailers fell down into deep end of the online trade. The same situation happened at the consumer's end as well as more people discovered the convenience and comfort of online shopping and e-transactions. New hygiene standards have evolved and sanitizers and masks became handy weapons to fight against Covid-19. All the malls, high end stores, cafeterias and

theaters received devastating blows and their return to normal remains uncertain. This paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of novel corona virus on the perception of customers and to examine the intensity of changes in buying behavior.

## **2.0 Rationale of the study:**

The pandemic Covid-19 has influenced every aspect of a consumer's life; some are temporary while few others are long lasting with greater impact on consumer behavior. The Indian consumer goods industry has been greatly affected by these radical changes and in the present scenario it is vital to identify these challenges and their impact in the present and the future. This analytical study is hence essential in this regard. Anyone who has survived this pandemic situation can vouch for the immense pressure created from the fear for one's own life, health and the simultaneous well-being of his family, availability of essential items, safety of his job and so on. The sudden demand of solutions for the numerous unforeseen challenges has caught us off-guard and forces us to think and act differently and, in some cases, indifferently. Restrictions in the form of lockdown and self-isolation disrupt normal life of the people to a considerable extent as we gasp for breath in the shells of our homes. If we are to break these shells and reclaim lost grounds, we must have an idea of the nature of our problem and the challenges at hand. This paper is an attempt at assessing the impact of the pandemic on consumer perception and behavior. The researchers also endeavor to examine if these changes are temporary and will revert back to the pre- Covid scenarios or whether they will remain the new norm for years to come.

## **3.0 Literature survey:**

Peter and Nord (1982) explained that the behavioral perspective of consumer behavior focuses on external cues that stimulate customer responses through natural learning. Consumer decision making is an information processing mechanism in which cognitive conditions have critical role in the process. It is a problem-solving process and the individuals use the information available around them for searching solutions. Different opinions prevail among marketing experts on existence of this learning process and information processing system.

Engel et al. (1990) reveals that a customer plays different roles in his buying behavior like user, payer, and buyer. It is very difficult to predict behavior of consumer and most of the experts in the field have claimed that customer behavior is irrational. Relationship marketing is an impactful asset for consumer behavior analysis as it has a keen interest in highlighting the importance of the consumer or buyer thereby tracing out the actual meaning of marketing.

Loudon and Bitta (1993) state that consumer behavior is a subset of human behavior and it also has a wide coverage like human behavior. All the factors which have an impact on daily life of a person influence his buying behavior also. According to them it is very difficult to draw a line to separate consumer behavior and other aspects of human behavior. Hence the contribution of behavioral science like sociology, anthropology and psychology etc. are very significant in understanding consumer behavior.

Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) have observed that consumer behavior is a process in which people select choices of their personal or household articles by committing their resources like money, time and effort. Blackwell et al. (2001) has defined consumer behavior as activities of people including obtaining goods, consumption and ordering goods or services.

Philip Kotler et al. (2009) explain that the study of consumer behavior is a blend of different disciplines, which includes concepts from psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology,

economics and marketing. This study explains how the emotions of buyers influence their buying behavior individually and collectively. It also examines how the need of a customer is arising and the way in which it is influenced by their demographic features and behavioral variables. The scope of the study also includes exerting influences of group such as friends, family, society and reference groups on buying behavior.

Mihalj Bakator et al. (2016) in their article titled “Analysis of consumer behavior and marketing strategy improvement” reveal that perception, cognition and social influence are major factors to be considered by a marketer before framing marketing strategies. All these factors behave like double edged weapons, consumers decide the intensity of these factors and they have great impact on consumers thinking process. They have used a model developed by Hartline (2011) to explain the concept of impact factors on the consumers. The model shown in Fig.2 given below will help marketers to develop strategies to overcome the covid-19 crisis.

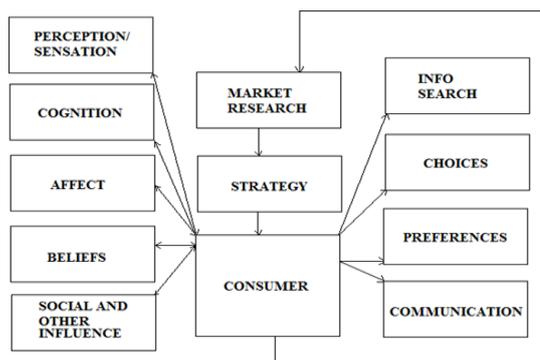


Fig.2: Impact Factors on Consumer (Source: Hartline 2011)

Accenture (April 2020) says that customers are reacting to crisis in different ways. Fear and stress in the mind of consumers are fueling to panic buying of staple and hygiene products. A few portion of the society is behaving indifferently and continuing their life as usual neglecting all the precautions to be taken as directed by the Government and health professionals. The outbreak of the pandemic has pushed out consumers from normal life and they are trying to cope with the new normal.

Deloitte (2020) has revealed in their report titled “Impact of Covid crisis on short and medium-term consumer behavior” that people are forced to shift from traditional shopping to online shopping. The survey reveals that a considerable portion of customers are thinking to continue the same even after complete unlocking. The crisis has resulted in the growth of home delivery services and this may continue for longer periods because of the convenience they offer. Customers started to depend on local products and local markets and it is expected that the trend will continue for the coming 12 months. The study finally concludes that Covid 19 crisis affects different groups of people to varying degrees either on a short-term basis or on for a long-term resulting in a strong shift in consumer behavior in almost all segments.

#### 4.0 Research methodology:

This study largely depends on primary data collected from 335 people across the world. The selections of the samples were done purely as per the convenience of the researchers. A well-structured questionnaire was prepared using various electronic means and circulated among the sample respondents digitally. After omitting incomplete and duplicated questionnaires, 300 questionnaires were kept for analysis. Sample respondents included people from different age groups and occupational backgrounds like agriculturalists, professionals, Government

employees, business people and home makers. Participation of the respondents was voluntary and they were requested to give details of their purchase, consumption behavior and every walk of life after the spread of pandemic Covid-19. Apart from the information collected using questionnaires, the researchers utilized their own observations and experience to reach an inference. Methods of data analysis are based on the gathered information that provides the real life experience during the isolation of respondents, especially after the rapid spread of the pandemic.

## 5.0 Data Analysis and Discussion:

The data analysis and discussion part given below is for analyzing the shift that happened in the buying behavior and perception of customers. The researchers also attempt to provide an understanding on the impact of Covid-19 on the daily life of people and their family economy.

### 5.1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents:

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

Demographic Features	Category	Respondents	Percentage
Age	<= 20 years	19	6.33
	21- 40 years	157	52.33
	41 -60 years	98	32.66
	>60 years	26	8.67
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Gender	Female	123	41.00
	Male	177	49.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Country of residence	India	191	63.67
	UAE	28	9.33
	Qatar	39	13.00
	Bahrain	17	5.67
	Maldives	11	3.67
	USA	5	1.66
	Others	9	3.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Occupation	Business	34	11.33
	Profession	44	14.67
	Employed	164	54.67
	Agriculture	29	9.67
	Home maker	14	4.66
	Retired	15	5.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Annual family Income	<500,000	137	45.67
	5 lakh to 10 lakh	118	39.33
	10lakh to 20 lakh	32	10.67
	> 20 lakh	13	4.33
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Status of education	Up to 12 <sup>th</sup> Standard	29	9.67
	Graduates	166	55.33
	Above graduation	88	29.33
	Others	17	5.67
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Place of living	Urban	114	38.00
	Rural	186	62.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

(Source: Primary data)

Demographic features of the 300 sample respondents in this survey are explained in the table given above. There are 123 females and 177 males, majority of them are aged between 21 to 40 years. All the respondents are of Indian origin out of which 63.67% are Indian residents and the rest are from different parts of the globe. In addition, 45.67% of the participants belong to the income limit of below 5 lakhs, 39.33% in the income class of 5 lakh to 10 lakh, 10.67 % between 10 lakh and 20 lakh and a minor portion of the sample respondents (4.33%) receive an income above 20 lakh. Furthermore, 55.33% of the people who participated in this survey are graduates and 29.33% of them have qualifications higher than graduation. Moreover, 54.67% of the participants are employed, 14.67% are practicing professionals, 11.33% of the participants are entrepreneurs and 9.67% of them are engaged in cultivation.

### ***5.2. How far has the pandemic affected the social life of consumers?***

The rapid community spread of corona and the ongoing health crisis across the world have forced consumers to change their daily routines and work culture. In response to these changes, their buying and consumption practices also shifted accordingly. Updates from the WHO and other leading economists in the world indicate that this fundamental shift will continue for a couple years and will have a long lasting impact on consumer behavior. Fig.3 explains the social impact of pandemic. The survey reveals that 63% of the employees who participated in the survey prefer to work from home partially or fully and 72% of the respondents prefer to stay at home. Moreover, most of them (82%) are cautious in keeping social distancing when they appear in public places and use their own vehicle (47%) when leaving home. As far as shopping modes are concerned, 42% of the respondents started to use new methods like online, door delivery etc. and 29% of them started using new brands. Another important aspect is the changes in hobbies as people started to spend more time for new hobbies like gardening, watching movies, cooking etc.

### ***5.3. How hard did the pandemic hit jobs and other sources of livelihoods?***

The study reveals that the loss of employment is the immediate and most severe impact of Covid-19. In the long run it may lead to poor and low economic growth and inequality in income distribution. Fig.4 shows the impact of Covid on employment as per the opinion of the respondents of the survey.

The analysis reveals the crisis existing in the job market due to the spread of the pandemic. The outbreak of the Covid has forced employers across the world to stop fully or reduce their size of operation as well as the work force. As per the opinion of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, around 122 million people lost their jobs in the initial period of lockdown. This survey shows that 25% of the working class completely and 40.85% of them partially lost their jobs. Surprisingly, after the onset of virus, 12.8% out of the 164 workers carried on with their normal work and 21.34% were unable to go for work due to the lockdown and the other restrictions imposed by the regulators.

### ***5.4 How far the pandemic affected on other means of livelihood?***

In India, agricultural activities and harvesting were exempted initially from the nationwide lockdown for ensuring harvesting of Rabi crops and the farming of Kharif crops, which ensured proper flow of food grains throughout the lock down period. As far as small scale farmers are concerned the survey reveals that the pandemic has brought a considerable reduction in agricultural activity due to the shortage of labor, raw materials and transportation facilities. Majority of the farmers participated in the survey opined that their farming activity have

reduced significantly after the spread of the novel corona virus. Professional service firms are included in the first list, which was largely affected by the crisis. Professionals like doctors and lawyers lost their clients due to the lockdown declared across the world and also due to the shift of client's priorities. Service providers like consultancy firms, accounting and auditing firms and technology service providers lost their businesses due to the cancelation of projects, shift of client's priorities and cost cuttings.

Rapid outbreak of the novel Corona virus has led to health crisis globally, but in addition to that it has created a significant commercial impact as well. As per the report of KPMG, 94% of the fortune 1000 companies are facing financial crisis due the pandemic. Considerable reduction in the urban buying of non-essential goods in India has resulted in the steep decline in urban transactions and business. Indian economy was facing the lowest growth rate in over six years in the third quarter of 2019-2020 and the measures taken to reduce the spread of the pandemic have caused a further reduction in consumption and investment. 34 respondents of this survey are doing business and 27 of them have revealed that their businesses have been considerably reduced after the spread of the pandemic.

#### **5.4. Did the pandemic affect family income across the world?**

The study reveals that the spread of the pandemic and the consequent restrictions have affected people in the lower and middle income segment severely. The economic distress that happened as a result of the reduction in family income of the sample respondents has been explained in the fig. 6.

The above analysis shows that nearly 50% of the households from the lower and middle class have lost their income considerably due to the spread of the virus and the restrictions imposed as a result of it. Households in the lower and middle income groups are affected significantly because of the blows on their major sources of income. On the other hand, households in the upper middle class or upper class are affected to a much lesser extent since they are holding stable good salaried jobs or investments or a profitable business. Another important fact observed by the researchers is that the rural households are more affected than their counter parts in the urban areas. Income level of 78% of the rural respondents and 53% of the urban respondents has reduced significantly. Furthermore, household income of 22.2% of the participants in the survey out of the total 300 have reduced considerably, which means nearly 74% of the households are facing distress as a result of the reduction in their income since the lockdown began.

#### **5.5. What is the new normal in consumer behaviors?**

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly influenced every aspect of human life, including the ways in which people shop. People from almost all parts of the world are trying to adjust with the new normal life and their buying behavior is also tuned to it. Changes in perception and buying behavior have created heavy demand for some product categories and steep decline in demand for some other commodities. Even though markets are in the gradual mode of unlocking, retailers are still facing issues as several physical stores have not opened in most parts of the world and those which have are operating under strict restrictions. The consumers have limited choices other than to shop online since they are forced to stay away from gathering in front of those few functioning outlets. Added to this, the factor of convenience shifts the balance in favor of buying online. Respondents were asked to report whether corona has impacted their buying behavior or not. Majority of them opined that the spread of the pandemic has disrupted their buying behavior. Fig.7 indicates the clear picture of the shifts in the buying behavior of sample respondents.

### 5.6 Did the pandemic make the consumers frugal?

This study reveals that the customers are very cautious about spending their income in the wake of spread of corona virus. 81% of the participants in the survey claimed that they have started rational spending after the rapid spread of the pandemic. The study also states that urban people are more cautious in spending money than their counter parts in rural areas, since they have more choices than the latter.

**Table 2: Changes in Spending Habit**

Spending habit	Rural	Urban	Total
Reduced	148	95	243
Same as before	31	13	44
Increased	4	9	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>300</b>

(Source: Primary data)

The above analysis shows the exact picture of changes in customer spending in every aspect of their daily life. 14.67% of the participants kept their spending same as before the spread of corona and 4.33% spent more. Generally, almost all industries have reported low spending by their customers. There are a number of reasons for the decline in the spending habit of customers. The respondents had multiple opinions. The fig. 8 explains reasons for decline in customer spending.

The economic consequences of the pandemic have forced people to spend less. The fig.8 explains the fact that 236 participants of the survey chose the decline of income as one among the reasons for reduced spending. The nightmare of the rapid spread of virus is the reason opted by 213 participants as another cause for reduced spending and lockdown measures is yet another reason for the same. Future concerns about the prevailing situation also made a considerable portion of people to minimize themselves to essential commodity shopping. Respondents were asked to rank the reasons for reduced spending as an after effect of Covid-19 outbreak (reason with highest impact is assigned as rank 1 and the lowest as rank 6. As per the table given below, the 'decline in income' got the highest rank with the mean score 2.97 and was considered as the main reason for the changes in the spending habit followed by fear of spreading pandemic, future concerns, inconvenience, shift in preference and others respectively.

**Table 3: Mean Score of Reasons for Changes in Spending Habit**

Usage	Mean Score of Ranks
Decline of income	2.97
Fear of pandemic	3.02
Future Concerns	3.54
Inconvenience	3.67
Shift in preferences	3.71
Others	4.09

Source: Primary data (own calculation)

### 5.7 What has changed with the ways consumers shop across the world?

It is certain that public health causalities which arose on spread of the virus have hit the pattern of consumption and the ways of shopping around the globe. The growing panic has influenced their buying behavior, starting from what they want to buy to how they want to buy it. Shopping habits have undergone a rapid fundamental change since the spread of the pandemic.

They continued to evolve uncontrollably with time in most of the countries, and will remain the norm for the times to come. The new shopping habits thus picked up are here to stay. Fig. 9 depicts the findings of the survey with regard to the radical shift that happened in the shopping habits.

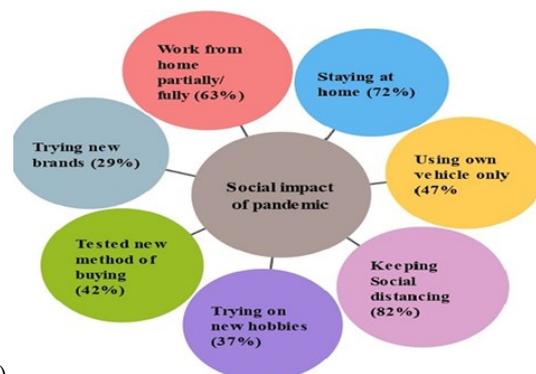
### 5.8 Did the pandemic usher in an era of a new consumption behavior?

The buying behavior of people also changed along with the rapid spread of pandemic. The swiftness of these changes was extraordinary during the initial period of the lockdown but subsided or stabilized after some time. Most of the nations across the globe have started to unlock slowly in different phases, but the survey reveals that the consumers are still holding the temporary changes they made in their shopping habits as normal and their opinion indicates that it will continue for at least a couple of months as the fear of the second and third waves of the virus looms large. Consumers have stopped buying non-essential items and most of the sellers in these segments around the world either shut shop or are operating with limited capacity.

Fig.10 explains the impact of Covid on consumption behavior. Respondents have become more health and hygiene conscious and hence majority have started to buy healthcare and cleaning items at an average rate of 43% more when compared to the period before the pandemic. To manage the imposed isolation, people started to get connected digitally for entertainment, learning and games, which led to 35% increase in spending on internet connectivity and DTH connections. While they have limited the consumption to the most basic needs, respondents state that they have been spending more on perishable and non-perishable groceries and frozen items on an average of 32%, 17% and 29% respectively. In the initial days of the spread of the virus these percentages were very high indicating panic buying expecting food shortage, but slowly it got stabilized. Increasing trends reflect on consumption of alcoholic beverages, tobacco and pets' products also with an average growth rate of 13% and 9% respectively indicating the start of new hobbies to reduce the stress of isolation.

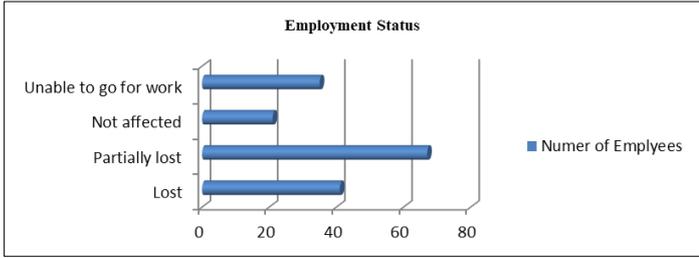
Fig.10 shows the exact picture of prioritizing the needs and expenditure in selected categories, as people started to select products and brands with a more thought-out approach. Due to the slowdown in the pace of daily life, people started to stay at home and feed normal homemade food to their kids, which resulted in a decline in the demand for instant baby foods and infant care items. The maintenance of social distancing and limited time in public places has reduced the consumption of items like personal care products, cosmetics and fuel. Since the pandemic shifted the focus to essentials and health care items, consumption for clothes and other wearable's hit a steep decline on an average of 54% and 72% respectively. The ways in which people spend their leisure time has totally changed and outdoor entertainments or dining in restaurants are mostly avoided.

Fig. 3: Social Impact of Covid-19



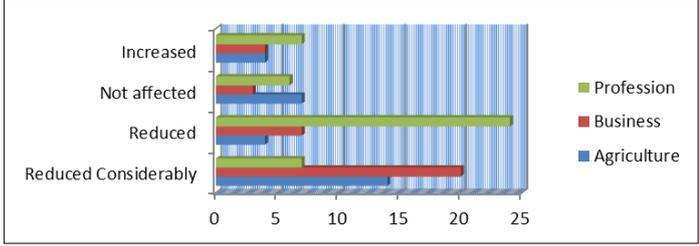
Source: Primary data (Self compiled)

Fig.4: Impact of Covid-19 on Employment



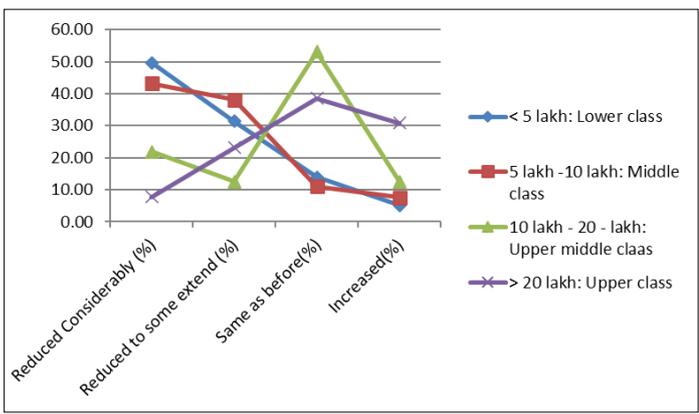
Source: Primary data

**Fig.5: Impact of Covid-19 on other Means of Livelihood like Business, Agriculture and Profession**



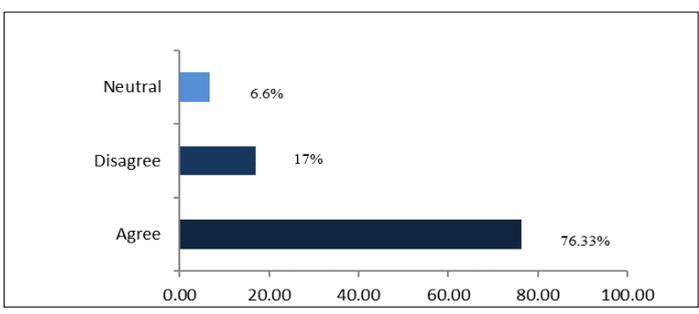
Source: Primary data

**Fig.6: Impact of Covid-19 on Family Income**



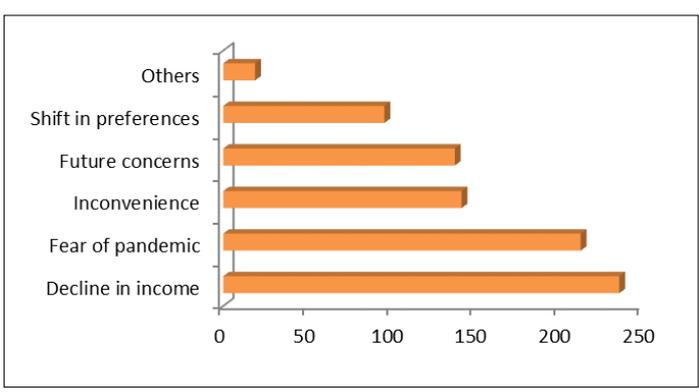
Source: Primary data

**Fig.7: Shifts in Buying Behavior**



Source: Primary data

**Fig.8: Reasons for Changes in Spending Habit**



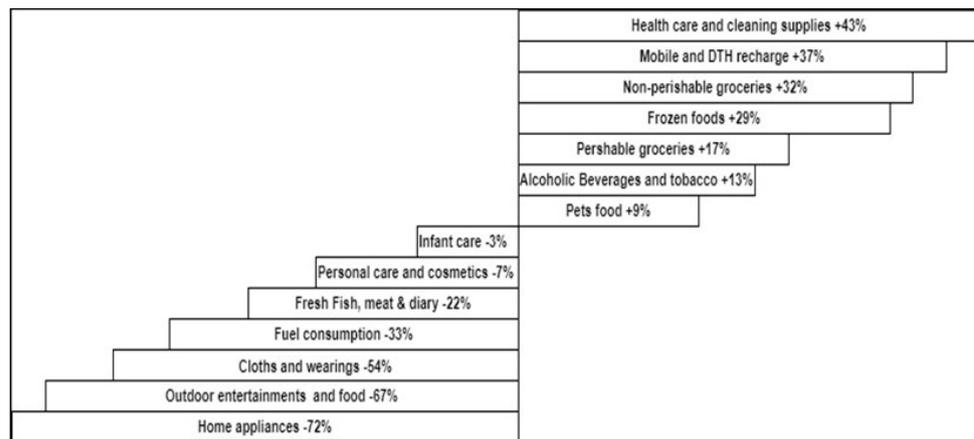
Source: Primary data

**Fig.9: Impact on Shopping Habit**



Source: Primary data (Self compiled)

**Fig.10: Changes in Composition of Consumption**

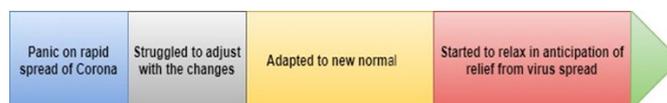


Source: Primary data

**6.0 Conclusion:**

Obviously the Covid 19 pandemic has created rapid and dramatic changes in all aspects of our lives, including the ways in which we work, buy things and consume them. Isolation protocols, closure of markets and physical stores, fear of pandemic, job losses and other factors are impacting the buying and consumption decisions. The analysis conducted by the researchers reveal exactly how much the consumer behavior is being altered as a result of the ever-growing uncertainties in the markets. Report of 'SAP Commerce Cloud Customer System Insights 2020' reveals that there is a 63.6% increase in e-commerce transactions when compared to the same period of 2019. The analysis of the data collected through the survey indicates the sign of fundamental change in consumer behavior; therefore, to cater the changing demands, businesses should tailor themselves innovatively and craft a strategy that makes products and services affordable to the customers affordable without them having to sacrifice much of their savings and quality of living. Fig.11 shows the customer's journey from the spread of corona till date. Initially it was very shocking for the people across the world and created a panic among them as they struggled to adjust with the rapidly changing environment. After a while people started to adapt with the changing situations and slowly let go of some of the hardest measures.

**Fig.11: Paradigm Shift in Buying Behavior**



Source: Self observation



The analysis of consumer responses collected from across the world reveal that the customer perception and buying behavior are settling into a new normal with people quickly adapting to live with the reality of Covid-19 and countries are in the course of unlocking. The pandemic has affected different markets with varying intensities but a common change that happened to consumers across the globe is the massive shift to essential consumption and the demand for the value of spending. A huge rally to digital and omni channels, shock to loyalty, health consciousness and hygiene concerns are witnessed. As most of the economies including global giants are struggling to survive due to huge revenue losses in connection with worldwide lockdown, the future strategies of marketing experts and the new normal of consumer behavior will fix the order of world economy.

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