

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE CHANGE IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN ROMANIA

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### Abstract

The world has faced numerous challenges in recent years, which have triggered significant changes in the behaviour of individuals. The COVID-19 crisis subjected the business environment to unprecedented trials, with multiple changes taking place in the way of business management, the influence being strongly felt in the commercial sector as well. The present work aims to analyse the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic generated on consumer behaviour in Romania, as well as the changes regarding the mentality of individuals in this regard. Thus, the results of our own research verify the hypothesis that, during the pandemic, online trade has acquired a new dimension, consumers being particularly concerned with procuring essential goods, with changes in purchasing and consumption habits taking place.

**Keywords :** pandemic, consumer, commercial activity, COVID-19

**JEL Classification:** D11, D12

### 1. Introduction

For about three years, the world has been undergoing an accelerated process of change. The macro-environmental factors accentuated their effects in the business environment, the worthiest of mention in this regard being those of an economic and political nature. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the one hand, followed by the outbreak of regional conflicts, on the other, have subjected the world to unforeseen trials since the end of 2019.

This phenomenon is considered to be "one of the most significant and unpredictable events of recent times" (Rahmanov et al., 2021), changing even "the way we perceive the world around us" (El-Kady, 2022), including how "people think and live their lives". Even though the spread of the virus has slowed over time, the effects of turbulent years are still being felt economically and, naturally, after overcoming a period that raised many challenges, people are trying to reflect both on the challenges they have been subjected to and to the lessons learned from past experiences. Sources from the literature advance the idea that "the effects of the pandemic are just beginning to be understood" (Bender et. al, 2022), through the prism of the changes that have taken place in society.

Specialists in the field consider the impact of COVID-19 on business "significant" and multi-level, generating immediate effects, "many of which are unexpected, the managers of the organizations not being prepared to manage them" (Pînzaru et al, 2020).

The question now arises - in what way has the mentality of individuals changed with reference to the consumption process, and what was the impact of the pandemic on the general behaviour in this regard? McKinsey & Company reports indicate eight areas in which the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered changes, namely: *work* (by increasing unemployment and the transition to telework), *education* (mostly transferred to the online environment), *communication and information* (changes regarding the perception of news from the media), *travel* (reduction of expenses in the field of

tourism, especially with regard to the international branch), *health and well-being* (increased attention to health, reorientation of product consumption, telemedicine), *entertainment* (predominance of digital, opting for streaming services), *personal life* (more time spent at home), *purchase and consumption process* (transition to e-commerce, trust in certain brands, reduction of store visits frequency, reorientation towards convenience stores, promotion of the sustainability idea).

One cannot deny that the COVID-19 pandemic has throughout this period influenced the way the commercial sector operates, with Bender et al (2022) noting in this regard that an increased level of interest in resilience has been stimulated, particularly in the food field. Other areas were not without impact either, with online trade gaining a lot of momentum recently, at the expense of traditional trade. However, as the literature mentions, a consequence of the "economic, social and psychological impact of COVID-19" (Das et al, 2022) is that individuals have reconsidered the way they spend money, after, during the pandemic, consumption behaviour was sometimes found to be "unusual".

Authors such as Sheth (2020) identify this trend from the perspective of the lockdown effects, and the consequences of social distancing, which "disrupted buying and consumption habits", as people developed "new habits", especially under the influence of technological evolution, which increasingly became the most popular electronic shopping platforms.

According to Donthu and Gustafsson (2020), one of the effects of the pandemic has definitely materialized in forcing the closure of a large number of businesses, causing unprecedented changes in many areas of activity, more prone to the risk of bankruptcy, with start-ups being even more so, as they had not yet had enough experience to predict the long-term effects of external forces. It is interesting to note that many of the works in the literature, published even in the first half of the pandemic period, express, as regards the post-pandemic period, predictions on changes in behaviour and paradigm shifts, which, more recent articles, published in a period already considered post-pandemic, they come to confirm and validate the theories expressed along the way.

The challenges encountered by enterprises covered a wide range of aspects, from difficulties in supply to obstacles in the management of human resources, with some fields of activity facing, to a greater extent, various difficulties. The migration of activities online, a measure largely adopted globally (Neger, Uddin, 2020), has often become a unique chance for survival, with the retail sector developing a lot in this regard (Sayyida et al, 2021).

The reports drawn up by the United Nations (2020) characterize this period as "a crisis that hit a productive and business structure with weaknesses that have been building up for decades", representing especially for the private sector "an unprecedented shock" (Apedo - Amah et al, 2020), by affecting its productive capacity.

The documents published, on the other hand, by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2021), characterize the COVID-19 crisis as "a seismic shock to the way we live, the way we work and, in general, the way we perceive the world".

The authors also mention a positive influence of the pandemic, in the sense that businesses were forced to become more flexible, "the COVID-19 crisis highlighting the ability of mature businesses to adapt" (Pînzaru et al, 2020), both in terms of strategy and of operations management, becoming more responsive in adopting new technologies and in all aspects of work.

The managerial implications of the pandemic are also mentioned by Vazquez - Martinez et al (2021) who mention the need for changes and even a process of reinventing some businesses, given that the pandemic has "hindered and harmed business and economic activities to a great extent". The International Labor Organization, on the other hand, indicates that "the recovery of national economies and markets depends on creating an environment in which businesses can move from survival to development" (ILO, 2021).

Regardless of the case, however, the period of the pandemic changed the world, business and consumer to the same extent (Svajdova, 2021), opening up new perspectives of evolution.

## 2. Theoretical background

The moment of imposing restrictions and drawing certain limits regarding the usual course of life was also the moment of becoming aware of the importance of commerce in an individual's life (Svajdova, 2021), reducing the frequency of physical trips to stores. What, until then, was considered a daily, normal activity, acquired new dimensions and values. Hesham et al. (2021) specify in this sense the fact that consumers represent the category particularly affected, because they "represent the ultimate recipients of the various production, marketing, and other efforts of organizations".

A representative feature of the period was the increase in the quantities of products purchased. We are already talking about a change in behaviour, with the addition of the "fear" factor, which has partially generated, in some cases, compulsive or exaggerated behaviour, causing people to buy more for fear of running out of access to a specific product. In this case, we are talking about the so-called "panic purchases" or those made under the impulse of the moment, depending on the dominant emotions (Verma, Naveen, 2021). In relation to the quantitative aspect, the reason behind the act of purchase often turned out to be in fact a lack of reason in a classical sense of the word, authors such as Wang et al (2020) recalling, in this sense, the tendency of exaggerated constitution of some product reserves, an action referred to as "stockpiling", under the influence of a "stock up mentality" (Zwanka, Buff, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to mention another characteristic of the new behavioural pattern, namely the fact that, as a rule, the level of expenses made for the purchase of non-essential products has been reduced (Asuamah, 2023).

The typology of purchased products changed, in turn, with a greater emphasis being placed on the purchase of basic products, necessary to continue life in parameters as close to normal as possible. Some authors even state that the pandemic "changed humanity's relationship with food" (Hesham et al., 2021), the orientation being to a greater extent in a direction aimed at prioritizing health.

According to Wang (2023), consumer behaviour analysis considers "how the emotional, mental and behavioural response affects the decision-making process". But will this new behaviour, generated by the experience of COVID-19, prove to be sustainable, or has the end of the pandemic already drawn a deadline for its future expiration?

Karaboga and Ozsaatci (2021) draw a direct link between the changes produced in the economy under the impact of the pandemic and the social life of individuals and their consumption behaviour, all of this under the effects of psychological and sociological factors, which even determined changes in attitudes as well as in consumption habits, both at the individual level and at the household level. Sources from the literature indicate that the physical environment and the context, in general, determine changes regarding the decision-making process, taking into account, at the same time, the impact of emotions. Vazquez - Martinez et al (2021) study the impact that the pandemic has had on an individual's motivation to buy, based on a wide range of factors: "demographic, available resources, personality, family, culture, social class, attitude, and information processing factors".

The behavioural adjustment of an individual started primarily from the idea of personal security, as a need that must be satisfied so that the person in question can continue his or her life in conditions as close as possible to normal, compared to the negative impact of the implementation of restrictive measures (Karaboga , Ozsaatci, 2021) during certain months.

Other authors (Özyörük, Civelek, 2022) propose a double approach regarding the effects generated by COVID-19: on the one hand upon consumer behaviour and on the other hand upon the consumer market.

The first approach would present a more general picture, by referring to the influence of factors of an economic, psychological, socio-cultural nature, and so on (Charu, 2021) on the consumption behaviour of an individual. Among them, El-Kady (2022) identifies psychological factors as determinants in making the purchase decision. The second approach refers to the consequences generated by the pandemic on the consumer market "in various fields, such as tourism, green

consumption, retail activities" (Özyörük, Civelek, 2022). Within them, the effects were felt to a greater or lesser extent, the researchers citing in this respect the reduction of the flow of tourists worldwide, the drop of activity in the field of public catering, the use of public transport at a lower level, as well as services in the entertainment area (Wang, 2023), in contrast to the increase in the level of use of utilities, in the context of carrying out a high volume of activities in the personal space.

Among the most significant effects, however, we find the expansion of electronic commerce to unprecedented levels in the period before the pandemic (Sayyida et al, 2021), the challenges represented by the Coronavirus causing both "vulnerable groups of individuals and small businesses" to apply survival strategies (Rashi et al, 2021), the orientation towards the virtual environment being certainly one of them. Although it is expected that some habits will return to pre-pandemic patterns over time (Groppel – Klein et al, 2021), this trend of digital evolution is still expected to continue in the years following the pandemic (Accenture, 2020), especially regarding the possibility of online transactions (Zwanka, Buff, 2020), in which we can identify a major paradigm shift. According to Statista, the process of buying products online involves a number of aspects that prove important to customers. Thus, 31% of consumers indicate a good return policy as important, a similar percentage considering the diversity of products offered as essential, compared to physical stores. 43% appreciate fast and safe delivery, while 36% indicate that it is essential to be able to navigate the website quickly, and 43% appreciate the availability of the desired products.

Asuamah (2023) even considers the development of e-commerce platforms and the reorientation of some services online as elements that play a "crucial role in this transition process"; however, this digital development remains uneven and asymmetrical (Criscuolo, f.a). However, Deloitte studies show that although the number of users employing the mobile payment method has increased, it "does not mean that those consumers who were initially non-digital will drastically change their behaviour" (Deloitte, 2020).

Belitski et al (2021) state that "protecting and supporting small businesses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic period is critical," as these businesses play a critical role in post-pandemic economic development.

In the perception of certain authors, changes in consumer behaviour would even represent "new opportunities" (Vinerean, 2020) offered to organizations in the perspective of adapting to "their target audiences", especially in the retail sphere.

Accenture studies (2020) propose five consumer archetypes: the worrier, the individualist, the rationalist, the activist, the indifferent. Predominant during the pandemic is indicated to be the category of the rational consumer (39%), and it remained in pole position in terms of weight in all phases of the pandemic evolution.

Moreover, the deviation from the usual consumption routine branched out in three directions: prioritizing aspects regarding health, limiting waste, and orientation towards local producers. As for this latter aspect, some authors even talk about the concept of "ethnocentrism", in the idea of buying mainly local/national products, for three reasons: for fear of not harming the national economy, "the morality of purchasing imported products ", and "personal bias regarding imported products" (Verma, Naveen, 2021).

### 3. Research methodology

In order to study what was the impact of COVID-19 on the change in consumer behaviour in Romania, we used as research method *the questionnaire-based survey*, a method through which we collected certain information, based on a certain sample of the researched population.

This research had as its main tool an online questionnaire, applied through Google Forms, between March and April 2023, on a sample of 375 people.

*The hypothesis* from which we started, in the elaboration of this research, was that, as the literature shows, during the pandemic consumers were in general, more reflexive, being particularly

preoccupied with the concern for basic / essential goods. At the same time, against the background of traffic restrictions, online trade has acquired a new dimension.

The main objective of the research was to study the impact of COVID-19 on the change in consumer behaviour in Romania.

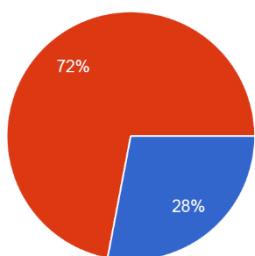
The secondary objectives of the research are presented in the table below:

**Table no 1 – Secondary objectives**

SO1	Identifying the impact generated by the Covid-19 crisis on the commercial sector as a whole
OS2	Identifying the level of concern / preoccupation of consumers regarding the possibilities of supplying current products, during the period of the imposition of circulation restrictions
OS3	Identifying the frequency with which, in general, purchases were made during the pandemic
OS4	Identifying consumers' perception regarding their own type of behaviour (dominantly rational or dominantly emotional) manifested during the pandemic
OS5	Identifying consumer perception regarding the importance of protective measures against the spread of the virus during the pandemic
OS6	Studying the perception of the advantages and disadvantages of online commerce
OS7	Identifying consumer perceptions of the dominant type of commerce in the future

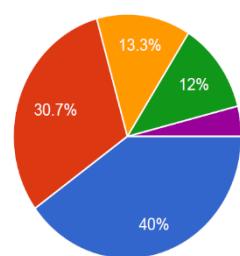
In order to reach these objectives, a questionnaire consisting of 19 questions, of which 4 identification questions and 15 content questions, was designed and distributed online.

The identification questions took into account gender, age, level of education, occupation. The distribution of the sample according to the identified characteristics analysed was as follows:



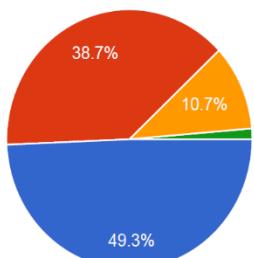
**Figure 1** . Gender of respondents

● Male  
● Female



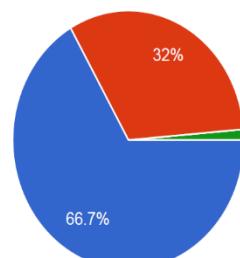
**Figure 2** . Age of respondents

● Under 25  
● 25 – 35  
● 36 – 45  
● 46 – 55  
● Over 55



**Figure 3** . Level of studies

● High-school  
● Bachelor studies  
● Master studies  
● Doctoral studies



**Figure 4** . Status on the labour market

● Employee  
● Not employed  
● Unemployed  
● Retired

The structure of the questionnaire is complex, the questions being both closed questions and questions based on measurement scales, with respondents giving a score for the proposed criteria, according to the Likert scale, from 1 to 5.

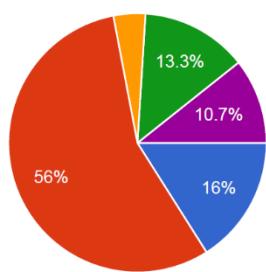
#### 4. Results

More than half of respondents (56%) believe that the biggest impact generated by the Covid-19 crisis on the commercial sector as a whole has been the closure of certain commercial establishments, which has generated the loss of many jobs.

At the opposite pole, with only 4%, we find those who appreciate that the biggest impact generated by the pandemic has led to strategic changes in terms of business management.

It should be noted that, in a significant percentage (16%), the subjects believe that a high impact was felt at the level of incomes of employees in commercial units, as a result of the restriction of the activity of stores.

At the same time, for 13.3% of the respondents, the increase in the price of certain categories of products represents the strongest effect of the crisis generated by Covid-19 on the commercial sector, while 10.7% of the subjects surveyed believe that the reorientation of customers to other commercial units represents the greatest impact of the pandemic on commercial activities, in general.



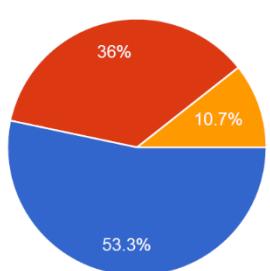
- The reduction of commercial activity generated a decrease in the incomes of employees
- The closure of certain commercial establishments led to the loss of many jobs
- Companies management has rethought business strategies
- The price increase of certain categories of products
- The reorientation of customers toward other commercial units

**Figure 5** . The impact generated by the Covid-19 crisis on the commercial sector as a whole

Summing up, we note that, in general, the respondents believe that the strongest effects of the pandemic on the commercial sector, as a whole, were, in order: the loss of jobs for many employees and, implicitly, the reduction of their incomes as a result of the closure of some commercial units or the restriction of activity in the commercial sector, the increase in the price of certain categories of products, the reorientation of customers to other commercial units, the preoccupation of company managers to adapt their market strategy to new challenges.

We find, therefore, that the respondents are much more sensitive to the effect of the pandemic on employees, customers and less concerned about its impact on entrepreneurs.

When it comes to stores frequented during the pandemic, slightly more than half of subjects (53.3%) say that their location-related shopping habits have not changed, continuing to shop at the same stores as before the outbreak of the pandemic .



- I frequented the same shops as before
- I only frequented the nearest shops
- I frequented every kind of shops

**Figure 6** . Shops frequented by consumers during the pandemic

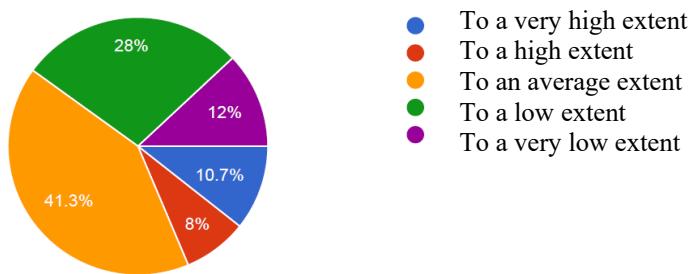
However, it is noted that a percentage of 36% is held by those who claim that in the period after the start of the pandemic they only frequented stores in their vicinity, and the remaining 10.7% chose any store to make the necessary purchases.

So as to conclude, as regards the shops frequented before and after the pandemic, no fundamental changes in behaviour can be found, beyond the concern for physical distancing and compliance with certain hygiene conditions, and perhaps, precisely for this reason, some of the respondents chose to frequent, in recently, especially the shops near them.

Without being extremely worried, most respondents (41.3%) claim that they were still quite concerned ("at an average level") about the supply of current products, during the period of the imposition of movement restrictions.

On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that almost a fifth of the respondents state that the problem of getting supplies for the daily necessities worried them to a great extent (8%) and even to a very great extent (10.7%).

Even if a rather important category of the subjects state that the issue of the supply of current products worried them to a small extent (28%) and even to a very small extent (12%), it is obvious that during the period of the imposition of circulation restrictions as a result of the pandemic generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus there were certain changes in consumer behaviour regarding their concerns and even concerns about procuring the products they need every day.



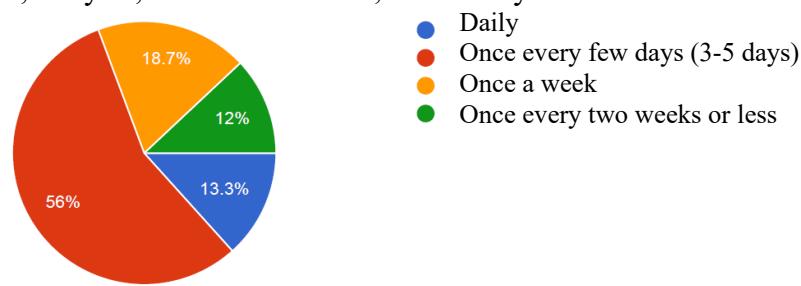
**Figure 7 .** The level of preoccupation / concern of consumers regarding the possibilities of supplying current products, during the period of the imposition of restrictions on circulation

When it comes to the frequency with which they made their purchases during the pandemic, the majority of respondents (56%) state that they usually stocked up once every few days (3-5 days).

The fewest number of the surveyed subjects (12%) claim that during this period they visited the shops once every two weeks or even less often. Even those who say that they went shopping every day are not much more numerous, their percentage being 13.3%.

It should be mentioned that almost a fifth of the respondents (18.7%) made their purchases, as a rule, once a week.

Considering all these results, we can see that the overwhelming majority of consumers (about 75%) frequented the stores once every few days or even once a week, being much less those who were at the extremes in terms of the frequency with which they made their purchases (on the one hand, daily or, on the other hand, once every two weeks or even less often).



**Figure 8 .** The frequency with which consumers made their purchases during the pandemic

The present research shows that, during the pandemic, consumers were, in general, more reflective. Thus, more than half of the respondents (52%) state that, during this period, they became more rational, buying only the products they needed.

Much lower percentages (17.3%) are registered by those who claim that, during this period as well, they purchased both products of immediate necessity and other categories of non-essential products.

It should be noted that, even during the pandemic, compulsive buying behaviour characterized a fairly large category of consumers, almost a third of respondents (30.7%) purchased any products they liked or wanted.

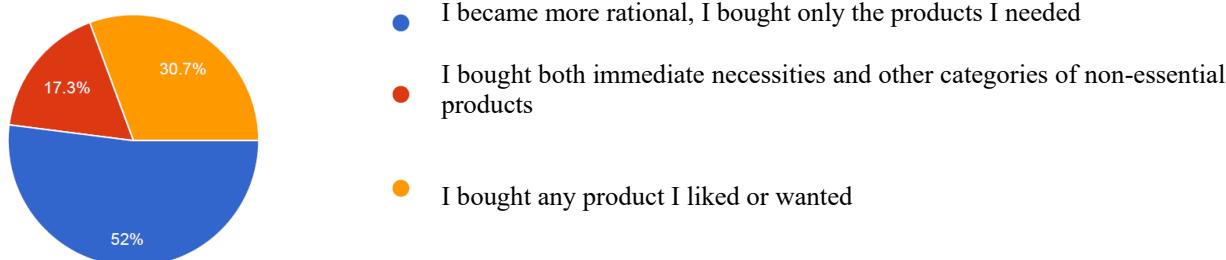


Figure 9 . The perception of personal purchasing behaviour during the pandemic

All in all, we can note that although the percentage of impulsive purchases and, in general, of those who exploit the emotional springs of consumers was quite high during the pandemic, a greater inclination of people towards rational consumption can be found.

As for the respondents' perception of the effectiveness of the protection measures against the spread of the virus during the pandemic, applied by economic agents, most respondents claim that they were effective (61.3%) and even very effective (16%).

As it can be seen, there are much fewer who believe that these measures were ineffective (5.4%) or totally ineffective (8%).

Consequently, the overwhelming majority of consumers declare to have been satisfied and even very satisfied with the way economic agents applied the protection measures against the spread of the virus during the pandemic.

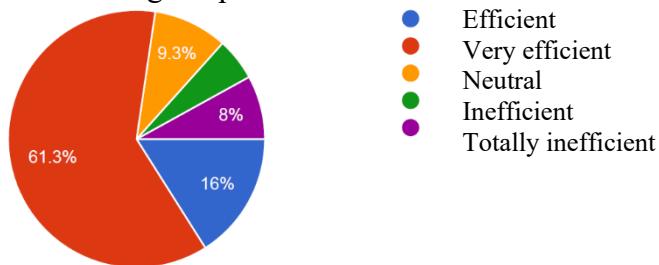
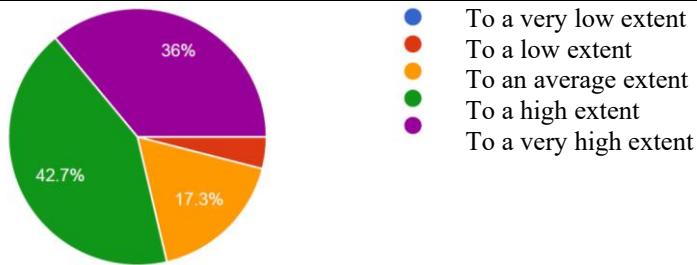


Figure 10 . The efficiency of protective measures against the spread of the virus during the pandemic, applied by economic agents

When it comes to their behaviour, the overwhelming majority of respondents believe that they were responsible and, in general, respected the protective measures against the spread of the virus (42.7% - to a large extent and 36% - to a very large extent).

Only 8% of the subjects state that they complied "to a small extent" with the requirements for protection against the spread of the virus, and 17.3% believe that they only "to an average level" complied with these measures.

Summing up, more than three quarters of the respondents consider themselves to have been responsible, and even very responsible, in terms of complying with protective measures against the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.



**Figure 11** . The extent to which consumers complied with protective measures against the spread of the virus

During the pandemic, most people changed their daily routine, the daily activities of some time ago are now reduced or even non-existent, for example many individuals worked less or even lost their jobs and consequently their incomes got lower. At the same time, buying and consumption habits changed quite a bit from one day to the next. Many people feared the possibility of an economic crisis, etc. and they began to buy much more than they normally used to, purchasing even products that were not a great necessity.

Asked to what extent the pandemic contributed to changing priorities in terms of their buying and consumption behaviour, using a scale from 1-5, where 1 means to a very low extent and 5 to a very high extent, we observe that most respondents, in a percentage of 30.7%, changed their purchasing and consumption habits to some extent / to an average extent.

It should be emphasized that 24% of the subjects appreciate that their behaviour changed to a great extent, and 21.3% of those surveyed claim that the priorities regarding their purchase and consumption behaviour changed even "to a very high extent".

So as to conclude, the vast majority of people state that the pandemic has contributed to a medium, high or even very high extent to changing their priorities in terms of purchasing and consumption behaviour, being thus very few who state that shopping habits consumption before the pandemic have remained or changed very little.

From the answers of those who participated in this survey, we notice that the pandemic has not only left its mark on the purchasing and consumption behaviour of individuals, but also on their income level.

Most of the respondents (29.3%) say that their incomes were affected to a very high extent by the pandemic, 16% of the subjects estimate that their incomes were affected to a high extent, and 22.7% say that their incomes changed to some extent / to an average extent.

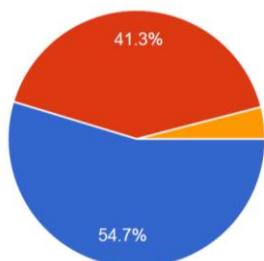
On the other hand, less than a third of respondents believe that the pandemic has not greatly affected their income.

Correlating this question with the previous one, we can conclude that the change in buying and consumption behaviour during the pandemic is not only a consequence of people's uncertainty regarding the possibility of finding the goods they need in stores, of changing certain priorities in terms of consumption, etc. and, to some extent, this change in behaviour is also the consequence of the change in the level of consumer incomes during the pandemic, in conditions of lower incomes, as a rule, consumers being concerned, above all, with products and services meant to satisfy basic needs.

As regards the amount allocated to non-essential purchases (clothes, electronic items, branded items), more than half of the respondents (54.7%) say that during the pandemic they spent less than before the pandemic.

41.3% claim that the amounts allocated to these types of purchases remained, in general, unchanged, and only 4% of respondents state that the amount allocated to non-essential purchases was higher during the pandemic compared to the previous period.

Summing up, during the pandemic people became more reflexive, more rational in terms of consumption and focused more on goods and services that satisfy basic needs, largely ignoring the other categories of purchases.



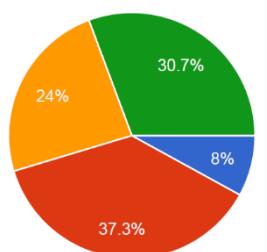
- The amounts allocated to non-essential purchases were lower than those allocated before the pandemic
- The amounts allocated to non-essential purchases were relatively identical to those allocated before the pandemic
- The amounts allocated to non-essential purchases were higher than those allocated before the pandemic

**Figure 12** . Dynamics of amounts allocated to non-essential purchases (clothes, electronics, brand items)

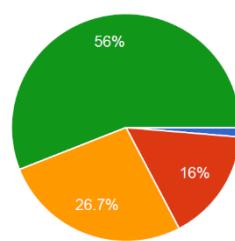
Correlating the answers given by the subjects to two of the questions, we notice that the public food serving outlets were much more frequented before the pandemic than during it.

Thus, before the outbreak of the pandemic, 37.3% of the respondents frequented the restaurants weekly, and after the outbreak of the pandemic, the percentage of those who went to a restaurant weekly decreased a lot, reaching 16%. And the percentage of those who frequented the premises daily decreased from one period to another, reaching from 8% to only 1.3%.

On the other hand, compared to the period before the pandemic, the percentage of those who went to restaurants less than once a month increased, as expected (from 30.7% to 56%).



- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than once a month



- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than once a month

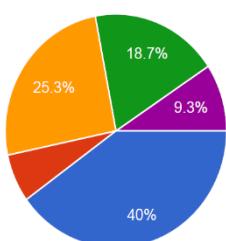
**Figure 13** . The frequency with which consumers frequented public food serving outlets before the pandemic

**Figure 14** . The frequency with which consumers frequented public food serving outlets during the pandemic

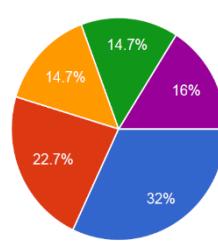
The surveyed subjects identified certain disadvantages, but also a number of advantages of online commerce.

Thus, 40% of the respondents believe that the main disadvantage of online trade is the intangibility of the products, and for 25.3% of the subjects the cost of transportation is another important disadvantage of this type of trade.

Other disadvantages would be the low credibility of some stores (18.7%), as well as the aspects regarding data confidentiality (9.3%), as well as those related to the security of transactions (6.7%).



- Intangibility of products
- Security of transactions
- Shipping cost
- Credibility of stores
- Data Privacy



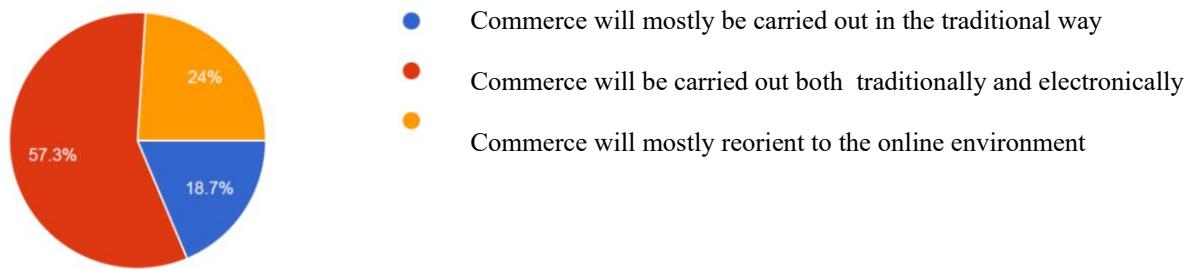
**Figure 15** . Disadvantages of online trading

**Figure 16** . Advantages of online trading

On the other hand, almost a third of the respondents (32%) considered that the main advantage of online trade is the more affordable price for certain categories of products, while for 22.7% of the surveyed consumers the biggest advantage of online trade is the speed of placing orders and their delivery.

Other respondents appreciated, in approximately equal proportions, that the main advantages of this type of trade are the possibility to compare the characteristics of the products and their prices (16%), but also the possibility to place the order without time limits (14.7%) or the right to return products within a specified time frame (14.7%)

Regarding the future of commercial activities, the majority of respondents (57.3%) believe that, in general, a balance will be maintained between traditional and electronic commerce.



**Figure 17** . The dominant form of commerce in the future

Only 18.7% believe in the power of traditional trade, appreciating that it will be dominant in the coming period, and on the other hand, almost a quarter of respondents (24%) believe that the future belongs to online trade.

Therefore, it is a fairly broad perception that online business activities will expand more than brick-and-mortar commerce in the years to come.

## 5. Discussions and conclusions

The pandemic generated by the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus led to a paradigm shift in the entire society, putting pressure not only on the medical system, the social protection system or the education system, but also on economic activities as a whole.

As the literature shows, the pandemic has left its mark, in one way or another, on all socio-economic aspects: personal life, health and well-being, education, communication and information, employment and unemployment, leisure time, behaviour of purchase and consumption etc.

Many industries suffered and, with them, employees had to adapt to the new realities. On the other hand, people, in their capacity of consumers, had to be more careful in how they managed their financial resources, to be particularly concerned with the concern of basic goods and to ignore as much as possible, consumption of symbolic products.

Purchasing and consumption habits were subjected to pressures dictated by social distancing, by people's fear of not running out of some basic products, by the modification, in many cases, of consumer incomes, the specialized literature paying particular attention to the role of economic factors, but and the psychological ones that were the basis of the new manifestations in terms of consumption.

Online trade developed to the detriment of the traditional one, with people accessing more and more electronic platforms intended for shopping. In this context, not only entrepreneurs, but also consumers have become more receptive in adopting new technologies, so that both businesses and consumers have had to reinvent themselves.

Starting from these aspects, through this research we set out to identify the impact of COVID-19 on the dynamics of consumer behaviour in Romania.

Thus, the results of our own research also verify the hypothesis that, during the pandemic, e-commerce reached a new dimension, and consumers were particularly concerned with essential goods.

Among the strongest effects of the pandemic on the commercial sector, according to the surveyed subjects, we should mention the closing of certain commercial units, the loss of jobs for many employees and, implicitly, the reduction of their incomes, but also the increase in the price of certain categories of products.

It should also be emphasized that, as it emerges from our own research, during the period of the imposition of restrictions on circulation, there were changes in the behaviour of consumers, regarding their concerns and even worries about procuring the products they need every day.

In terms of the frequency with which they shopped during the pandemic, most consumers usually stocked up once every few days or even less often and, as much as possible, from stores in their vicinity.

For many people, their incomes were affected by the pandemic to a high and very high extent, and although impulse purchases have remained at a fairly high level, consumers have become somewhat more analytical and purchased mainly essential products and less non-essential products.

Consumers declare about themselves that they were responsible and, in general, respected the protection measures against the spread of the virus, and, at the same time, they are of the opinion that the protection measures against the spread of the virus during the pandemic, applied by economic agents, were also effective.

Despite all these protective measures, restaurants have been less and less frequented by consumers, and online commerce has seen an expansion that few would have probably expected before the pandemic.

Beyond certain disadvantages of online commerce – the intangibility of products, the cost of transportation, the low credibility of some stores, the issues regarding data confidentiality and those related to the security of transactions – consumers consider that online commerce has many advantages, the most important being the more affordable prices for certain categories of products, the speed of placing orders and their delivery, the possibility to compare the characteristics of the products and their prices, but also the possibility to place the order without time limits, or the right to return the products within a specified time interval.

As regards the future of commerce, most consumers believe that, in general, there will be a balance between traditional and e-commerce, at least for some time, but with an upward trend in e-commerce.

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