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Understanding Societal Influences on the Customer Journey: COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

Daissy Moya Sanchez, Ramon Martin Guart, Andrea Ramírez Moya, Joaquim Majó Fernández

Faculty of Tourism, University of Girona, Girona, Spain
Email: daissy.moya@udg.edu

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Abstract

For years, the consumer behavior process, known as the Customer Journey, has been studied from an individual point of view. However, nowadays, it is crucial to research how society influences it and how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed these patterns. By creating a split-ballot experiment and in-depth interviews with professionals, this research analyzes descriptively the changes faced by the different safety measures, such as lockdowns and socially distancing activities government enforced on five product categories: retail, electronics, wellness & health goods, food, and entertainment. The findings of this project evidence that the changes in behavior in the purchasing stages of customer-packaged and intermediate goods have sightly remained the same as when the pandemic started. However, the changes in the enjoyment stage are returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Keywords

Customer Journey, Consumer Behavior Process, Customer Experience, COVID-19 Pandemic, Spain

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed how businesses operate, consumers behave, and governments adjust regulations (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Due to "lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health fears" (Remes et al., 2021), countries were confined at home, lowering the demand for services that used to require the physical presence of a person. There has been a change in consumer behavior in the wake of the outbreak. Thus, studying this journey before, on the first wave, and one year into the spread of this coronavirus is fundamental to brands, marketing professionals, and future researchers to know consumers' touchpoints to satisfy their social aspirations on durable, consumer-packaged, and intermediate goods.

According to insights reported by Comscore (Weitman & Essling, 2020), the week with the most digital visits was April 20th-26th, 2020, with more than sixty billion worldwide. This information matches the first peek of the pandemic as well. After that, visits slowly declined but remained higher than pre-outbreak levels. "These data suggest that while consumers spend less time online now than at the height of the lockdowns, digital behavior is still significantly more prevalent than pre-coronavirus" (Weitman & Essling, 2020). However, brands such as P & G, Chase, and Uber turned off their digital advertising spending and saw no changes in their business outcomes (Fou, 2021). Therefore, it is thought-provoking to see the effects the pandemic has caused on the consumer behavior process (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Identify how humans rely on their senses to make decisions in all situations. Depending on a person's area, different degrees of isolation have lowered the exposition to stimuli in their journeys. As a result, it is crucial to link the customer experience at home and the digital world by questioning the pandemic's effects on consumers' purchasing preferences. Do they prefer going to physical stores or going online?

On March 13th, 2020, the Spanish Government declared a State of Emergency and encouraged their citizens to stay home to protect themselves and the rest of their compatriots (Moncloa Palace, 2020). These measures included a nationwide quarantine lockdown from March 15th until June 21st, 2020. People could only leave their households for indispensable work and stocking (like grocery shopping and medicines), closing all non-essential establishments (Barceló, 2020). Although, at the moment of writing this research, all the measures to stop the spread of coronavirus have been lifted, it is remarkable to keep on record the changes the customer behavior process faced by the COVID-19 pandemic from a social point of view in a period of isolation and social distancing.

This research also aims to recognize the importance of studying the customer journey from a social perspective by describing how the consumer behavior process works in a social customer journey in the middle of a sanitary crisis. This introduces the questions: how has the COVID-19 outbreak changed consumer preferences on their journey, and how has it changed media consumption in Catalonia? "In Spain (especially Catalonia) have been given, with a special reference to traditional culture, which has always played a major role in shaping the identities of individuals and groups" (Pascual i Ruiz, 2002).

This also raises a question of how brands can manage the touchpoints of an experience in a Social Customer Journey a year into a pandemic from a Customer Relationship Management point of view.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following section holds three parts. The first one describes the Social Customer Journey. The second one analyzes the Influences on Consumer Behavior Touchpoints. The final section discusses the challenges faced by the COVID-19 outbreak.

2.1. Consumer Behavior Process (CBP) and the Social Customer Journey (SCJ)

Everett M. Rogers, in the 80s, defined the process of acquiring a product as "the mental process through which an individual passes from first hearing about an innovation to final adoption. He categorizes customers into five types according to their willingness to adopt new products: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards" (Eng & Quaia, 2009). For a person to embrace a product or service, they must go through some touchpoints on problem recognition, the information search, the evaluation of alternatives, the purchase decision, and the post-purchase stages of consumption. These "journeys" were recognized at least as far back as the late 1800s when marketing experts decomposed the effectiveness of advertising into a series of staged effects. The most influential of these early stepwise models evolved into the AIDA framework.

Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action-still prevalent in academic settings and marketing practice (Hamilton et al., 2021). However, that model only contemplates the pre-purchase stage, and since Puccinelli et al. (2009) said, "Customer journeys are depictions of the entire customer experience," academics and marketing practitioners should acknowledge the outcomes of purchase, which include the engagement, the satisfaction, the evaluation, and the loyalty loop that creates advocacy.

When starting a CBP, an individual will be faced with problem recognition. This awareness could be an exposure to a motivation, a need, or a satisfaction driven by physiological (rational drivers) or psychological (emotional drivers) input. After learning about all the possible products/services that can solve that point of departure, it is the moment to discriminate the ones that will perform a better outcome for the person (Kotler et al., 2014). In any case, this decision carries a risk factor, and the fear of making a mistake, the fear of missing out, and even the fear of loss could become a driver in selecting one item (Thomson, 2013).

With the advent of information and communication technologies and websites that promote establishments, the possibility of clarifying access to a service increased since the interested party, from a computer or mobile device, can see the average value of the services, the rating they have received from users and the positioning compared to other establishments that provide the same services. In the same way, the feedback given by the owner can be observed (Majó Fernández & Moya Sánchez, 2017).

Hamilton et al.'s (2021) paper examined how the social context has not been studied yet and how researchers have had an individual customer journey outlook. Even though authors like (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and (Puccinelli et al., 2009) have studied social influences as an external influence of touchpoints when consumers go through the process of identifying the characteristics of a product or service, then making the purchase decision, using the product, and finally evaluating their experience. Dr. (Gajjar, 2013) says the factors that affect consumer behavior are cultural, social (like reference groups, family, roles, and status), personal (being an individual's age, personality, lifestyle, and economic situation), and psychological (their motivations, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, in the case of consumption they could be risk takers or risk-averse). However, the social spectrum is more potent than thought before because "people who are seemingly socially distant may exert a powerful influence on one's decisions" (Hamilton et al., 2021: p. 70).

The kind of product a consumer purchase affects their behavior. When purchasing a product, there are three kinds of responses (Ariely & Norton, 2011). The first is the routine response behavior when the purchased goods are frequently bought; usually, there is little information search or analysis before acquiring it. These products tend to be low-cost, familiar, and easily accessible, and there is not much thought from the consumers—for example, food and beverages or wellness and health products. The second response is extensive problem solving; people need more time to search for information online or from friends and think before purchasing the product. These endurable goods are more expensive and less frequently bought than the ones exposed before—for example, electronics or entertainment products. Finally, limited problem-solving is a middle ground between routine response behavior and extensive problem-solving. There is a small involvement, but still, some research is needed before purchasing retail products like clothes.

In this area, we go back to the essence of the marketing mix of the product (including its features and its customer's benefit and experience), price, placement (online or offline), and promotion to guide a consumer through the purchase process (Londhe, 2014). In the digital era, brands have disrupted how they interact with the public. Back then, "marketers assumed that consumers started with many potential brands in mind and methodically winnowed their choices until they had decided which one to buy". However, in the present day, "after a purchase, consumers frequently share information about product performance, even for mundane purchases, on retailer websites and social media, potentially influencing the decision-making of others with their ratings and reviews" (Hamilton et al., 2021). If these others engage with that information, they might buy a product. By doing so, they are in the middle of their Social Customer Journey and will share it with their peers.

2.2. Influences on Consumer Behavior Touchpoints

Along with the CBP, people consume and are on the line of multiple touchpoints that have a bold or fair effect on their purchases. Identifying critical events ("moments of truth") is essential to select the ones with a more significant outcome for a brand's goals. Lemon and Verhoef propose a Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience, considering previous, current, and future experience. Each stage describes the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase touchpoints, either internal or external to a brand. They identified "four categories of customer experience touchpoints: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social external independent" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016: p. 76).

Each touchpoint (**Table 1**) is an enormous source of data that helps companies create and optimize marketing strategies for customer acquisition, retention, growth, and advocacy. The customer-owned and social touchpoints could be defined from the customer's point of view distance.

Table 1. Customer Experience Touchpoints.

Owned Experience	Touchpoints
Brand-owned	Store, website, brand's social media, brand representatives, events.
Partner-owned	Third party stores and ATL (Above the Line) channels: TV, radio, magazines, press, cinema, billboards.
Customer-owned	Family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances.
Social/External	Influencers, experts, brand's customers.

Note: Own source based on the papers by (Hamilton et al., 2020).

2.3. The Pandemic of COVID-19

On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), alarmed by the high SARS-COV-2 cases and deaths worldwide, declared a pandemic so countries could take legal actions to reduce transmissions. COVID-19 primarily spreads through close contact between humans and has significantly affected retailing industries (Pilawa et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly all aspects of life and the world economy, has disrupted customer's purchasing habits and shopping behaviors (Alzaidi & Agag, 2022; Silva & Souza, 2022), has led to drastic changes in influential media for purchasing decisions (Byun et al., 2023), and, combined with firms' multichannel adjustments, has accelerated changes in consumer shopping behaviors. One important factor when studying the CBP is considering the economic influence that COVID-19 had on people. In a period of affluence, there would be more disposable income, and individuals would buy better and more expensive products (Gajjar, 2013). However, in times of recessions, like the sanitary crisis we live in, "consumers will be less willing to buy products that frequently, they might be buying more of the frequently purchased products like your food products, milk, eggs and so on. However, they might be less likely to buy more durable products like TVs and cars". Nevertheless, the impact has been uneven because some people have been able to work from home, keeping their incomes and "accumulating more savings while forced to cut back on spending…; others lost jobs and income or closed down businesses and have struggled to pay the bills" (Remes et al., 2021).

However, almost two years later, the Bank of Spain communicated in the middle of the COVID-19 outbreak that the containment measures, together with the decline in demand, have caused an unprecedented drop in business activity and a significant reduction in surpluses for a very high proportion of Spanish companies (Blanco et al., 2020: p. 16). It turns into an increase in debts due to low commercial activity, and almost 40% of companies will be under financial pressure (Jiménez, 2020) and might close forever.

Countries like the United States have seen an increase in new business applications that doubled the volume in 2019, and the United Kingdom had a 30% growth (Sneader & Singhal, 2021). This pandemic has allowed entrepreneurs to build their hustles to stay afloat in these unprecedented times. Regardless, companies must remember that they are brands as well.

3. Methodology

To identify the change the pandemic has had over the consumer behavior process one year after it started, it is valuable to perform descriptive research because it "generates data, both qualitative and quantitative, that define the state of nature at a point in time" (Koh & Owen, 2000: p. 219). To achieve this, quantitative data will be gathered by a survey to later validate with secondary data from media studies and qualitative data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with academics and professionals in consumer behavior.

Referring to the survey, the tool to collect data will be a questionnaire, as it is a research method instrument that gathers objective (facts) and subjective attitudes to subsequentially analyze the frequency, distribution, and correlation of some variables in a sample (Igartua & Humanes, 2023). The authors conducted questionnaires and took several rigorous steps to ensure their reliability and validity in this study. Experts in the thematic field analyzed the content validity and assessed the relevance and clarity of each item. Additionally, they applied statistical techniques such as exploratory factor analysis to confirm the structure of the questionnaire and ensure its construct validity. These processes ensure that the questionnaire used in this study is reliable and valid for measuring the variables of interest. In this case, the segment to study will be a non-probability sampling, following the convenience and the voluntary response of people in Catalonia, since they are accessible units of analysis to reach between March and April 2021, considering that those months mark the anniversary of the almost global lockdown. The questionnaire will be in a digital format, using the university's resources on Google Forms.

A suitable sample for the size of Catalonia's population, 7.7 million according to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat, 2020), to have a 95% confidence level, the most commonly known to have statistical significance and an error margin of ±8.5%, would be 133 individuals (SurveyMonkey, 2021). To reach that sample, we will contact friends, family, and colleagues on WhatsApp to answer the survey and ask if they could spread the word about the study. The questionnaire's link was posted in the Faculty's Newsletter for two consecutive weeks, from March 20th until April 30th, and on our social media pages; however, since most of our acquaintances live in Spain (outside Catalonia).

The sample cannot be extrapolated to Catalonia in America and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, for future research, this study could be performed to range a more significant sample to analyze in-depth the changes the pandemic faces in the Iberoamerican sphere (**Figure 1**).

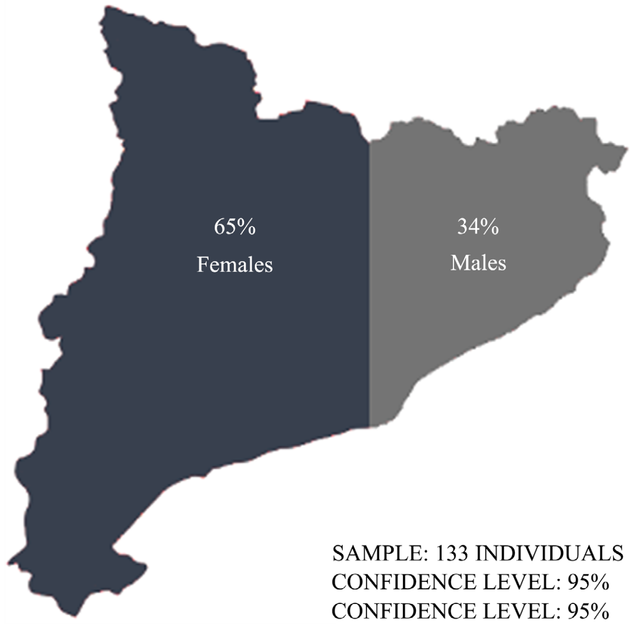

Figure 1. Survey sample. Own source.

One of the biggest challenges when studying consumer behavior is product choice. The outcome will be unclear depending on the kind of product an individual encounters. It is entirely different if it is an item they frequently buy, such as food and beverages or wellness goods. Alternatively, if it is a less often purchased product, like clothes, electronics, or entertainment. To have a global view of the consumer behavior process, it is representative to use an experimental questionnaire, also known as a split ballot, to create different models with the same questions and randomly distribute them to be able to analyze the groups separately for context-specific variables and at the same time use the results as a whole (Igartua & Humanes, 2023; Krupnikov & Findley, 2018; Stucki et al., 2018).

For the survey, the questionnaire has introductory and subjective variables to gather data relating to their consumer behavior process before, during the first wave of the outbreak, and a year after the COVID-19 pandemic started. There are open questions to identify their lifestyles and media consumption. Further, based on the final digit of the sample's phone number, they are categorized into specific product buying scenarios. The products selected for this research are from the five "most meaningful industries in 2019" in Western Europe: retail, electronics, food, consumer goods (for this study being wellness and health-related), and entertainment. This will ensure a close to accurate randomization and low human error.

Referring to the interviews, it will be meaningful to reach experts to validate the results found on the consumer behavior process from a social outlook. The interviewees will be carefully selected according to their professional backgrounds. They will take place right after analyzing the results. To keep distancing and safety restrictions to prevent contagion of the coronavirus, they will take place on Google Meet, the university's resource for videoconferences that allow sharing the screen with the results' figures. Since they will be remote, the distance is redundant, and academics and marketing practitioners could live anywhere in the world. They will require a reliable technological device and a place with a stable internet connection (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

The principal purpose of this qualitative technique is to find an enriching argument between the results found in this research and the current practices of professionals to validate the data. Their identity will be preserved anonymously, leaving their identities confidential in this paper but still keeping the integrity of the qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2015; Val & Gutiérrez Brito, 2006).

4. Results

From the survey, the sample is formed by 65% of females, 34% of males and 1% abstained from answering the gender question.

In Table 2, you can see the percentage of participation of the people who answered the survey according to their age, status, and generation to which they belong.

Table 2. Demografic Information.

Generation	Status	Percentage
Gen Z	Students under 20 years old	3%
Zillennials	Students and employed 21 - 27-year-olds	36%
Millennials	Students, freelancers and employed 28 - 40-year-olds	19%
Gen X	Freelancers, employed, and unemployed 41 - 52-year-olds	17%
Baby Boomers	Freelancers and employed 53 - 72-year-olds	23%
Silent Generation	Freelancers, employed, and unemployed over 73 years old	2%

Note: Own source.

The fact that they answered a 20 - 30-minute-long questionnaire means they rely on a stable internet connection.

When talking about segmenting the respondents by the VALS Framework, on the one hand, Gen Z (60%), Zillennials (71%), and Millennials (68%) follow ideals. They are thinkers who value knowledge and creativity with exclusive resources. On the other hand, Gen X (64%) and Baby Boomers (77%) follow self-expression. They are makers who value family bonds and personal beliefs with shared resources. It is noteworthy to consider that on a second level, the

Zillennials (48%) and Millennials (44%) follow self-expression with shared resources, and Gen X (59%) and Baby Boomers (57%) follow ideals with exclusive resources. On another front (**Table 3**), they identify themselves as thinkers (quality and savings hunters), which matches their values and lifestyles, and doers (loyal to the brand they constantly buy).

Table 3. Consumer behavior attributes on different products.

Attributes	Clothes	Electronics	Entertainment	Grocery's Food	Health & Wellness
Quality Seeker	85%	93%	76%	90%	81%
Strategic Saver	61%	40%	55%	59%	67%
Dollar Defaulter	9%	20%	10%	7%	22%
Passionate Explorer	15%	33%	21%	24%	15%
Opportunistic Adventurer	27%	27%	21%	24%	15%
Habitual Sprinter	36%	40%	24%	41%	33%

Note: Own source.

As mentioned in the literature review, internal and external factors affect a customer's behavior (**Figure 2**). The respondents across generations think individual and social factors are more important than branding and marketing factors one year into a pandemic. The standing of emotional and physical wellness and friends and family wellness increased from significant to crucial (scored on average 77.8/100 before the pandemic to 92.9/100 in April 2021), possibly from the crisis's uncertainty, and the fact that they could have taken them for granted; and a brand's eCommerce went from a neutral factor to an essential one (scored 56.4/100 in before the pandemic to 71.7/100 in April 2021) (**Figure 2**).

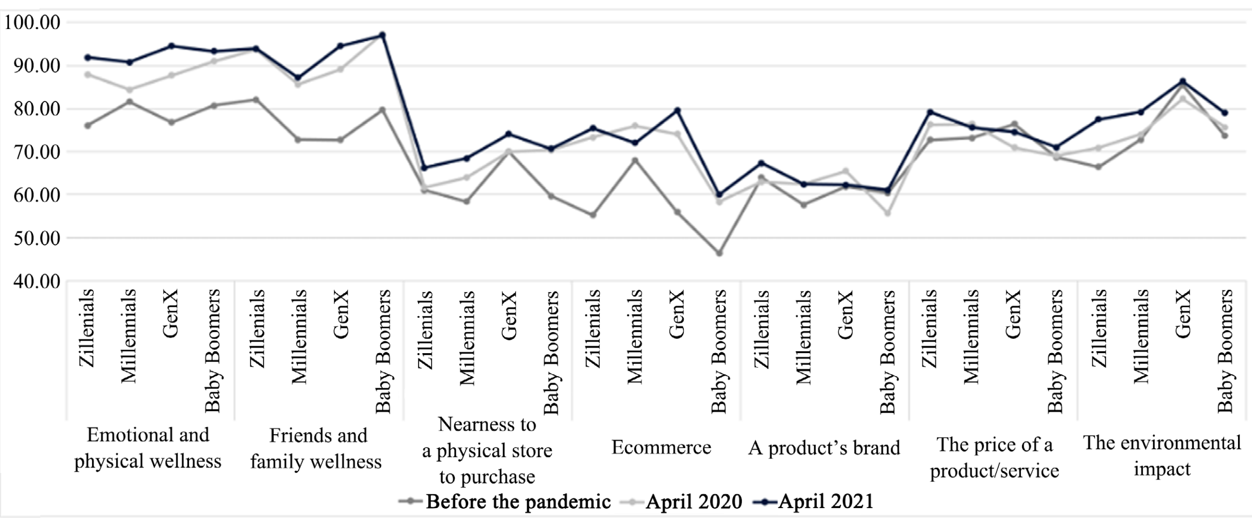

Figure 2. Change on the importance of internal and external factors that influence consumer behavior. Own source from the survey's 5th question.

The price and brand of a product/service have remained slightly the same, while the willingness to protect the environment has only increased among Zillennials and Millennials. It is noticeable that Millennials and Gen X, before the pandemic, cared more about a product/service price than their friends and family's well-being. Talking to academic researchers about this behavior, they mention that it could be because of the low-cost craze that started at the beginning of this millennium in Spain when prices stopped being value attributes. A new reality is born where any product/service can be produced at the demand a customer is willing to pay. Before that time, the price was proof of the product/service quality. Then, the higher the price, the better quality it had (Figure 3).

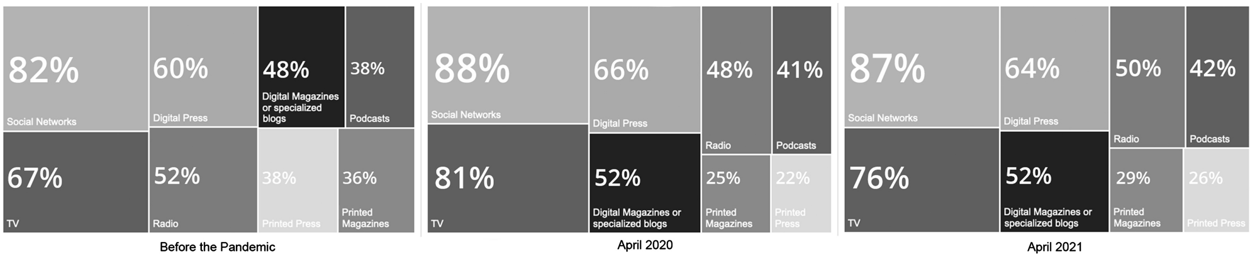

Figure 3. Change of media channel shares based on frequency. Own source from the survey's 6th question.

The media channel that thrived the most because of the pandemic was television. It reached 14% more people during the first wave of the pandemic than pre-COVID times. Before the pandemic, 67% of respondents learned about products and services from television, rising to 81% during the pandemic (Figure 3).

Putting TV and social networks together, they were the only channels where the fewest people said they never used them. Considering the Association of Media Research in Spain (AIMC, 2021) studies, internet audiences matched the sample (81.1% vs. 82%) before the pandemic. As of the first wave of the survey between January and March 2021, the results slightly differ from 84.7% by the AIMC versus 87% by the sample, but still, it is within the error margin. However, in the case of television, on the one hand, in 2020, the AIMC reported an audience of 84.2%, and the sample was 81%. On the other hand, as of March 2021, the AIMC reported 85.2%, which is even higher than the previous year, while the sample lowered its reach to 76%.

The following part of the questionnaire focuses on the pre-purchase stages that cover need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and the purchasing place of a product. To fairly randomize the split-ballot survey, the respondents were divided into five groups depending on the last digit of their phone number: 0 or 9 (25.5%), 1 or 8 (11.5%), 2 or 7 (21.5%), 3 or 6 (21.5%), and 4 or 5 (20%), that represent three different categories of products that resemble the thought behavior process across durable goods (i.e., 1 or 8: electronics, and 2 or 7: entertainment products), consumer-packaged goods (i.e., 3 or 6: grocery's food, and 4 or 5: health and wellness products), and intermediate goods (i.e., 0 or 9: clothes) (Figure 4).

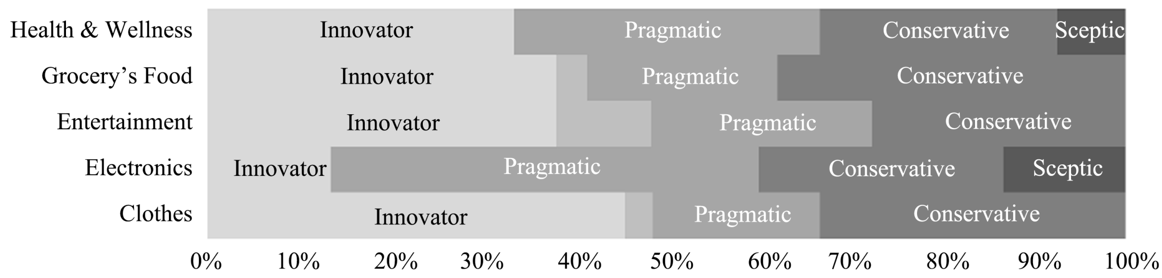

Figure 4. Characteristics that describe how people purchase products based on the product adoption curve. Own source from the survey's 8th question.

When asking them the characteristic that describes them the most purchasing their product (**Figure 4**), almost half of the sample belongs to the early market of product adoption, and the other part constitutes the mainstream market. When people buy an electronic product, their data resembles the product adoption curve theory. A small part of the population are early adopters and laggards, and the more significant part is the majority. In this market of people who value family bonds, knowledge, and creativity, Zillennials are the most innovative visionaries and pragmatics on intermediate goods. Millennials are innovators in consumer-packaged goods, while Gen X innovates in durable goods. Baby boomers are the most conservative and skeptical of consumer-packaged goods. For durable goods (**Table 4**), before the pandemic, there was a tie for the best place for people to be aware of new products, locations like physical stores, eCommerce, and digital magazines were the most ideal. Due to lockdown implementations, the optimal locations to place ads and information about current releases were reduced to the brand's website, followed by digital magazines and specialized blogs. Social networks were the most used in the search information stage, followed by television and digital press. However, one year into the pandemic, people prefer to seek input from TV, social media, and a brand's website. Regarding product/brand comparison, people are used to relying on stores, social media, digital magazines, and specialized blogs. Even though the go-to place during the first wave of the pandemic was digital outlets, nowadays, people prefer physical business establishments and e-commerce. Nevertheless, it is meaningful to keep in mind that at this stage, channels like the press (printed and digital), TV, radio, and podcasts are sources that influence their behavior. As for the decision-making stage, people solely rely on their brand-name channels during this time.

Table 4. Preferred media channels on the pre-purchase stage one year into a pandemic.

Touchpoint Events	Durable Goods	Consumer-Packaged Goods	Intermediate Goods
Awareness of New Products	Ecommerce	Brand's store & website	Ecommerce
Search Information	Television	Social Networks	Social Networks
Product/Brand Comparison	Stores	Ecommerce	Ecommerce
Decision-Making	Brand's store & website	Stores	Stores

Note: Own source from the survey's 10th question.

On consumer-packaged goods, the top places for people to be aware of new products were brand-owned. One year into the pandemic, they remain on top and closely followed by social media. Before the pandemic, it was not influential compared to the other channels. Social networks were the most employed on the search information stage, followed by eCommerce, television, and billboards. Nowadays, social networks have become even more relevant, mainly used for customer service, and they are closely followed by television and radio. Channels like digital magazines, specialized blogs, billboards, a brand's website, and digital press have a symbolic audience that should not be overlooked.

Regarding product/brand comparison, people used to rely on brand-owned locations, followed by billboards and press (printed and digital). The pandemic strongly impacted physical stores, billboards, and printed media to lose their relevance. Currently, a brand eCommerce keeps leading the stage, and now it is followed by social networks, digital magazines, specialized blogs, and digital press. As in the decision-making stage, people solely prefer physical stores no matter the time.

On intermediate goods, eCommerce is a fabulous place for people to learn about new products. One year into the pandemic, it remains on top. Social media and offline stores should be considered as well. Social networks were the most engaged in the search information stage, followed by the brand-owned touchpoints. Nowadays, social networks have become even more relevant. On the one hand, a brand website kept the same influence. On the other side, stores lost a small quantity of their force. In the case of product/brand comparison, before the pandemic, eCommerce dominated the stage. Stores, social media, digital magazines, and specialized blogs needed more relevance. Currently, the digital business remains on top. Even though physical stores were not considered during the first wave of the pandemic, nowadays, they are the second option, followed by digital magazines, specialized blogs, and social networks. As in the decision-making stage, people relied solely on offline stores. Today, it is still on the top and is closely followed by eCommerce, which boosted its force during the first wave of the pandemic.

When asked about their Social Customer Journey (**Figure 5**), the sample said they started to be more social about durable goods as they entered the purchasing process. The stage when they are the most social is enjoying themselves with their peers (average 54.5%) and evaluating (average 34.5%) their durable and consumer-packaged goods. Product acquisition (36%) and enjoyment (27%) are the most social when purchasing intermediate goods.

People are the least social when acknowledging their need for a product or service (average 62%). However, the degree of their social influence on that stage is uncertain since the funnel works in a spiral, and the external factors are constantly impacting. The fact that they do not experience a touchpoint with a social other does not mean that at another stage, they have not been affected before to be aware of a new product/service. Depending on the kind of product, people behave differently. They could experience a touchpoint either by themselves or

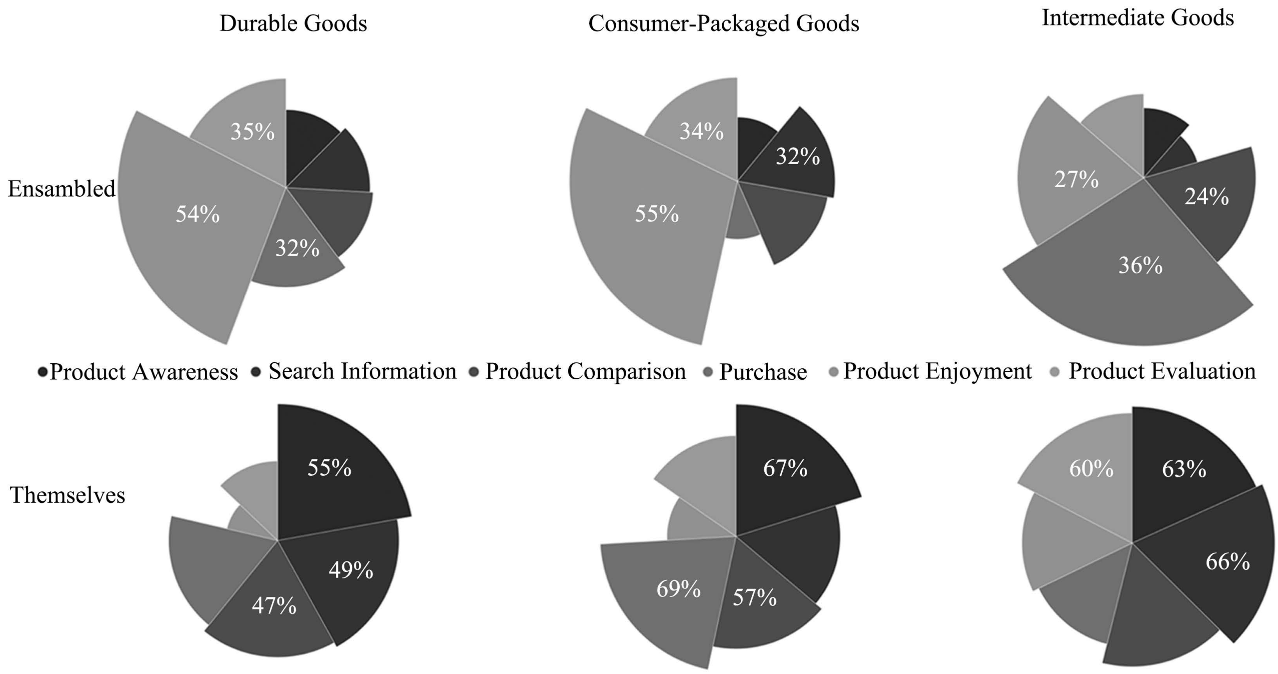

Figure 5. The Social Customer Journey as of April 2021. Own source from the survey's 11th question.

along with their peers. Nevertheless, there is a target range on durable and consumer-packaged goods when the level of individualism and social factors meet, that is, when enjoying and evaluating the product.

The stages that faced the most change due to the pandemic on consumer-packaged goods were product comparison, purchase, and enjoyment. Furthermore, intermediate goods were the purchase and enjoyment of the product. The changes in behavior in the purchasing stage have sightly remained the same as when the pandemic started. However, the enjoyment stage changes are slowly returning to the pre-pandemic practices.

On the one hand, the behavior patterns of people when sharing information during the search about the product stage of the CBP slightly changed from pre-pandemic times until one year later. People started relying more on closer people. On the other hand, their sharing experience is relatively similar between different products.

Figure 6 shows evidence of the social impact theory as the sample exchanges knowledge with proximal people who are temporally and physically close on an average of 7.4 out of 10 scales across products. Even though brand representatives may seem too distal (3.5 out of 10) in health, beauty, and wellness products, they could also be associated as acquaintances, friends, or family, and online reviews significantly increase their impact.

It could be argued that this fact only happens in either social communities, for instance, Latin America and the Mediterranean, specifically Catalonia (**Figure 7**), or in close relationships in cultures that could be described as cold, such as some regions in North America and Northern Europe. In this survey, people trust their peers' thoughts and reach their close relationships for informative information about all three categories (60.6%). On durable goods, they get brand representatives for technical advice (21%). On consumer-packaged goods, they equally engage for technical information (25%) with almost every segment, except with influencers. They trust brand representatives (20%) and unknown offline/online customers (15%) for intermediate goods. This fact raises questions about the actual value of influencers since people do not reach them at the beginning of the journey for product awareness or inquiries when deciding to purchase a good.

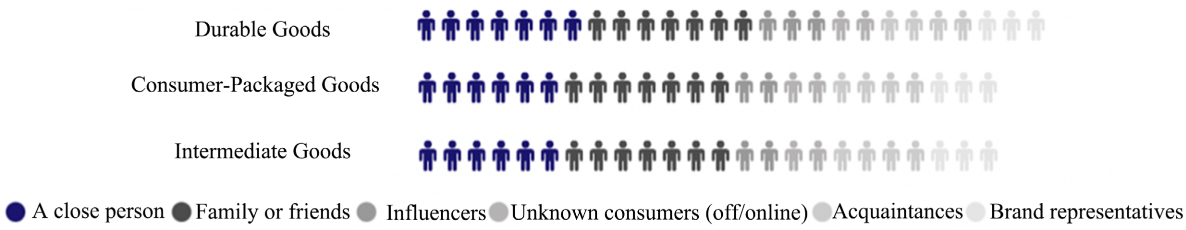

Figure 6. Averaged frequency of people sharing information when inspired to purchase a durable consumer-packaged, intermediate good. Own source from the survey's 12th question.

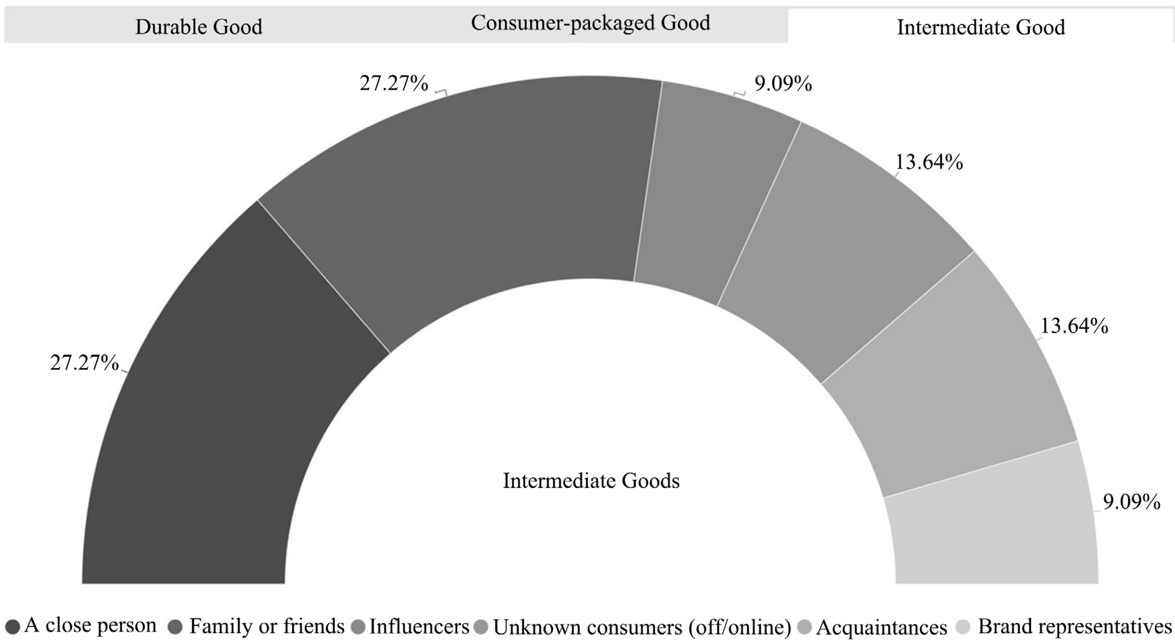

Figure 7. The average frequency of people reaching these social others on the decision-making stage. Own source from the survey's 13th question.

Due to lockdown restrictions and because people did not want physical contact, sales of durable goods on eCommerce and third-party websites pushed up to 60% compared to offline stores (Figure 8). There is a battle head-to-head on these two channels. For instance, people prefer the brand-own online store for a slight difference. Besides, people prefer buying those products in a brand-owned store (25%) rather than third-party stores (15%), like MediaMarkt and El Corte Ingles.

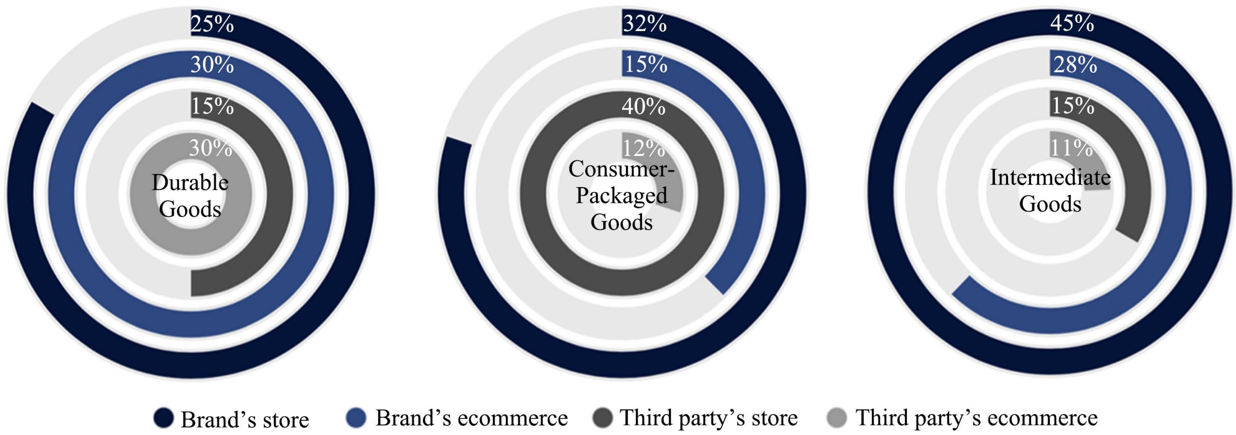

Figure 8. The average share of purchase channels as of April 2021 is on durable, consumer-packaged, and intermediate goods. Own source from the survey's 15th question.

On consumer-packaged goods, people prefer purchasing their products at their local supermarkets (40%) and then on the brand's website. It is essential to consider that there are not usually specific brands' offline stores for food, health, and wellness products. However, people can order their items on the brand's website, and 15% of the sample prefers them.

For intermediate goods, people prefer offline stores the most (60%). Combining physical and online alternatives, 73% are brand-owned. People will not purchase clothing on third-party websites like department stores (i.e., El Corte Ingles), Amazon, or eBay.

Depending on the physical location a person lives in, their behavior will differ. For example, people living in cities with reliable internet connections will be more likely to adopt digital alternatives for shopping. In contrast, village people will be opposed and try more offline sources.

5. Discussion

From a social point of view, the significant change the COVID-19 pandemic had over people was the increase in awareness of their own and their peers' wellness.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Although, indeed, studies have already verified that the COVID-19 pandemic changed purchasing behaviors (Alzaidi & Agag, 2022), our analysis shows that the Customer Journey is social that when making decisions before, during, and after the pandemic, consumers consider the opinions of family members, friends, and comments on social networks and web pages.

The significance of these factors is crucial, as they will appreciate and care about their outlooks more. From a "moments of truth" point of view, these consumer-own channels would have more impact than brand-owned, partner-owned, and external channels. Brands have an enormous challenge to provide an exceptional customer experience on their own offline and online channels. Those are the ones where people become familiar with new products, search for information, compare items, decide, and purchase their products.

Beyond the outbreak, a second challenge that faced the consumer journey was lockdown restrictions. The government's imposed closures did change people's behavior. However, as soon as they were lifted, the behavior almost went back to normal because three months of nearly complete isolation was not enough time for people to create new consumer habits. Nonetheless, depending on the person, they might prefer to continue online shopping for consumer-packaged and intermediate goods and offline shopping for durable products.

Even though a consequence of confinements was that the levels of socialization were reduced to proximal others, as of April 2021, people kept their Social Customer Journey patterns. They engaged the most with others when purchasing intermediate goods and enjoying durable and consumer-packaged goods. People will trust those they find equal, like family and friends (offline and online) because they share the same values. So, in the case of this sample, they will believe what their peers who value family bonds, knowledge, and creativity accept. It is crucial to remember that there are stages at the beginning of the process when people prefer to experience those touchpoints by themselves, for instance, being aware of a new product across product categories.

This is the first study carried out on the media before, during, and after the pandemic, and in which it was shown that in the market studied, their media consumption significantly changed on printed channels like press and magazines, and their online versions increased. In the case of television, it enlarged its audience because people trusted this medium to get updates on pandemic restrictions; despite that, it is also the top place for people to search for information about durable goods like electronics and entertainment products.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Recent studies have shown substantial changes in the purchasing process due to COVID-19. Our research is the first to offer practical implications for entrepreneurs and managers that will allow them to design and develop strategic plans in such a way that consumers do not see the brand as a company but as a friend since our study showed the importance of the opinions of friends, family members, and third parties in each of the moments of the Customer Journey, since Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action.

On the other hand, based on this study, media such as magazines and newspapers will verify that they should direct their strategies to digital media since the COVID-19 pandemic made analog media go into the background. For sustainability, users prefer to avoid printing and consult online information.

5.3. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

For future research, this study should compare broader cultures because Spain's culture tends to be more social than other European countries. From an advertising point of the customer journey, in this kind of market, it should focus on strategies from a customer-centered perspective, marking objectives to reach a wider audience since they need to get the buyer persona target and their friends and family. This research questions what behavior patterns people have picked up in a pandemic and whether they will not change. What is the actual value of influencers, and is their ROI worth it? Must smaller influencers have a proximal approach to their audience to have a closer relationship? Do brands think of products for people in villages with unreliable internet connections? How do they reach them?

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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