

Online Shopping Behavior of Gen Z Consumers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study aims to examine online shopping behavior during the pandemic in the emerging market, Turkey. The current study benefits from thematic analysis and the stimulus-organism-response model. In-depth interviews with Gen Z consumers were carried out to collect qualitative data. Findings show that shopping from online stores during the pandemic (response) is affected by stimulus (retailers' precautions, crowding, product category) and the organism (pandemic experience, perceived benefits of online shopping, perceived risks of online shopping, past experiences of online shopping, the perceived threat of COVID-19).

Keywords: pandemic, online sales, e-commerce, qualitative study, stimulus-organism-response model.

Introduction

Retail sector in global scale is seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Beckers et al., 2021). Global consumers tried to cope with this new uncertainty in ways such as hoarding or apparel overstock at the beginning of the pandemic (Mckinsey, 2021). After that, the form of retailing changed into a more "no-touch" retail version which offers contactless deliveries as a reason for touching something perceived too risky by consumers (Forbes Magazine, 2020). Even though consumers are not ready to give up on brick-and-mortar retail stores, the usage of online shopping has increased throughout the world. Furthermore, the pandemic positively affects the online shopping behavior of consumers (Hassen et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). While online shopping was steady in developed markets, emerging markets increased their online purchases and were more involved with e-commerce during the pandemic. For instance, on the one hand, Korean, Chinese, and Turkish consumers reported more online shopping; on the other hand, consumers in Switzerland and Germany reported the weakest online shopping during the pandemic (UNCTAD, 2020).

The main focus of this paper would be to answer the following questions:

- What* are the stimulus factors that affect organism factors of Gen Z's online purchasing during the pandemic?

- *What* are the organism factors that affect the online purchases (response) of Gen Z during the pandemic?

Therefore, this study aims to examine online shopping behavior during the pandemic in the emerging market, Turkey.

Theoretical Background

Empirical studies on consumer behavior towards e-commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic mainly examined online grocery or food shopping (East, 2022). For instance, East (2022) assumes that online grocery sales will continue to grow in the post-pandemic period. There also studies focused on online impulsive shopping (Lavuri, 2021), general e-commerce behavior (Guthrie et al., 2021), mobile commerce (Akram et al., 2021), and offline and online shopping (Moon et al., 2021). For instance, Lavuri (2021) notes that perceived utilitarian, hedonic value, materialism and enjoyment factors significantly impacted perceived trust and online impulsive shopping attitude. Guthrie et al. (2021) focused on the general e-commerce behavior and found that the pandemic may produce online purchasing behaviors as part of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Akram et al. (2021) state that trust, mobility, and customer involvement positively affect the intention to use mobile commerce. Moon et al. (2021) state that consumers who have knowledge of COVID-19, have positive recognition of government policy, and are confident that they can effectively cope with COVID-19 to use online shopping channels.

Conceptual (East, 2022) and case studies (Guthrie et al., 2021) are carried out in the related literature. While some studies relied on secondary data (Chang & Meyerhoefer, 2021), other scholars personally collected quantitative (Lavuri, 2021) or qualitative (Ozuem et al., 2021) data.

Methodology

Sample and procedure. The current study benefited from the snowball sampling method for data collection. The final sample consisted of 30 Turkish Gen Z consumers. All of them are college students. The paper benefits from the qualitative research method. Semi-structured interview guides were formed. Informants shared their real-life stories regarding their purchase preference towards online-sales during the pandemic. Data were collected by the author in 2021. In-depth interviews were conducted online. An average interview lasted for 40 minutes.

Analysis. To analyze the qualitative data, we benefit from *reflexive thematic analysis* (Braun and Clarke, 2021) method. The current study benefits from the *stimulus-organism-response model* while constructing the themes.

Results

Stimulus: Stimulus factors consists of retailers' precautions, crowding, and product category. Informants stated that they prioritize hygiene conditions and crowding of stores if they prefer going to physical stores. Moreover, they prefer the closest grocery store in early hours and purchase their other needs such as clothing or shoes online.

Organism: Organism factors consists of pandemic experience, perceived benefits of online shopping, perceived risks of online shopping, past experiences of online shopping, the perceived threat of COVID-19. When informants get used to the pandemic, they both prefer online and offline shopping instead of only preferring online shopping. They also perceive price discounts, promotions as benefits of online shopping and see it as a healthy way during the pandemic. Moreover, informants perceive online shopping as risky as a reason of delivery and return processes, extra fees, and the possibility of getting the wrong sizes of some clothing. Past experiences of online shopping such as past problems with logistics companies, or the possibility of the product is not like as it seemed on the website also affect the informants' online shopping behavior. The perceived threat of COVID-19 is the most important organism factor and informants don't want to get closer to other people because of not to harm their or their family's health.

Response: Response is shopping from online stores during the pandemic. Stimulus factors affect the organism and organism affects the response. Even some informants were purchasing online before the pandemic, some others stated that even those who were suspicious of online shopping, started to use it during the pandemic.

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