

CHANGED E-COMMERCE BEHAVIORS OF AZERBAIJANI CONSUMERS DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The newly emerged type of coronavirus observed in Wuhan, China, in 2019 has affected human health and healthcare systems and rattled and altered all systems of society. In particular, it has changed consumer behaviors and likely caused most of those behavioral changes to become permanent. The pandemic caused by this coronavirus has also transformed the nature of business, especially global e-commerce, resulting in a massive increase in the number of individuals who stayed at home and made online purchases. The main purpose of this research is to identify changed e-commerce consumer behaviors in Azerbaijan during the pandemic through the use of a survey. Analytical methods involve the collection and analysis of topic-relevant works and the collection of data through a survey. Survey results were analyzed via SPSS.

Keywords: consumer behaviors; consumer behaviors during the pandemic; e-commerce in Azerbaijan

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) initially surfaced in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Because COVID-19 spread through droplets produced by infected airways, generally when people were coughing or sneezing, various activities such as public gatherings and travel were curtailed or canceled, and curfews were implemented. Thus, the pandemic not only threatened human health and health systems, but also caused changes in how people engaged in commerce; there has been an

upsurge in e-commerce because people did not leave their homes.

This research aims to identify changing online consumer behaviors during the pandemic in Azerbaijan and determine how Azerbaijani e-commerce companies should set their strategies in response to those changing behaviors. Analytical methods were used in this study, and topic-relevant books, scientific works, articles, comments of scientists, and statistical data were collected and analyzed. A survey method was used to examine changed consumer behaviors,

with results analyzed via SPSS. The work and theories of Kotler and Armstrong (2014), Szmigin and Piacentini (2018), and Kotler (2008) were adapted for the identification of consumer behavior.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, what is meant by the term 'marketing' and how it relates to consumers and consumer behavior is discussed. This is followed by a literature review in which studies on consumer behavior in general and consumer behavior during the pandemic are discussed. The survey that has been used to gather the data for this research is then described, followed by a methodology section, including the creation of hypotheses. Survey results are then provided, followed by a conclusion.

Marketing and Consumer Behavior

Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (AMA, 2005). The purpose of marketing is to satisfy the needs and wants of customers, to please them, and, eventually, to earn a profit. The reason for analyzing consumer behavior in the field of marketing is to understand their choices, purchases, and behavior regarding satisfying their needs and setting marketing strategies based on those behaviors. (Marshall G., 2014). Indeed, consumers indirectly participate in all the daily decisions that marketing managers make (Szmigin & Piacentini., 2018). As competition becomes ever more intense, analyzing consumers more closely, understanding their hidden needs, and satisfying those needs are the keys to marketing success.

While specifying and understanding what the consumer concept means is important, as the following definitions from the literature show, it has various interpretations.

- "Consumers are a group of individuals that use or possess a capability to use needed goods and services" (Szmigin & Piacentini., 2018: p. 34).
- "The consumer is an individual that possesses a capability to buy products for his/her personal needs and wants and consumes those products" (Hoyer W D et al., 2012).
- "The consumer is an individual who buys or possesses a capability to buy marketing

components in order to satisfy personal needs and wants" (Gabriel & Lang., 2015).

- "The field of consumer behavior analysis investigates how individuals, groups, and organizations select, buy, use, and decide about goods, services, ideas, and experiences to satisfy their needs and wants" (Hoyer W D et al., 2012).

Also, it is essential to differentiate the consumer concept from the customer concept because these two concepts are usually confused, resulting in false conclusions. A consumer is an individual who purchases a good or service for an end-use, making that consumer an end-user. A customer, however, is a person who regularly makes his/her purchases from a certain brand. For example, customers of diapers are parents, while babies are consumers of them. The customer and consumer of a product can be the same person, however, which happens when an individual purchases for personal use, such as ordering a meal from a restaurant. All in all, it is important to specify the needs and wants of customers and consumers separately.

Consumer behavior is a scientific research field that investigates processes (and causes of these processes) regarding the selection, purchase, and disposal of goods, services, ideas, and experiences by groups and individuals. (Armstrong et al., 2014). Consumer behavior analyzes processes regarding selecting, purchasing, using, and deciding about goods, ideas, and services that individuals and businesses require to satisfy their needs and wants (AMA, 2005).

In a study on the behavior of consumers of hand sanitizers, Devi Prasad Kotni VV (2023) noted that a consumer's purchasing decision is influenced by five factors of consumer behavior - personal, psychological, social, cultural and economic factors - and that various variables influence a consumer's decision-making process for each factor. It was also noted that consumer information about individual and economic factors can be useful in developing pricing strategies and positioning strategies, while information related to social and cultural factors is necessary in developing promotional strategies and product strategies.

According to another definition, though, consumer behavior is the sum of the following components: purchase of goods and services, evaluation of them, the decision process, and

related physical activities. The rise of the Internet as a venue in which consumers can make purchases has caused customers and vendors to engage differently in the market. As a result, many firms have shifted from traditional to Internet connections, and people can also access Internet marketplaces. (Appel et al., 2020). Using the Internet this way is known as E-commerce, which is the sum of buying and selling processes over the Internet. It has been defined by different organizations as:

- The process of goods' production, advertisement, sales, and distribution over telecommunication channels (World Trade Organization., 2017).
- The process of buying and selling goods and services for receipts and positioning orders using specifically selected methods (Coppel., 2000).

The mandatory isolations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic changed even more the way products were bought and sold, pushing them increasingly to e-commerce. This, of course, had an effect on consumer behavior. The literature review which follows lists some studies that have addressed this change in consumer behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hacialioglu & Sağlam (2021) described how the implementation of state-level isolations in most countries around the world changed the buying and selling behavior of consumers and producers, thus causing a restructuring in the e-commerce sector. Bhatti et al. (2020) described how, following the World Health Organization's (WHO) announcement that a pandemic had occurred, e-commerce activity jumped. Their study showed that 52 percent of shoppers avoided going to physical stores and congested places, and furthermore, 36 percent said they would not go shopping until they had obtained the coronavirus vaccine. And (Parlakkılıç, 2020) noted how consumer payment behavior changed as a result of the pandemic, with consumers and producers switching to QR codes, digital wallets, digital money, etc., in addition to credit cards.

Çiçek & Muzaffae (2020) noted that, whereas prior to the pandemic much of e-commerce was in the form of the purchase of travel and accommodation and clothing, the range of products and product groups demanded by

consumers during the pandemic increased greatly. Disruptions of the shopping habits of consumers as a result of the quarantines and social distancing practices caused by the pandemic was investigated by Jagdish Sheth (2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer buying behavior and trends was investigated by Temizkan, Güven and Yilmazer (2021). Two months after the pandemic was declared, data were collected on survey participants' demographics, levels of awareness about the virus, intentions to participate in public life, basic needs, and purchasing behaviors and trends related to travel services. Within the study, t-test and ANOVA were used and the findings confirmed that technological habits for online shopping in malls and grocery stores increased.

Cakiroglu, Pirtini, and Çengel (2020) noted how people's behavior is affected by economic, political, cultural and public health situations, and evaluated consumer behavior trends related to the pandemic. Using a lifestyle conceptual framework, they found that consumers' increased need for basic needs during the pandemic increased their use of online shopping and digital platforms. And in their analysis of consumer purchasing of food products during the pandemic, Baltaci and Akaydin (2020) noted that the isolation, quarantine and economic and psychological uncertainty created by the pandemic caused an increase in the online purchase of food products, resulting in imbalances in supply and demand.

DATA DESCRIPTION

This study analyzes changes in the e-commerce behavior of consumers in Azerbaijan during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey questionnaire was used to collect the data needed for the analysis. Overall, 23 questions on product usage, product stocking, and e-commerce and digital shopping practices, along with some related to demographics, were asked. The questionnaire was prepared on Google Forms and shared via Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The data collection process lasted between January 16 and January 30, 2023 and 293 respondents in total participated in the survey.

A summary of the demographics of the 293 respondents can be seen in Table 1. Males

constitute 49.1% of the respondents, while females represent 50.9%. The age distribution of the respondents is: 18-25 (51.9%); 26-35 (26.3%); 36-45 (11.6%); 45+ (10.2%). The normality of the distribution is provided as at least 30 people participated from each age category (Krithikadatta, 2014). In addition, 60% of the respondents are single, and 40% are married, and a significant majority of the respondents, 87%, have advanced-level education.

METHODOLOGY

In the research, we conducted the test of various predetermined hypotheses based on the data organized in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of participants

	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	144	49.1%
Female	149	50.9%
Total	293	
Age distribution		
18-25	152	51.9%
26-35	77	26.3%
36-45	34	11.6%
45+	30	10.2%
Total	293	
Marital status		
Married	117	40%
Single	174	60%
Total	293	
Education level		
Advanced level education	255	87%
Intermediate level school	23	7.8%
Basic level school	15	5.2%
Total	293	

Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

H1: During the pandemic, product selection behavior on e-commerce platforms demonstrated gender-related differences.

H2: During the pandemic, product selection behavior on the e-commerce platform demonstrated marital status-related differences.

H3: During the pandemic, shopping platform selection behavior demonstrated gender-related differences.

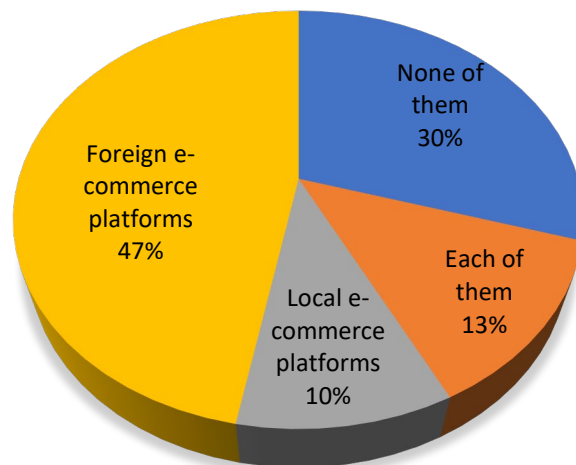
H4: During the pandemic, shopping platform selection behavior demonstrated marital status-related differences.

H5: During the pandemic, the e-commerce activity of consumers demonstrated gender-related differences.

H6: During the pandemic, the e-commerce activity of consumers demonstrated marital status-related differences.

To collect data on changes in online consumer behavior, first questions regarding frequently used online shopping platforms were asked, followed by those regarding what specific products were purchased during the same period. As can be seen in Chart 1, 47% used only foreign e-commerce platforms, 10% used only local e-commerce platforms, 13% used both foreign and local e-commerce platforms, and 30% used no e-commerce platforms.

Chart 1: E-commerce platforms used by consumers during the pandemic



Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

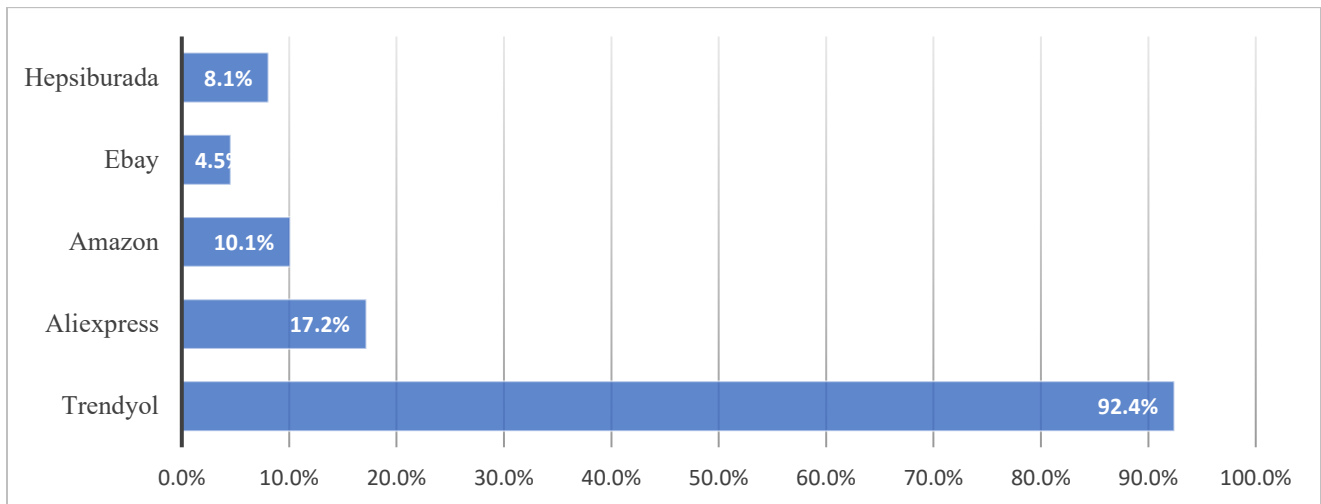
Significant differences were observed, however, when analyzing changes between local and foreign platform usage. As noted, 47% of

consumers reported using foreign e-commerce platforms, while 10% indicated using local e-commerce platforms, and the primary reason for this is that local platforms are not fully capable of providing solutions to satisfy their needs. The lower price advantage of foreign platforms makes them a more attractive and advantageous option as well.

Chart 2 displays the distribution of foreign e-commerce platforms used by the survey

respondents during the pandemic. Trendyol was the leading foreign e-commerce platform, with a usage rate of 92.4%, thanks to a combination of lower priced options and a sufficient quality of its products. Following Trendyol were Aliexpress, Amazon, Hepsiburada, and Ebay, with usage rates of 17.2%, 10.1%, 8.1%, and 4.5%, respectively.

Chart 2: Distribution of foreign e-commerce platforms used by consumers during the pandemic



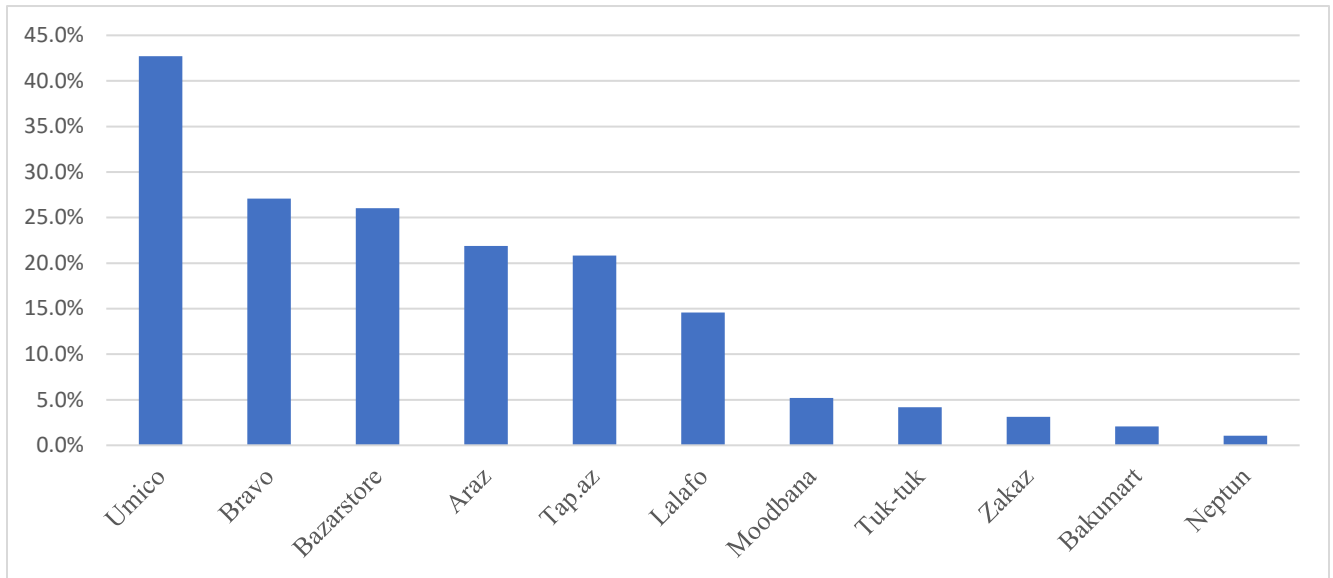
Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

Chart 3 displays the distribution of usage among local e-commerce platforms. Umico, which was used by 42.7% of the respondents, serves as a marketplace for products from all categories. Stores can register on and add their products to the Umico platform. Umico then takes responsibility for delivery, promising to deliver the day after the order is received. Moreover, it also differentiates itself from the competitors by offering its customers on-credit purchases without leaving home, thereby stimulating fully online shopping.

Other fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) retailers frequently used by respondents include Bravo (27.1%), Bazarstore (26%), Araz Supermarket (21%), Tap.az (20%), and Lalafo (just below 15%). The remaining platforms, from Moodbana to Neptun, many of which are start-

ups, were not yet competitive enough to be used by more than a small percentage of respondents.

Chart 3: Distribution of local e-commerce platforms used by consumers during the pandemic

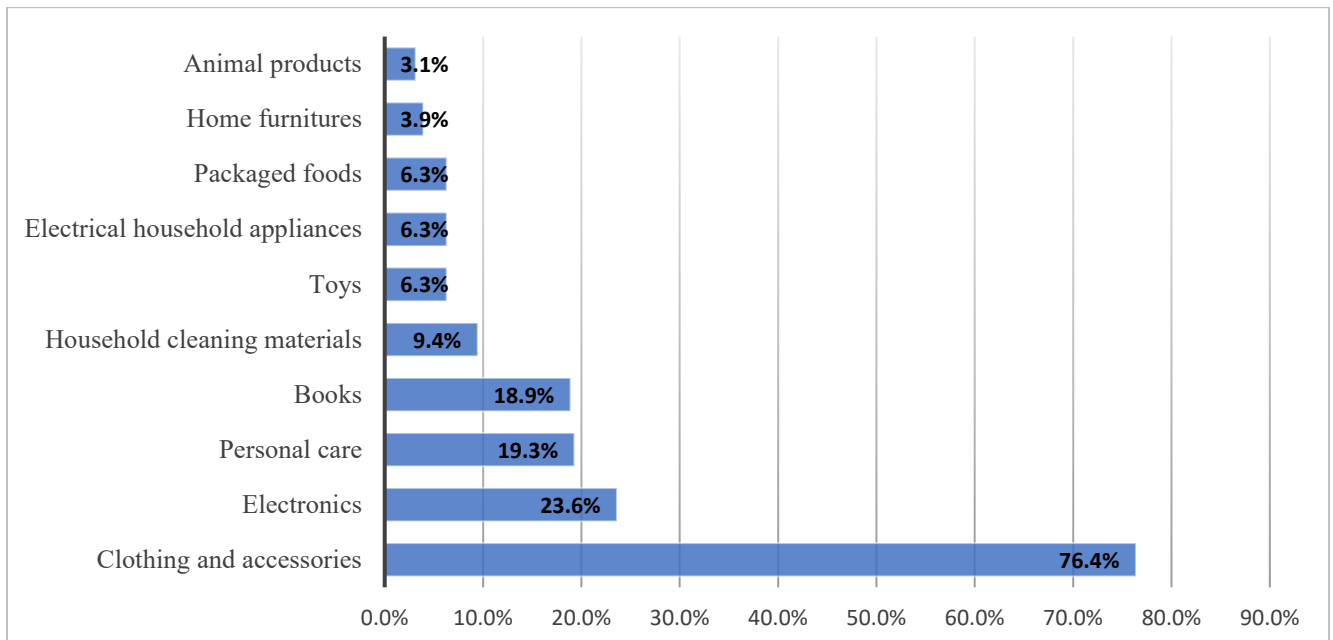


Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

Chart 4 displays the percentage distribution of the kinds of products purchased online using the Trendyol platform. The obtained data revealed that during the pandemic, the most purchased product type were clothes and accessories (76.4%), followed by books (23.6%), electronics (19.3%), and personal care products (18.9%). Interestingly, 96% of clothes buyers, 90.5% of

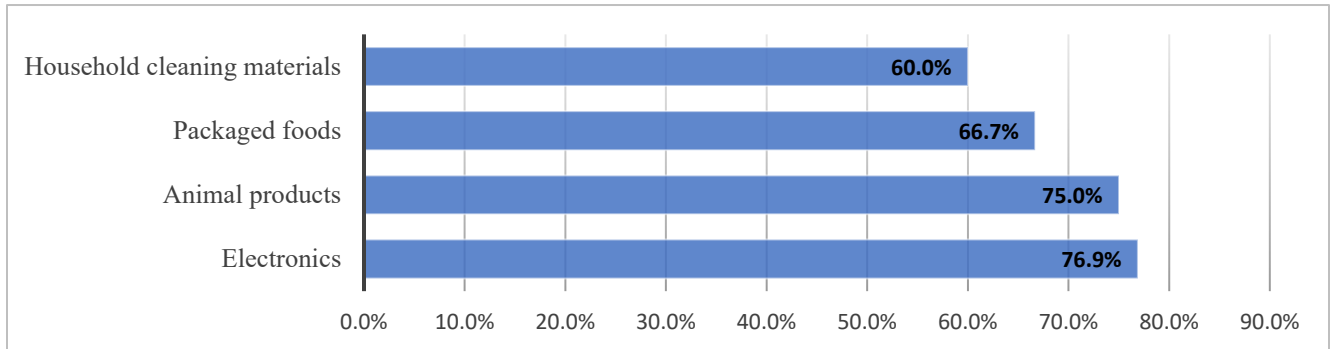
electronics buyers, and 83% of personal care buyers completed orders via the Trendyol platform. The local e-commerce platform, Umico, was mostly used for the purchase of electronics (76.9%), animal products (75%), packaged foods (66.7%), and cleaning products (60%) as indicated in Chart 5.

Chart 4: Distribution of products purchased online by consumers during the pandemic based on the Trendyol platform



Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

Chart 5: Distribution of products purchased online by consumers during the pandemic based on the Umico platform



Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

As a part of the research, various tests were conducted among the variables. Considering that survey questions were constituted from multiple choice questions, the Chi-square method was selected for hypotheses testing to satisfy assumptions of reliability and normality. This method is used to test the correlation between two variables. The most-used variation of the method is the Pearson Chi-Square test, in which there is an observed correlation between variables if the P-value is less than 0.05 (alpha), and

vice versa if the P-value is greater than 0.05. In addition, the Chi-square table is assumed to be valid if at least 20% of cells have observations of more than 5 (McHugh, 2013), which is the case in this study.

Using the Chi-square test, each demographic variable was tested to find feasible relationships between demographics and consumer behaviors. The results of the Chi-square analysis is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Result of Chi-square Analysis

Variables	“Chi-square” value	Degrees of freedom	P-value	Result
By the Gender variable:				
Selected foreign e-commerce platforms during the pandemic	8.253	6	0.220	No relationship
Selected products on an e-commerce platform during a pandemic	71.818	11	0.000	Positive Relationship
By the Marital Status variable				
Selected foreign e-commerce platforms during the pandemic	4.242	6	0.644	No relationship
Selected products on an e-commerce platform during the pandemic	14.670	11	0.198	No relationship

Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

In addition to Chi-square test, T and ANOVA tests were applied to check the relationships between the two variables. The T-test is used for variables with two options (male and female),

while the ANOVA test is used for variables with more than two options (for example, age range with five selections). All in all, both tests are used to check the relationship between two variables.

Normal distribution conditions must be satisfied for the effective implementation of these tests. To approve the normal distribution of the data, skewness and kurtosis figures should be between

(-2) and (2) (George & Mallery, 2010). The results of the normality tests are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Result of Normal Distribution Analysis

Variables	Skewness		Kurtosis		Result
	Statistic	Standard error	Statistic	Standard error	
Changing e-commerce activity during the pandemic	-0.635	0.142	-0.572	0.284	Normally distributed

Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

It should be specified that responses to the questions with multiple selection options have not been included in the table since they are not useful for effectively implementing normality checks, T-tests, and ANOVA tests. First, the T-test

was conducted based on the demographics, followed by the ANOVA test for the age variable. Results obtained from the T-test are as given in Table 4.

Table 4: Result of T-test conducted between variables

	Levene's test for equality		T value	Degrees of freedom	Significance level (2)	Result
	F value	Significance level				
By Gender variable						
Changing e-commerce activity during the pandemic	1.329	0.250	-0.541	291	0.589	No Relationship
By Marital Status variable						
Changing e-commerce activity during the pandemic	0.600	0.439	0.177	289	0.860	No Relationship

Source: Calculations of the authors based on the collected data

Based on the T-test conducted between variables, no significant relationship was detected. Also, there was no effect of consumers' gender or marital status on consumers' behavior regarding product stocking duration, frequency of e-commerce shopping, specific e-commerce platform preference, or usage of social media.

RESULTS

The following conclusions regarding the hypotheses have been obtained based on the statistical analysis of the collected data:

- H1: During the pandemic, product selection behavior on e-commerce platforms demonstrated gender-related differences. H0 is rejected because the P-value is less than 0.05. It is interpreted that during the pandemic, product selection on e-commerce platforms showed gender-

related differences. While 33% of males purchased electronics from e-commerce platforms, only 7% of females did. On the other hand, while 30% of females purchased personal care products from e-commerce platforms, only 7% of males did. A significant difference is also observed in purchases regarding the toy category: while 11% of females purchased toys from an e-commerce platform, only 2% of males did.

- H2: During the pandemic, product selection behavior on the e-commerce platform demonstrated marital status-related differences. H0 is not rejected, as the P-value is greater than 0.05. It was revealed that during the pandemic, product selection behavior on the e-commerce platform did not show marital status-related differences, meaning that married and single individuals make similar choices in product selection.
- H3: During the pandemic, shopping platform selection behavior demonstrated gender-related differences. Here H0 is not rejected (the P-value is greater than 0.05), meaning that no gender-related differences are observed in the selection of online shopping platforms.
- H4: During the pandemic, shopping platform selection behavior demonstrated marital status-related differences. Again, H0 is not rejected because the P-value is greater than 0.05. Marital status did not affect e-commerce platform selection during the pandemic; married and single individuals make similar choices in e-commerce platform selection.
- H5: During the pandemic, the e-commerce activity of respondents demonstrated gender-related differences. Because the P-value is greater than 0.05, H0 is not rejected. During the pandemic, gender did not affect the e-commerce activity of respondents.
- H6: During the pandemic, the e-commerce activity of respondents demonstrated marital status-related differences. And here, too, H0 is not rejected, as the P-value is greater than 0.05, meaning that married and single individuals did not demonstrate differences in their e-commerce activity.

CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic changed consumers' online shopping behavior in Azerbaijan, just as it did worldwide. Half of the respondents in the survey indicated an observable increase in their online shopping behavior. The vast majority of the respondents preferred foreign e-commerce platforms, especially Trendyol. Umico was the most preferred local e-commerce platform, mostly because the other local e-commerce platforms hardly satisfied the needs and wants of consumers and failed to focus on e-commerce activities or incentivize online shopping behavior. Clothes and accessories were the most purchased product category by Azerbaijani online consumers. And it was found that during the pandemic period in Azerbaijan, e-commerce behaviors did not demonstrate significant variations for either the gender or marital status of consumers.

Focusing on expanding local e-commerce activities is assumed to let firms achieve higher market share and increased sales. To do that, firms should seek to create added value by understanding consumers' needs and wants properly. Firms can utilize artificial intelligence chatbots to respond to consumer answers. In addition to answering simple questions, chatbots are no longer just answering tough questions. They are also helping businesses stay in touch with customers 24/7. Another important focus area is the establishment of trust via proper communication channels. E-commerce platforms can build confidence by adding customer feedback at the bottom of the product.

The research has some restrictions, however. A main limitation is that, because the pandemic has been a relatively recent phenomenon, research on how it has affected consumer buying behavior is somewhat sparse. In addition, the effects of the COVID-19 still are being felt, which means it is not yet possible to investigate fully before and after buying behaviors. A second limitation of the study is that consumers do not have accurate information about their behavior before the pandemic. To reduce the impact, consumers were asked which of their behaviors had changed, which had decreased, and which had increased, and more than one option could be selected for a more complete answer.

Further research studies, then, should focus on new research about consumer behavior during

the pandemic, as well as investigating success determinants in the e-commerce field, potential e-commerce opportunities in Azerbaijan, and identifying methods of customer value creation in the e-commerce business.

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