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The Shopping Experience: Pandemic Edition

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The Shopping Experience: Pandemic Edition

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the

Weissman School of Arts and Science

Baruch College, The City University of New York

In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

By

Katie De Paula

Graduate Student's Name

May 17th, 2022

Date

Under the guidance and approval of the committee,
and approved by all its members, this project has been accepted in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in
Corporate Communication.

This project also has been presented at colloquium to departmental
colleagues and faculty.

Approved:

Professor Richard Wilkins, Advisor

Date: 5/17/2022

Professor Caryn Medved, Reader

Date: _____

Professor Caryn Medved, Program Director

Date: _____

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Katie De Paula

Graduate Student's Name

May 17th,2022

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The Shopping Experience:

Pandemic Edition

Katie De Paula

CUNY Baruch College

Spring 2022

Picture this: It is September 2020, and you (the reader), are attempting to purchase a birthday gift for your mother by going to your local shopping mall in person for the first time in months. You have your mask on and are taking the necessary social distancing precautions while in the store. Suddenly, you eye a purse that might be a good fit for your mother however, standing next to the purse is a group of people who have their masks below their chins and are browsing the area without a care for precaution against COVID-19. Since you have had your own bad experiences with COVID-19, you are faced with two decisions. One choice can be to wait a moment for these people to move from the area or simply return home and purchase the purse for your mother online where it can be shipped directly to you. Welcome to the new age of the consumer's shopping experience brought to us by what is known worldwide as COVID-19.

Throughout the pandemic caused by COVID-19, people began going to the store as more of a necessity rather than going for random reasons. Many were frightened to leave their homes which is what led to the extreme use of online grocery shopping. Not only that but the E-commerce business became the main source of buying goods such as clothes, toys, electronics, and more. Here in New York City, shopping centers were allowed to open beginning September 9th, 2020. Out of curiosity, my friend and I drove past Queens Center Mall on the opening day. We could not believe our eyes as we saw a tremendous line to even get into the mall alone. It was as if people had craved going to the mall and needed to experience that once again. After 3 weeks of the mall reopening, I decided to go as I needed to purchase a birthday present for my mother. I went on a Sunday morning and found the mall to be emptier than I expected. I did not end up buying anything that day as I found the prices to be quite high, but I did do my fair share of browsing. When I got home that day, I found the same item I looked for in the mall for about

\$30 less in price online. I began to wonder what was going through the minds of other consumers like me due to the impending holiday season approaching. Black Friday is considered by most to be part of the Thanksgiving holiday break. It is a day where stores supposedly release the best deals of the year in order for people to fulfill Christmas wishes for their loved ones. Due to the unstable circumstances caused by COVID-19, I would like to explore what “shopping” will mean to the average consumer given the current circumstances and how that might affect future of shopping.

The year 2020 will forever be remembered. And why you may be asking? Because of something that the world has come to know as COVID-19 or the coronavirus. The virus has created havoc all over the world, affecting everything from humans to animals. According to the CDC website, “reported illnesses have ranged from very mild (including some people with no reported symptoms) to severe, including illness resulting in death” (CDC COVID-19 Response Team,2020). To protect their people from the life-threatening effects of this disease, governments worldwide had to put in place safety measures because of the severity of the coronavirus. On a political, cultural, and economic scale, the growth of COVID-19 led to many problems. The ethical integrity of an individual has also been called into question by how people react to the virus. The planet has had to face a number of challenges announced on a regular basis as new developments regarding the virus are reported. News outlets and government officials have pushed the expression "Wear a mask, save a life" to foster a sense of solidarity in the fight against COVID-19. The rise of COVID-19 paved the way for the growth of the e-commerce industry (OECD, 2020).

Starting in March of 2020, fear lived in the homes of all Americans in the United States. While essential businesses such as grocery stores, gas stations, and pharmacies were allowed to remain open; other businesses considered to be non-essential were shutdown. The only option to obtain an item from a store such as “Macy’s” was to order it from their online website. Since the only way to get items like toys and electronics was to order them online, people frantically began to adapt to the new “virtual” world. The elderly was advised to order groceries through online delivery markets like Amazon Fresh or Instacart. The growing fear led to the frenzied online shopping by several families who did not want to risk missing out on essential commodities such as toilet paper, Lysol, freezers, and meat. Fast forward to 5 months later, where in New York City, malls were allowed to reopen in September of 2020. Shoppers slowly left their homes and entered the malls to shop in person.

I created this study because of the crucial need for further analysis behind the increasing decline of shopping malls across America. According to a report on Insider.com, footage caught in 2018 showed several instances of malls showing lack of life and smaller crowds. For as long as I could remember, malls played an important role in society as it stood for many things such as a place to congregate, purchase items for loved ones, and even share a meal with friends or family. Due to COVID-19, government mandates included the closure of many stores, except for those which sold groceries and medical items. However, upon the reopening of shopping centers throughout the summer and into the fall of 2020 and beyond, much more can be observed and analyzed regarding the effect of the pandemic on mall performances. Future studies can explore an abundance of questions that may answer and uncover all the underlying reasons to the fall of shopping centers and rise of online shopping.

Research Question: Due to the world's current COVID-19 situation, and the subsequent transition to online and socially distanced interactions, what is "shopping" to the consumer in this environment?

In order to answer this question, I will be using the ethnography of communication as an entry point. The ethnography of communication is committed to approaching the research respondents in a language and interaction that is effective. These include committing to the rules of speaking that are put in place in a particular culture (Hymes, 36). The rules of speaking involve the methods in which speakers relate to various models of speaking, message, and topic forms. In making communication effective there should be more focus on the knowledge and the attitude of members of a society. There are various human group theories of speaking associated with different cultures. The comparative approach to fieldwork is, therefore, crucial in this phase.

One of the qualities that ethnography of communication instills in people is to be sharp and have a disciplined focus. People who are interested in understanding the ethnography of communication have the ability to have effective communication among themselves and other people regardless of theory culture. An example has been given on Carbaugh and his main aim in conducting his research. According to the study done by Carbaugh and Hastings, they aimed to find how the communication of an individual or participants indicates how they do things. Students who learn ethnography emphasize that an individual must have a theory for them to do good ethnography. Ethnography is concerned with particular ways in which a culture communicates (Alvarez, 18).

Investigators have always been asked to get involved in socially situated scenes and discover the communication of social life. Communication should be considered as seeing and hearing about self or a person. It is the relationship with one another, with institutions, and the social structures. Considering communication as such is seen as a bold move to stand firmly on the social foundation. Ethnography involves penetrating the meaning of people's lives and individuals in society. By this, the researcher is able to learn the symbols and their meaning in different cultures (Carbaugh, 157). Understanding the culture and values of society will facilitate the methods in which the research will be carried out. The research will involve interviews where strangers and members of the society will be engaged. There will be various questions that will be asked to the interviewees. In order to interact with these interviewees, a researcher must understand the ethnography of communication. It involves understanding the communication of the social life of the people. The research has observation collection as one of the methods of gathering data.

In the ethnography of communication, seeing has been considered as one of the ways in which people communicate with themselves. Furthermore, the ethnography of communication explains that symbols can be used in different cultures as a way of communication. Such commitment to ethnography is relevant and enables a researcher to interpret various symbols that can be found in a particular culture. For instance, in the present study, the researcher will be able to learn various behaviors of the people who are in stores and interpret pictures that will be taken during the research. Professor Donal Carbaugh has stated that ethnography is a cyclical investigative procedure. He has gone further to term it as a comparative method of research. The process involves three steps, known as pre-fieldwork, fieldwork, and post

fieldwork. The main concern in these steps is the fieldwork, which comprises the various ways of generating data. The methodological section in the research paper involves collecting information through observation and interviews. It is considered as the cyclical investigative process of ethnography (Carbaugh, 158). Cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) focuses on the distinctive communication procedures that happen in various cultures. This involves how various groups interact in their social lives. The commitment of ethnography of communication in analyzing a society's way of communication is important because it enables in understanding the various techniques that will be used in the study to get information. Furthermore, understanding the culture will enable the researcher to know what they are expected to do and what they are prohibited from doing. Such information will help the researchers do their study effectively and gather the right information without going against the norms of a culture (Boromisza-Habashi, 297).

Methods

Data Collection

Methods to Carry out Study:

A) **Interviews:** I conducted 10 interviews in the Fall of 2020 with friends and family members; as well as a selection of random strangers who were shopping in stores.

- Interview Questions:

- 1) Would you say the pandemic has caused you to shop more online?
 - b) If so, how often?
 - c) What goods do you typically buy online?
- 2) Is the price factor of the item an influence or more so the convenience?
- 3) How do you feel about shopping in stores?
 - b) Is the pandemic causing you to hesitate?
- 4) Does having to wear a mask in stores bother you?
- 5) Do you plan to shop more online or in stores during the holiday season?
 - b) What is the reason behind your choice?
- 6) Would you feel comfortable shopping with the crowds on Black Friday?

B) **Observational Collection:** Went to stores at different days and times of the week.

Observed whether stores were crowded or relatively empty. Took pictures of scenery.

Basis for analysis:

Relational Dialectics/ Vacillating Forms: A dialectic is an interactive sequence in which at least two opposing sets of communicative symbols--and their meanings--are being played with, or against each other. I examined the descriptive data for a play of symbols together and explore the motives for selecting one set of symbols rather than the other. Example of this would be: One consumer may be lazy or scared to shop in stores due to the inconvenience and/or risks associated with COVID-19 VS The other consumer is more proactive and/or not as concerned with the current pandemic situation, enough that it prompts them to shop in stores.

Face Theory: This theory deals with the possible notion of “I need to maintain face” experienced among consumers. With the rise of the pandemic, came along a huge debate between people who wanted to wear masks and practice social distancing **VS** others who did not care for following those rules. There is the group of people who identify with the new normal of wearing masks and following social distancing rules. Then there is the group who is seen as “abnormal” for not wearing masks or following social distancing rules.

Example: Young adults ages 20-27 wear frowned upon in April of 2020 as they still went and flooded the beaches/streets of Miami Florida for their Spring break. Videos were captured of them not following social distancing and not wearing mask for their own safety. Social Media platforms received constant negative commentary regarding these individuals in Miami.

***Disclaimer: This sample of interviews and mall observations were taken in the Fall of 2020.

INTERVIEW GUIDE USED FOR STUDY:

Introduction Transcribed: Hello, how are you? (PAUSE). That is good to hear. I would please like a moment of your time to get some feedback regarding your shopping experience this year.

To begin:

1. Would you say this pandemic has caused you to shop more online?
 - b) If so, how often?
 - c) What goods do you typically buy online?
2. Is the price factor of the item an influence or more so the convenience?
3. How do you feel about shopping in stores?
 - b) Is the pandemic causing you to hesitate?
4. Does having to wear a mask in stores bother you?
5. Do you plan to shop more online or in stores this holiday season?
 - b) What is the reason behind your choice?
6. Would you feel comfortable shopping with the crowds on Black Friday?

Interview with Person 1

1) Would you say this pandemic has caused you to shop more online? - Back in April when the pandemic had spread fear in my household, I used online platforms such as Amazon and Walmart to order items I wanted or needed at the time.

d) If so, how often? – About once a week.

e) What goods do you typically buy online? I buy clothes and shoes.

2) Is the price factor of the item an influence or more so the convenience? Sometimes the convenience is why I rather purchase online. My full-time job can be very demanding.

3) How do you feel about shopping in stores? – I feel okay with doing so just as long as I have my mask and those around me do as well.

c) Is the pandemic causing you to hesitate? – At first when malls reopened, I was hesitant especially with indoor malls.

4) Does having to wear a mask in stores bother you? – It does but I will always keep it on no matter what. Especially as people look at you weird when you don't have it on.

5) Do you plan to shop more online or in stores this holiday season? - I feel as if I plan to shop more online as there are constantly amazing sales.

b) What is the reason behind your choice? The pricing of the items and convenience.

6) Would you feel comfortable shopping with the crowds on Black Friday? – I would not feel comfortable shopping with crowds on Black Friday as I would be concerned with getting COVID-19 from someone.

Observations: In my opinion, this conversation has led me to believe the person was trying to “maintain face” which correlates with the face theory. The person stated that she is always sure to keep her mask on especially because people “look at you weird if you don’t have it”. Here the person is stating they don’t want to fall into the group who is seen as “abnormal” for not wearing masks or following social distancing rules. This person would not feel comfortable with the looks and stares caused by not wearing a face mask. The COVID-19 virus is a factor that does seem to impact her decisions as well as she doesn’t mind going in-person shopping just as long people are abiding by COVID regulations. Due to this person’s work schedule, online shopping is a better option in terms of time management and efficiency. Price does matter but it seems as if she values her time more.

Interview with Person 2

1) Would you say this pandemic has caused you to shop more online? Yes, it definitely has led me to shop more online.

f) If so, how often? – I would say about every 2-3 weeks.

g) What goods do you typically buy online? – I typically buy clothes and food.

2) Is the price factor of the item an influence or more so the convenience? I find really good deals most of the time online.

3) How do you feel about shopping in stores? – I don’t think it’s smart to go shopping with crowds of people this year.

d) Is the pandemic causing you to hesitate? – Yes, I personally have experienced friends and family who passed away due to COVID-19 so I rather not risk any exposure.

4) Does having to wear a mask in stores bother you? - No, wearing a mask is necessary.

5) Do you plan to shop more online or in stores this holiday season? - I have done most of my shopping online already.

b) What is the reason behind your choice? – I found good prices online this year on most of the gifts I wanted to purchase. But more importantly I did not put myself at risk to get COVID.

6) Would you feel comfortable shopping with the crowds on Black Friday? – I am definitely trying my best to not do any in-person shopping besides at the grocery store.

OBSERVATIONS: To this person, price is an important factor in their shopping experience. This may suggest the person is financially smart or has a fixed budget for spending. The spread of COVID-19 has also influenced their preference of shopping solely online this year. This person identifies with the group of people who recognize the new normal of wearing masks and following social distancing rules. They want to maintain “face” by making sure people know they are serious about abiding by COVID policies. To this person, they did not mind getting most of their holiday gifts online as the price was right and so is maintaining safety precautions.

Interview Data Concerns

People who were interviewed could have been untruthful in their responses, which makes this data unreliable. People may have one opinion about a matter today and have a completely different stance regarding the same topic on another day which also changes the data. The sample size is not big enough as only 10 people were interviewed. The locations were too varied as they were within several cities of New York (Buffalo, Queens, Long Island). Like many interviews conducted priorly have noted, there is potential for subconscious bias. Lastly, there is potential inconsistency in an individual’s answers (example: Interview 1).

Store Visits Done by Me in the Months of October and November of 2020

Week 1- October 4 th Sunday	Week 2- October 21 st Wednesday	Week 3- November 2 nd Monday	Week 4- November 15 th Sunday
Location: Queens Center Mall	Location: Queens Center Mall	Location: Roosevelt Field Mall	Location: Niagara Falls Outlet
Level of Crowds: Low	Level of Crowds: High	Level of Crowds: High	Level of Crowds: Low
Social Distancing rules: Strictly Applied	Social Distancing rules: Loosely Applied	Social Distancing rules: Moderately Applied	Social Distancing rules: Strictly Applied

Observations:

Week/Scene 1- The first time I went to the mall; I was surprised to see how relatively empty it was. As I walked through those doors, I was immediately hit with the familiar smell of Auntie Anne's pretzels. I also quickly saw that everyone stuck to themselves and in their own space. In front of Uniqlo there was a short line outside with about one family and a couple in line to get in. These people kept a good distance from each other. A Uniqlo employee ushered one individual out and let the family in while the couple behind them slowly crept to the front of the line. Across from Uniqlo, I noticed how a Nike employee was demanding that the people next to enter wash their hands with hand sanitizer as they are going to touch the shoes to try on or look at closely. I then proceeded to try and enter the Adidas store upon which an employee refrained me from entering due to the fact that the store was already at capacity. I was indicated to get on the empty line and wait for two more people to exit. As I stood online, I watched how the employees consistently adjusted their masks as if uncomfortable. Once inside I felt as if the store was sterile and never touched before. I grabbed a pair of shoes and went to checkout. Here I found a glass barrier between me and the cashier. I had to raise my voice so that they may hear me speak. I then inserted my debit card and after I was done, I noticed the cashier immediately sprayed down and wiped the card cashing system. Afterwards I decided to leave the mall and noticed there was less staff manning the parking lot itself.

(Extract from Week/Scene 1)

Precaution and Fear. With this shopping experience these are the two words I can use to sum up the scene. As it was only the recent opening of shopping malls after months of closure, people (employees and customers) were taking every bit of precaution. Precaution as it is hard to know if a shopper or employee possess COVID-19. Coupled along with the fear of actually contracting such a harmful virus. This speaks to the characteristics of everyone in the mall that day. These people can be said to be rule followers, cautious, afraid of harm, and possess a will to live healthy.

Week/Scene 2- The second time I went to the mall was on a Wednesday afternoon at about 3:00pm. As I try to walk in through the doors of the mall, I find myself having to maneuver through several people trying to pass through or exit the mall as well. Imagine my surprise when I see the mall crowded with people. It brings me back to my high school days when students would be released from school and adults from work which would allow them to head to the mall to shop or socialize. As I made my way up the escalators to the third floor all I was able to observe was the long lines outside of several popular stores such as Apple, Vans, and Victoria Secret. Not only that but everyone was only standing about a few inches away from each other. Once I get off the escalator, I am shocked by the different groups of people I see sitting on the floors of the mall just conversing with friends or family. They also had their face masks at chin level as they either spoke or ate something. I hurriedly shuffled to the Vans store upon where I had to make a line for about 30 minutes to get inside. As I stood on the line, people would pass by me with their face masks at chin level as they took a sip from their bubble

tea or Starbucks drinks. Once I got inside of the Vans store, I saw there was only two employees and another long line to pay for my items.

When it was my turn to pay for the shoes, I noticed the cashier was sweating and kept adjusting his mask as if it was hard to breathe for him. He needed assistance and lowered his mask to speak into the walk talkie. After processing my order, he cleaned his hands with hand sanitizer. I then walked out of the store and proceeded to the parking lot. Where again I saw groups of people socializing by their cars as I exited the garage.

(Extract 2 from Week/Scene 2)

It is evident what this scene portrays: normalcy. As I stated in before, my initial feeling as I entered the mall was back to when I was in high school. This was during a time where everyone was free to roam and socialize and shop in the mall as if it were any other day. That was the reality of back then. Now it should be seen as more of a fantasy due to the risks of contracting COVID-19. This scene evidently shows that people just want things to go back to normal and what better place to do that than the mall. Where you can eat, shop, and be entertained. With all the tragedy that has happened, it is easy to want to escape the reality of things and find a moment of happiness while at the mall.

Week/Scene 3- It is the day before the US presidential elections, and I head to the mall in search of a birthday present for my father. This time I was not surprised to see the mall crowded on a Monday evening at 5:00pm. There was a buzz in the air this time around. People all around me conversating and huddled closely together in their groups. It could be due to the anxiety of who would be crowned the next leader of our nation. And yet again I see lines to get

inside individual stores. As I walk towards the store I need, I feel the stares of others who are waiting on line. I get it. Waiting on those long lines can get boring so you must find entertainment somewhere. I finally approach Aldo which is a small little space in the mall and imagine my surprise when there is no line to get in. I simply walk in and there are people everywhere and shoe boxes falling on the ground. I approach a saleswoman and ask for the shoe I'm searching for. Her eyes jitter from the shoe boxes on the floor to the top of my nappy head. She pulls her face mask slightly away from her mouth to respond to me. As they do not have my shoe in stock, I leave the store and see her begin to clear the floor of shoe boxes. I then go up to the food court and look around at my options to eat. The mall food court is packed with people seated and dining in. I noticed two janitors try and keep up with the overflowing garbage bins. I got on a line to get Chic Fil A and was approached by a staff member with an iPad. The staff member also pulled her mask away from her face to ask me to order with her while I was on the line. I then only had to pay once I reached the cashier. Afterwards I was directed to a section where I could wait for my order. After receiving my order, I left the mall to eat in my car as I could not find a seat in the food court.

(Extract 3 from Week/Scene 3)

The new normal. In this scene it is clear people are beginning to accept the reality we live in. Which now involves waiting on lines to get inside stores and wear face masks but only when we feel like it. I say this because look at the employee who spoke to me. She slightly pulled away her mask allowing particles to fly into her mouth by doing so. But she did not care as the mask made it uncomfortable for her to speak. Same as the people seated in the food court. Everyone

was seated with their families or friends and dining in as if it were any normal period of time. Then once they were finished with the meal, they would simply place the face mask back on.

ONLINE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE OBSERVATIONS

Event/ Day: Cyber Monday

Date: November 30th

Individual: My mother

Scene: I walked into the living room and noticed my mother at the family computer desk. I approach her and she has her reading glasses on while intently looking at the screen. I ask her what she is doing and she replies “ I am on Amazon reading the reviews on this hair product. It seems that people really like it and it has almost 5 stars out of 347 reviews”. She proceeds to place it in her virtual shopping cart and continues to search for more items. I then ask her if she does not want to try going to the store to see if the item is cheaper. To this she replies “I am not stepping foot in a store to get COVID, I would pay even one million dollars more if I have to”.

(Extract from Scene)

My mother is clearly afraid of contracting the COVID-19 virus. She wants to avoid getting the virus at all costs including paying more for her hair products online if she has to. She is using the consumer feedback section (reviews) to figure out if she is going to even purchase the product to begin with. This portrays that she likes to be cautious and educated/informed.

Day: Sunday

Date: November 22nd

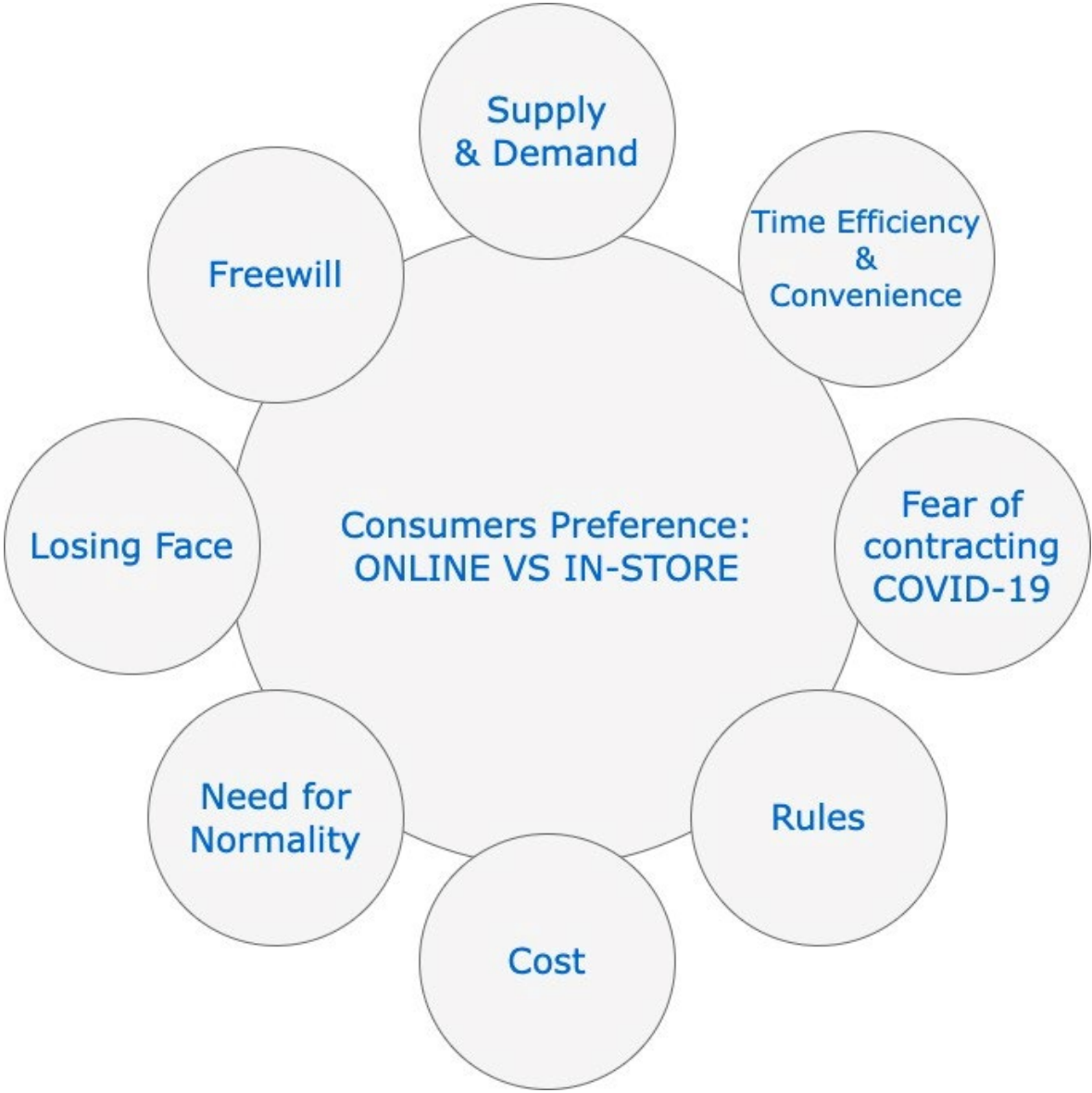
Individual: Lizbeth (Friend)

Scene: In the waiting area of a restaurant with my friend. She is intently looking at her phone so I ask what she is doing. She replies "I found out I can order the Nintendo switch system for in-store pickup before Black Friday. I replied "Wow that's great, you don't have to go make lines on Friday to get it. She replies" Yes, I can go on Wednesday at 6pm to pick up at the Best Buy store." "I am also waiting for the option to do the same thing with this Lenovo laptop I am interested in". I then ask her "Would this mean you don't have to go Black Friday shopping anymore or do you plan to still go?" She responds, "If I get my items online now then I don't have reason to go to the store with the crowds of people who will be there."

(Extract from Scene 2)

As seen here, my friend was conveniently able to order the items she wanted by simply pressing a few buttons on her phone. This prevented her from having to go in person shopping on Black Friday and guaranteed her the highly coveted items she wanted to purchase. This makes this individual smart and savvy

Recurring Themes



Data Analysis

Relational Dialectics

A dialectic is an interactive series in which at least two opposing sets of identity symbols are played with or against each other and their meanings. This analytical method was created to explain how opposing personalities, relational dynamics, and rhetorical choices are crafted. Conflicts can occur as individuals establish social relationships in a variety of environments.

Facework

One of the most common methods used in communication is face presentation. This takes place mostly in Chinese social life. It is a significant part of Chinese social psychology. Wanting face in Chinese society means that there are social esteem and personal satisfaction. Losing face indicated that there are embarrassment and rudeness that is caused in public. Therefore, enhancing or maintaining other people's faces is the crucial cognitive and discursive domain that categorizes Chinese social practice. The study termed 'face' acts as a researcher's analytical framework. With such cultural knowledge, a researcher will understand the way they are expected to behave in case they have to interview a Chinese native. The researcher needs to organize a native's concept. The studies draw the importance of recognizing such communication concepts of various cultures (Chen, 131).

For the purposes of this term paper, we will be exploring the face theory as it pertains to the experience of a shopper given this new world of COVID-19. I proceed to explore how shoppers want to save face or lose face by observing their actions regarding COVID-19 policies. I

suppose that some shoppers may lose face by not caring to wear their face masks at all times while others will save face by keeping it on. Face can be greatly influenced by an individual's friends, family, and the community/society upon which they are in.

Results

In-store Shopping - Online Shopping

The first relational dialectic focuses on the participants' preference of shopping online or shopping in stores. The participants' choice is determined by several factors such as price, time efficiency, and their feelings regarding the nation's current COVID-19 crisis. Some of the interviewees expressed how they prefer to shop online due to the better pricing, while others did not explicitly mind the higher costs in-stores. This may suggest two different sets of characteristics: financially responsible vs financial irresponsibility. Those who are financially responsible achieve their financial goals with planning out their spending and savings. These people are said to be more independent and live a comfortable lifestyle. Those who are financially irresponsible often fail to meet their financial obligations and sometimes are faced with issues to "make ends meet".

Extract (1)

(Q2) Is the price factor of the item an influence or more so the convenience?"

"The price is definitely a factor because who doesn't like sales and savings. "

(Q2) Is the price factor of the item an influence or more so the convenience?"

"Of course, saving money any way you can is important especially during this pandemic when things are so uncertain. I can be employed one day and unemployed the next."

(Q5b) What is the reason behind your choice?

"I found good prices online this year on most of the gifts I wanted to purchase."

Another determining factor expressed by interviewees is regarding time efficiency. Time is an invaluable factor throughout a person's life. A person's life can be very time consuming as there are always factors such as school, work, family, and friends that take up their own amount of time. A person typically has to allocate the time they have in a day to these different factors. Thus, making it sometimes hard to incorporate outside factors that may not seem like such a necessity. For the person whose preference lays with online-shopping, it may suggest that they value time-management and efficiency, while those on the other side of the spectrum do not value it as much. Logically, those who value time and efficiency would opt for online-shopping as within just a few minutes they can have the item of their desire shipped to their home. Whereas those who prefer to go to the store in person have to allocate the time to commute to the mall, wait on lines, and browse in the aisles for their desired items before purchasing it.

Extract (2)

(Q5) Do you plan to shop more online or in stores this holiday season?

“I plan to do a mix of both.”

(Q5b) What is the reason behind your choice?

“I just prefer being in person and grabbing the item or trying it on. And I also get it sooner than I would if I ordered it online.”

Lastly, the biggest influence on the consumers' shopping experience this year has been largely in part of the coronavirus. Shoppers this year have had to use their feelings towards the pandemic to decide whether or not to shop in person or online. The tension comes down to the participants who fear the coronavirus and its harming affects versus the participants who not as concerned of the coronavirus and are brave enough to face the risks. This suggests a set of characteristics between both groups of people: cautious and fearful versus brave and reckless. The cautious and fearful shopper will try to mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19 by shopping for most of their items online this holiday season. The brave and reckless shopper will choose to shop online or instore at their own freewill or discretion.

Extract (3)

(Q1) Would you say this pandemic has caused you to shop more online?

“ Back in April when the pandemic had spread fear in my household, I used online platforms such as Amazon and Walmart to order items I wanted or needed at the time. “

(Q3) Is the pandemic causing you to hesitate?

“ At first when malls reopened I was hesitant especially with indoor malls. “

(Q1) Would you say this pandemic has caused you to shop more online?

“Yes, it definitely has led me to shop more online.”

(Q3) How do you feel about shopping in stores?

“ I don't think it's smart to go shopping with crowds of people this year.”

(Q3B) Is the pandemic causing you to hesitate?

“Yes, I personally have experienced friends and family who passed away due to COVID-19 so I rather not risk any exposure.”

Face theory:

The theory demonstrates how self-interactions are ultimately social, with each sense of self relying on ongoing face-to-face interactions. It involves not researching the psychology of each person, but rather the syntactic relationships between different people's actions that are mutually present to each other. In creating and sustaining social contact, the idea of "face" plays a central role. It is universal to be self-regulated in humankind, and socialized interactors are obligated to preserve the face of both themselves and others in social encounters (Vyain, Chapter 5).

Face Theory: Abnormal- Normal

The second relational dialectic focuses on the notion of “I need to maintain face” and “Saving face is not important to me”. During the corrective process, in failing to prevent a “loss of face,” one draws public attention to the state in order to correct the events that preceded that loss. This explanation applies to the participants that feel the need to “maintain face”. Given the current pandemic situation, these participants identify with the group of people who recognize the new normal of wearing masks and following social distancing rules. They want to maintain “face” by making sure people know they are serious about abiding by COVID policies. The assumption can be made that these people would like to preserve their image/reputation while also their health and safety. Face involves two particular wants: positive and negative wants. The positive face expresses an individual’s needs to be approved of or appreciated in certain respects. In this case, the participant which wants to belong to the “normal” group who wears their face masks all the time might be doing so because of the approval received by others in the same category.

Extract (1)

(Q4) Does having to wear a mask in stores bother you?

“No, wearing a mask is necessary. “

(Q4) Does having to wear a mask in stores bother you?

“It does but I will always keep it on no matter what. Especially as people look at you weird when you don’t have it on.”

On the other hand, you have the group of participants who fall under the “abnormal” group. This is because they simply do not want to wear their mask regardless of COVID-19 safety regulations. These individuals also fall under the negative face which expresses a persons’ desire to be unhindered and to keep his or her rights, autonomy, and freedom of action without imposition. These individuals do not like being told what do and want to live their life by following their own rules regardless of who implements them. Many factors can influence their decisions including their political and socioeconomic views.

Cautious- Carefree

The last relational dialectic focuses on the participants’ regard for their own life. They either prefer to live a cautious life thus they are more careful with their actions, may eat healthier, do more exercise, and schedule doctors’ appointments regularly. On the contrary, they may prefer to live life carefree and just “go with the flow “of things. These individuals are less concerned with the fear of death and are content with letting life run its course whenever it needs to.

Conclusion

To conclude, the initial assumptions for this research study proved to be true. In regard to indoor shopping, some participants shared the personal preference of going in-store shopping. These participants had no issues with practicing social distancing rules and wearing their mask. Many had accepted the terms of the “new normal” created by the pandemic. Not wearing a mask meant losing “face” which was important to some participants who cared about how they were view by others. In-store shopping allows for the consumer to try on and feel the quality of the item, while also avoid shipping costs which factors into the overall price of the item. An important discovery was regarding what the mall actually represented to individuals. Pre-pandemic, malls were a place for social interaction amongst people in society. Everyone was free to roam around without face masks and socialize with others. As a result, people have gravitated back to the mall in order to recreate and feel even if for just one moment that sense of normalcy.

In regards to the online shopping experiences, consumers wanted to mitigate the risk of getting COVID-19 due to the interaction with other people in stores. Shopping for goods and services online has become a more affordable option. It is both time-efficient and conveniently easy to order items that get sent straight to your door. Participants felt as if they would encounter shoppers that may not want to wear masks or follow social distancing rules which would put them at risk. Having to spend more time waiting on long lines that are not only to pay for the items but also to get inside the store alone has un-enticed shoppers.

In essence, shopping to the consumer during the holiday season and throughout the rest of the year was dependent on several factors that each individual has to consider. Those who primarily choose to shop online will do so in avoidance of the harmful effects of contracting COVID-19, as well as the time-efficiency and in some cases the price difference. Whereas those who shop in-stores will do so for the sense of “normalcy”, the need to live “carefree”, and for the experience.

Implications

Will the overall rise of online shopping continue long term once COVID-19 is over? The growth of the e-commerce industry was largely in part of the rise of the coronavirus. Thus, this begs the question of whether it will continue to thrive at such a large magnitude once this pandemic comes to an end. Will businesses shift their focus and continue to push consumers to order more from their online platforms? It is too soon to tell as we have not yet come close to the end of this pandemic. Will in-store shopping even be an option in the future? Throughout the pandemic, we have seen the closure of many businesses from small businesses to large ones such as Century 21. Many have shifted to selling their items through online platforms such as Etsy, Amazon, Ebay, or their own websites. It is much more cost-efficient for a merchant to sell their goods/services online than having to own a store location, pay rent, and pay employees to run it. While it is still hard to picture a future where everything has gone “digital”, including the shopping experience, the world is not too far off from that vision.

How will this shift the workforce in the shopping industry? The most worrisome implication caused by the growth of online shopping is in regard to the workforce. With the closures of so many stores also comes along the end of job positions such as retail workers, custodial staff, administrative workers (receptionist), and customer service us to name a few. Along with the depletion of those job positions, comes to mind the rise of new job positions specifically pertaining to the online industry. This would then mean that does who belong to those areas of the workforce would have to adapt to the changing times or get left behind (be unemployed). This is particularly scary to think of as we cannot predict if people would be able

to or have the means of adapting to these changes. Many of those job positions like retail workers and custodial staffs do not require any- to a little experience whereas with this online shift there would be some sort of training/education necessary. So ultimately, will this increase the unemployment rate for a short-term or long term?

Possible Factors for changes in online shopping performance:

Consumers want to mitigate the risk of getting COVID-19 due to interaction with other people in stores. Shopping for goods and services online can occasionally be a more affordable option. The convenience caused by ordering items straight to your door versus slower services in shopping stores due to low employee personnel promotes easy accessibility. There are consumers that may not want to wear masks or follow social distancing rules that are placed in stores/shopping centers. Many stores/shopping centers have long lines outside which makes online shopping more time efficient. Stores do not have a large number of products in stock due to supply chain shortages which causes consumers to rely on online ordering.

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