

The Impact of COVID-19 on Online Consumer Behavior for Sports Equipment: A Trend Analysis

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Abstract

This article proposes to examine how internet shopping for sports equipment changed during and after the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. The goal of the study is to comprehend how the pandemic affected consumer behavior in relation to purchasing of sporting goods. Using Google search data for phrases related to sporting goods, the study looks for patterns and changes in customer interest over time. According to our findings, there were considerable shifts in the sports equipment search trends both during and after the epidemic, with a noticeable rise in searches for terms like "home gym," "fitness equipment," and "fitness app," among others. According to the analysis, pandemic-related lockdowns and gym closures were the main causes of the rise in sports gear and fitness-related searches. The survey sheds light on how customers shop online, emphasizing the significance of the home gym trend as a reaction to the closing of conventional gyms and the demand for at-home fitness options. By offering insights into the changing customer behavior during a pandemic, this study adds novelty to the field of sports equipment sales. In their quest to comprehend shifts in customer behavior and modify their strategies in light of such shifts, marketers, corporations, and legislators may find the findings to have major practical ramifications. The research also gives prospects for future studies, such as the comparison of the results with other regions or the discovery of specific elements that influence consumer behavior in this setting.

Keywords

Online consumer behavior, Sports equipment, COVID-19, Google Trends, Home gym

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Introduction

The world as we know it has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic. Every aspect of our lives—from the way we work to the way we interact with one another—has been impacted by the global crisis. Consumer behavior is one area that has undergone substantial change. People have had to adjust to new practices in product consumption and purchasing as a result of lockdowns and other social isolation measures. One industry where the pandemic has significantly altered customer behavior is the sports equipment industry. People have had to find new methods to remain active and healthy as gyms and sports facilities have either closed or are operating at reduced capacity. The demand for outdoor sporting products and home exercise equipment has increased as a result.

In the UK, the market worth of sports equipment increased by 13.7% in 2020, according to a study by ResearchAndMarkets. The report also emphasizes how sales of outdoor sporting products and home exercise equipment increased during the pandemic (ResearchAndMarkets, 2021). Customers find products online whether they are actively shopping or not, which is why online consumer behavior is becoming more and more significant. Our study indicates that this significant move to the online space is here to stay. According to another study by Think with Google, online research grew in 2020, with consumers using online sources to support their purchases at a rate of 84%, up from 76% in 2019. This shift was primarily caused by consumers over the age of 45, with 80% of those in the 45–54 age range conducting online research in comparison to 68% in 2019 (Think with Google, 2020). The demand for health and wellness

goods has increased as more people work from home and spend more time inside. Fitness gear and other health-related goods are in higher demand as a result of this.

Numerous trends that were already in motion prior to the start of the crisis have been hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the shift toward online purchasing was already underway prior to the pandemic, but the crisis has hastened the process. According to The Washington Post, as homebound consumers rushed to create home gyms, stock up on sneakers, and download fitness apps in their millions, sales of exercise equipment, gadgets, and clothing have surged during the pandemic (The Washington Post, 2021). You can use Google Trends to see how queries changed over time in the UK during the pandemic. You can use this platform to track the changes in sports equipment inquiries over the course of the pandemic and afterwards. People have had to adjust to new practices in product consumption and purchasing as a result of lockdowns and other social isolation measures. In order to understand how online shopping behavior has evolved, we will examine search trends for keywords associated with sports equipment and online shopping over the course of this time period.

1. Literature Review

Consumer behavior has changed as a result of the increase in online sports equipment shopping, with many consumers choosing more environmentally friendly and sustainably produced goods. This may be seen in the rising demand for recycled and environmentally friendly sporting goods, which are increasingly available online. Unfortunately, despite the rise in online sports equipment sales, there is still little accurate data available on consumer preferences and behavior. Nonetheless, the spike in online purchasing activity both during and after the pandemic indicates that online sales will likely continue to be important in the UK market for sporting goods.

The COVID-19 epidemic has significantly affected the world economy, which includes the sports equipment sector. The industry has been compelled to adjust to new opportunities and problems as a result of lockdowns, social distance-creating tactics, and changes in consumer behavior (Dubois et al., 2022). According to a number of studies, the epidemic has changed how people shop for sporting goods. Lockdowns and other social isolation tactics have led to a rise in at-home physical activity and exercise among customers, which has raised the demand for home fitness equipment. The demand for conventional sports gear, such as basketballs, soccer balls, and golf clubs, has also decreased as a result of the closure of gyms and sports facilities.

The United Kingdom has a lengthy history of sporting traditions, with a particular emphasis on football, rugby, and cricket. Nonetheless, there has been a shift in recent years toward more varied types of exercise and fitness, including yoga, cycling, and running. The epidemic has increased the shift toward other types of exercise while participation rates in traditional sports have remained largely unchanged. When gyms and sports facilities were closed or only partially operational due to the pandemic, many people turned to online shopping to buy sports equipment for at-home training. As a result, there was a considerable increase in online purchasing, with several stores reporting significant growth in the sale of sports footwear, exercise equipment, and home gym equipment. Even as regulations have loosened, this trend has persisted, with many consumers choosing to keep working out at home rather than going back to the gym.

Due to the risks connected with in-person purchasing, many consumers have switched to online shopping, which has hastened the transition towards e-commerce. This has had a big effect on the sports equipment market since more people are now buying sports gear online, which has increased e-commerce sales. Companies have been pushed to reassess their distribution systems and adjust to customers' shifting needs as a result of the transition toward e-commerce (Elnaggar et al., 2022).

Sports equipment's supply chain has been significantly impacted by the epidemic, causing delays in both manufacture and delivery. Lockdowns and social isolation policies drove numerous factories to close, which resulted in a scarcity of raw materials and finished goods. Sports equipment manufacturers have had difficulties as a result, and they have been compelled to alter their production procedures and look for new suppliers in order to preserve their product supply (Hu et al., 2022). Businesses in the sports equipment sector have responded to these difficulties by adapting in a number of ways to stay competitive and satisfy changing consumer demands. For instance, in order to address the rising demand for these products, several businesses have moved their attention to home fitness equipment including dumbbells, exercise cycles, and yoga mats. In order to accommodate the rising demand for online shopping, businesses have also made investments in e-commerce capabilities, such as upgraded websites, increased shipping procedures, and more effective order fulfillment (Wang et al., 2022).

Together with these adjustments, businesses have made investments in new product development, resulting in the creation of new goods and services that are specifically designed to meet the needs of customers during the pandemic. For instance, numerous businesses have unveiled brand-new online training courses and virtual fitness classes that enable customers to exercise and engage in physical activity from the convenience of their homes. As to this, businesses have been able to continue communicating with customers and providing for their requirements despite the pandemic's hurdles (Shaw et al., 2021).

Companies in the sports equipment sector have also collaborated and partnered to address the issues brought on by the epidemic. For instance, some businesses have joined with neighborhood gyms and fitness studios to offer at-home workout equipment, enabling customers to continue exercising and engaging in physical activity even after these establishments close. To enhance their e-commerce capabilities and offer quicker and more effective delivery to clients, some businesses have partnered with delivery and logistics organizations (Kim, 2021).

Cost reduction, combined with improving the customer experience and revenue development, assumes a vital part in the research of online consumer behavior for sports equipment during the pandemic. In order to reduce costs in the retail sector, emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), must be adopted. Key components in this respect include effective target consumer group identification, automation to simplify personnel requirements, and inventory management optimization. Retailers may identify patterns in consumer behavior and customize their offerings as a result, which saves them a lot of money. Understanding consumer preferences and behaviors, supporting effective online sales, and improving the entire customer experience are all made possible by these cost-cutting measures. (Anica-Popa et al., 2021)

In order to remain competitive, some businesses have cut their pricing, while others have concentrated on providing promotions and discounts in order to draw clients (AbdulHussein et al., 2022). Also, brands have to take into account the shifting consumer preferences for sustainability and environmental friendliness and modify their product lineups to reflect these trends. Customer service is a crucial component of marketing strategy in the post-pandemic era. With the importance of online purchasing growing, brands must make sure they are giving their customers a nice and frictionless experience. This involves giving customers access to accurate and thorough product information, replying to their questions as soon as possible, and assuring safe and effective shipping and delivery procedures (Chiu et al., 2018).

The importance of sustainability and eco-friendliness to consumers has forced brands to concentrate on these themes as well. This entails employing environmentally friendly products and packaging, cutting waste, and lowering their carbon footprint. Sports equipment manufacturers are looking into cutting-edge ways to lessen their environmental effect, such using recycled materials in their goods and putting sustainable manufacturing practices in place (Komonen et al., 2022).

Consumers of sporting goods have become noticeably more price sensitive as a result of the pandemic. This is partly because the pandemic has had a considerable influence on consumers' financial situations, which has caused many of them to give affordability and cost-effectiveness priority when making judgments about what to buy (Siepmann et al., 2021). Businesses have had to adjust their pricing strategies to account for this shift in consumer behavior, choosing more aggressive, value-driven pricing models that put the needs of the customer first. In doing so, there has been a considerable departure from premium pricing and a move toward more reasonable and realistic pricing models that better reflect customers' cost-benefit analyses.

Also, the pandemic has significantly increased e-commerce and digital engagement among purchasers of sporting goods. Consumers are increasingly turning to internet retailers to buy sports equipment as a result of lockdowns and social distance measures forcing many brick-and-mortar establishments to close (Nyenhuis et al., 2020). Businesses have had to make major investments in their e-commerce capabilities to adapt to this shift in customer behavior, including the creation of fresh, cutting-edge digital platforms and the expansion of already existing ones. Businesses have also been forced to implement more aggressive and interesting marketing tactics that use social media and other digital platforms to connect with customers.

Consumers of sporting equipment are placing more value on brand reputation and trust as a result of the pandemic. This is partly because the epidemic has produced an atmosphere of unpredictability and uncertainty, which has caused many consumers to give higher priority to the brands and goods they believe to be reputable and trustworthy. Businesses have been forced to make investments in their brand image and build a strong brand identity that reflects their values, commitment, and reliability in order to adapt to this shift in consumer behavior. This has meant placing a strong emphasis on customer involvement and satisfaction, brand promotion, and corporate social responsibility (Kim, 2022).

A specialized tool called Google Trends shows consumers historical search volume information for particular words or phrases. It demonstrates the historical trends in search volume for a term in a given locale or language. Marketers can learn more about consumer interest and intent by examining these search patterns, and they can also spot new trends in their specific regions (De La Rosa et al., 2022). Google Trends, for instance, can be used to determine when a specific good or service is in high demand or to learn what terms customers are looking for in regard to a specific brand or product category (Jun et al., 2021).

Google Trends can be a useful resource for figuring out trends and studying customer behavior in the context of online purchases of sporting goods. Marketers can learn which items and brands are most in demand, when they are most in demand, and what factors may be influencing or discouraging online sales by looking at search data for specific keywords and phrases linked to sports equipment (Perez et al., 2023). This information can then be utilized to develop new products or services, improve the targeting of potential customers, and optimize marketing campaigns. Overall, Google Trends offers a special and helpful technique to keep on top of the game in a dynamic and cutthroat online industry.

2. Methodology

Using information from Google Trends, the approach used for this study was created to look into the changes in online consumer activity related to sporting goods both during and after the COVID-19 outbreak in the United Kingdom. The process of data retrieval began with the identification of the pertinent search terms and keywords for sporting goods. Based on a preliminary review of the literature and additional research conducted on the platform, a thorough list of search phrases was produced. The words "fitness equipment," "home gym," "yoga mats," "running shoes," and "exercise cycles" were among the many sports-related terms on this list. The following step was to retrieve information from Google Trends after the list of search phrases had been created. Each search word had to be entered into the platform's search field together with the location and duration parameters. Data was gathered from January 2020 to March 2023 in order to get a complete picture of how consumer behavior was affected by the pandemic and the afferent restrictions imposed by the government.

The data was divided into segments based on particular time periods, such as before and after the start of the epidemic, as well as by particular keywords and product categories, in order to further enhance the analysis. This segmentation made it possible to analyze consumer behavior changes over time and the variables that influenced those changes more thoroughly.

Prior to the pandemic's occurrence in the UK, the search volume for terms linked to sports equipment served as a baseline for the data analysis process. Following that, the time period of the pandemic was examined, paying close attention to the virus' progress, governmental restrictions, and how these things affected online behavior. As the data analysis step continued, other sports equipment kinds that customers were looking for online were also identified and examined. The study sought to determine how the pandemic affected UK customers' online activity by comparing the search volumes for various sports equipment terms before, during, and after the pandemic.

The analysis technique also concentrated on finding trends in search traffic over time. The researchers were able to ascertain how consumer behavior changed as the pandemic spread and laws were altered as a result of this. Identifying any seasonal trends in consumer behavior connected to searches for sports equipment was the final step in the data analysis cycle. This contributed to the understanding of how seasonal changes in consumer behavior might affect the sales of sporting goods, which could also be unrelated to the evolution of the pandemic in the region.

Table no. 1. Search queries used in the empirical study

General	Fitness App + Gym Equipment + Fitness Equipment + Home Gym + Exercise Equipment
Specific	Yoga Mats + Running Shoes + Exercise Cycles + Resistance Bands + Dumbbells

Source: Authors

As it can be seen above in Table 1, we have categorized the search terms in two sets, namely “General” and “specific”. The general group refers to terms that can return more broad information about the variety of activities one can encounter in regards to sports and exercise. They offer a clearer vision into how the population reacted during the initial news of the crisis but not only. The second list contains specific sport equipment that have been popular among people who chose to start working out from home, the products are easy to use and offer a great variety of exercises.

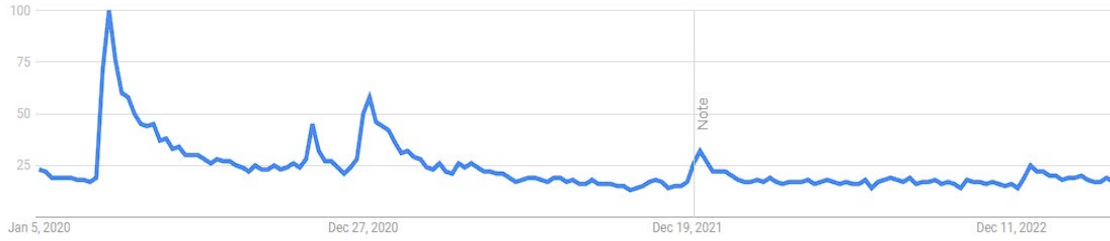


Figure no. 1. Google Trends index for General search terms
Source: trends.google.com

Figure 1 shows the fluctuations in the general terms that were searched during and after the pandemic. The first spike at the start of the pandemic can be attributed to the sudden shift to home-based exercise and the increased demand for connected fitness equipment and paid apps. The second spike near the end of November coincides with the second wave of COVID-19 infections and the subsequent lockdown measures that restricted outdoor activities and access to gyms. The smaller spikes at the start of the year reflect the seasonal pattern of New Year resolutions that motivate people to purchase sports equipment, but often result in low usage and abandonment.

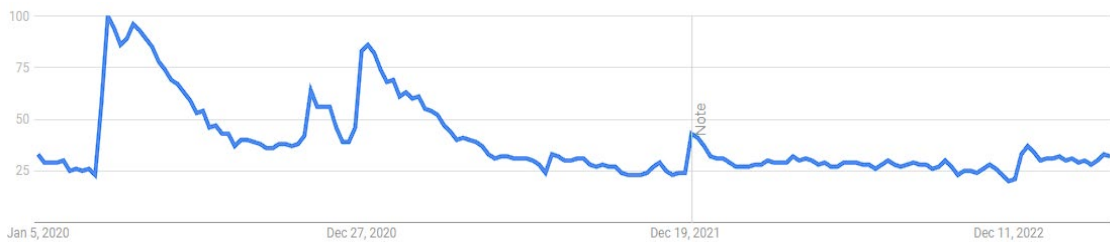


Figure no. 2. GT index for specific search terms
Source: trends.google.com

Figure 2 shows the variations in online consumer behavior in regard to sports equipment searches during and after the pandemic. This one reveals some nuances that suggest a higher level of consumer awareness and deliberation in their search behavior. For instance, the first spike at the start of the pandemic is slightly lower than the first spike in Fig. 2, implying that some consumers bought sports equipment impulsively or out of necessity, without conducting much research or comparison. The second spike near the end of November is slightly higher than the second spike in Fig. 2, suggesting that some consumers were more selective and informed in their choices, as they faced another round of lockdowns and restrictions. The spikes at the start of the year are also higher than the corresponding spikes from the general terms searches, indicating that some consumers were more committed and persistent in their resolutions to exercise and buy sports equipment.

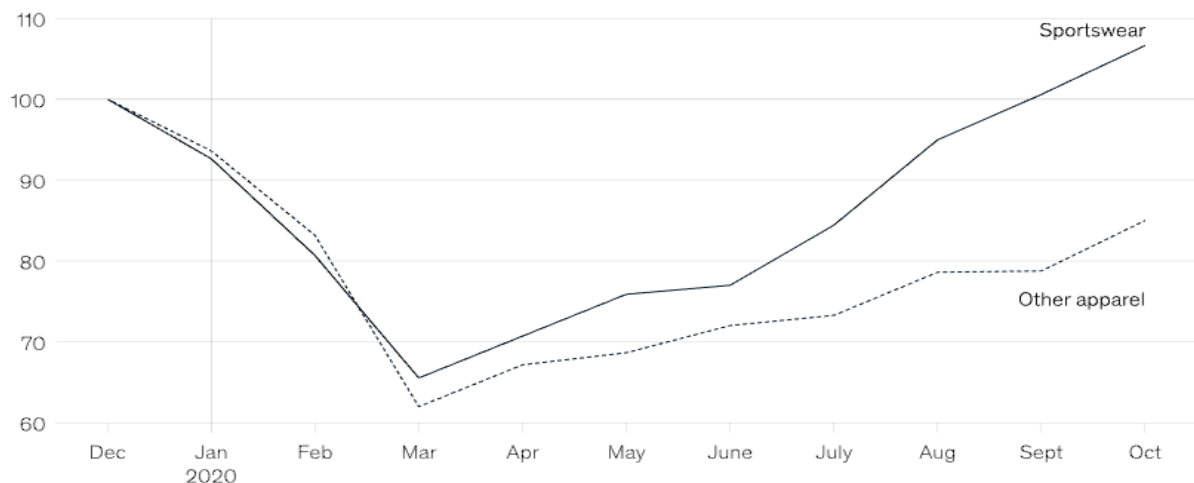


Figure no. 3. Sportswear performance compared to the general apparel industry
Source: McKinsey.com

Figure 3 illustrates how the overall sector was impacted by the start of the pandemic, and how the following months the sportswear subsector, which proved to be more resilient than the overall apparel industry, has seen larger growth. While the apparel market suffered a steep decline in sales due to store closures and reduced consumer spending, the sportswear segment experienced a smaller drop and recovered faster. This suggests that consumers prioritized comfort and wellbeing during the pandemic and shifted their spending to more casual and functional clothing items. The sportswear subsector also leveraged its digital capabilities to capture more market share and customer loyalty. Online channels became more important for sportswear purchases, as physical stores were closed or restricted. Sportswear companies that had a strong digital presence and offered convenient delivery and return options were able to meet the needs and preferences of online shoppers. Moreover, some sportswear companies also offered innovative solutions such as digitally enabled fitness equipment, virtual coaching, and online communities to enhance their customer proposition and engagement.

3. Results

An interesting association between the volume of searches for sports equipment and the pandemic situation in the UK was found after an analysis of the data obtained from Google Trends. Between January 2020 and March 2023, there were several lockdowns, restrictions, and adjustments to government regulations as a result of the epidemic. Our findings indicate that these policy changes had a noticeable impact on the trends in sports equipment searches, with the most pronounced rises occurring during the times of stringent lockdowns.

The volume of sports equipment searches in January 2020 remained rather constant, with a slight uptick at the start of the year. However, with searches for "home gym," "fitness equipment," and "fitness app," among other terms, there was a sudden increase when the number of COVID-19 cases began to grow in March 2020. The first national lockdown was announced in conjunction with this increase and began on March 23, 2020.

The peak of the first wave of COVID-19 cases, when the toughest regulations were in force, coincided with the months of March to May 2020, when searches for sporting goods peaked. In June 2020, as the number of COVID-19 reported infections started to diminish and the lockdown measures were progressively relaxed, the search trends for sporting goods began to decline.

On November 5, 2020, the government declared a second nationwide lockdown, which caused a spike in searches for sporting goods. This pattern persisted through December 2020, coinciding with the holiday season and the declaration of the third nationwide lockdown.

As limitations were gradually loosened and the immunization program was implemented in 2021, the number of searches for sports equipment gradually decreased. Yet, a two-week surge in searches at the beginning of the year was notable, as it has been in years before. New Year's resolutions and the desire to live a healthy lifestyle can be appointed as the source for this rise in searches.

Overall, our findings imply that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown procedures significantly influenced UK search trends for sporting goods. The study sheds light on how consumer behavior changes during a pandemic and emphasizes the significance of the home gym trend as a reaction to traditional gyms closing and the demand for at-home fitness options.

4. Discussion

Our research tried to extend previous research, by examining impact of the pandemic and how it altered United Kingdom's consumers' online purchasing habits for sporting goods. It is well known that the pandemic has forced people to alter their lifestyles. As a result of gym closures and lockdown limitations, people have been searching for alternative ways to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. Given that people were attempting to adjust to this new way of life, it makes sense that there was a rise in inquiries for sporting goods. After the restrictions were lifted and life returned to "normal," it is difficult to tell if the majority of people have continued on this trend. People have been compelled to adapt and change their behavior as a result of the pandemic, but it is unclear whether these changes will last permanently or only temporarily. It is essential to remember that other factors, such as seasonal variations or marketing campaigns, may have had an impact on the search trends for sporting goods, so it is difficult to say with certainty how much of the increase is actually due to the pandemic.

However, the fact that searches for "home gym," "fitness equipment," and "fitness app" significantly increased during the pandemic suggests that people were actively looking for methods to maintain their health and fitness despite the difficult circumstances. The psychological needs that people have, such as the need for control, predictability, and autonomy, can be used to explain this tendency. People frequently look for methods to regain control when they feel as though their lives are spiraling out of control, and one such strategy is to get fit and active. Moreover, the fact that people were searching for "home gym" and "fitness equipment" suggests that they were looking for solutions that would allow them to exercise at home, which can be seen as a response to the closure of traditional gyms. This trend highlights the importance of at-home fitness solutions and the need for businesses to adapt to these changing consumer behaviors.

It's crucial to recognize the limitations of this research, though. It is challenging to infer a causal relationship between the pandemic and the rise in sports equipment searches, despite the results' suggestion of one. Additionally, the research is only capable of examining Google Trends data, which may not adequately represent the complexity of consumer behavior. Additional research is required to examine the pandemic's long-term impacts on consumer behavior related to sporting goods and to pinpoint the variables that contribute to these changes.

The research results of this study are consistent with the outcomes of the study on purchasing green items in the post-pandemic era. Given that consumers' increased awareness of crises promotes the tendency to acquire sports equipment online, both research highlight the importance of crisis awareness in affecting purchase intentions. With its beneficial effects on product understanding, crisis awareness, and subjective standards, social media marketing is also essential. As customers' perception of control over their behaviors and sense of responsibility influence their purchasing behavior, perceived behavioral control and responsibility attribution are also important aspects (Sun et al., 2022).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the potential of using Google Trends as a useful data source for comprehending population behavior during and following the COVID-19 outbreak in the United Kingdom, particularly with regard to online sports equipment purchasing activity. The increasing volume of online searches for sports equipment is evidence, according to the research, that the pandemic and related lockdowns have had a substantial impact on online consumer behavior. This study also points to the need for additional study in this area, specifically the need to determine whether this pattern has remained when limitations were lifted and a more normal way of life resumed. One important aspect to note here is that while some companies had a strong establishment in the digital space and were ready to offer not just products, but other kind of services such as online trainings, overall the market was not entirely ready for such a disruption as the pandemic was.

Also, this study contends that the pandemic has had a profound psychological effect on people, prompting them to look for alternative forms of physical activity. This conclusion emphasizes the significance of addressing the population's mental health requirements during future public health emergencies and of taking into account how lockdown procedures may affect people's physical and mental health. To build on the findings of this study, further investigation is required, including a look at how vaccination rates and new virus types affect online sports equipment purchases. Overall, the results of this study add to the expanding corpus of research on the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on consumer behavior and lay the groundwork for future studies in this field.

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