

## **CHANGES IN CONSUMER ATTITUDE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC PERIOD - CASE STUDY CALARASI CITY, ROMANIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID -19 pandemic affected all economic branches and implicitly the incomes of the population in Romania, as well as in other European and world countries. This study analyzes the attitude of the inhabitants of Calarasi regarding the consumption of food and non-food goods, as well as the way of purchasing, directly or online, between February 2020-November 2021. The methodology used was empirical, a questionnaire, which was completed by 886 people, inhabitants of Calarasi city in Romania. The respondents are between 18 and 75 years old, with different professions and level of education. The data processing was performed, using the SPSS program. The results of the study confirm that there are major changes in attitudes towards consumption. Attitude changes could be identified as follows: first of all, the way of purchasing some goods, the share of online orders has increased, especially among certain age categories of the population; another behavioral change is the quantitative oscillation for certain foods during the period analyzed in the study; a third observation is the attitude of consumers towards the purchase of non-food goods, including tourist services. The results of this study could be a guide for those who work in the production and distribution of goods and services, in order to adapt their distribution according to consumer requirements.

**Keywords:** pandemic, Covid-19, consumers, attitude, behavior

### **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID 19 pandemic has influenced and continues to influence human behavior related to everything, including behavior related to daily activities, work, transportation, fun or recreational activities and eating. Human behavior is constantly changing, especially during the isolation in lockdown, but also in the period of restrictions. In this case, it is necessary to change the behavior of entrepreneurs and companies that meet the needs of these people. People' needs are maintained but the way they are met is different. Behavioral changes regarding service and food consumption appear gradually and differently, because it takes a period of adaptation to the new situation created.

The creation of food stocks is one of the first gestures manifest by the consumer. This conservation instinct is manifested by the creation of food stocks [12], [11], [8]. In difficult situation, is known this kind of consumer` attitude, especially for food products. The motivation is related to possible crises or shortages that may be created or to the eventual increase of prices [17], [3], [2]. These reserves can create negative effects such as the lack of food on the shelves and also, deterioration of the stored goods, without

being consumed by those who bought them. At the same time, the expenses of those who buy them are quite high at that time [13]. Not only food is purchased but also devices in which food products can be stored. This certainly influence the amount spent on making food reserves. This behavior is supported by a variety of reasons, including psychological [11], [5].

## **METODOLOGY**

The data collection was done by applying a questionnaire in Calarasi, in two stages. A first questionnaire was applied during the beginning of COVID 19 pandemic (March 18-20, 2020).

The second questionnaire was applied more than a year and a half after the outbreak of the pandemic with COVID 19 (November 20-22, 2021).

These two questionnaires followed the behavioral changes of the population from this port city on Danube regarding:

- the consumption of food products, stockpiling of food and non-food goods and consumption of services;
- the way of purchase, directly or online;
- the percentage of purchasing products and services online compared to physical purchases, depending on the age and education of the consumer.

The choice of analyzing the behavior of the population in Calarasi city was influenced by several factors: a first factor can be considered local conservatism. Here, the life of each person is organized according to community` principles. People are a little bit influenced by the attitude of external life. There are connections with the big cities that include Bucharest (the capital city) and with rural environment, but this influence cannot be considered a determining factor in the daily life of inhabitants; another important factor is the power of influence among community members. There are opinion leaders in these local communities. Among them may be teachers, priests or elected leaders of the local administration (mayor).

## **RESULTS**

In analyzing the results for each questionnaire applied, the situation seems to be different. Thus, from the first analysis, based on the questionnaire applied in the beginning of COVID 19 pandemic, the population` behavior is based on the creation of food reserves and less on non-food products. This is the first contact with this virus, and the measures announced by authorities have created a slight panic, manifested by food insecurity for the future and also, fear of illness due to contamination (the methods of disease` transmission are not known). This is exactly what made most of them to have a clear tendency to isolate themselves, after had made a sufficient food supply for a period of at least 2 weeks or more.

After analyzing the results of the questionnaire, it is considered that the virus is contagious, and isolation is a way to reduce the chances of infection, but the creation of food stocks is a justification to avoid the risk of running out of food or having to buy at higher prices. Isolation "until this problem is solved" seems to be the justification of each respondent who resorted to this behavioral method, based on the creation of food reserves. The answers obtained to questions related to creation of food stocks and possible duration of these purchased goods - "At the time of announcing lockdown for how many days did you buy food supply?" and "What is the reason for creating food and non-food stocks

during COVID 19 pandemic?" confirms the fear of food shortages or rising prices (Table 1 and Fig. 1).

Another reason for food stocks is the fear of rising food prices. Among those interviewed, 32% considered that the price of food will increase and purchasing power is limited, thus are created difficult situations, based on the lack of opportunity to purchase the necessities of daily life (Table 1).

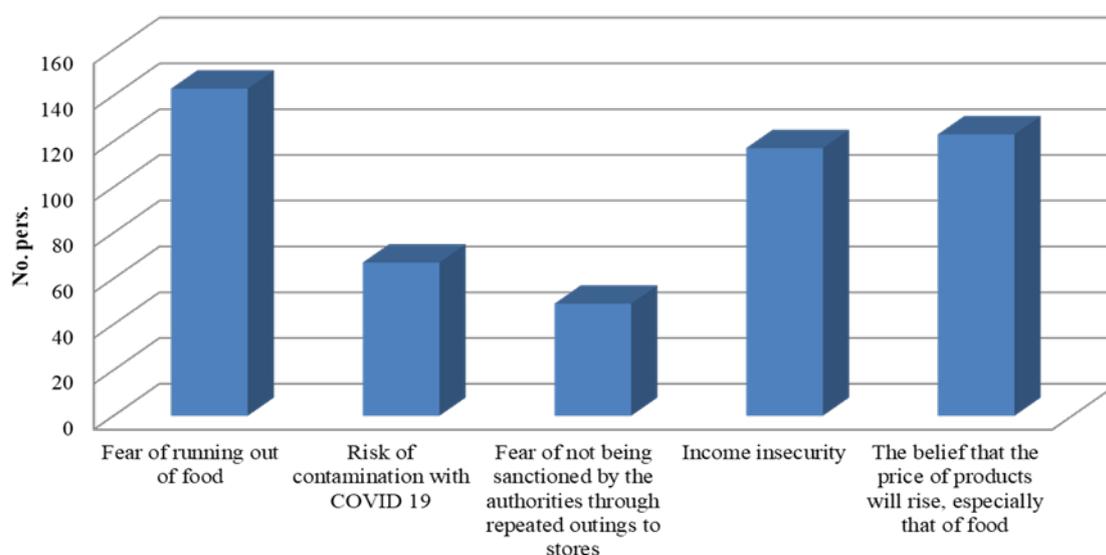
**Table 1.** The reason for creating reserves of goods and the average reserves` duration created by the population of Calarasi city, in the beginning of COVID 19 pandemic

<b>The results of questionnaire applied between March 18-20, 2020</b>	
<i>The reason for creating food and non-food reserves</i>	<i>The behavioral effects</i>
Fear of running out of food;	Emptying stores and lack of products on the shelf;  Creating stocks of unnecessary products;  Disposal of unused perishable products after expiration of validity period (waste of products and unjustified expenses);
Risk of contamination with COVID 19;	
Fear of being sanctioned by the authorities through repeated outings to stores	
Income insecurity;	
Belief that the price of products will increase, especially for food;	
Average duration for which they made food and non-food reserves	6-7 days

The disadvantages of creating food stocks are also given by high costs. This buyer "silence" does not have a rational foundation, is an emotional one, given by fear [4]. But there is also an explanation for understanding this type of behavior, resulting from the lifestyle that many formed during communist period when economy was centralized. In that time, the general lack of both food and non-food products created such behaviors; the population was forced to procure elementary products in large quantities, for a life considered "normal." Thus, is a culture of creating reserves [14] [9], [16], [7]. The age of those who practice this behavior is predominantly over 50 years.

The average duration for which were made reserves is 6-7 days. Shorter periods are specified for the purchase of basic products, such as bread or fresh vegetables and fruits, but there are also people who mention "freezing" as a solution to extend shelf life (including bread).

Regarding the way of purchasing products, 92% of them were physically purchased from stores and from agri-food market, through direct relationship between the seller and the buyer. The remaining of 8% were recorded as online transactions, for non-food products and less for long-term food (canned) products. The consumer profile highlights for the beginning of COVID 19 pandemic, that most people were oriented towards the purchase of products directly from stores and agri-food markets (table 2).



**Figure 1.** Reason for making food stocks for the population of Calarasi, Romania, between March 18-20, 2020

**Table 2.** Profile of goods consumer from Calarasi, Romania, from March 18-20, 2020

Consumer profile - questionnaire applied between March 18-20, 2020		
	Purchase of products directly - physically	Online shopping
Questionnaire applied to a sample of 200 people	93% of those surveyed	7% of those surveyed
Education	57% primary and secondary school 36% high school 7% university	28% high school 72% university
Women/Men	62% women / 38% men	13% women/ 87% men
Income	under 1000 lei – 17% 1000-2500lei – 45% above 2500lei – 38%	above 2500 lei – 100%
Age	18-24 years– 16% 25 -34 years – 22% 35-54 years – 23% 55-64 years – 19% 65 -84 years – 18% above 85 years– 2%	18-24 years – 1% 25-34 years – 47% 35-54 years – 29% 55-64 years– 23 %

After more than a year since COVID 19 pandemic outbreak, the behavior analyzed for the population in the same city, offers a changing image regarding the population`attitude, both the way in which goods are purchased but also in the quantities of goods purchased. The second questionnaire was applied more than a year and a half since COVID 19 pandemic outbreak, between November 20-22, 2021, on a sample equal to the first one, 200 people. When people were asked about the creation of food and non-food reserves ("If a new lockdown is required for how many days will you buy food?"), can be observed a change in attitude. The average time resulted from respondents` statements is 2-3 days, compared to the previous average of 6-7 days.

The biggest difference in obtained answers is found in the way of product purchase - physically from stores and markets or online. Making online purchases increases quite a lot, taking into account the short period. Among the respondents oriented on online shopping, most refer to both food and non-food purchases (clothing, cosmetics,

appliances, computers, tablets, phones, etc.). For food products, the prepared products are preferred. On the first place are complete menus and pizza, to which are added others, including cakes. This way of purchasing products is influenced by several factors: the most important is familiarity of many people with computer activity, online work, including school courses or other activities that have been carried out in this way. Familiarization with the virtual environment also favored the sector of acquisition of goods through the virtual space [9], [1], [13].

The age of those who have adapted more easily to a behavior based on the purchase of goods through the Internet, is mostly between 25 and 54 years. This is possible because of receptivity to something new, in this case virtual environment but also to material possibilities, financial availability to acquire the needed goods (Table 3).

For direct purchases, from stores and public markets from local producers, there are still many people, more than half, in general those who want to have the opportunity to choose their products following their direct observation [6], [15], [7], the pleasure of buying the needed product, the desire to socialize and, out of habit. There is also the inability to shop online, due to the lack of knowledge or necessary means. The elderly population but not only them are in this category. Along with them are young people, with a low level of education or those with low incomes, who do not have the necessary means.

**Table 3.** Changes in profile of goods consumer from Calarasi, Romania, November 20-22, 2021

Consumer profile - questionnaire applied between November 20-22, 2021		
	Purchase of products directly - physically	Online shopping
Questionnaire applied to a sample of 200 people	72% of those surveyed	38% of those surveyed
Education	59% primary and secondary school 34% high school 9% university	39% high school 61% university
Women/Men	59% women / 41% men	24% women / 76% men
Income	under 1000 lei – 38% 1000-2500 lei – 43% above 2500 lei – 19%	above 2500 lei – 100%
Age	18-24 years – 9% 25-34 years – 17% 35-54 years – 21% 55-64 years – 22% 65-84 years – 29% Peste 85 years – 2%	18-24 years – 11% 25-34 years – 47% 35-54 years – 29% 55-64 years – 13%

The change in attitude and behavior of the population towards the development of recreational and commercial activities is visible [10]. This is due to vaccination, which has created confidence in immunization against this virus, but there is also a greater risk of "we learn to live with the virus" or "that's it, we go on."

This trust has a logical basis, the one of vaccination, and on the other hand, the resumption of economic, social and cultural activity creates a general good condition

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID 19 pandemic has brought great behavioral changes among Romanian population, regardless the living place, urban or rural. These changes affect the attitude that the inhabitants of a city may have, such as Calarasi city, vis-à-vis the quantity of necessary goods that must be purchased, the type of products and the way of purchasing

them. Thus, many have understood that making reserves creates discomfort for other residents due to the lack of products on the shelf, and for those who buy them it is a big financial effort, and waste can be added to the negative effects.

Regarding the type of products purchased, there are changes. Many people were oriented towards the acquisition of means necessary to carry out an online activity: computers, tablets, smartphones, etc.

At the same time, many Romanians in Calarasi city stated that they had never accessed the Internet, did not have and did not know how to use a computer, a tablet or send an e-mail. Also, they have become more open about buying the needed goods online and found this action easier and less demanding.

However, there is also a less pleasant aspect in this way of shopping: lack of socialization! The elderly are the ones who want more socialization, they are used to a way of life in which can exercise and shop at the same time. For them, shopping in a market is a way of life. The pandemic had a negative effect on them, due to the lack of opportunities at leaving the house.

Between the two analyzed periods the differences are clear. The population was unprepared for a secluded life in their own home and with a virtual activity in the first period and much more prepared for such a life in the second period.

Over time, the population' confidence in the medical system and in the role that new drugs and the vaccine can play, creates a state of behavioral balance of the population in this Romanian port city, Calarasi.

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