

## The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis on Online Shopping

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### Abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic that occurred in Wuhan, China in December 2019 affected the whole world in a short time. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. In order to prevent spread of the pandemic, countries worldwide started to impose curfews in whole or in part, and certain changes occurred in the shopping methods of consumers in line with these decisions, and new changes occurred in different sectors. During the pandemic, stores and shopping centers physical sales are adversely affected due to movement restrictions and business shuttering. Considering the crowded environments as the transmission source of the COVID-19, consumers choose online shopping. Since the risk of physical contact with e-commerce has decreased to zero, it has started to attract more intense attention from customers in order to protect their health during the pandemic process. In addition to protecting people's health with the product they want, it also eliminated the loss of time and comforted people in terms of practicality. As a result, online sellers have seen an opportunity in this crisis and increased their sales volumes at a record level. The overall aim of this study is to examine the effects of COVID-19 on online shopping behaviors and trends, and the impact of COVID-19 on the online shopping of different consumer products.

### Keyword

COVID-19,  
Online shopping,  
e-commerce

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus, which first appeared in the Wuhan region of China in December 2019 and called COVID-19, unexpectedly affected the world in a short period of time in terms of health and economy. The World Health Organization (WHO) has characterized and recognized COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2021). Considering the rapid spread of the virus and the danger of death, it is obvious that it will affect people's behaviors and lifestyles for a long time.

It is clear that the pandemic has affected societal trends related to how we work, how we behave, how we trade, how we shop, and how we use technology very rapidly. While these trends were already changing before the crisis, world is seeing an acceleration that will result into a new normal coming out of the crisis (He & Harris, 2020).

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During this pandemic, physical trade has been negatively impacted due to various reasons such as people wanting to stay away from physical contacts and curfews (OECD, 2020). Customers are avoiding going brick and mortar shopping stores and crowded areas. Especially the retail sector has been badly influenced by the pandemic due to movement restrictions and business closures and problems arising from the complexities of the supply chain due to curfew restrictions or bans. In a way, the coronavirus has seriously accelerated the transformation of the trade that is already taking place, in other words, the shift from the physical environment to the virtual environment (Ticimax, 2020).

COVID-19 has been exceptionally challenging for businesses worldwide and brought to the fore the special role of e-commerce can play in this crisis and beyond. In the post-COVID-19 world, the unparalleled growth of e-commerce businesses will disrupt retail frameworks. The spread of digital technologies and the Internet allows humans to still connect and communicate—and companies are able to interact with their customers despite being physically distant (Anam et al., 2020).

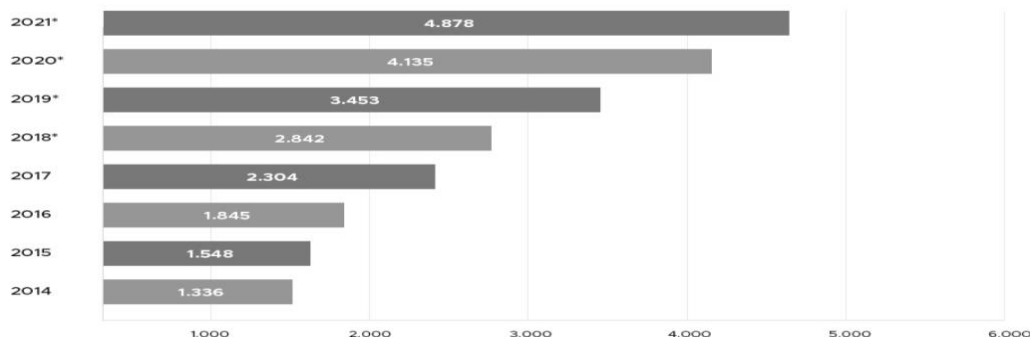
On the other hand, the global efforts to contain the pandemic has changed the consumers' daily habits, consumption patterns, and ways of thinking, resulting in a boost to the “home economy” and a further improvement in online shopping and services that were already gaining traction worldwide (Deloitte, 2020). Due to COVID-19, online demand has increased for multiple categories, including entertainment and food and beverages, which are delivered by using innovative non-contact formats.

The aim of the present study is to have an overview about the impact of COVID-19 on the online shopping behavior and trends. The study will look at the online shopping trends and behaviors in Turkey and the world. In this qualitative research, the scanning method is used. The current literature, articles and the news sources about the impact of COVID-19 on online shopping behavior and trends are examined. This study is among the limited number of studies on online sales during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

## 2. TRANSITION TO ONLINE SALES FROM RETAIL TRADE

The world is renewing itself through continuous and fluid change and transformation. Companies and business cannot avoid adapting to the changes in their internal and external environments in order to ensure the continuity of their activities. If companies and businesses cannot keep up with these innovations, they will have to forever lose their profitability and competitiveness, and may even have to stop their operations. In the process of adapting to the latest developments, the methods of businesses reaching their customers and communicating with their customers have also changed (Akyazi, 2018). Today, it can be said that the world market has become universal as a result of technological developments. This form of trade, which allows the trade of all known products to be carried out electronically and in a short time, is called e-commerce or online sales. With the globalization of online sales, its place in daily life has become very clear.

Online sales and shopping have been able to gain a place and progress in all areas of economic life with the degree of spread and easy ways it has provided. The most important reason why these developments are so fast is that online sales are available on the internet and instantly.

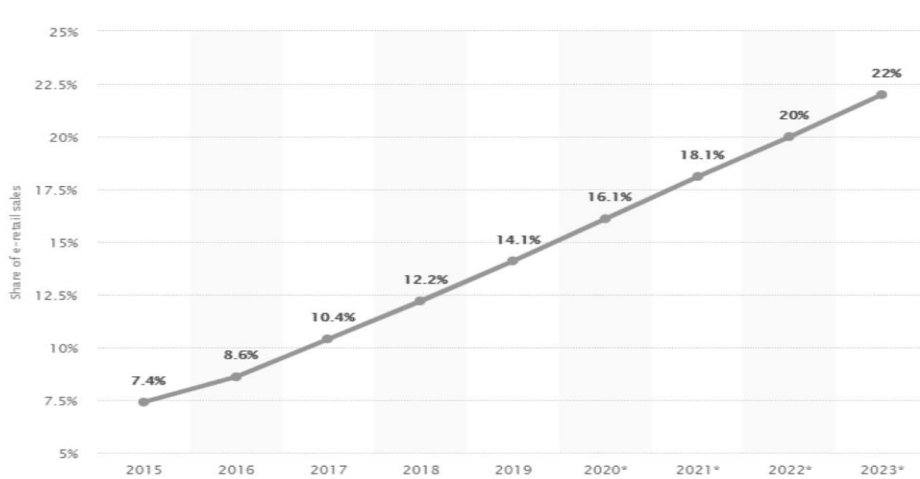


Sales in billion US dollars

**Figure 1.** Online Sales Trend (Source: Statista: E-commerce worldwide- Statistics and facts)

As seen in the graph above (Figure 1), the development of new technologies in the online sales sector has led to behavior changes in recent years. Online sales and sales graph have been determined as a large increase by 2019 and it is determined that it is very likely to exceed US \$ 4.878 billion by the end of 2021.

E commerce, or online sales, is a concept that has emerged as a result of globalization and has become more prominent in daily life. The development of the concept of virtual organization with the transition to the information society is one of the important reasons that led to the widespread use of e-commerce (Demirel & Eriş, 2019).



**Figure 2.** Share of online sales in global retail sales (Source: Statista: E-commerce worldwide- Statistics and facts)

The share of online sales in worldwide retail sales was recorded as 7.4% in 2015. Looking at 2019, it is estimated that the share of online sales in global retail sales, which was 14.1%, will increase up to 22% in 2023 (Figure 2).

### 3. COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON ONLINE SHOPPING

Online sales have increased rapidly since the outbreak of COVID-19, with the addition of new and active users (Anam et al., 2020). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the consumer behavior unpredictably and restructures the sector. People who think about their health have abandoned shopping in physical markets and turned to online sales, and as a result, online sales volume has increased considerably.

The graph below (Figure 3) shows the changes that occurred in the online sales volume since January 2020 to May 2020 in Germany, USA, UK and Turkey. The graph evidently showed that the biggest jump in COVID-induced online shopping is in Turkey especially after the first cases seen in March 2020. This increase is almost 200%. Due to the changes in the measures taken in Germany, the increase has decreased. After March 2020, as a result of the preventing measures, there were increases in USA and UK.

Beside the increase in the volume of online shopping, it has been noted that the preferred online shopping products has also been changed. In 2018, clothing (57%) was one of the most common and preferred online shopping categories worldwide. Footwear (47%) and consumer electronics (40%) follow the clothing category (Orendorff, 2020).

As a result of the impact of the COVID-19, it was determined that before the pandemic period, customer spending in online sales was mostly in the travel and accommodation expenses and clothing category. However, as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, there have been different and justified changes in the demand of products and product groups resulting from the pandemic. These changes are clearly shown in the graph below (Figure 3).

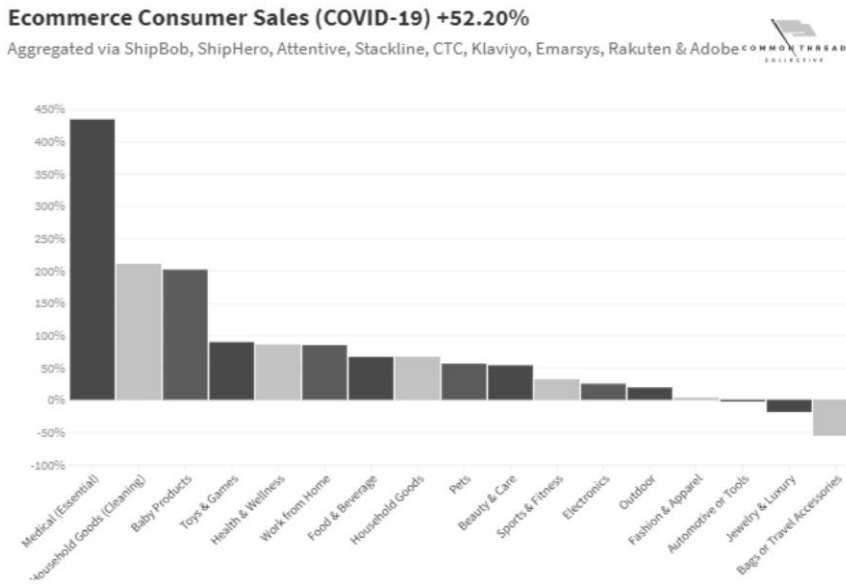


Figure 3. E-commerce consumer sales during COVID-19 (Source: Orendorff, 2020)

According to the information given by the data of Common Thread Collective and the graph given above, while the product group with the highest increase in online sales was medical products for health reasons, there were many great changes in baby products and cleaning categories. However, there was a decrease in the sales of product groups in the jewelry, clothing, automotive and travel sectors. The tourism and travel sector had the most negative impact due to the coronavirus bans and restrictions.

#### 4. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 ON THE ONLINE DEMAND OF PRODUCTS AND PRODUCT GROUPS

It has been noted that the COVID-19 pandemic clearly changed the online demand of products and product categories. Due to COVID-19 generated conditions the online demand of some products decreased while the online demand of certain products increased significantly (WTO, 2020). The table below shows the change in online demand for products between March 2019 and March 2020, when the COVID-19 began to appear. A certain and quite high increase in the field of health is clearly evident. In addition, basic needs and other factors have significantly increased online sales volume.

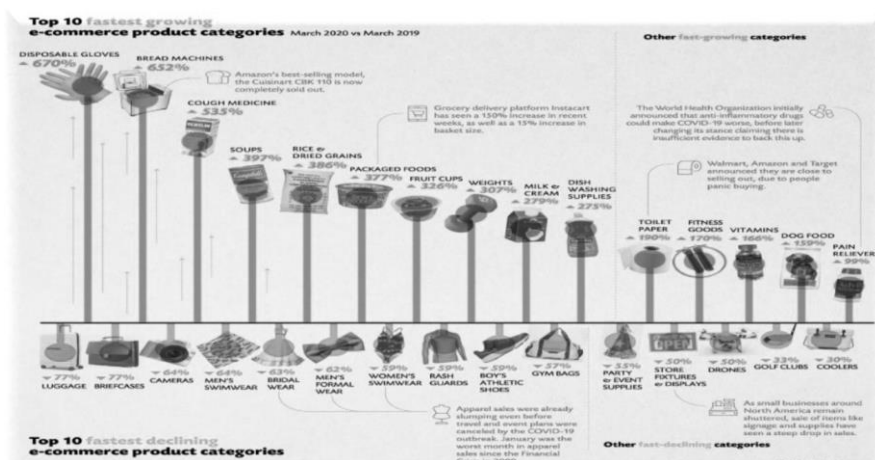
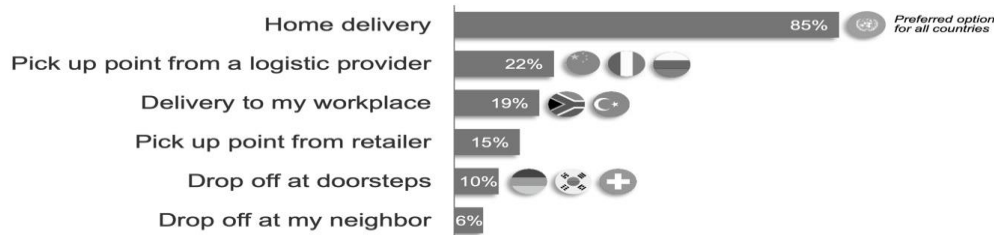


Figure 4: Changes in online shopping products during COVID-19 (Source: Jones, 2020)

As can be seen from the graph above, after COVID-19, serious changes have been observed in people's online buying behavior and product purchase rates. Major changes have been experienced, especially in the field of cosmetics, health and education (Jones 2020). Figure 3 exhibits that there is an increase in online shopping of the food and hygienic products while there is a considerable decrease in the online shopping of the certain product categories such as textile.

Additionally, in the survey conducted by UNCTAD, in which 3008 people participated from different countries, it has been found that an overwhelming majority of people want to get their products deliver to their home address (Figure 4).



**Figure 5:** People's preference for product deliveries during COVID 19 (Source: UNCTAD, 2020)

### Clothing and Accessories Products

Due to the pandemic, certain changes have occurred in all sectors and the clothing sector has experienced a decline. People did not worry about clothing, as they had to stay at home due to the restrictions imposed by the epidemic and wanting to avoid getting sick, and they reduced shopping. The online revenue for clothing in online sales decreased by 10.9% on an annual basis as of the end of March 2020, in USA (Mcdowel, 2020). Clothing stores serving online in the UK experienced a 23% decrease in their sales in March 2020. Especially in terms of men's products, there was a decrease in the sales of men's shoes at 33% and the decrease in men's clothing was around 43% (Güven, 2020). As a result of the harsh and rapid epidemic and fearful at home, people did not shop for clothing, while the sales volume started to increase with reduced measures and attractive discount campaigns.

### Food and Beverage Products

The demand for all products of the food industry has been one of the leading sectors where the change in online sales was felt the most during the pandemic period. Before the rules on staying home for the coronavirus epidemic, its share in the market turnover is not even 1 percent, but it has increased to 3 percent (Sakarya, 2020). Similarly, Turkish customers increased their online sales share on food to around 42%. However, half of this customer base stated that they will shop this way from now on and will remain in the online sales area (Güven, 2020). People avoid physical contact by not going to markets to shop and to be find themselves in crowded environments have increased online sales of food and beverage products in this context. Accordingly, the markets have made efforts to make the online sales applications faster and more convenient. Due to the high demand for online applications established by supermarkets to serve customers, the delivery times were seriously negatively affected.

It has been observed that consumers tend to save money due to the decrease in professional and office life due to the epidemic. In order to make use of the time spent at home, people tend to cook as a hobby. Researching different recipes and mixtures to strengthen their immune systems, consumers also tried to find easy ways to make them at home. As of March 2020 and April 2020, the searches for "bread making at home", "yeast making" and "bread making machines" on Google significantly increased. The family consumption research data of Ipsos Research Company in March 2020 coincide with this trend. According to the research findings of the company, online flour shopping increased by 98 percent and online yeast

shopping increased by 80 percent in March compared to the previous period (Güven, 2020; TRT Haber, 2020).

After the rapid spread of the COVID-19, there were also increases in the product groups in the beverage market demanded through online sales and trade. In China, which is the starting point of COVID-19, there has been an increase in the demand for fresh food products as well as drinks on online trade sites during the pandemic. It has been observed that there are serious demands for water, alcohol and even dairy products (Güven, 2020). In line with this, the UK-based Naked Wines company stated that the profit from alcohol sales will be increased for 2020 (Rigby, 2020).

### **Health, personal care and cleaning products**

After the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as an epidemic, certain restrictions came in almost every country, and people tried to stock up and protect their health because of these restrictions. People who are afraid of this pandemic have made serious efforts to reach products such as hand sanitizer and surgical masks and products such as toilet paper and bread (Meyer, 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic, medical experts have warned that hands should be washed frequently and for at least twenty seconds. People used more soap and hand sanitizer products due to warnings. Sites making profit from the sales of these products experienced problems in the sales and distribution of these products during this period. Since soap and hand sanitizers are effective in combating the virus, these product varieties started to be sold very quickly. Therefore, the demand for health-protecting and health-safety items is rapidly increasing. In Turkey, since the start of pandemic in Turkey the online sales of cologne increased 34-fold, sterile gloves 19 times, hand sanitizer 10 times, soap 4 times, medical masks 4 times, the toilet paper sales increased 3.5 times (Günyol, 2020). This situation has occurred all over the world in the same manner. As a result of the serious impact of the pandemic in the USA, the increase in sales of hand sanitizer products increased by 73% in four weeks (Nielsen, 2020).

It has been determined that the most frequently searched products on the internet during the period when the COVID-19 started were masks, hand sanitizers and disinfectants, which are in the category of cleaning and health products. Due to the exorbitant and disproportionate price hikes the prices of these products have increased significantly (Güven, 2020).

Other health related products that gain attention during the pandemic are vitamin products. Vitamins are considered to be an important source of boosting the immune system in order to beat the coronavirus and experts stated that especially vitamin C supplements should be used in this regard. This leads to a high increase in the online sales of vitamin related products. In Turkey the vitamin products see an increase of average 10 percent (Meral, 2020).

Due to the closure of beauty saloon industry as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 the online shopping of hair and care products enhanced significantly. The online sales of beauty products increased significantly around the world (Güven, 2020). The main reason for this is that people who do not want to be affected by the pandemic are sensitive about social distance and hygiene and do not find it appropriate to go to hairdressers. The situation is similar in Turkey. The hairdressers, who were closed to prevent the pandemic, pushed people to buy shavers and hair care products online.

### **Luxury Consumer Products**

The product groups in the luxury consumption category suffered serious declines in the world wars and during the Spanish flu of 1918 and other crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic this product category has been subjected to serious blows. It is predicted that the coronavirus outbreak will bring greater challenges to the industry than the economic crisis that broke out in 2008. It is estimated that the global luxury consumption product groups will decrease by approximately 80 billion euros this year. In 2019, expenditures of over 350 billion euros were recorded for goods in the luxury consumption group such as clothes, shoes and jewelry. It is estimated that customers will spend less than 80 billion euros this year (Deloitte, 2020).

### **Books and Hobby Products**

As a result of the quarantine process, people who chose to stay at home to protect themselves and their loved ones also gained the habit of online buying of book and reading. According to Iyzico data, people who habitually buy and read books at home have exceeded the sales average. In the quarantine, which started with the process of staying at home, the level of online book purchases increased (Güven, 2020).

### **Technology and Electronic Products**

Due to the uncertainties created by the pandemic one of the sectors that saw the most impact from this situation is the technology sector. People have started to acquire different hobbies and habits to spend time at home and have started to play online and other games based on advanced technology. The revenue of online stream applications increased by around 30%. Another technological product that has increased in the pandemic area is the sales of smart watches. While at the beginning of 2019, an average of 11.5 million smart watches were sold all over the world, with the pandemic in 2020, an increase of over 20 percent occurred, and 13.8 units were sold (Güven, 2020).

## **5. HOW COVID-19 SHAPED THE FUTURE OF ONLINE SHOPPING**

The coronavirus pandemic, which has affected the whole world, has had a great impact on online sales and E-commerce environment and can be regarded as a turning point that will lead people to more online shopping in future. COVID-19 pushed the people to online shopping. Some of the online shoppers are the people who never shopped online before the pandemic. After isolation, people inevitably had to obtain some of their needs through online shopping.

According to experts, there will be some changes and differences in our behavior in almost every field of life, even after the pandemic (He & Harris, 2020). Accordingly, some products that uses in daily life need to be supplied quickly and are expected to be purchased faster through online sales instead of physically procuring from the market. In this context, companies and online sales sites suffered some problems during the pandemic for distribution and inventory (OECD, 2020). With the increasing number of users due to the pandemic, many businesses have seen it as an obligation and necessity to overcome their shortcomings in the digital world. Physical stores will be replaced by more online sales and people will be able to reach these companies more easily. At the same time, companies will discover new models and give more importance to advertising on social media in order to provide faster and higher quality service to customers. After the coronavirus, there has been a sharp turn from physical stores to online trade and sales and will continue to increase. Regardless of age, almost every age group is now striving to be in this area. The online shopping which was not growing before the pandemic got a huge impetus by the pandemic generated conditions and people around the world are now engrossed in more online shopping.

Moreover, COVID-19 become a source of awakening for countries across the globe that they have to be self-sufficient with national and domestic production and they shall develop the technological infrastructure to deliver the products and services to people through online platforms. The first and most useful way that comes to mind in terms of selling this to other countries is definitely E-commerce and online sales method. The main lesson from the pandemic for the businesses and governments is that online shopping and e-commerce will reshape international trade in the coming years and online sales is going to play an active and vital role in the sale and trade of almost every product and product group.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

As a result of the rapid growth of the internet and the digital world all over the world, people have been affected by this technological development in every sense from social life to cultural activities. With this innovation, customers can instantly see new products and access to all kinds of information about products has become easier and simpler. Although online sales and e-commerce have been developed in recent years, people generally relied on physical stores for shopping. However, with the coronavirus pandemic, people are

pushed turned to online sales and physical shopping experience is rapidly started to be replaced by online sales.

As a result of the effect of the pandemic, the social and economic life has been changed drastically. Due to the precautionary measures of governments and the fear of COVID-19 people minimized the physical contact and started to use the online platforms for shopping. This results into a whopping increase in online shopping and trade volume during the pandemic as compared to previous years. There were curfews and some prohibitions, and later these were eased or ended. Despite this, people have acquired the habit of online sales and started to continue. With the ending of bans and restrictions in some countries, the volume of online trade has decreased, albeit slightly, but has made great progress for the future and will continue. Until the vaccine is successful, every family will find it logical to make every need, including the grocery store, through online sales. If it is to be made, while there has been a significant increase in the sales and demand of some products and goods groups in the impact area of this pandemic, there has been a decrease in the sales of some products. COVID-19 has significant impact on e-commerce of the world and in some cases negative impact but overall e-commerce is growing rapidly because of virus. Coronavirus compelled to customers to use internet and make it habit in their daily routine (Abiad, Arao, & Dagli, 2020). During the pandemic period, consumers especially buy health, personal care and cleaning products.

To conclude, while the world is at war with the COVID-19 in every sense, businesses and companies have to evaluate the economic consequences of this crisis. They can learn a lot from this crisis and can explore new the opportunities that arise due to crisis and businesses can exploit those opportunities.

The public health crisis in the form of COVID-19 showed that businesses and governments should make radical changes in the areas of production and distribution so that in such crisis the necessary infrastructures should be there to meet the requirements of distribution and demand of the different products and services.

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