

Consumer behavior has shifted significantly during pandemic, survey reveals

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an increase in telework and online commerce, and a significant decrease in the number of personal trips people are making. Understanding the effects of these rapid

changes on the economy, supply chains, and the environment will be essential, as some of these behaviors will continue even after the pandemic has ended.

Researchers from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute recently presented the results of two sets of surveys they conducted in an effort to quantify and understand these unprecedented shifts. One survey was collected from respondents in more than 20 countries, and the other was collected within the United States.

In a series of [three webinars](#), José Holguín-Veras, the director of the Center for Infrastructure, Transportation, and the Environment at Rensselaer, and Cara Wang, an associate professor of civil and environmental engineering, led a team of researchers in presenting their findings on how the [pandemic](#) has affected in-person trips to places like school, work, and the store; tele-activities, such as travel, shopping, education, and work; and purchasing behaviors, including e-commerce, and precautionary and opportunistic buying.

All three webinars and accompanying data presentations can be viewed [here](#).

"What is clear from this research is these disaster-related buying behaviors create tremendous problems," Holguín-Veras said. "It increases demand, removes critical supplies from the markets, and makes supplies unavailable to emergency responders. It is impossible for the [supply chain](#) to deliver these sharp increases in demand."

For instance, [the survey revealed](#) that 53% of respondents in the U.S. bought an increased quantity of products during the pandemic, 20% purchased products more frequently, and 30% switched from shopping within a store to shopping online. Researchers found that a portion of those purchases were driven by a small percentage of opportunistic

buyers—those who bought goods with the intent of selling them to make a profit. While these types of purchases were only driven by a small percentage of people, researchers conclude that this group did have a major impact on the availability of critical supplies.

When the team looked at equity in terms of access to critical supplies, the surveys revealed that those from lower income households were less able to stock up on supplies and therefore reported precautionary buying more frequently than higher income households.

Researchers also found that there were equity issues in terms of telework, as the rate of those who were able to work from home varied by gender, job sector, and level of education.

"Changes in both physical and tele-activities depend on many features—gender, income level, and education," Wang said. "So, policy measures need to consider the heterogeneity."

According to the surveys, the [number of monthly work trips](#) people made during the start of the pandemic decreased by 60%. Post-pandemic, respondents believe they will still be making fewer work trips than before, down by 8.2%.

Monthly grocery store trips decreased by 41.6% when the pandemic happened, with some people shopping less frequently and others shifting to grocery purchases online. Post-pandemic, survey respondents expect to return to the grocery store more often, but still less than before the pandemic began, by about 8.2%.

In contrast, [monthly delivery of groceries increased](#) by 132.2% during the pandemic, a trend that may not disappear once the pandemic is over. Respondents expect that post-pandemic, their monthly grocery deliveries will still be 63.8% higher than before COVID-19. While all package

deliveries increased during this pandemic period, the grocery delivery increase was the largest.

"The pandemic has caused short-term change, for sure, and part of the change will remain after the pandemic. These changes are also likely to continue to develop in the long term," Wang said. "Also, what we can conclude is that online deliveries are unable to replace shopping and service activities for most categories."

For example, there are some areas where the surveys reveal people are eager to return to pre-pandemic normality. Respondents said they expect monthly visits to friends to increase after the pandemic by 7.4%, a number that reflects an increase over the number of visits they made even before COVID-19. The survey revealed similar increases in entertainment and airport travel.

"We are trying to shed light on the direction and permanence of these behavior changes. It is clear to us that these impacts are profound and multifaceted," Holguin-Veras said. "According to the data, there is a new normal that might emerge that is in between what we would call 'before' and 'during' the pandemic."

The researchers hope their findings help policymakers develop future policies to offset not just the effects of COVID-19, but also the lasting changes that may result even after the pandemic has ended.

Provided by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

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