

How consumers responded to COVID-19

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The unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on people's daily lives has facilitated changes ranging from social interactions to purchasing behavior. Adjusting to the many disruptions may seem difficult, but people are more adaptive than you might think, according to findings published in the October 2020 issue of the *Journal*

of Consumer Research.

The paper, "In Times of Trouble: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Responses to Threats," offers a [conceptual framework](#) for examining threats like COVID-19 or economic recessions and how they impact [consumer behavior](#), says Ralph J. Tyser Professor of Marketing at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business Amna Kirmani, who co-authored the study with Margaret C. Campbell (University of Colorado), J. Jeffrey Inman (University of Pittsburgh) and Linda L. Price (University of Wyoming).

"COVID-19 itself is a [health threat](#), but it's also a major economic threat because of product scarcity and job losses," says Kirmani. "There's a social threat too because unlike other threats, this one involves physically distancing from other people and that's something we haven't seen in the U.S. in a long time."

The researchers also identified a fourth threat: misinformation. It's prevalent especially on [social media](#), Kirmani says, and there is a general sentiment that people don't know which sources of information to trust.

"One concern that we've identified is the notion of truth and what people perceive as fact or fiction, especially with regards to the pandemic," says Kirmani. "That could have major implications for whether people choose to receive the vaccine."

"There's a lot of creativity that comes out of need. If [hand sanitizer](#) or masks weren't available, people made them at home," says Kirmani. "On the company side, some businesses like breweries switched to making hand sanitizer, or apparel companies to mask making."

It's what marketers call "adaptive responses" by [consumers](#) and companies, Kirmani says.

Such responses were typical throughout the quarantine period, says Kirmani, editor of the *Journal of Consumer Research*. When theaters closed, streaming services broadened their consumer bases, and when gyms closed, home exercise equipment makers sold more gear, she says. People sought out other stay-at-home pastimes, as well, causing a surge in interest in cooking, baking, and gardening.

The researchers also highlighted the recent trend of young adults moving back in with their families. In July, that figure climbed to as high as 52 percent, up from 47 percent in February, according to data from the Pew Research Center. The tally includes [college students](#) whose campuses were closed to limit the spread of the new coronavirus.

Kirmani says the pandemic was the catalyst for laying out the different threats that consumers face, and that consumers must prepare themselves for a constantly shifting landscape moving forward. This paper, she says, aims to encourage other researchers to explore these topics and identify the needs of consumers during disruptive times.

"This pandemic is not a short-term phenomenon. We should have the expectation that things will continue to rapidly change on a daily basis," says Kirmani.

More information: Margaret C Campbell et al, In Times of Trouble: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Responses to Threats, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucaa036](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaa036)

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