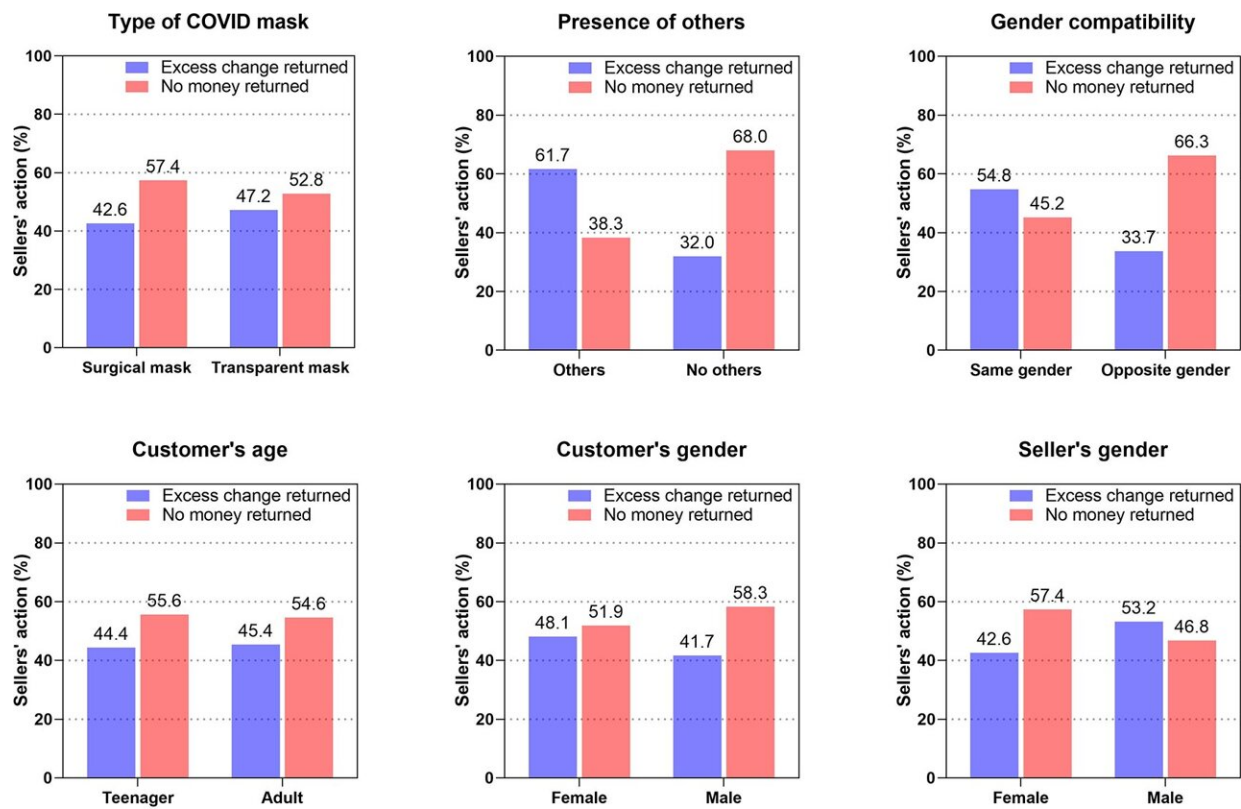


Keep the change: Scientists analyze the attitudes of shop assistants

March 8 2024



Bar plots depicting the relationship between all variables manipulated and controlled for in the study and the frequency of sellers' honest/dishonest behavior. Credit: *PLOS ONE* (2024). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0296746

The limited number of shoppers during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the unfavorable behavior of sellers toward buyers. The

fewer shoppers in the shop, the more likely the sellers were to keep their change, a study by scientists from SWPS University shows. For shoppers, it is a signal to remain vigilant; for decision-makers, it is a practical tip for shaping policies during crises.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, various restrictions were introduced in Poland and many other countries to stop the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These restrictions included wearing masks in public areas, a ban on gatherings and a limited number of people shopping at the same time.

Shops, masks and social distancing

Researchers from SWPS University decided to look at the lesser-known effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They investigated how pandemic restrictions introduced in shops affected the behavior of shop assistants—and [published](#) their research results in *PLOS One*.

"Our goal was to demonstrate that reducing social interactions by covering faces and maintaining distance. These measures may loosen [social norms](#) and lead to tangible material losses," says study co-author Dr. Maciej Kościelniak from the Institute of Psychology at SWPS University.

The researchers emphasize that while masks are a proven measure of protection against the spread of the virus, covering the face leads to a change in human interactions. It limits the possibilities of drawing conclusions and increases the sense of anonymity.

The study was conducted in 216 grocery shops in Poland in June–September 2021. The majority of participating shop assistants (over 78%) were women.

The shoppers, played by research assistants (two adults in their 50s and

two teenagers), were tasked with buying a specific product and giving the seller an amount greater than the actual price of the product. During the study, some research assistants wore non-transparent masks covering the nose and lower part of the face, and the other group wore plastic visors.

Shopping with others means a greater chance for fair treatment

It turned out that wearing a mask or a transparent visor had no impact on the sellers' honesty. What did matter was the number of customers in the shop. A customer who shopped in the presence of other people was more than three times more likely to receive correct change than one who was alone with the seller. The researchers were surprised to find that sellers were more likely to give correct change to shoppers of the same gender as themselves.

The study provides practical insights for policymakers responsible for establishing regulations and [social policies](#) during a health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

While maintaining social distance is vital for [public health](#), it could inadvertently encourage fraudulent practices. Retail outlets should, therefore, consider introducing more rigorous monitoring systems. Customers, on the other hand, should be more vigilant to minimize the risk of being cheated, comments the researcher from SWPS University.

The authors of the publication point out that the scientific discussion tends to overlook the less obvious but significant consequences of [pandemic](#) restrictions.

Noticing them is crucial for developing informed policies that will

protect the social fabric during times of crisis, Dr. Kościelniak concludes.

More information: Maciej Koscielniak et al, COVID-19 masks and limited number of shoppers as determinants of shop assistants' (dis)honesty, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0296746](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296746)

Provided by SWPS University

Citation: Keep the change: Scientists analyze the attitudes of shop assistants (2024, March 8) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-scientists-attitudes.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.