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Covid-19 Crisis: What Impacts on the Purchasing Behavior of Tunisian Consumers and on Retailers' Strategies?
Case of Supermarkets.

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Abstract-The study has identified a set of assumptions that have led us to focus on the major issues for operators in the sector. It has been revealed that the Covid-19 crisis could encourage the development of new trends among Tunisians, such as simplifying the purchasing process, reducing consumption, using online shopping for most of the products. Accordingly, a number of effects might take place such as the increase in online purchases of everyday consumer goods and groceries or the use of short and local channels. Then, how should large retail outlets keep up with these changes and benefit from the transformation of their sector?

Keywords -Covid-19- Purchase behavior-Retail.
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1-Introduction

COVID-19 is the infectious disease that has affected most countries of the world. Since its onset in December 2019, this epidemic has affected more than 40 million people, and killed more than a million. In April 2020, the WHO declared the disease to be a pandemic which has pitched several countries into a health crisis and forced them to live for months in total containment, causing a state of general panic. The preventive measures implemented have led to sudden and unforeseen changes in people's behavior and lifestyles. Since then, everyone has started avoiding crowds and public places and people were less and less enthusiastic as to the idea of leaving their homes.

(Libaert, 2018) explains that "the notion of crisis is associated with uncertainty about the present and the future and with a loss of bearings". In the event of a health crisis like the one the world is experiencing, fear arises from the presence of an invisible element transmitted through contact. Setting limits to purchases for essential and necessary products has become the norm. In addition, while many brick-and-mortar stores have closed down, a lot of consumers have resorted to online shopping. Studies have shown that the use of online shopping apps and sites has increased substantially. The development of new audiences who have proved to be active online using different applications has been primarily through websites offering food services and providing delivery services. (Zarchi et al., 2020).

As Goetzmann (2020) has stated it according to a detailed multi-factor analysis, "even if there is good reason to believe that the health crisis will change habits and consumption patterns, it is far too early to be positive about the future".However, the aim of this article is to explore the possible post-crisis impacts. The analysis has been carried out through a triangulation process of expert interviews, statistical data and scientific contributions. This analysis has

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identified a set of hypotheses about the possible impacts of the crisis on purchasing behavior and on the retail sector.

II-Post-Crisis Purchasing Behavior, Between New Habits and the Accelerated Pace of Trends:

To carry out our research, it is necessary to emphasize the buyers 'behaviors during the confinement period to build on our analysis.

During the mandate period, it has been found that:

- Some products, mainly food and cleaning products, were stored in big quantities. This may be explained by the effect of the state of panic that people experienced following the closure of several stores and especially by the uncertainty and lack of information. No one knew how long this confinement would last, or how the health situation would evolve.
- Consumers have avoided hypermarkets favoring short supply chains, such as mini markets, grocery stores and small retailers as well as home delivery. According to the president of Large Outlets Union, their turnover has fallen by 15% since the outbreak of the pandemic in Tunisia in March 2020 and the number of customers dwindled by 20%. A survey carried out by the National Consumer Institute and the National Chamber of Electronic Commerce has showed that 30% of Tunisian internet users bought online during the lockdown period.

84% are pre-COVID e-shoppers and 16% have purchased only during the period of the pandemic. According to the same study, the motivations behind buying online are mainly to avoid traveling (71%), avoid the risk of contagion (43%) and avoid queuing in front of the store (23%).

III-Possible Purchasing Behavior Once the Health Crisis Mitigated:

Four hypotheses have been identified while observing the purchasing behavior during the confinement and analysing interviews with experts;

H1: the health crisis favouring new trends and consumption habits:

This hypothesis is based on the fact that the crisis has introduced new consumption habits among Tunisian consumers. Most consumers today buy the bare essentials and often the cheapest goods or promotional products. Admittedly consumers are much more reassured than during the lockdown period. But the effects of the crisis on the country's economy have caused household purchasing power to deteriorate considerably. Several companies have been out of business and we do not yet know the real effects of this crisis on the unemployment and the inflation rates. With reference to a survey made by the World Bank after the lockdown, 41% of those surveyed were not yet working. Among the 41% declaring themselves off work, more than 80% have referred to reasons directly or indirectly related to COVID-19, especially in the tourism sector, one of the most affected sectors by the crisis and whose number of workers is very high.

Corporate failures are not yet fully known and we do not know exactly the extent of the damage or the time required to overcome them. However, households negatively impacted by the Covid-19 crisis account for the majority of the population used to hyper consumption and shopping at supermarkets. This crisis and the confinement experience have also given rise to new trends mainly "consume less but better", "Do it Yourself", the refocusing on family life and the consumption of local products. Many Tunisians have turned to organic and natural products and everything homemade. While this has been imposed by the new economic and social environment, it has proved to be a way to support the national economy. Consuming local has become the standard for a significant part of the population, which represents another challenge for the economy attempting to satisfy consumers who are highly-demanding in terms of quality.

These tendencies reflecting home and activities such as DIY, cooking and sewing had already been identified following periods of crisis and analyzed, in particular by Faith Popcorn in the 1990s (Popcorn, 1992; Popcorn and Hanft , 2001). "The reasons already aimed at protecting the purchasing power and reviving the pre-industrial values as antidotes to overconsumption. »

H2: Return to Short Supply Channels*:*

The confinement has highlighted clear differences in the nature of the distribution channels depending on the type of products purchased. Basic commodities and typical purchases have been done through convenience stores and short supply channels. Tunisians have resumed the habit of these purchasing modes and kept doing it even after the confinement. It is therefore likely that they will maintain this habit in the post-Covid-19 period.

This hypothesis (H2) tends to promote the development of short supply channels, especially as consumers are increasingly moving towards organic and local products. This amount to awareness of the benefits of consuming these products which are considered to be better in terms of healthiness, more ecological and for some people, consuming locally is somehow a way of expressing social responsibility. In addition, the supply problem during the Covid-19 crisis and in particular during the confinement period raised awareness of the need to relocate industries and production units. If companies take advantage of this observation, several regions could see the development of new factories, regenerating economic activity all over of the country. Perhaps a ratchet effect in favor of short supply channels and local products will occur once the health crisis has abated, "that of a life closer to nature, based on ecological values and resorting to responsible consumption of more authentic products "(Badot and Moati, 2020).

H3: Growth in online shopping :

It is very likely that once the anti-Covid-19 vaccine has been discovered and the barrier measures will disappear, the purchasing process could be different. Indeed, initiatives offering a smoother purchasing path and minimizing the buyers' efforts could be widely developed.

During the confinement period, and following the closure of several brick-and-mortar stores, e-commerce has emerged as a real solution providing more and more consumers with the opportunity to have a new shopping experience (online shopping) for different types of goods including food

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products. The most purchased products / services on the Internet during COVID-19 are: leisure and sports items (45%), utility bills (40%), household items / appliances (29%), food (23%) and health and beauty items (22%). Taking e-shoppers as a whole, 69% have expressed satisfaction. The most used media for online shopping are e-commerce sites (66%), social networks (36%), multi-brand sites (27%) and deal sites (11%).

Thus, several companies already present on this channel and others which proved to be predisposed have taken advantage of this crisis. Their success is mainly due to the flexibility of their business models as well as their ability to cope with unexpected demand. Considering the payment methods used, nearly 72% of e-buyers pay for their purchases on delivery. The main barriers for those who did not buy during the lock-down are: the difficulty to check the products quality (48%), the security of online payment (35%), the poor choice of the offers made on the Internet (22%) and delivery times which may take too long (16%).

Previously, online grocery shopping accounted for less than 1% of consumer goods sales. The two main limitations were the absence of having the habit to buy this type of product outside large and medium-sized stores and the low willingness to pay delivery costs. These also reflect very high internal costs of the supply chain management due to the complexity of manufacturing baskets and logistical burdens. This rate has risen to 39% during the confinement period and even after the lock-down, the percentage has remained high (28.8%).

In the light of this experience, we will undoubtedly witness a spread of market-places and new e-commerce sites of local suppliers enabling booking, recovering or delivering consumer products. However, this remains strongly dependent on the ability of operators to market user-friendly and low-cost systems (Clément and Badot, 2019).

H4: the health crisis has revived enthusiasm

This hypothesis is based on the fact that after the crisis, buyers will feel the need to restore the hedonic pleasure associated with the shopping experience. This would include a return to social activities, friendly outings and meetings whose absence has generated great frustration. During the confinement period, almost half of the households left their homes daily and more than a third went out regularly. The proportion of households who have been out or on a weekly basis represents a minority of the population (10%). 62% say they have met friends or relatives. Cafes, tea rooms and restaurants, as well as shopping centers and hypermarkets would then experience maximum activity as soon as health measures allow it. In fact it was summer when the rate of infection dropped considerably and people resumed their usual pace of life.

This echoes an analytical framework specific to the postmodern current, in line with Max Weber's thought, which considers a systematic resort to hedonic re-enchantment following periods of disenchantment (political, economic, social, etc.).This almost vital re-enchantment is mainly expressed by consuming rewarding products and attending shopping centers, amusement parks and other places of entertainment (Andrieu, Badot and Macé, 2004; Lipovestky and Serroy, 2013).

IV-Possible Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Retail Sector along with Clear Challenges.

Once again, we have to rexamine the main features of the Covid-19 crisis and their impacts on the distributors' strategies during the confinement period, in order to isolate them.

Following the closure of businesses considered non-essential, several phenomena have been observed:

- Sales of fresh food products are organized in short supply channels.
- The logistics services of food brands have been reorganized towards home delivery, despite the excessively high costs.
- The marketing departments have undertaken additional actions in social networks and through the media to keep in touch with consumers.

These trends could reoccur if the retail sector managed to overcome many challenges mainly:

- Corporate failures, particularly small or highly specialized suppliers, which would reduce the possibility of a less industrial supply required by demand.
- The consequences of a possible development of teleworking on trade surrounding the business location places. Indeed, the area of office space could decrease leading to a drop in the number of out-of-home employees, which would be problematic for restaurants and other sales outlests targeting employees.
- The massive integration of local producers and / or short supply chains into consumer supply channels, which may lead to higher prices of products due to the high purchasing and coordination costs. The other challenge will be to ensure a regular and homogeneous supply to demanding consumers with often disjointed or even contradictory behaviors.
- The logistics of the food trade through home delivery which has long struggled to find productivity gains due to the high costs of handling, robotization and delivery of fragile, fresh and small products.In addition, a sharp drop in income due to a possible economic and social crisis would only increase the stakes for this sector.
- The lack of interest in non-food products and impulse buys due to an economic retraction in better quality essentials in addition to the risk of weakening the non-food segment due to a number of factors (drop in affected income, growth in e-commerce, oligopolization of the sector through second-hand purchases and parallel markets).If this trend were to increase due to the habits acquired and made aware during the lock-down, it would undoubtedly lead to the closure of many outlets or even to the weakening of shopping centers.
- The technological and financial accessibility of digital marketplaces to "small producers" and independent traders who are often sensitive to the

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complexity of the entry and maintenance costs in these IT and logistics systems. However, even before the health crisis, the quality of merchandising as well as the simplicity of the ordering process and the speed of delivery are key success factors. The reinforcement of stakeholders such as local communities or Chambers of Commerce based on national programs should be of great help in this regard.

Overall, the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on the mass retail sector should vary depending on several factors: type of product (basic necessities vs pondering or impulse purchases), sensory and emotional quality of the buyer's experience, capacity of producers and logistics providers to maintain the accessibility of products in short supply channels and the involvement of local and national public actors in supporting, accompanying and regulating future changes.

V-Conclusion

Like most countries in the world, the Tunisian economy has been severely impacted by the covid-19 crisis and the purchasing behavior of individuals has also experienced obvious changes. This study is part of a frontier research which aims at understanding the impact of this crisis on the consumers' purchasing behavior in the large retail sector by analysing a set of statistical data and through academic research and interviews with experts.

Through this exploration, we have tried to understand the various changes in the consumers' purchasing behavior in supermarkets resulting from the covid-19 crisis as well as the potential future impacts of this crisis on their purchasing behavior especially with the new economic circumstances of the country and consequently on the development of this sector.

The first step towards exploring the subject of the Covid-19 crisis impact on the buyers' future behaviour and on the mass retail sector once the crisis has eased, enables us to catch a glimpse of how certain trends are working long before the health crisis and the possible ratchet effects as a result of habits acquired and made aware during the confinement. No doubt exogenous factors, such as the spread of teleworking and the relocation of industries will have significant consequences for the sector.

Uncertainty and complexity are the key words linked to this state of crisis. However, when the companies based in the country manage to better identify their benchmarks and certainties as well as the decision-making factors, they will be able to choose their investments with relevance. On the other hand, an extension of this crisis, whether on a health, economic or social level, will reinforce uncertainties and multiply risks. The ratchet effect will then be of great importance.

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