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LIFE & ARTS | LIFE & STYLE

Home as Refuge, Fewer Reusables, Less Privacy: The Consumer Trends Emerging From Coronavirus Lockdowns

New market research finds dramatic shifts in consumer values and behavior as life gets turned on its head



The coronavirus has transformed the home into a refuge used for work, school, leisure and exercise.

PHOTO: OLIVIER DOULIERY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Ellen Byron*

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Goodbye rush hour and business suits. Hello robots and mood-boosters.

Just three months after releasing its forecast of this year's biggest global consumer trends, market researcher Euromonitor International on Monday updated its predictions to reflect a major impact from Covid-19. Some shifts have taken hold much faster than Euromonitor expected, notably the home's transformation into a multifunctional refuge used for work, school, leisure and exercise. But the pandemic has stalled other trends—relaxing previously rising privacy concerns and damping interest in reusable products.

“As we all know, life has been turned on its head,” Alison Angus, head of Euromonitor's lifestyle research, says in a webinar released Monday. Here are Euromonitor's updated predictions for the biggest global consumer trends:

PRIVACY CONCERNS LOOSEN: Euromonitor forecast in January that consumers would be less trusting of companies using their data without transparency, adequate security and opt-out options. But Covid-19 put those worries on hold, it says.

“Right now, consumers are more focused on the virus, that's their fear,” says Ms. Angus. “They're prepared to pause their privacy concerns and share data in the name of public health.” Even as lockdowns ease, Euromonitor expects privacy worries to remain on hold as online shopping and payments continue to be a necessity rather than a choice. Long term, Euromonitor expects consumers' reluctance to give up personal data to return, and it advises companies to be more transparent about their security measures.



Demand for better transportation options has waned. Empty seats at a New York subway station this month.

PHOTO: NINA WESTERVELT/BLOOMBERG NEWS

FRIENDLY TO ROBOTS: Consumers have suddenly become far more comfortable with robots and other types of artificial intelligence performing jobs traditionally done by humans. Euromonitor earlier this year noted that consumers were buying more AI-enabled home appliances and virtual assistants, like Amazon.com Inc.'s Alexa. But now, such devices have a new draw, says Ms. Angus. "Voice-control technology limits the need to touch surfaces so much, so that's why they are appealing," she says.

Robotic innovation is further driven by businesses investing in technologies that offer no-contact services and deliveries. "This pandemic could well propel robots into the mainstream, moving them from novelty to essential," says Ms. Angus. "In fact, it could be a situation where tech actually has to catch up."

HEIGHTENED DISTRACTION: Shorter attention spans mean that people expect information to be as accessible as possible in the quickest possible time. Earlier this year, Euromonitor cited this as the "catch me in seconds" trend and called for businesses to offer more personalized content in easily digestible messages. The pandemic has deepened consumers' distraction because they are overwhelmed by fast-changing information, and the lines between work, rest, play and exercise have blurred at home.

Another result is that consumers crave a new message from companies. "They expect them to be concentrating on public health and supporting the war against the virus, not so much on selling their products," Ms. Angus says.

SLOWER MOBILITY: The coronavirus has "all but stalled" demand for better transportation options, which Euromonitor in January had said was on the rise, Ms. Angus says. Before the virus, people were seeking easier navigation through crowded cities, including more public transportation and more opportunities to share bikes, scooters and even helicopters. Now such needs have waned. "We expect to see consumers slowly resurface, but they'll be cautious, with many continuing to work from home or working more flexible hours," says Ms. Angus. "Flexible working means maybe 'rush hour' is a term of the past."



Concerns about health and touching used products have consumers again embracing disposable items, such as these plastic bags after a late-March shopping trip.

PHOTO: GILLIAN FLACCUS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

MORE INCLUSIVITY: Demand for products and services that emphasize “inclusivity for all,” including people with physical and mental disabilities, is a trend that has been strengthened by the novel coronavirus, Euromonitor says. As more travel destinations, education courses, entertainment venues, business meetings and cultural institutions emphasize their online accessibility, disabled communities benefit. And a rising sense of community is fueled when more people are helping those in need, putting pressure on businesses to include disabled communities, Ms. Angus says. “As we come out of lockdown, most of us will have experienced firsthand the isolation many individuals with disabilities cope with daily,” she says. “This is increasing our community spirit everywhere.”

HOME BODIES: The multifunctional home is a prediction that came true “overnight,” Ms. Angus says. As access to broadband grew, Euromonitor in January had predicted that more consumers would become reluctant to leave their homes. Amid the coronavirus-fueled lockdowns, consumers fully retreated to their homes and immediately transitioned to working, learning, exercising and socializing there.

Casual dressing will become the norm and virtual socializing will continue even when physical gatherings resume, the market researcher predicts. “Already expected to be dramatic and far-reaching, the transition to the home as a hub has now happened and it’s here to stay,” Ms. Angus says. “For sure, as consumers resurface they will have changed some of their at-home habits.”

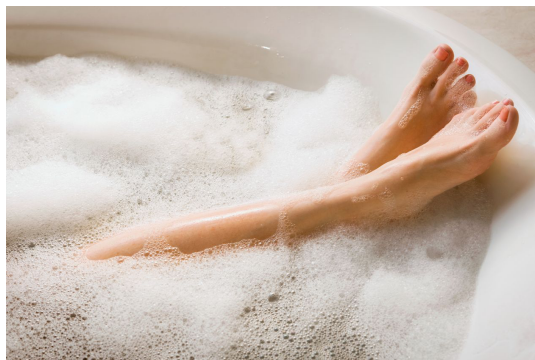


Awareness of reduced pollution levels will make people more focused on sustainable living. The downtown Los Angeles skyline in mid-April.

PHOTO: RINGO CHIU/ZUMA PRESS

LOCAL PRIDE: The pandemic has fueled consumer demand for more local brands and products, Euromonitor says. Overnight, international travel and supply chains closed. Meanwhile, the virus has created a feeling of “getting through this together” and wanting to support local businesses and communities to keep them going, Ms. Angus says. Even after the lockdowns, consumers will continue to buy locally produced goods because of safety concerns, Euromonitor predicts. “The products haven’t traveled far or been through too many people’s hands,” Ms. Angus says.

FEWER REUSABLES: “This is another trend that coronavirus for now has halted,” says Ms. Angus. Euromonitor initially predicted more circular business models that aimed to promote sharing, reusing, refilling and renting to avoid waste. But now, concerns over health and touching products that have previously been used have led consumers to again embrace disposable products, Ms. Angus says. “Clean comes before green,” she says. Recovery of this trend will take time, but it will come back, Euromonitor predicts, adding that sustainability still ranks high on consumers’ agendas. Companies will need to educate consumers about the safety of reusable products and clearly instruct them on how to clean them, Ms. Angus says.



People will be ‘favoring consumption patterns that prioritize the self’

PHOTO: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

CLEAN-AIR ACTIVISM: Concerns over air quality were already high on the list of consumer concerns at the beginning of 2020, influencing travel plans and prompting shoppers to make purchases from brands promising to help the clean-air effort. Now, limited activity and travel have dramatically reduced pollution. As lockdowns loosen and people return to work, awareness of reduced pollution levels will make people more focused on sustainable living, Euromonitor says. Concerns about indoor pollution and its impact on respiratory health are also on the rise, Ms. Angus says. “Consumers will continue to seek protection against pollution and expect businesses to support initiatives and provide solutions,” she says.

TAKING CARE: At the start of 2020, well-being was a top priority as consumers sought products that offered mood enhancement and brain-function boosts, Euromonitor reported. Amid the pandemic, that concern is heightened as many people struggle with isolation, fear of

the unknown and anxiety. They'll be looking for immune- and mood-boosters and legal cannabis, downloading relaxation and meditation apps and doing yoga, Ms. Angus says. "Covid-19 will reset people's behavior and priorities," she says. "They'll be favoring consumption patterns that prioritize the self."

Write to Ellen Byron at ellen.byron@wsj.com

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