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COVID-19 and The Subsequent Change on Buyer Behavior

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COVID-19 and The Subsequent Change on Buyer Behavior

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Honors Capstone Paper

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Abstract

The purpose of this Honors Capstone research project is to gain insight and understanding into how buyer behavior may or may not have changed after by the COVID-19 Pandemic through the perspectives of sales professionals, marketing professionals, and consumers themselves. This research project compared data from literary based research, 1:1 interviews, and three unique mass surveys dispersed on LinkedIn to gather information from multiple touchpoints. There were limitations to this research given the Pandemic is ongoing and there continues to be adjustments to this global phenomenon. Additionally, data collection from interviews and surveys was strictly voluntary and survey responses were limited in sample size due to lower interactions and responses to the postings on LinkedIn. Overall, this research has indicated a dramatic effect on buyer behavior as there is a clear divide in those who have disposable income and those who don't, with consumers expecting more from businesses both in their offerings and digital buyer journey.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has dramatically changed the world in many ways and particularly the way business is conducted. The virtual environment altered the way business is conducted for both employees and customers. The Pandemic also brought physical and financial constraints into the mix, ultimately changing the way consumers have shopped or even continue to shop.

As a marketing major going into sales support and marketing after graduation, I know that the corporate world I go into will face different challenges in meeting customer needs than it did when I first started college. My very first marketing classes took place before the Pandemic as well, so I know some of the principles I learnt will require a different application than the examples I learnt in class. I wanted to be as best prepared for the marketing field as possible post-graduation, so I decided to focus my capstone research on how COVID-19 has or has not changed buyer behavior. To best understand this potential change in buyer behavior I chose to study behavior insights through three lenses: a sales perspective, a marketing perspective, and a consumer perspective.

Limits

This research project did face three major limitations. The first limitation came from the database research itself. Since the Pandemic is still on-going there are no definitive or clear-cut answers as to how all aspects of buyer behavior has changed. Instead, a snapshot based on a two-year period had to be studied to best answer the research question. Additionally, there was a limited sample size for the 1:1 interviews due to scheduling issues and low response rates on LinkedIn inquiring for participants. Lastly, the three surveys themselves had considerably lower respondents than anticipated, making the sample size less than ideal. The ideal amount for each survey for optimal insights into buyer behavior trends was 50 responses per each survey, however I received 8 responses to the marketing-based survey, 13 responses to the sales-based survey and 26 responses from consumers for the consumer survey after sharing the links via my social media.

Research Methods and Design

To complete my research on this topic, I opted to gain my three perspective insights from more than one research method. To have a holistic view into buyer behavior and the Pandemic, I decided to conduct literary research from databases and articles, 1:1 interviews based on insights from this research and lastly create and distribute three tailored surveys based on prior research. Academic literary based research came from the Northern Illinois University library databases including Statista, Business Sources Complete and Academic Journal Complete.

The four 1:1 interviews were between 1 hour and 30 minutes and involved conversations with the following: an Account Executive at Adobe, a Director of Marketing at AFCO, a Vice President of Customer Experience Solutions at NTT DATA, and an accounting student at Northern Illinois University. To reach potential interviewees I leveraged my LinkedIn network calling all marketing and sales professionals. I also used my faculty advisor's network to reach out to someone in the buyer behavior field who had insights into how the Pandemic has changed consumer behavior. All these interviews had 10 prepared questions, however, to allow for unbiased and genuine answers, I started with one question and let the conversation flow according to responses rather than forcing each of my prepared questions into the conversation. I took notations during each phone and video call to collect my qualitative data and insights. Appendix A includes a copy of the list of questions each interview had prepared.

For the survey-based research, three separate Qualtrics surveys that were each tailored to one of the following audiences: salespeople, marketers, and consumers, were distributed. For the sales professionals and marketers-based surveys, there was a prescreening survey question asking if the survey participant was in fact working in that specific discipline and listed typical titles in that field. If the participant was working in the specified field, they would be taken to the first set of questions. If the participant indicated that they were not in the specified field they were taken to the end of the survey with the thank you page. Appendix B shows the prescreening question. The consumer survey did not include one of these pre-screening questions since all respondents were consumers in one way or another. Each survey included a preface text that described the purpose of the survey, who was conducting the research, the faculty supervisor for the research, and a disclaimer saying participants had to be over 18 to complete the survey. Appendix C shows the preface text at the beginning of each survey. Each survey included between four and five multiple-select and multiple-choice quantitative questions for each of the following categories: before the Pandemic lockdown, during the Pandemic lockdown and after the Pandemic lockdown. For each "after the Pandemic Lockdown" section, there was an optional qualitative question where respondents could include anything else they wanted to note about noticeable changes to buyer behavior in either their clients or themselves. Each survey also included four demographic questions to gather an overall understanding of the respondents and their background. The marketing and sales-based surveys were distributed via LinkedIn on separate posts calling attention for the desired audience to take part, Appendix D shows the posts used. The consumer survey was also shared on LinkedIn, as well as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to reach a greater audience. The surveys were released on March 24^{th} and ended on April 7^{th}, totaling a two-week open period. The goal was to collect 50 respondents for each type of survey, however with delayed responses in volunteers for the 1:1 interviews and lower engagement rates on LinkedIn, 26 respondents for the consumer-based survey were secured, 13 for the sales-based survey and 8 for the marketer-based survey. Appendix E shows the content of each survey. I also had a Northern Illinois University and Pi Sigma Epsilon alum reach out after taking the sales professional survey to share additional insights they had noticed since the Pandemic lockdown.

Research Findings- Literature Review

Introduction to Buyer Behavior

Buyer behavior is highly influenced by the world around consumers, and although habits form from a constant environment, these behaviors are subject to change. There are four main factors that influence buyer behavior: changes in social context, breakthroughs in technology, social and the government's rules and regulations, and lastly and more specific to this research, natural disasters, and regional and global conflicts (Sheth, 2022.) As consumers began to experience social context changes as they progressed through life stage changes, technology continued to innovate rapidly. This was already starting to change the way buyers made purchase decisions, however the COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent regulations to maintain safety accelerated these changes dramatically. Most countries responded to the increase in cases of COVID-19 with lockdowns, or in other words, limiting outside exposure with only essential workers continuing work in-person and all other workers remaining at home.

During the Pandemic Lockdown

The beginning of the Pandemic lockdown was characterized by the panic buying during what was an uncertain time. The immediate effects of the Pandemic were the eight following characteristics: hoarding, improvisation, pent-up demand, embracing digital technology, store comes home, blurring of work-life boundaries, reunions with friends and family, and discovery of talent (Sheth, 2020.) The necessities were the key focus for consumers during this time and this was demonstrated with the first immediate effect, hoarding, as toilet paper, bread, milk, disinfectants, and meats were stockpiled. Not only were individuals hoarding as prices increased due to shortages, but some took advantage of the situation and began selling essential items for a premium.

To navigate the shortages, people had to get creative and improvise with the way the obtained limited items and conducted typical in-person events. This was largely characterized with digital adaptions to events such as funerals and weddings. With this improvisation also came the postponement of larger purchases as well, meaning an increase in demand for future items, particularly luxury ones (Sheth, 2020.)

Although larger purchases were postponed, many consumers continued to adapt especially by embracing digital technology to communicate, learn of new products, and attempt to continue everyday life through virtual means. The increased integration of technology also meant that a lot of services began to be bought and consumed at home. In the entertainment industry, streaming became a safe way to watch blockbuster films instead of going to theaters. Groceries were more commonly delivered and an increase in home delivery was seen. With most activities being done at home, particularly purchasing decisions, time spent working was used by some to engage in more online shopping or entertainment. (Sheth, 2020.)

Connecting with family and friends overseas or far away required the use of platforms such as Zoom. The speedy and simple integration of online systems has proven to be more efficiency and convenience on consumption. Lastly the Pandemic gave many consumers additional time on their hands to pursue new hobbies or hone their skills. With the rise in social media engagement and the possibility to share new skills and products with a larger audience, consumers have become producers themselves both lessening their need for certain products but also taking away some market share (Sheth, 2020.)

As well as there being the eight immediate changes to buyer behavior, ecommerce also had a dramatic effect in the early days of the Pandemic. With in-person shopping limited to just essential stores, any non-essential business had to move their efforts online which ultimately had an impact on brand loyalty. Those that were accommodating were seen in a more positive light by current and returning customers (Yanni et al, 2022.) Furthermore, the uncertainties of COVID-19 have impacted brand loyalty. Those that were experiencing more anxiety due to COVID-19 are looking for reassurance from the brands they buy from. Brands that addressed the concerns of COVID-19 saw customers having a more positive attitude towards the brand and overall, a stronger connection with them (Verlegh et al, 2021.)

Immediately After the Pandemic Lockdown

After the immediate threat of COVID-19 decreased and the subsequent lockdowns ended, non-essential businesses began to reopen. However, even as stores began opening again many consumers remained online. In fact, it is estimated that the Pandemic contributed $218.53 billion in ecommerce during 2020 and 2021 (Berthene, 2022.) The Pandemic forced people to adapt to buying online and the increase in convenience became a much-enjoyed feature to the buying journey. According to a Statista study, before the Pandemic, 26% of respondents bought household supplies online and that increased 13% by February of 2021 (Chevalier, 2022.)

Not only did a preference of online shopping become more apparent after the lockdown, but there was also a shift in brand loyalty. A McKinsey study showed that 75% of US consumers were trying new buyer behaviors and 36% were trying new product brands. Of those that indicated they tried new brands, 73% noted they intended to include these in their everyday activities. (Charm et al, 2022.) Additionally, 39% of consumers abandoned trusted brands for new ones, aligning with consumers looking for more value (*Emerging consumer trends in a post-covid-19 world: Marketing & Sales*, n.d.)

Two Years After the Pandemic Lockdown

After the two-year anniversary of the first Pandemic lockdowns, there are new challenges coming out of the COVID-19 Pandemic that continue to impact buyer behavior. The first one that has had a big impact, is inflation. Inflation has increased by 8.5%, the highest since 1981 and necessities such as gas and rent reach a staggering high *(*Smialek, *2022.)* During the Pandemic, a third of consumers saw a decrease in household income, with many consumers now expecting to spend less on discretionary spending and more on essential items such as groceries and household supplies (*The evolving consumer: How covid-19 is changing the way we shop: McKinsey Live*. McKinsey & Company, n.d.)

Not only have changes in the economy in a post-lockdown world influenced the discretionary spending of consumers and how they spend their savings, but it has also influenced what they buy. The COVID-19 Pandemic has made many consumers reevaluate what's important to them, in fact 50% of respondents in Accenture's survey noted that the Pandemic had caused them to rethink their personal purpose and what's important to them in life. Furthermore, 42% said that they realized they needed to focus on more than just themselves. The three biggest considerations consumers factor more into their buying decisions now are health and safety, sustainability, and ethical sourcing. Regarding health and safety, 63% of those that indicated they had reconsidered their buying habits think that it is critical businesses actively promote healthy practices. Additionally, 45% would be willing to pay more for health and safety related experiences. Sustainability is also another important consideration for consumers now, and 65% of those reimagining buying habits are attracted to environmentally friendly practices. 59% even said they would switch to another provider for another sustainable product in the electronics market. Lastly, ethical consumption has been a key factor in buying decisions so much so that 76% of changed consumers were attracted to do business with brands that sourced materials ethically. 46% of these consumers went on to say they would pay more to a retail business that takes visible actions in making an impact in the community. (Barry, 2022)

Consumers expect to change their buying preferences into common habits, even after coming out of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Of US consumers, 57% indicated that they were trying to build a bigger savings amount than before and 53% even went on to say that they would try to fix something before buying a replacement (Ward, 2022.) As shoppers become craftier to save money, they also become more selective with their time and prefer online shopping. This holds such importance, that 57% of consumers who indicated changes in their buying habits said they would change retailers if new, fast, and flexible delivery options weren't provided for online orders. Even more telling was of those who said their habits wouldn't change, 48% agreed with the above group. (Barry, 2022)

Consumers that have reshaped their buying habits also expect more from businesses themselves. In the same survey noted above, 66% of these individuals expect brands to take more responsibility in motivating them to live by their values (Barry, 2022.) The Pandemic forced businesses to get creative with how customers' needs were met and proved that things could be delivered in a more simple and faster fashion, but that has only raised the bar for businesses today (Ranjan, 2022.)

Research Findings- 1:1 Interview Review

Buyer Behavior Interview

Before interviewing three interviewees from the perspectives of study (sales, marketing, and consumers) an informational interview was conducted. On February 14th, a Vice President of Customer Experience Solutions at NTT DATA was interviewed over the phone for a period of one hour. Below are the insights from the conversation on how COVID-19 has impacted the buying journey and customer behavior in general.

One of the biggest takeaways from the conversation was marketers, sales professionals, and companies in general need to rethink what their ideal customers are wanting. Things used to be linear in fashion for a buyer journey, but now customers have unique buyer journeys that vary. Nowadays, the buyer journey happens more upfront, and customers conduct their research ahead of time, so the salesperson is a secondary resource. With more information being online and customers relying on this more, sales and marketing professionals have less control over the buyer journey and need to make sure they provide information consistent with that found online without being redundant.

Another key talking point was how BOPIS (buy online pickup instore) orders are more convenient for shoppers now and businesses need to keep adapting to new methods quickly to fulfill customer needs. Customer experiences also need to be seamless and run smoothly, or else customer choices and preferences will change while they wait. One-stop-shops for both business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C) customers are increasing popular with many wanting the "Amazon experience" or fast and easy localized buying.

The last main focus of the conversation was the role of sustainability and socialization. Customers were already heading towards sustainable consumption, but the Pandemic has allowed for more research on sustainable products. Additionally, with so many people being at home and having limited interaction with others during the lockdown, spending time outside and being in nature was more popular. This is a common hobby for

Millennials and Gen Z but has become increasingly popular across the board. Experiences are also more important to younger audiences, and as life returns to “normal” they will be looking for more social context to their shopping experiences.

Sales Interview

While interviewing an Account Executive at Adobe in a 30-minute telephone interview, the following insights were gained.

When asked how relationships with returning customers were before the Pandemic, the interviewee noted they were “pretty loyal” and would provide a number of referrals. Before the Pandemic, it was regular practice to stop by smaller businesses if they were in the area for another client and check to see if any other businesses could benefit from the services.

When asked about this relationship with current clients during the Pandemic, it was made apparent that the relationship management shifted, with quick calls to check-in on clients and maybe a FaceTime video call. This meant interactions weren’t as personable, and were more business focused in nature. There was also a noticeable shift in loyalty in the sales sector, which ultimately came down to businesses not shifting to customers’ rapidly changing needs. During the COVID-19 outbreak, customer wants and expectations went up, and if there wasn’t a perceived value, they left. Innovative and agile functions or features were the most important factors to customers.

During the Pandemic, it was noted that reaching new customers was increasingly harder and most were “laser focused on cutting cost and adding value.” This mean leveraging local relationships and continuing to build the relationship between a client and the business made all the difference. Selling the true value of the relationship was key, as well as providing a one-stop-shop of client needs.

After the Pandemic, seamless experiences and good customer service created successful sales relations. According to the interviewee, clients now want something they can grow into and want to build a relationship with the product or service provider. Pre-Pandemic clients had more focus on product features, whereas nowadays people need a partner that can help them with their business goals.

When asked what is important to customers now, the interviewee noted three elements stood out: robust customer success function, i.e., a business that listen to the customers and makes the appropriate changes), more product recommendations, and support. Ultimately is comes down to good understanding of voice of the customer and the transparency of a business. *"Make it work- does not work."*

As the interview was wrapped up, the final comments were made, "after everything switched online, big businesses that weren't as agile, or slow to embrace digital change negatively affected buyer experiences."

Marketing Interview

While interviewing a Director of Marketing at AFCO in a 30-minute video call interview, the following information was provided.

When asked what marketing materials were primarily used before the Pandemic lockdown, they noted it was mostly flyers that mentioned the features of the services provided and how it worked. There was a focus on conveying efficiency and the financial justification of using their service, in this case premium financing.

After being asked if the marketing focus changed during the Pandemic lockdown, they responded that there was a shift in marketing yourself more, especially for nontangible services like premium financing. With a lot of clutter to get through, this is the only way to market. "Describing your worth makes you successful." If you can focus on differentiation, you will be able to describe your worth.

After the lockdown, the interviewee mentioned a change in marketing to being focused on “how you message and not what you message.” Email blasts and connecting with social media made this possible and served as an additional means of reaching the target audience. Being more specific with calls to action and asking customers to contact them electronically, did prove a barrier for some customers but most adjusted to the digital communications. The marketing team also recognized “teammates spent less time on the road so efforts should be moved to bringing us and agents us to speed with knowledge transfer.” This made them understand they use their time different and can use that time to diversify the teams to bring new marketing elements to customers.

When asked what the most difficult challenge has been as they market to their customers now and how it affected their departments outputs, the interviewee noted that it is “harder to gauge attitudes and direction on something when you can’t see them” but there was an increase in quality and digital content for marketing efforts. Moving to mostly digital marketing has meant resources and time is saved and there is very little waste in both materials and money.

To conclude the interview, the respondent was asked what they have seen is important to customers now and how it was different from before the Pandemic lockdown. Since the interviewee works in the insurance industry, they said that before Pandemic, rate was apathetic and customers had a low-rate environment. “Many took the rates for granted” but after the Pandemic more people are worried and apply rate pressures for best pricing.

Consumer Interview

For the final interview, an accounting senior at Northern Illinois University was asked about their experience as a consumer in a 30-minute telephone call.

When asked to describe their purchasing process before the Pandemic, the interviewee said, “it was a mix of looking at different things online and going in person to shop, usually out of boredom.”

Before the lockdown, when asked what their preference to online or in-person shopping was they noted that it depended on their intention. If the interviewee was just looking with no intention to buy, they preferred online, but if they were wanting to buy something in particular, they would prefer in-store. Repeat purchases were online preference and in-person was the preference for new purchases.

When asked to describe purchasing habits during the Pandemic, they said they "stopped buying everything. Everything was closed and online only so there was no point in buying new things no one will see." Only essentials were needed, and they used that opportunity "to get stuff in the store to get out of the home." No clothing or non-essential items were bought but would be online if something changed that.

After the lockdown and restrictions were lifted, their habits shifted and they "tried to go back to more in person shopping and buying more non-essential items." More clothing and music items were bought than before lockdown, but it was different than before with less being bought and more conscious decisions about spending. There was still a preference of in-person shopping since it provides a "social experience, and you don't know what you're going to find."

When asked how they evaluate products now, they consider brand, price, and its comparison to other products, "what's the next best thing in a specific store." Before the lockdown, they were not as conscious about the price. Due to the economy, they consciously go to Aldi for groceries, get prepackaged instead of fresh produce, and find the cheapest pricing. Skin care products are measured more, and the amount is used sparingly. One example given was comparing ice cream prices and brands across different stores, doing more research ahead of time instead of mindlessly adding to cart and just paying.

To wrap up the interview they were asked if there was anything else they wanted to add and they said they that spending, and buying is more limited now. They're not just buying for no reason, and instead go thrifting for clothing, and try more cost-effective ways to shop if they want something new.

Research Findings- Survey Review

Sales Perspective Responses

The following research shows the responses to how salespeople's clients behaved before, during and after the Pandemic lockdown.

When asked to rank how returning customers best responded to in-person meetings, video calls, phone calls, personalized emails/texts, and emails blasts before, during and after the Pandemic lockdown, it was evident that there was a shift in preference to messaging. Before the Pandemic lockdown, the majority of respondents noted their clients preferred in-person meeting the most with a few preferring phone calls, as seen by Figure 1a. During the Pandemic lockdown, there was an even mix in the in-person, video calls and phone calls being the most popular means of communication, shown by Figure 1b. Figure 1c shows how after the Pandemic lockdown however, majority of clients preferred video calls and only some preferring in-person.

Q1 - Please rank which of the following means of communication were most effective in reaching your returning customers, before the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

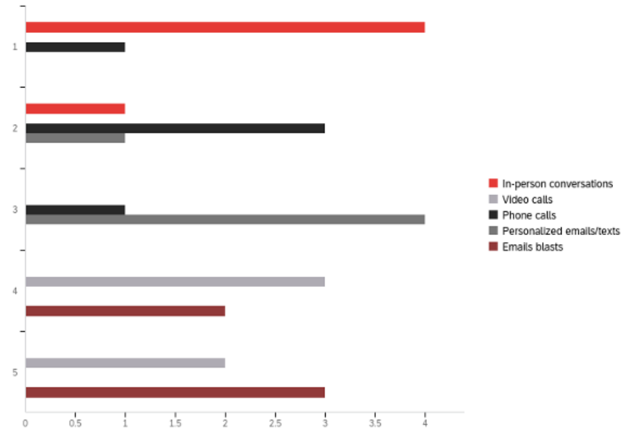

Figure 1a

Q6 - Please rank which of the following means of communication were most effective in reaching your returning customers, during the Pandemic lockdown? (1 being being most, 5 being least)

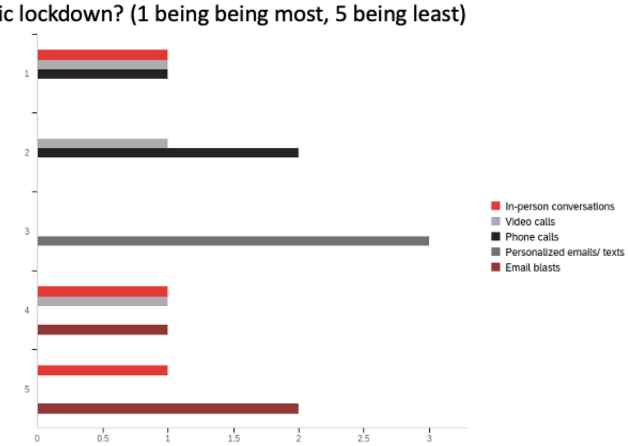

Figure 1b

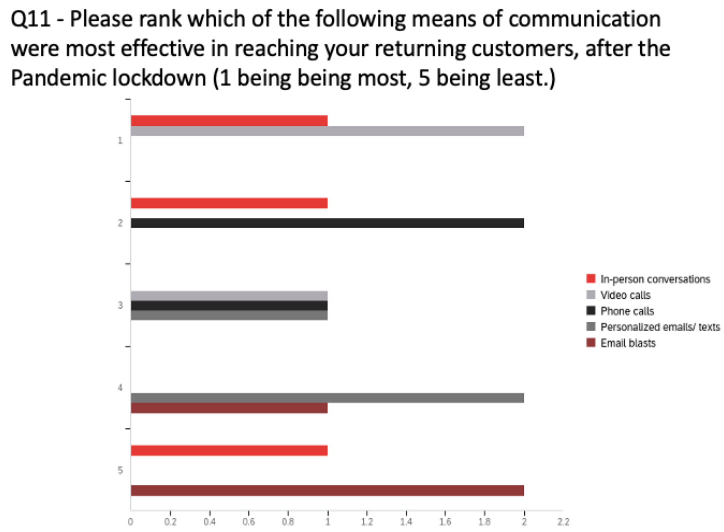

Figure 1c

The sales respondents were asked the same question except this time how their prospects preferred these communications methods. As with returning customers, in-person meetings were rated the most effective however phone calls were just as popular, as indicated by Figure 2a. During the lockdown there was a three-way tie again however this time with in-person meetings, personalized messaging, and email blasts which Figure 2b demonstrates. After the Pandemic lockdown, video calls were the most popular, but Figure 2c shows phone calls were also most efficient.

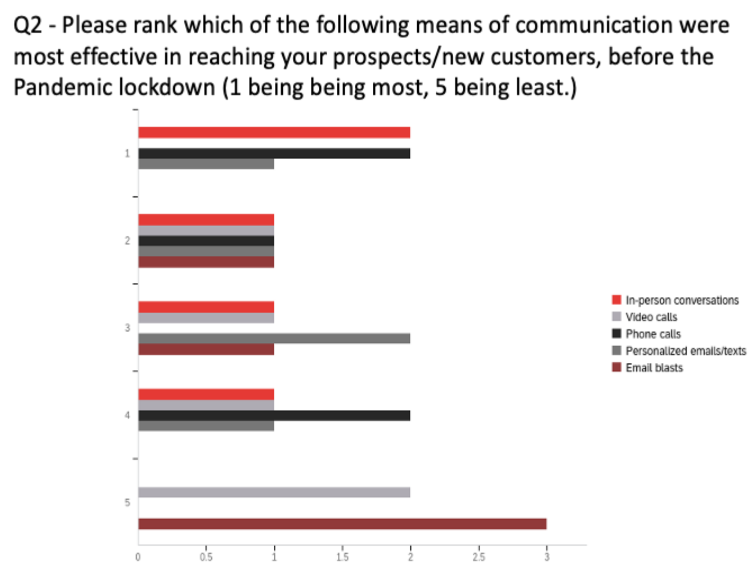

Figure 2a

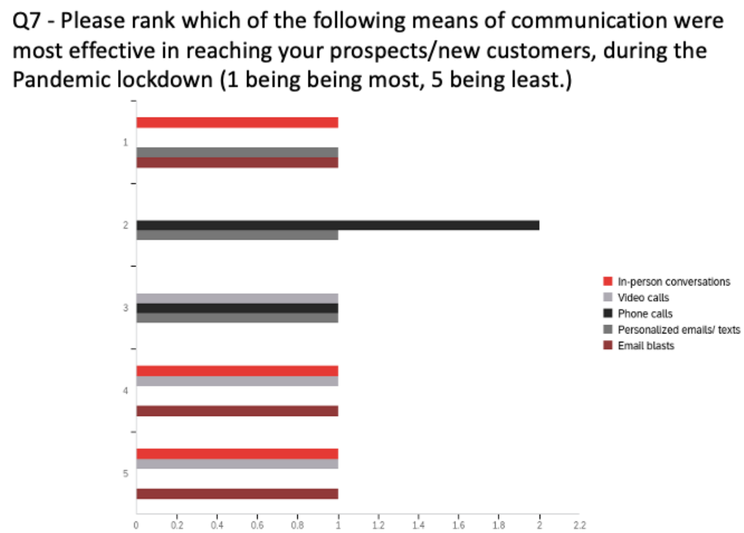

Figure 2b

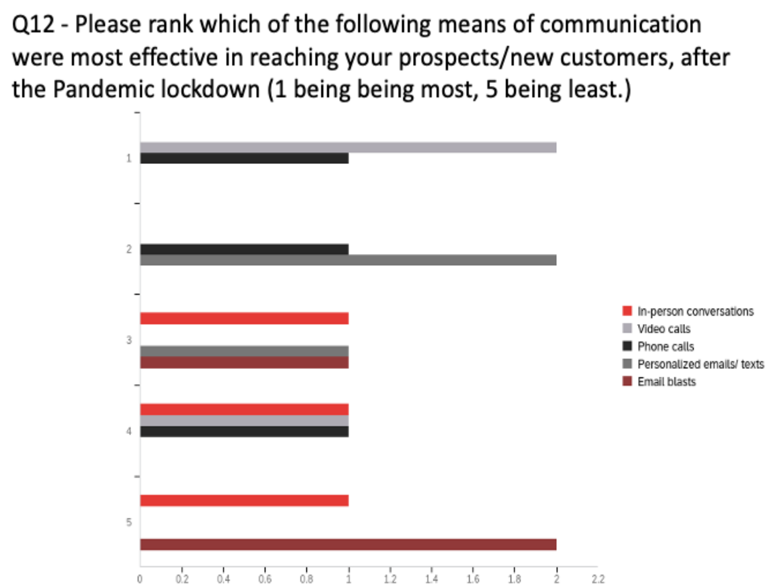

Figure 2c

The survey also asked salespeople to indicate the level of concern they had with price when making a buying decision. Figure 3a shows before the Pandemic Lockdown, 8% of respondents said their clients were somewhat concerned with price and 20% said their clients were very concerned with price. During the Pandemic, there was an increase in the number of clients who were very concerned with price to 66% and only 33% were somewhat concerned, as seen by Figure 3b. Yet, after the Pandemic lockdown, only 33% of clients were very concerned with price and 66% were somewhat concerned with price, as exhibited by Figure 3c.

Q3 - Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your client's level of concern with price?

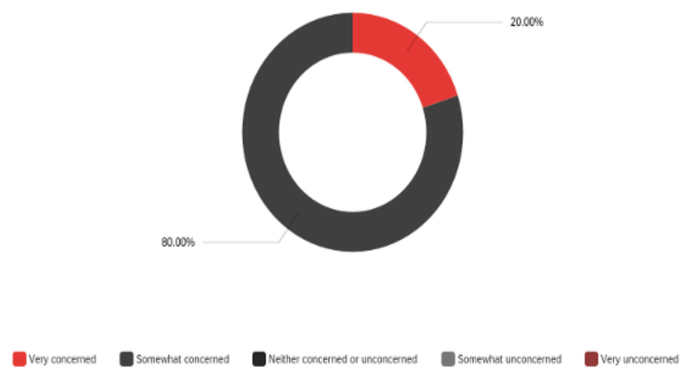

Figure 3a

Q8 - During the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your client’s level of concern with price?

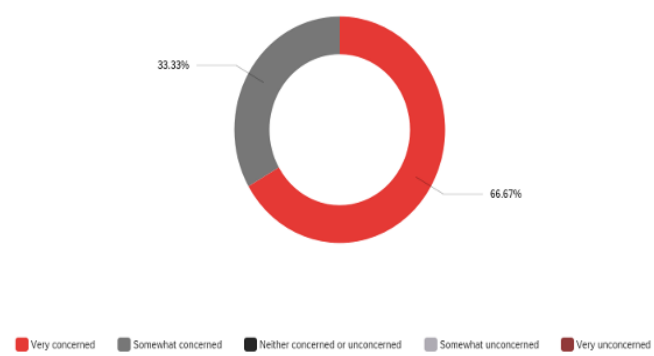

Figure 3b

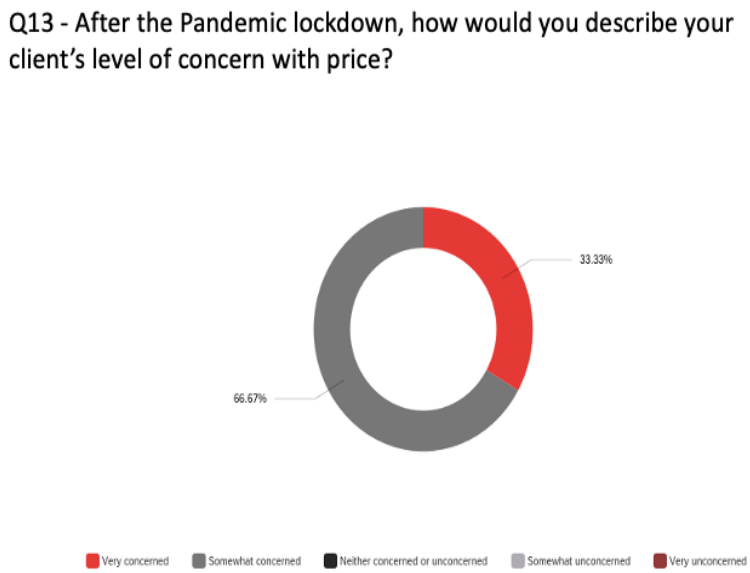

Figure 3c

Salespeople were also asked what clients valued most when making a buying decision. Initially, quality and cost value were the most important, as seen with Figure 4a. However, during the Pandemic most respondents noted that quality outweighed cost value. After the Pandemic lockdown, this remained true as seen with the similarity in Figures 4b and 4c.

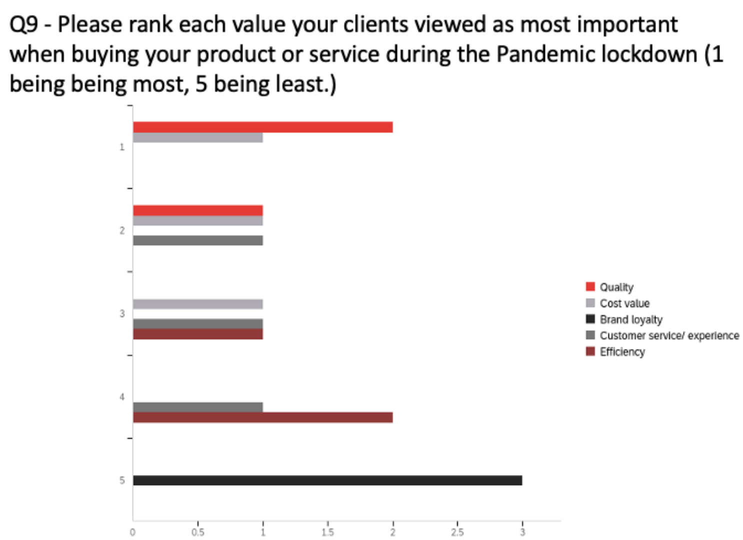

Figure 4a

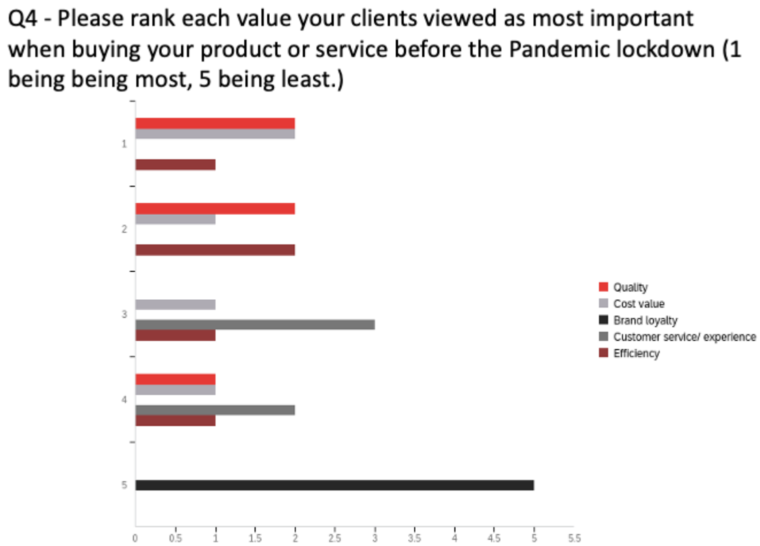

Figure 4b

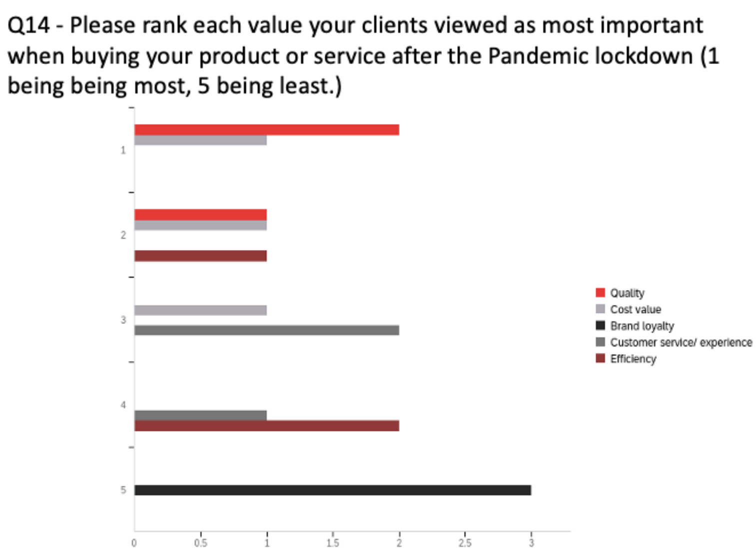

Figure 4c

Lastly, salespeople were asked to rank how important long-term growth support was for clients. Before the Pandemic lockdown, 80% of salespeople indicated their clients found long-term growth support very important with 20% finding it somewhat important, as demonstrated by Figure 5a. However, Figures 5b and 5c both during and after the pandemic, more clients found it very important with an increased total of 100%.

Q5 - How important was long-term growth support for your clients before the Pandemic lockdown?

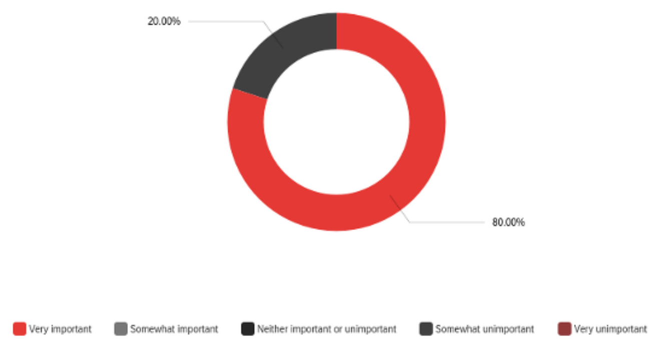

Figure 5a

Q10 - How important was long-term growth support for your clients during the Pandemic lockdown?

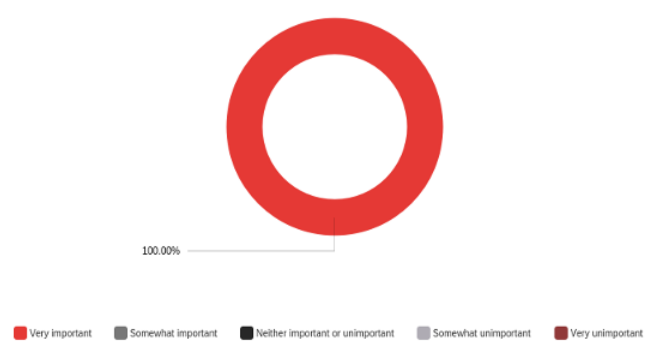

Figure 5b

Q15 - How important is long-term growth support for your clients after the Pandemic lockdown?

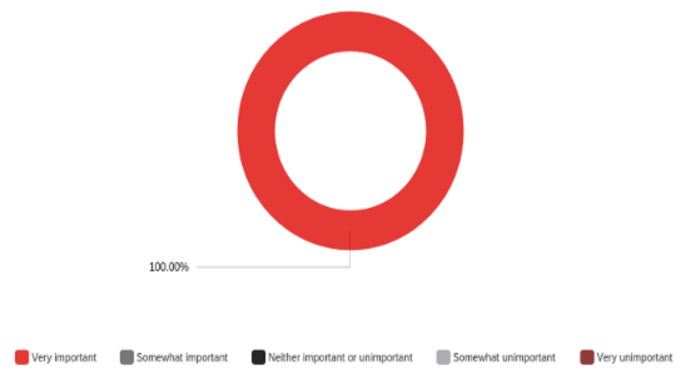

Figure 5c

After completing the survey two respondents left notes on additional insights they had. The main takeaway from their notes was customers are looking for true value, not just quality or cost but getting the most "bang for their buck." Additionally, the in-person meetings still hold the most value for some clients and some have even found Zoom and Teams calls redundant and less engaging. Feedback responses are shown in full in Figure 6.

Q16 - Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a sales professional?

Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a sales professional?
Value- bang for your buck
In my experience, In-person meetings are still the most effective way in communicating with serious prospects. This, of course, depends on the individuals thoughts/feelings about meeting in person. But I've seen quite the uptick in requests for in person meetings once the prospect finds out that we are all in office and available to take in-person meetings. As in-person meetings are less frequent across all industries these days, offering an in-person meeting really goes a long way in the prospects eyes. Always shoot for in-person if you can! Everyone is bored of Zoom/Teams calls!

Figure 6

I also had a Northern Illinois University and Pi Sigma Epsilon alum working as a Professional Business Development Representative at American Eagle reach out to me on LinkedIn with additional insight. They noted the following, “LinkedIn has also become more and more of a powerful outreach/sales tool over the past couple of years. I see a ton of engagement there and have scored some big opportunities through LI alone.”

Marketing Perspective Responses

The following research shows the completed responses to how marketers’ customers behaved before, during and after the Pandemic lockdown. Although eight responses were recorded, not all eight respondents answered all questions, and some were not answered by any respondents.

For the first question, respondents were asked to rank which of the following media tools were most effective in reaching their audience, before, during and after the Pandemic lockdown there were 0 responses. This question yielded no data to draw conclusions from.

When asked to rank the values customers deemed most important, quality, cost value, brand loyalty, customer experience and efficiency, one respondent indicated that quality was the topmost important value, closely followed by customer experience as shown my Figure 7a. Yet, during the Pandemic lockdown, cost value was the most important with quality coming second, as seen by Figure 7b. After the Pandemic lockdown, figure 7c shows quality was once again the most important but cost value was second instead.

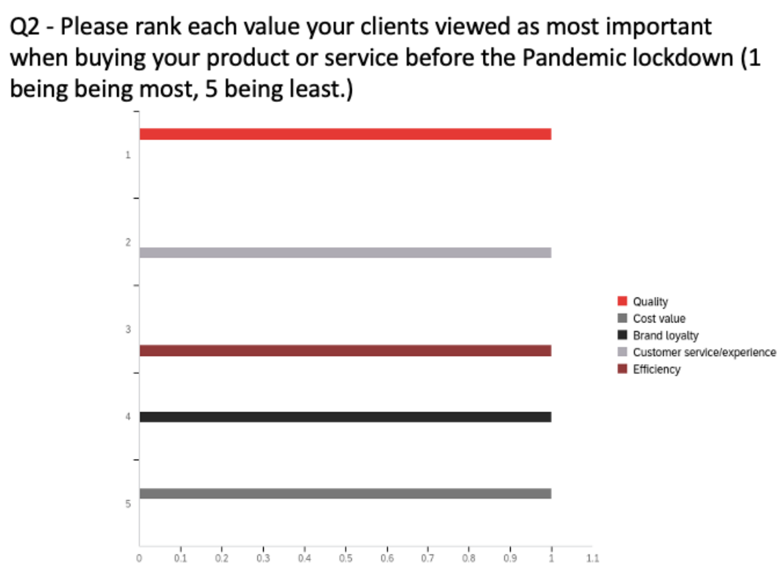

Figure 7a

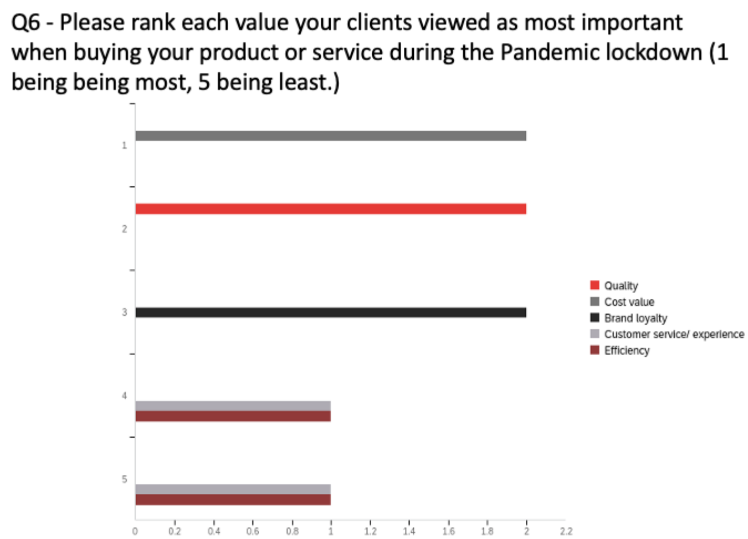

Figure 7b

Figure 7c

Marketers were also asked how concerned their clients were with price. Before the lockdown, 100% of respondents said their clients were somewhat concerned, as seen with Figure 8a. During the Pandemic lockdown, 50% indicated that their clients were somewhat concerned and the other 50% said their clients were very concerned with price, as seen with Figure 8b. After the Pandemic lockdown, 100% of respondents indicated their clients were somewhat concerned with price again, as Figure 8c shows.

Q3 - Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your client's level of concern with price?

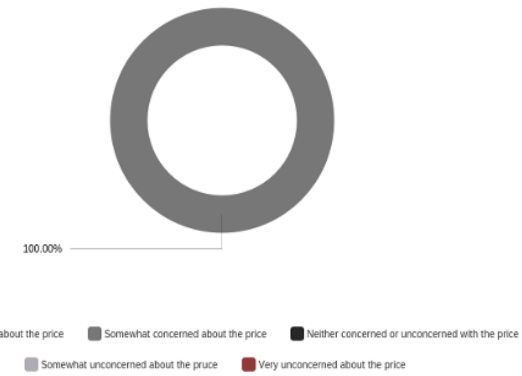

Figure 8a

Q7 - During the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your client's level of concern with price?

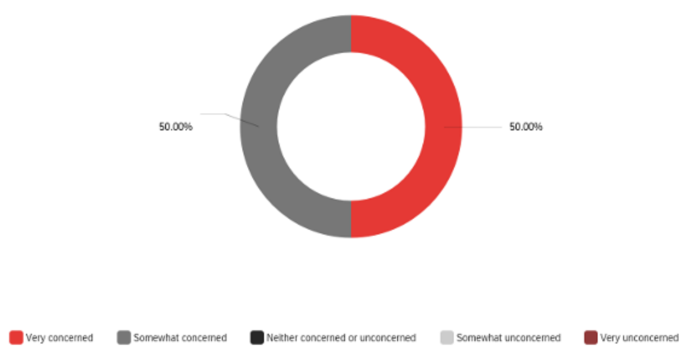

Figure 8b

Q12 - After the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your client's level of concern with price?

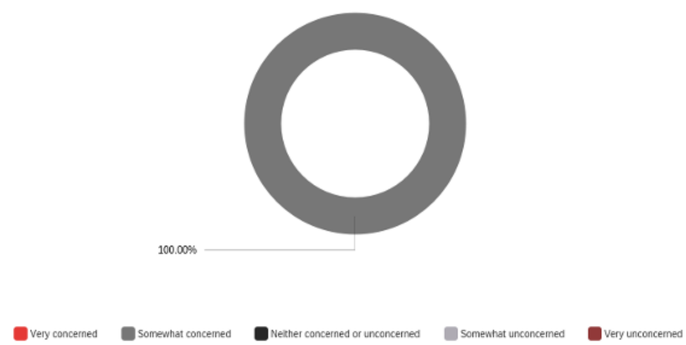

Figure 8c

In the next question marketers were asked how their prospects responded to digital marketing efforts. Figure 9a and 9b show that 100% of the respondents said their prospects were somewhat responsive to digital media. After the Pandemic lockdown however, 100% indicated prospects were very unresponsive as seen with Figure 9c.

Q4 - Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe prospects/new customers interaction with digital marketing efforts?

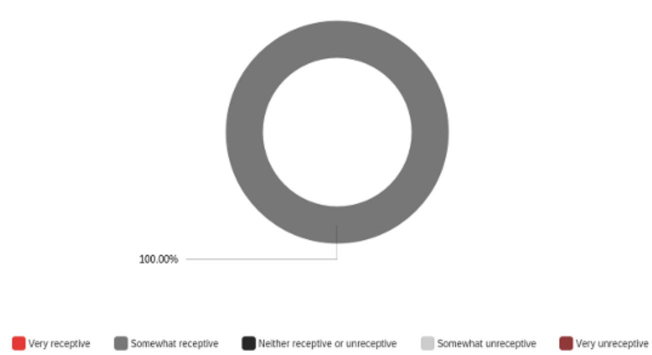

Figure 9a

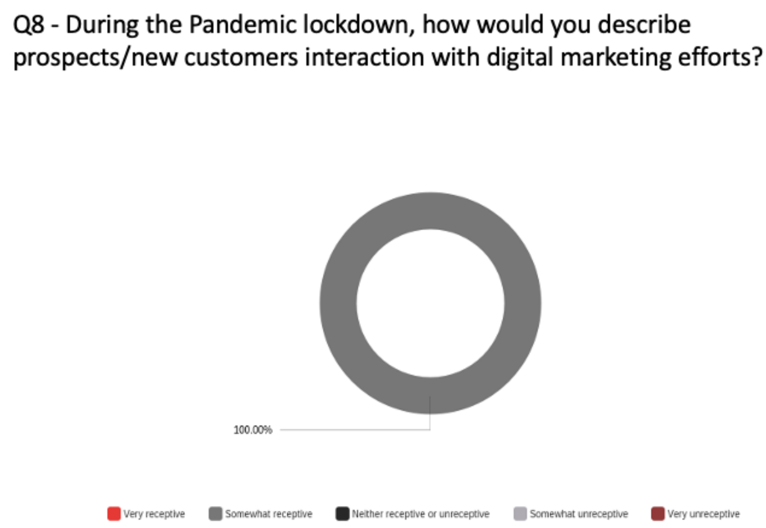

Figure 9b

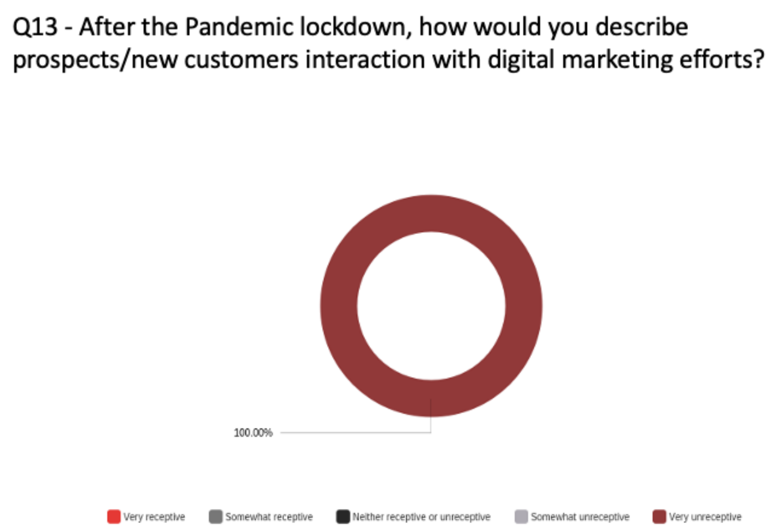

Figure 9c

The last question marketers were asked was if they had made any subsequent changes to marketing efforts. During the Pandemic lockdown, 75% of respondents said they had made changes as seen with Figure 10a, however none offered a qualitative response. Figure 10b shows 100% of respondents made changes after the Pandemic lockdown.

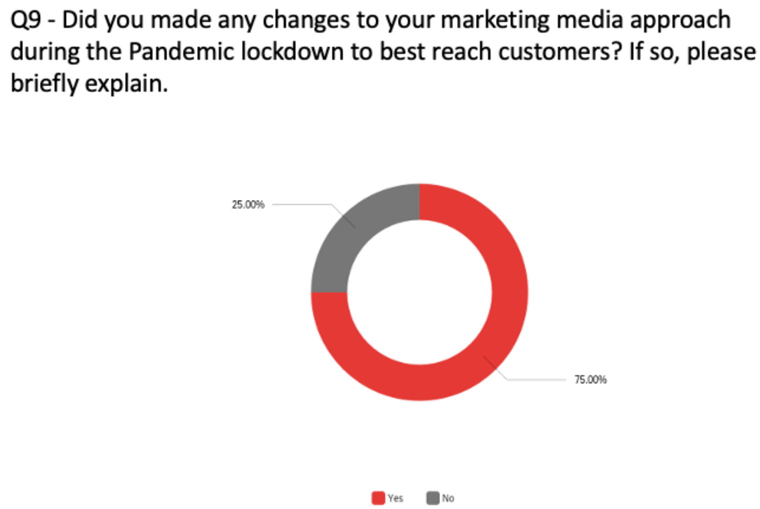

Figure 10a

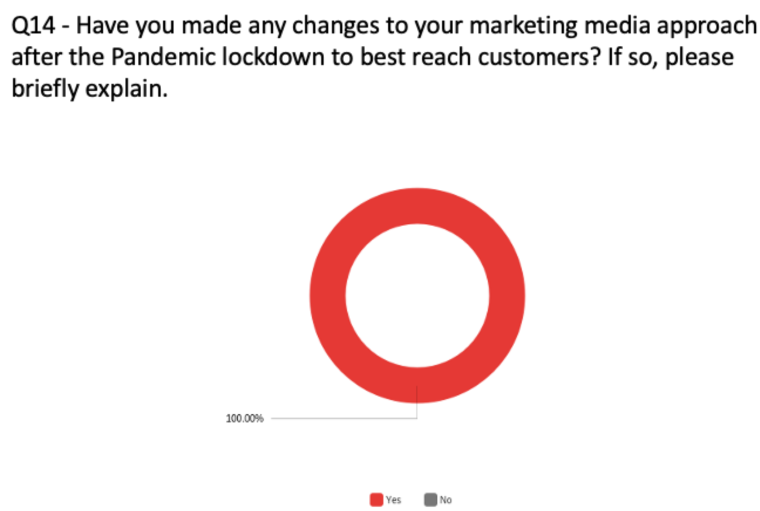

Figure 10b

Consumer Perspective Responses

The following research shows the responses to how consumers behaved before, during and after the Pandemic lockdown.

In the first question, respondents were asked how often they shopped for non-essential items before the lockdown. Figure 11a shows that 50% of respondents shopped once a week for non-essential items and 27.78% once every two weeks. Figure 11b shows that during the Pandemic lockdown, 26.67% shopped more than once a week and 20% longer than a month. After the Pandemic lockdown, 30.77% said they shopped for non-essential items once a week and 30.77% once every two weeks.

Q1 - Before the Pandemic lockdown how would you describe the frequency of your purchasing habits for non-essential items?

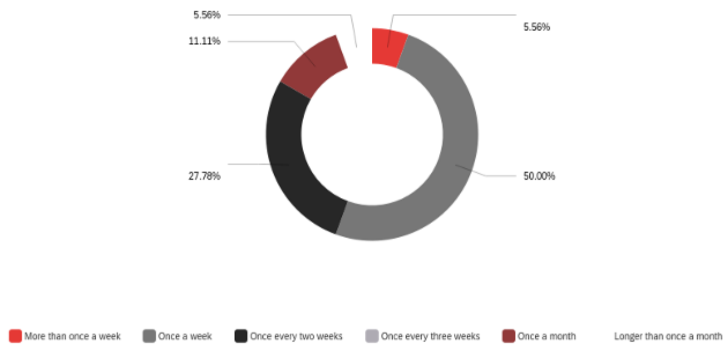

Figure 11a

Q6 - During the Pandemic lockdown how would you describe the frequency of your purchasing habits for non-essential items?

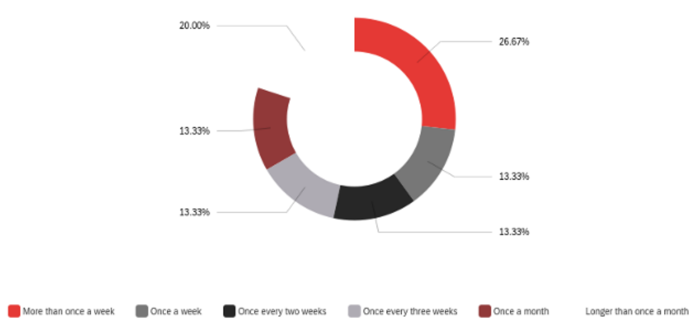

Figure 11b

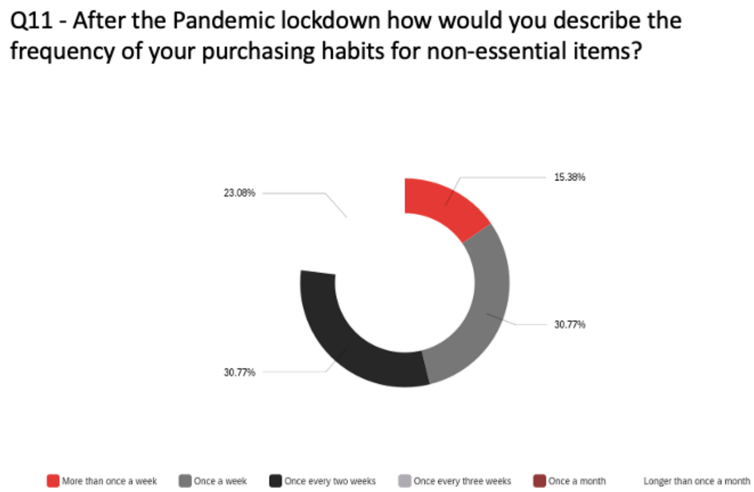

Figure 11c

Consumers were also asked to rank what they viewed as most important when buying a product or service. Before the Pandemic lockdown, quality was the most important value as seen by Figure 12a. During the Pandemic lockdown, cost value was the most important value as seen with Figure 12b. After the Pandemic, quality was the most valued, but cost value was closely behind compared to before, as demonstrated with Figure 12c.

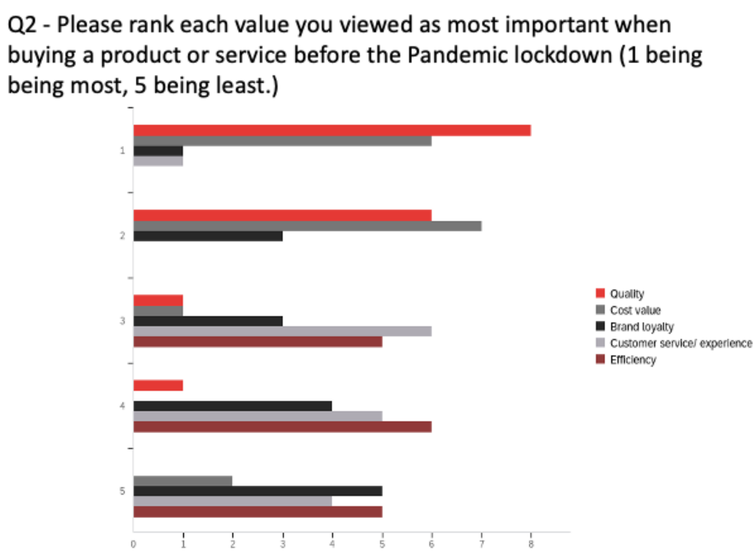

Figure 12a

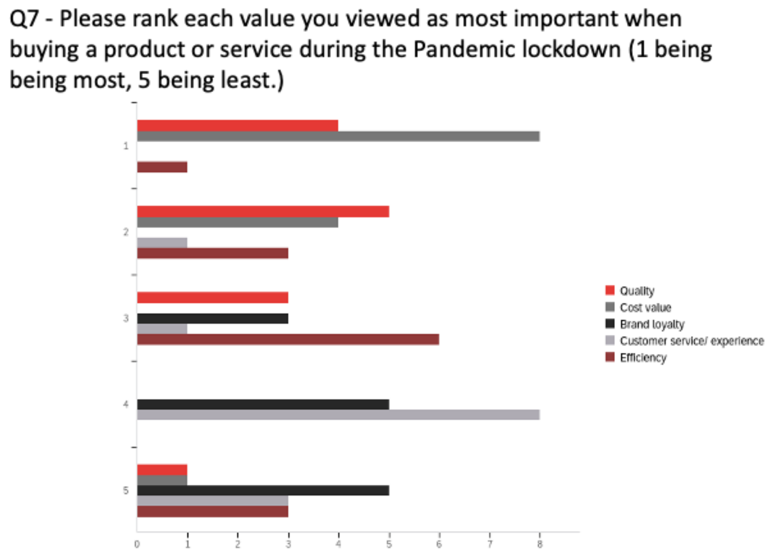

Figure 12b

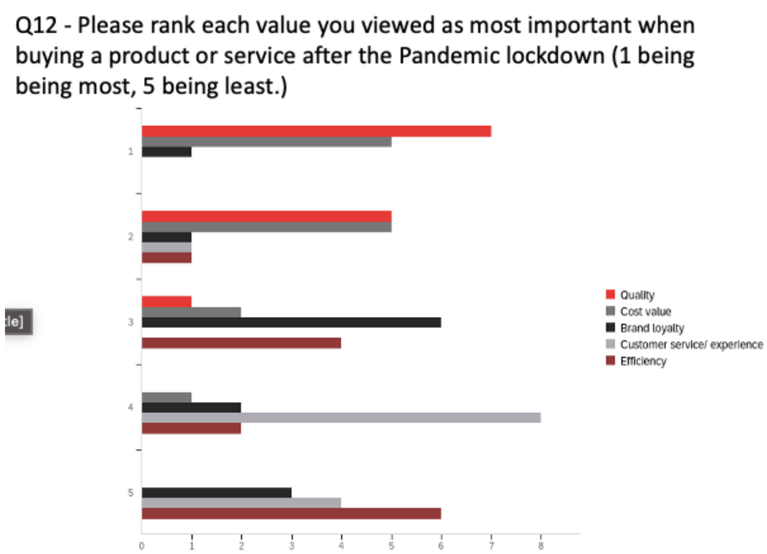

Figure 12c

In the next question, consumers were asked about was their level of concern with price. Before the Pandemic lockdown, 55.56% were somewhat concerned with price as seen with Figure 13a. During the Pandemic lockdown, Figure 13b shows 66.67% were very concerned with price. Figure 13c show after the Pandemic lockdown, 61.54% were very concerned with price.

Q3 - Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your level of concern with price?

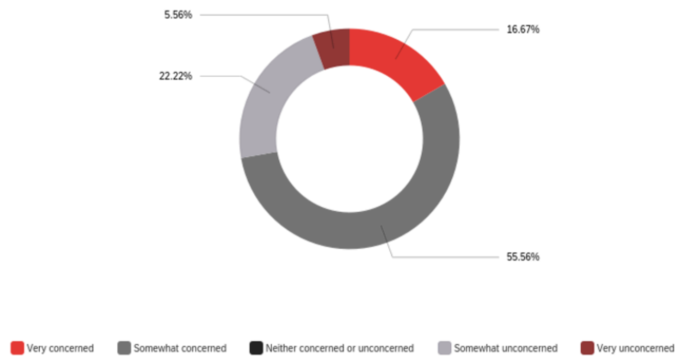

Figure 13a

Q8 - During the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your level of concern with price?

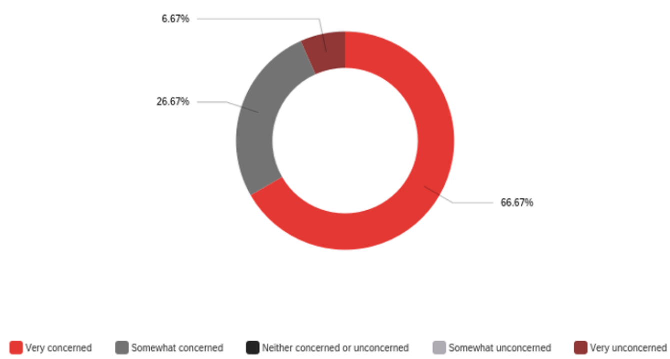

Figure 13b

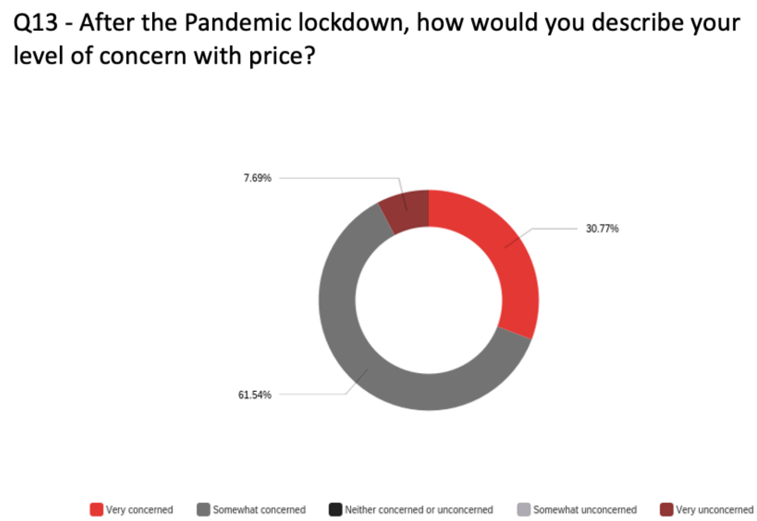

Figure 13c

Consumers were also asked to describe their preference to online versus in-person shopping. Figure 14a shows that 44.44% preferred in-person shopping with some online and 22.22% preferred mostly online with some in-person. During the Pandemic lockdown, Figure 14b shows that 40% preferred online with some in-person and 26.67% preferred all online. After the Pandemic lockdown, Figure 14c shows that 53.85% prefer mostly online with some in-person and 23.08% prefer mostly in-person with some online.

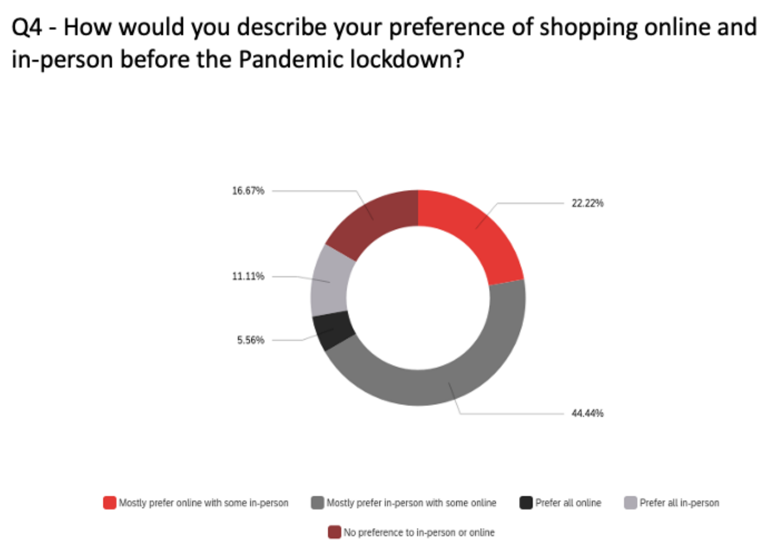

Figure 14a

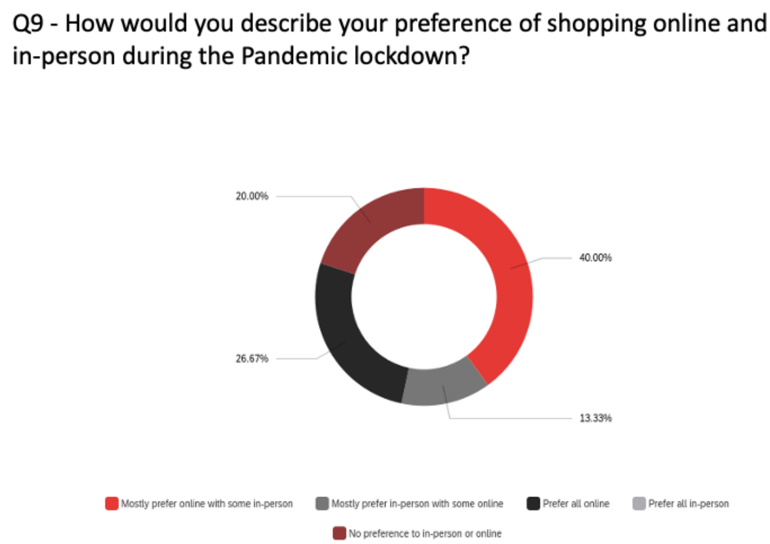

Figure 14b

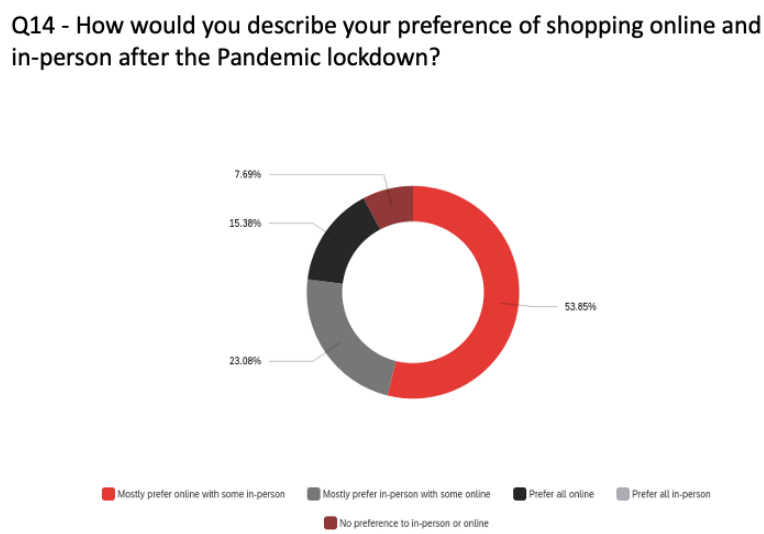

Figure 14c

Consumers were asked to also rank which means of promotional communication were most influential in their buying decisions. Before the Pandemic lockdown, social media was the most influential factor by a large margin, as seen with Figure 15a. During the Pandemic lockdown, Figure 15b shows that social media was still the most influential, again with a large margin. After the Pandemic lockdown, personalized email or text messaging was the most influential by a considerable amount shown by Figure 15c.

Q5 - Please rank which of the following means of promotional communication were most influential in your buying decisions, before the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

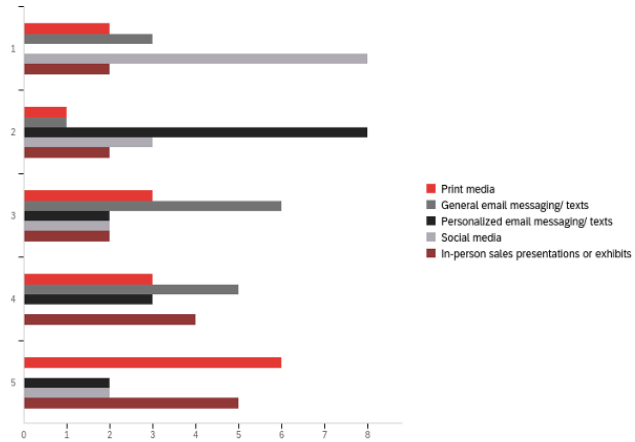

Figure 15a

Q10 - Please rank which of the following means of promotional communication were most influential in your buying decisions, during the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

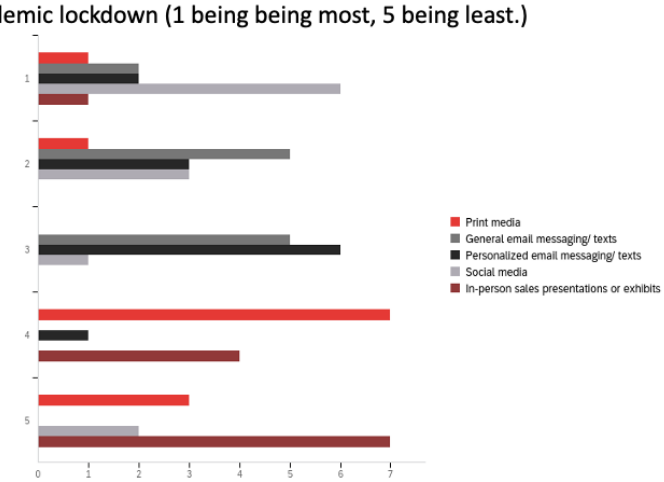

Figure 15b

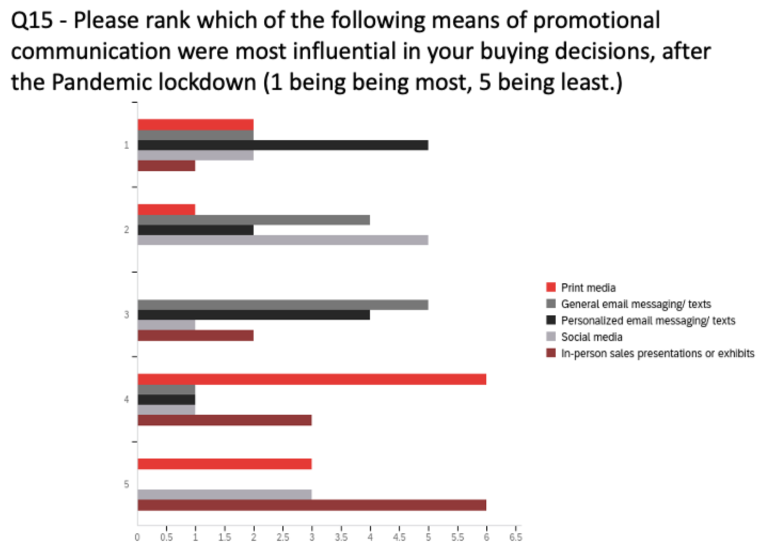

Figure 15c

In the last question, consumers were asked if they wanted to add any additional information. One respondent noted how prices have increased and another said how they are largely influenced to buy more products through word of mouth or from friends. They also indicated that they shop more online now. Figure 16 shows the qualitative results.

Q21 - Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a consumer?

Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a consumer?
Overall increase in online shopping. Biggest influence has been word of mouth / recommendations online or from friends.
Rising prices
N/A

Figure 16

Conclusion

After conducting this research, all findings were compiled and analyzed to form a conclusion. This research has led to the conclusion that COVID-19 has changed buyer behavior considerably. There is now a clear divide among those that have disposable income and those that don't, and as a consequence how overall cost and value are evaluated. Every customer is looking for value and worth, so they can truly get the most out of a product or service. The COVID-19 Pandemic has also raised the expectations of customers after unprecedented circumstances forced businesses to get creative with how consumers' needs are fulfilled. Lastly, in the digital space differentiation is more important than ever and conveying worth to each customer through the clutter is critical.

A summary of these findings and conclusion was then put into a comprehensive slide deck to be presented virtually to the Sales Advisory Board on April 7th, 2022. 28 people were present at the meeting including 17 companies and friends of the Sales Program who donate. The presentation lasted 20 minutes and was followed by a few questions from the audience. Figures 17-21 show the final presentation slides.

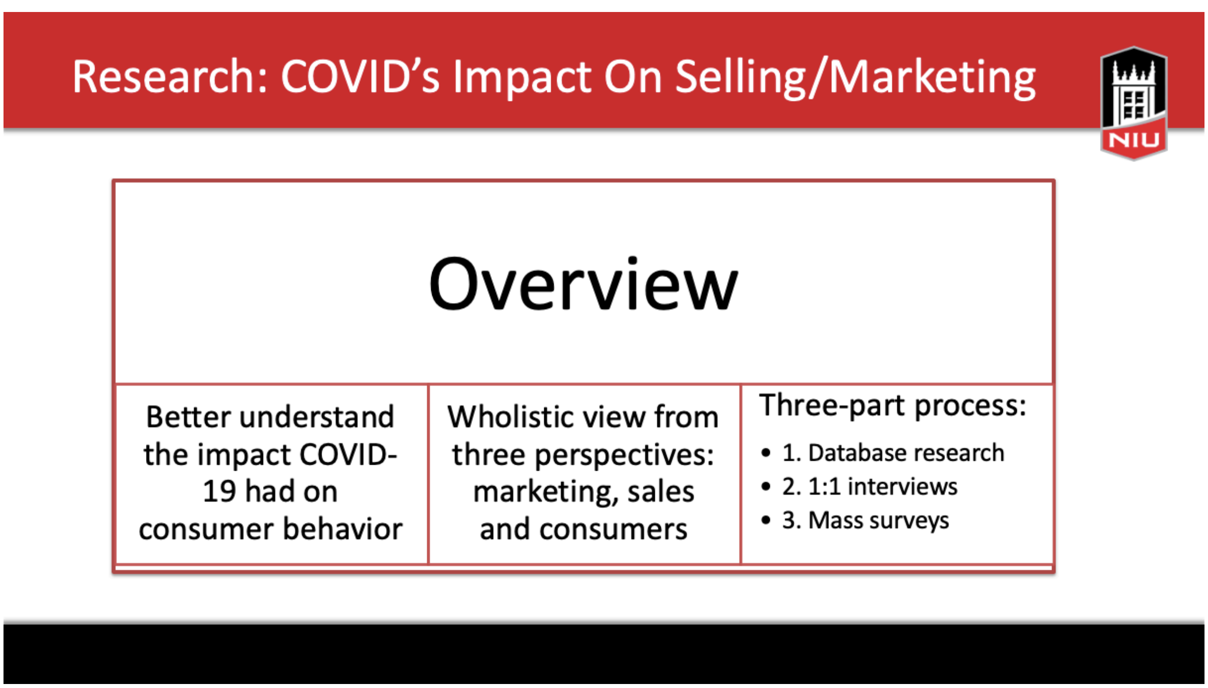

Figure 17

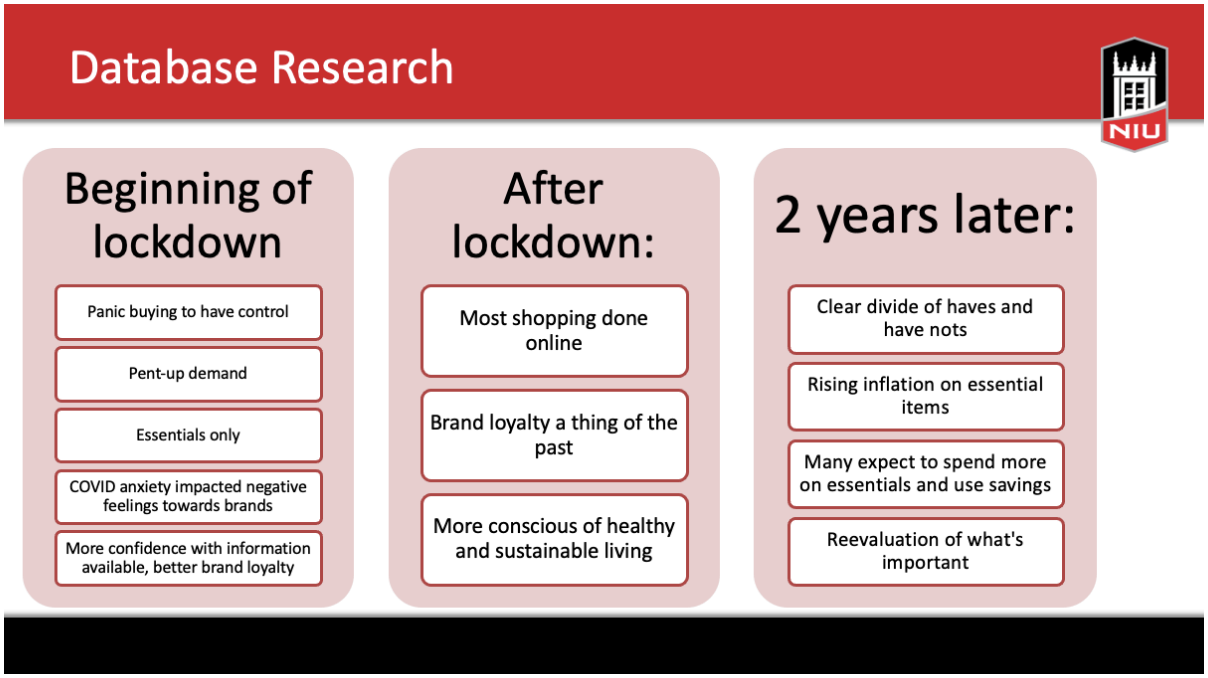

Figure 18

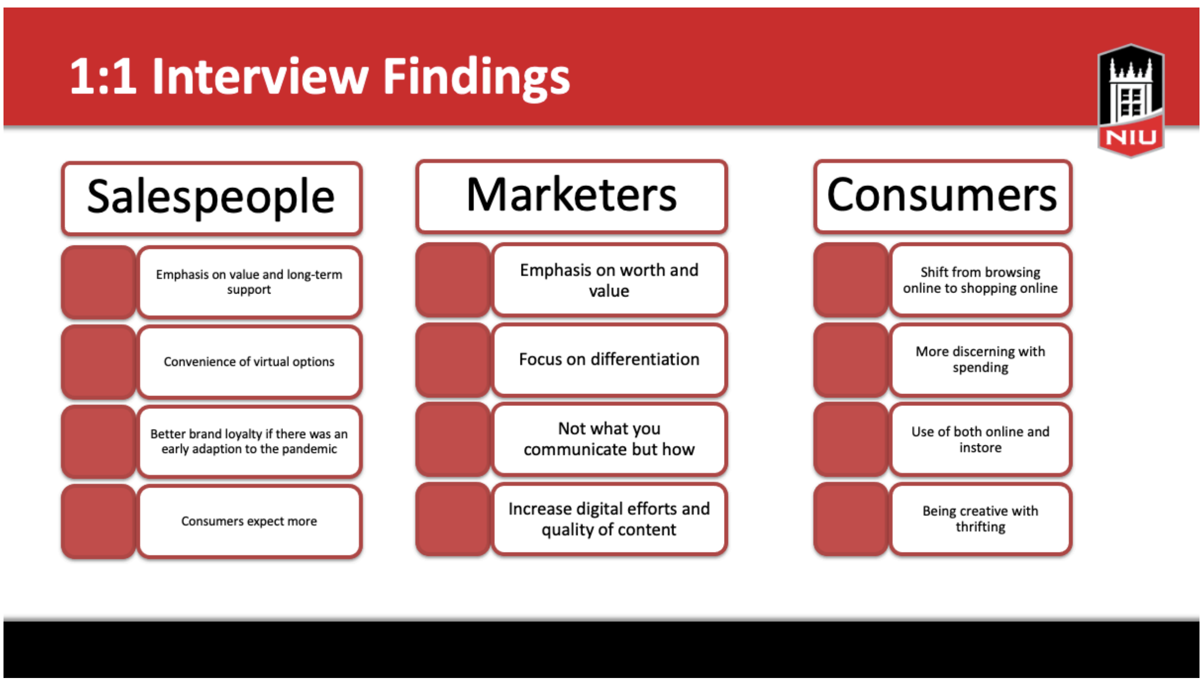

Figure 19

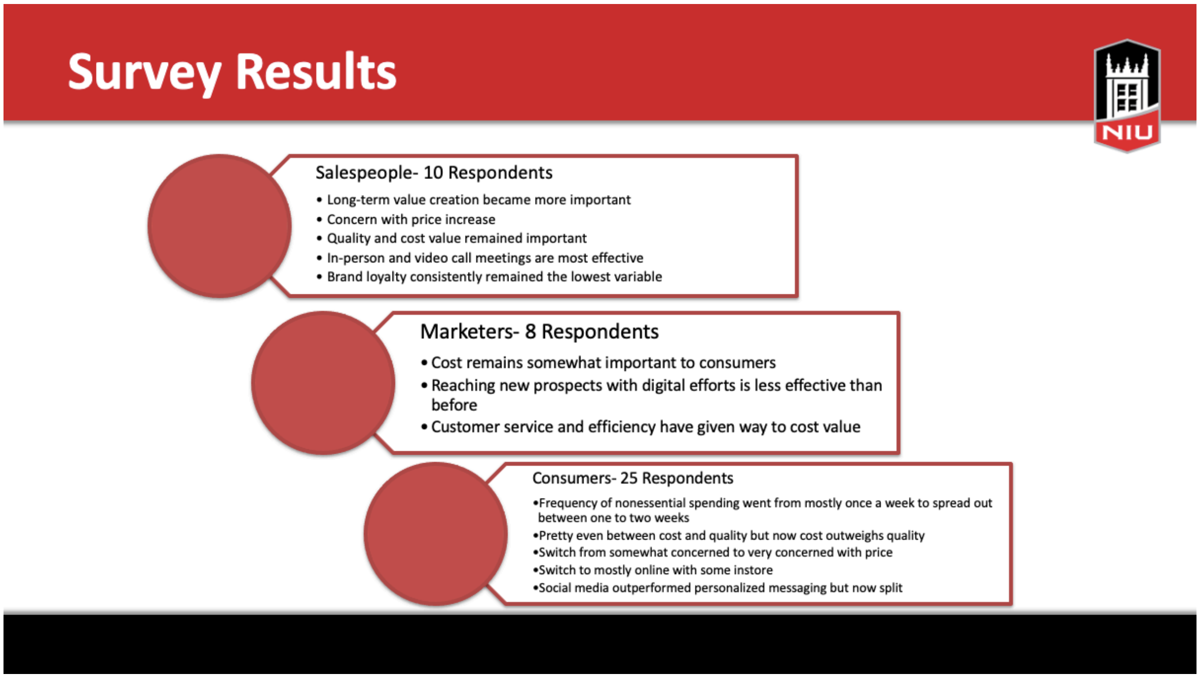

Figure 20

Figure 21

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Appendices

Appendix A: The following includes the prepared questions that were based off the academic research completed prior to the interviews. Below is the prepared question set for the sales, marketing, and consumer interviewees.

Sales →

1. Before the pandemic how would you describe your relations with repeat customers?
    a. What did this look like for new clients?
2. During the pandemic how did these relationships look?
    a. How did they compare to during the pandemic?
3. How have these relationships changed after the pandemic lockdowns?
4. What has been the hardest adjustment you had to make to reach your clients?
5. Did you have any customers stop business with you? If so, did they give any reasons?
6. What trends have you noticed these last three years?
7. What is important to customers now?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Marketing →

1. Before the pandemic what did your marketing materials primarily focus on?
2. During the pandemic lockdown, did this focus change?
3. After the lockdown did you adjust your messaging?
4. What has been the most difficult challenge you've faced as you market to your customers?
5. Has this affected your department or outputs?
6. What have you seen is important to customers now? Is this different than before?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Consumer →

1. Before the pandemic can you walk me through what your purchasing process looked like?
    a. Did you have a preference for online or in person?
2. During the lockdown how would you describe your purchasing habits?
    a. If there was a change what was this change like for you?
3. After the lockdown and restrictions what were your habits like?
    a. Did you have the same preference to technology as before?
4. How did you evaluate products? What was important to you before?
    a. What does this look like now?
5. Have you made any direct changes to your purchases or criteria for an item?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your consumer behavior?

Appendix B: The exhibits below show the prescreening questions for the marketing and sales respondents taking the surveys that were distributed on LinkedIn.

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Have you been in the marketing profession or field (marketing, digital marketing or social media work) at least since October 2019?

Yes

No

→

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Have you been in the sales profession or field (BDR, BDO, SGM, account executive or a sales manager at some level) at least since October 2019?

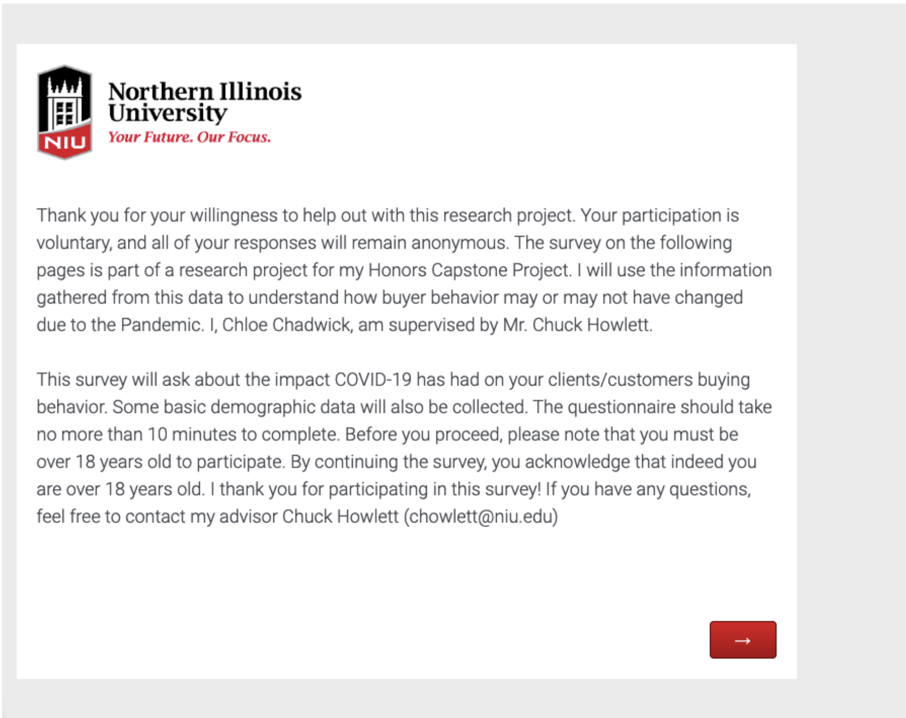
Yes

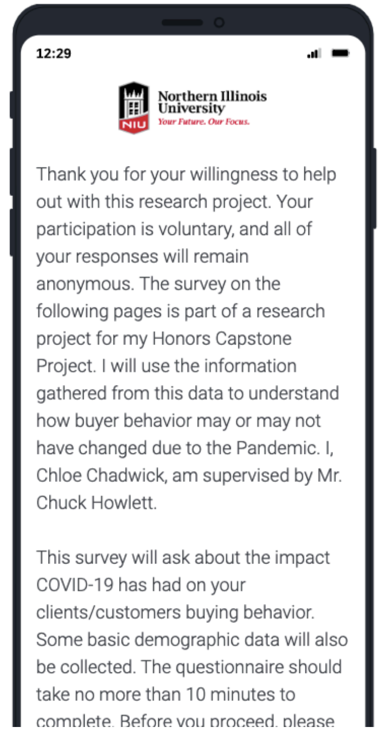
No

→

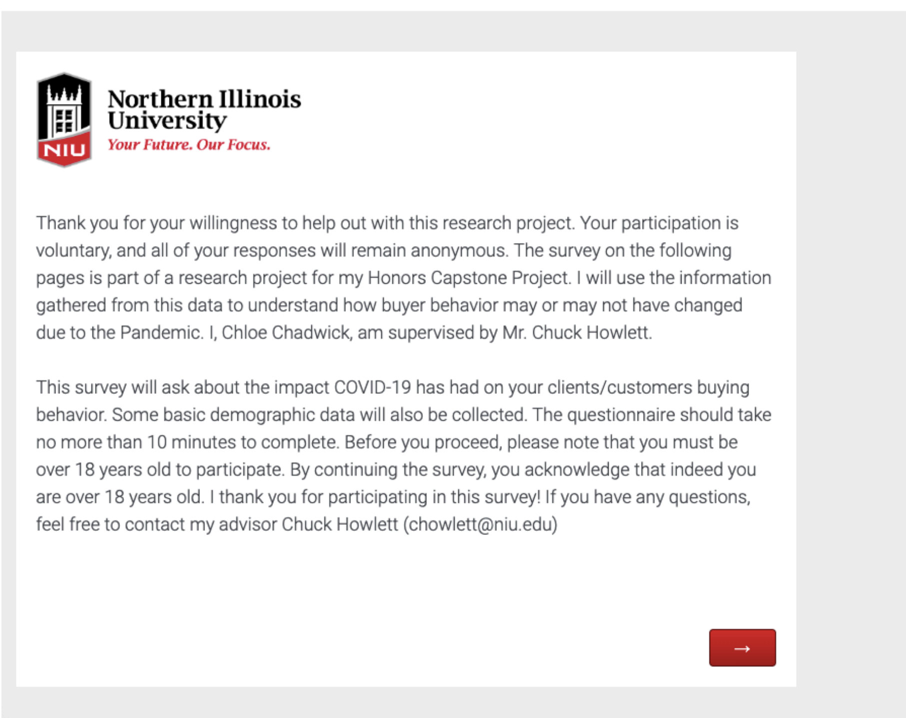
Appendix C: This shows the introduction text each survey type was distributed with. By moving forward with the survey participants agreed they were at least 18 years of age.

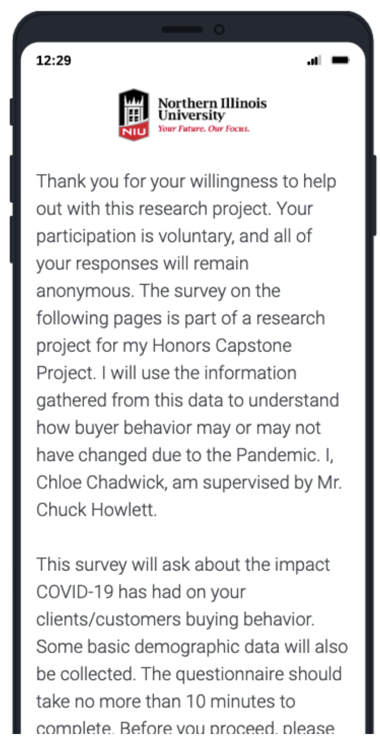
Sales:





Marketing:





Consumer:

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Thank you for your willingness to help out with this research project. Your participation is voluntary, and all of your responses will remain anonymous. The survey on the following pages is part of a research project for my Honors Capstone Project. I will use the information gathered from this data to understand how buyer behavior may or may not have changed due to the Pandemic. I, Chloe Chadwick, am supervised by Mr. Chuck Howlett.

This survey will ask about the impact COVID-19 has had on your buying behavior. Some basic demographic data will also be collected. The questionnaire should take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Before you proceed, please note that you must be over 18 years old to participate. By continuing the survey, you acknowledge that indeed you are over 18 years old. I thank you for participating in this survey! If you have any questions, feel free to contact my advisor Chuck Howlett (chowlett@niu.edu)

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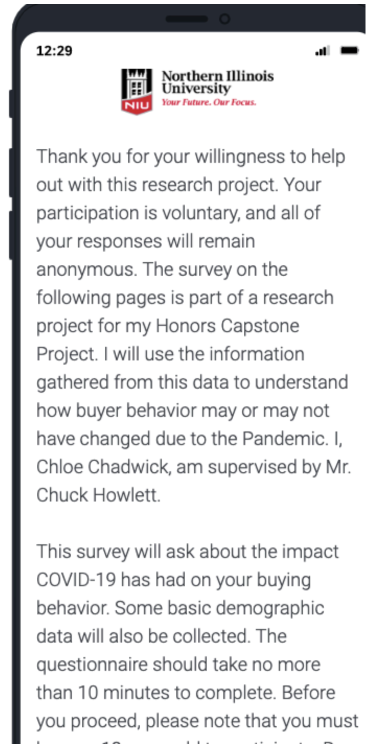
Powered by Qualtrics



12:29

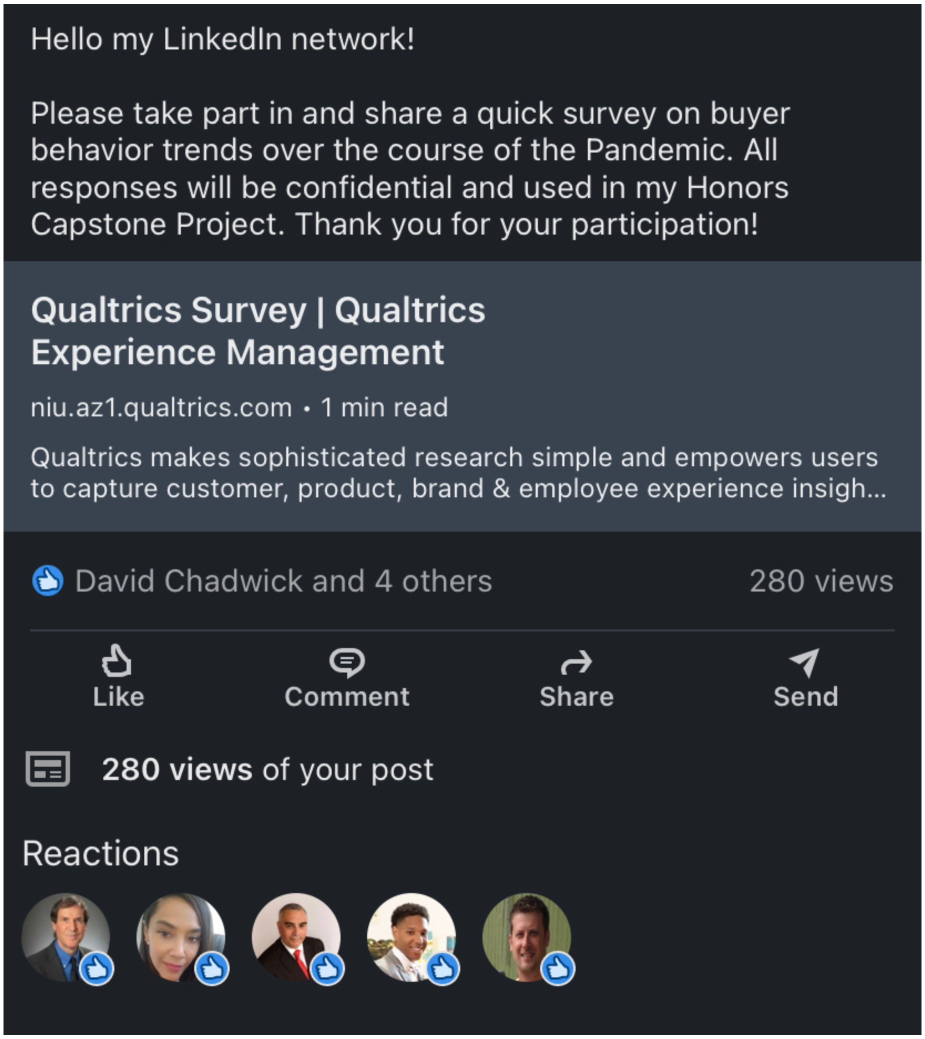
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Thank you for your willingness to help out with this research project. Your participation is voluntary, and all of your responses will remain anonymous. The survey on the following pages is part of a research project for my Honors Capstone Project. I will use the information gathered from this data to understand how buyer behavior may or may not have changed due to the Pandemic. I, Chloe Chadwick, am supervised by Mr. Chuck Howlett.

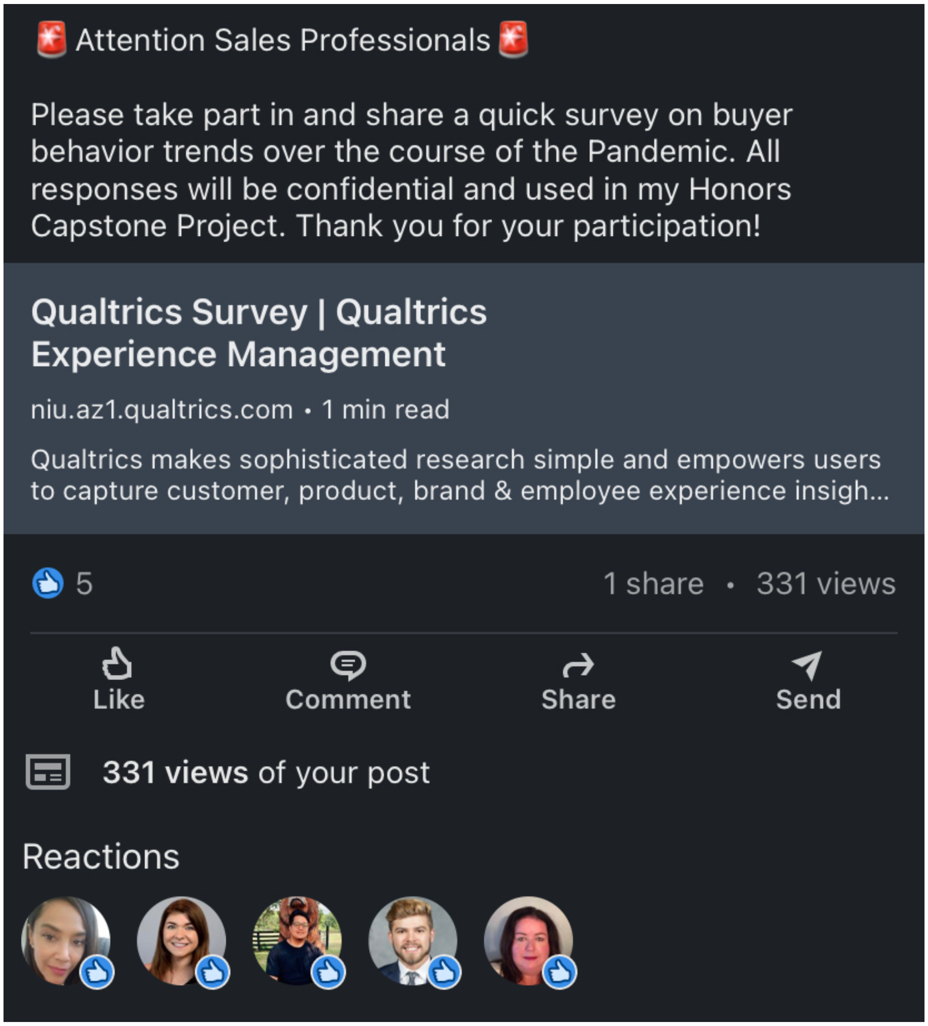
This survey will ask about the impact COVID-19 has had on your buying behavior. Some basic demographic data will also be collected. The questionnaire should take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Before you proceed, please note that you must

Appendix D: Below are the LinkedIn social media posts that each survey was initially sent out to on March 24th, 2022.

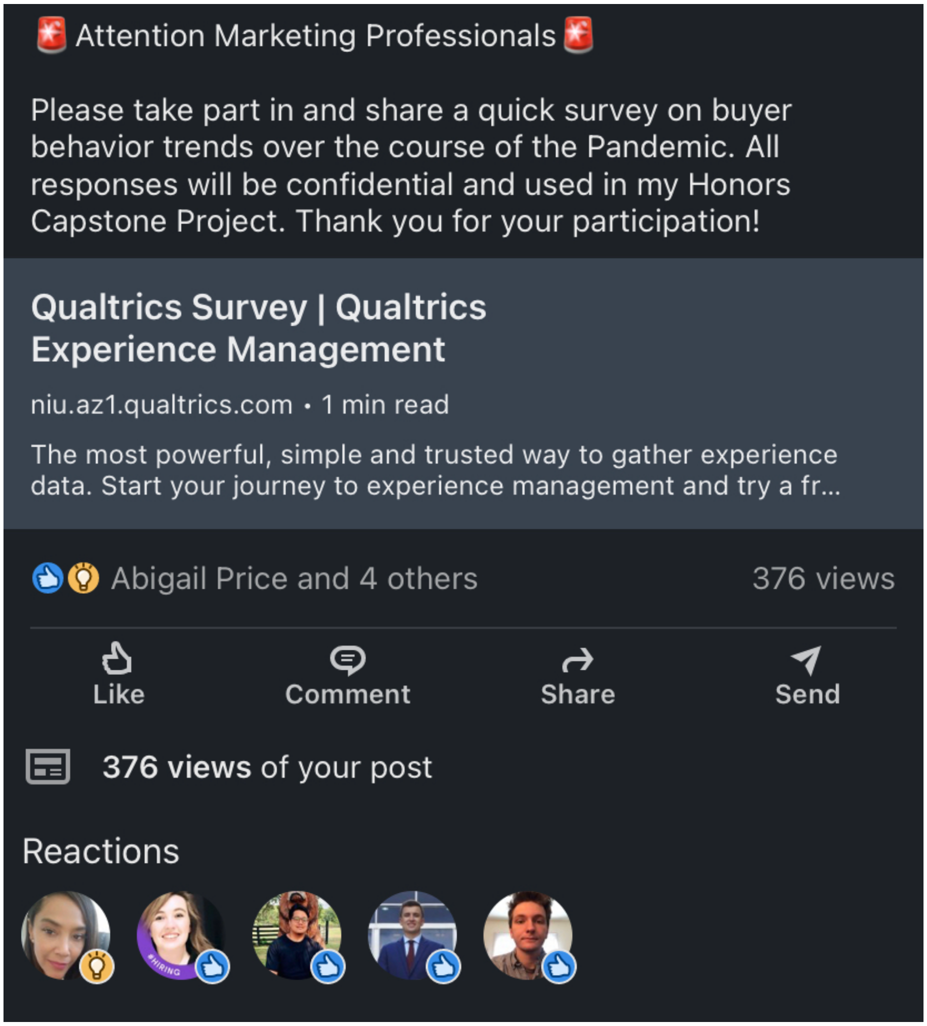
Consumers:



Sales:


Attention Sales Professionals
Please take part in and share a quick survey on buyer behavior trends over the course of the Pandemic. All responses will be confidential and used in my Honors Capstone Project. Thank you for your participation!
Qualtrics Survey | Qualtrics Experience Management
niu.az1.qualtrics.com • 1 min read
Qualtrics makes sophisticated research simple and empowers users to capture customer, product, brand & employee experience insigh...
5
1 share • 331 views
Like
Comment
Share
Send
331 views of your post
Reactions

Marketing:


Attention Marketing Professionals
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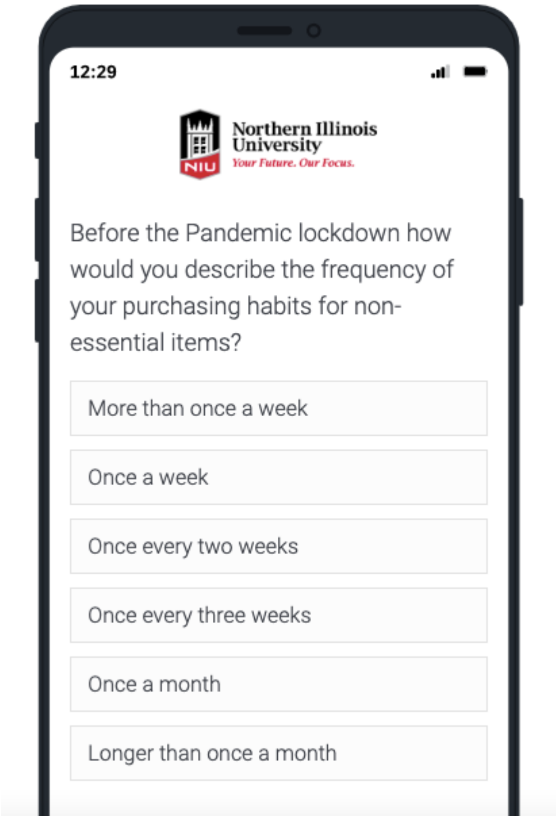
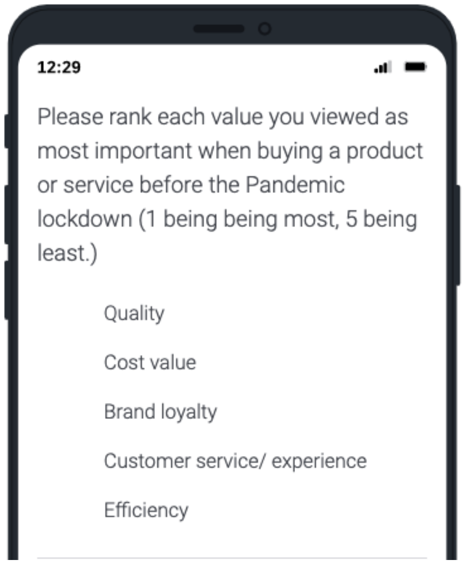
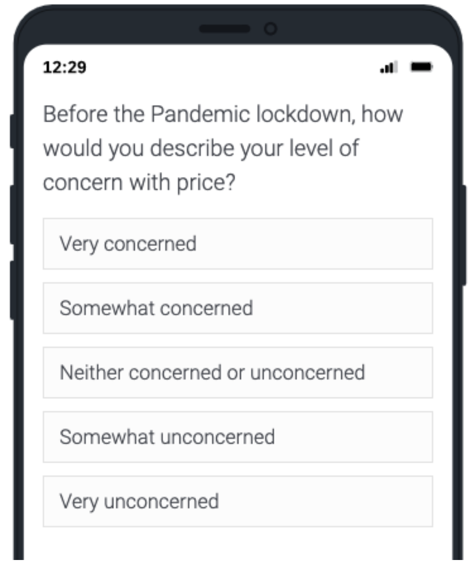
Qualtrics Survey | Qualtrics Experience Management
niu.az1.qualtrics.com • 1 min read
The most powerful, simple and trusted way to gather experience data. Start your journey to experience management and try a fr...
Abigail Price and 4 others
376 views
Like
Comment
Share
Send
376 views of your post
Reactions
#HIRING

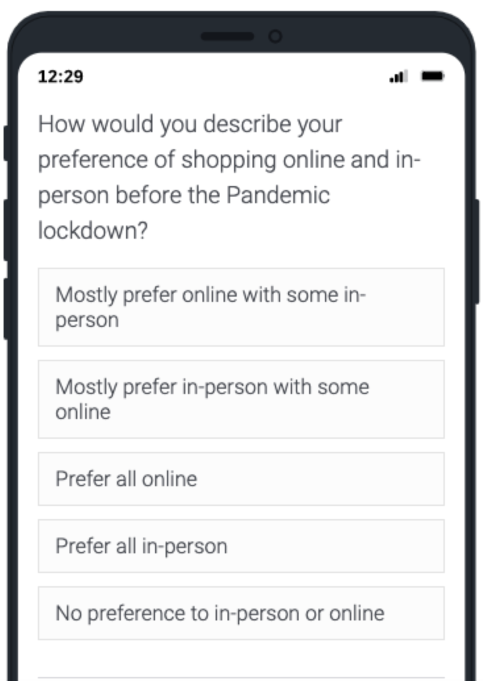
Appendix E: This appendix includes the entirety of each survey as the respondents would have seen them at the time of completion.

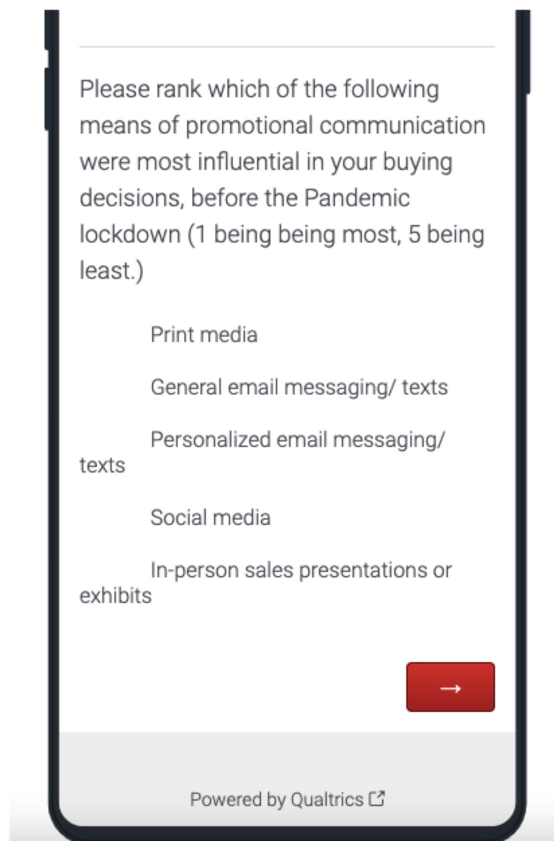
Consumers:

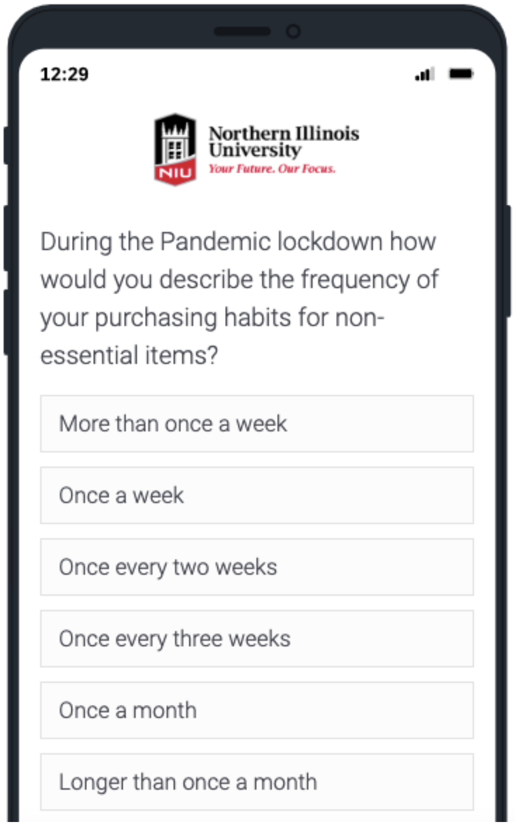












12:29

Northern Illinois University
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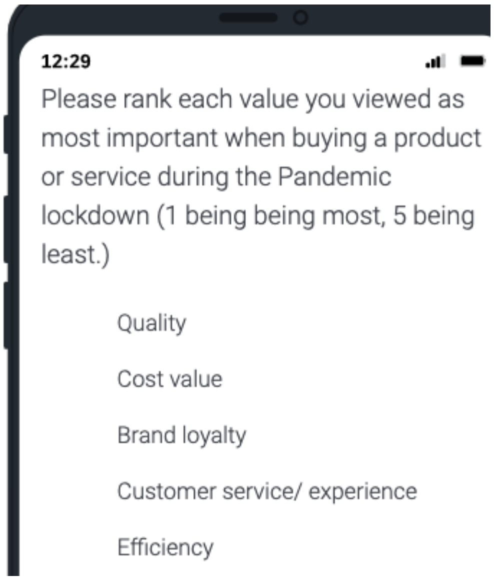
During the Pandemic lockdown how would you describe the frequency of your purchasing habits for non-essential items?

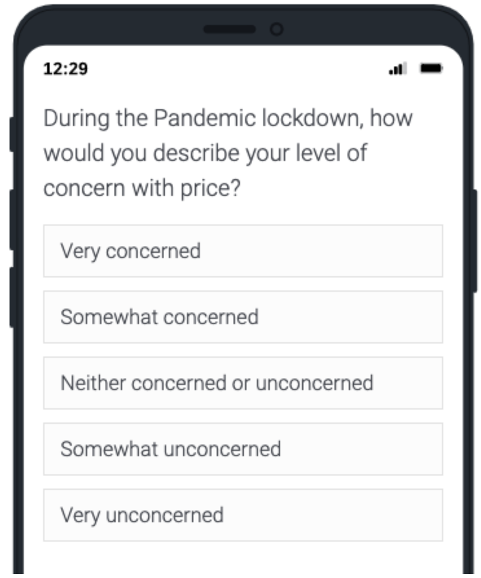
- More than once a week
- Once a week
- Once every two weeks
- Once every three weeks
- Once a month
- Longer than once a month



12:29

Please rank each value you viewed as most important when buying a product or service during the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

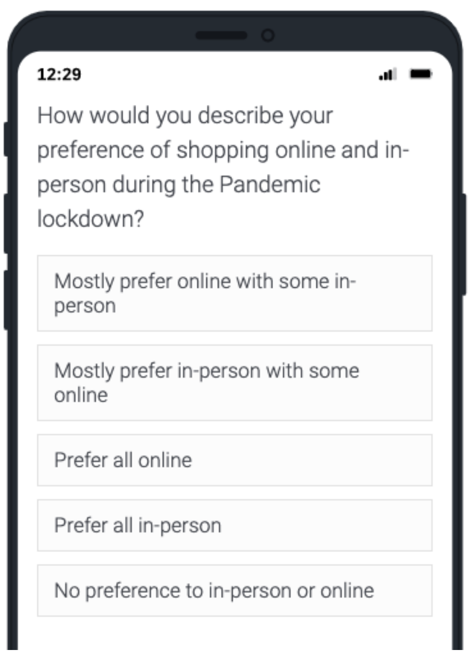
- Quality
- Cost value
- Brand loyalty
- Customer service/ experience
- Efficiency



12:29

During the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your level of concern with price?

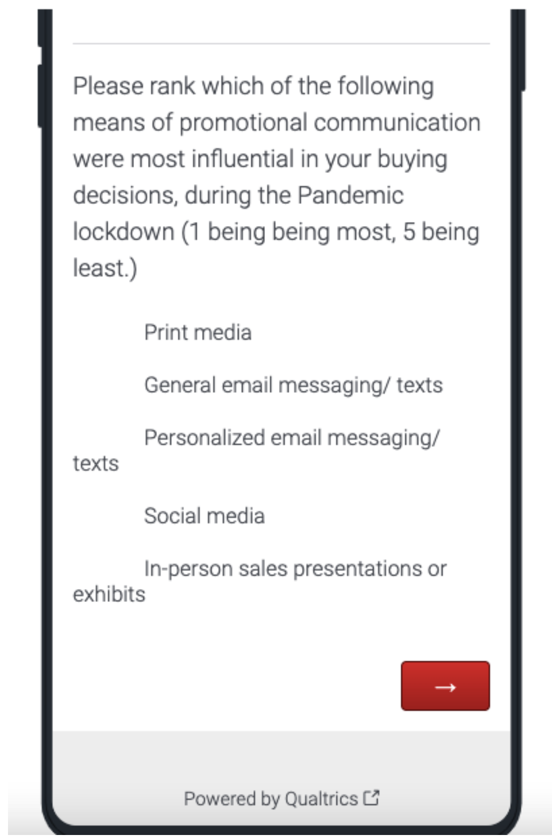
- Very concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Neither concerned or unconcerned
- Somewhat unconcerned
- Very unconcerned



12:29

How would you describe your preference of shopping online and in-person during the Pandemic lockdown?

- Mostly prefer online with some in-person
- Mostly prefer in-person with some online
- Prefer all online
- Prefer all in-person
- No preference to in-person or online



Please rank which of the following means of promotional communication were most influential in your buying decisions, during the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

- Print media
- General email messaging/ texts
- Personalized email messaging/ texts
- Social media
- In-person sales presentations or exhibits

→

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12:29

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

After the Pandemic lockdown how would you describe the frequency of your purchasing habits for non-essential items?

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12:29

Please rank each value you viewed as most important when buying a product or service after the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

Quality

Cost value

Brand loyalty

Customer service/ experience

Efficiency

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- Somewhat concerned
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- Mostly prefer in-person with some online
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- Prefer all in-person
- No preference to in-person or online

12:29

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Print media

General email messaging/ texts

Personalized email messaging/ texts

Social media

In-person sales presentations or exhibits

Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a consumer?

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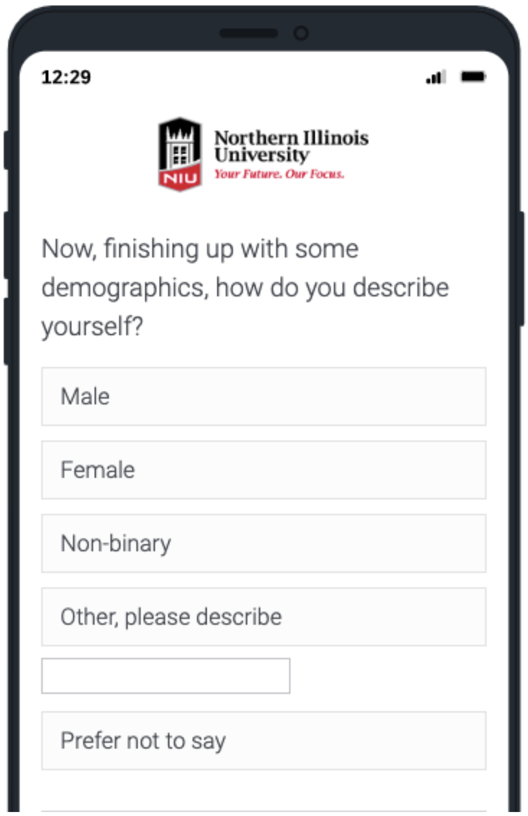
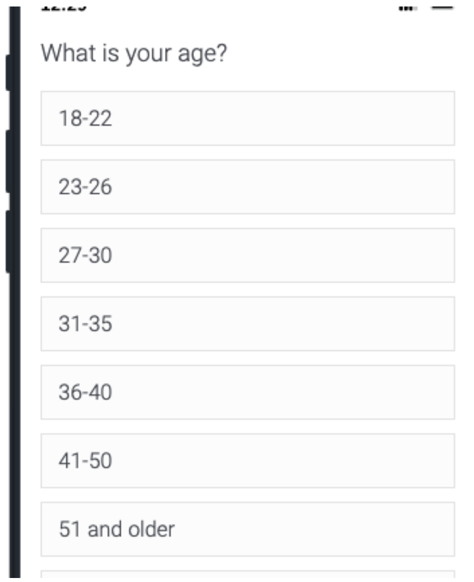
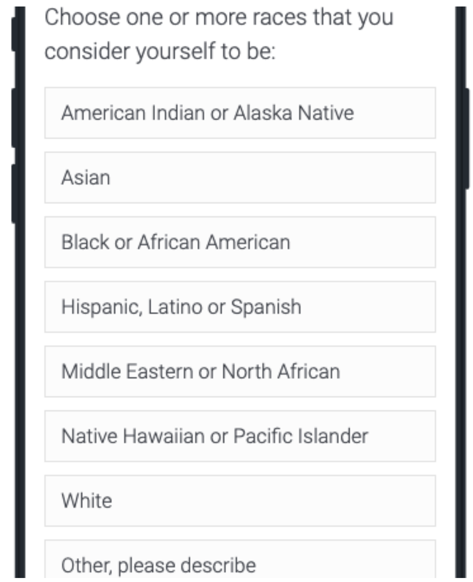
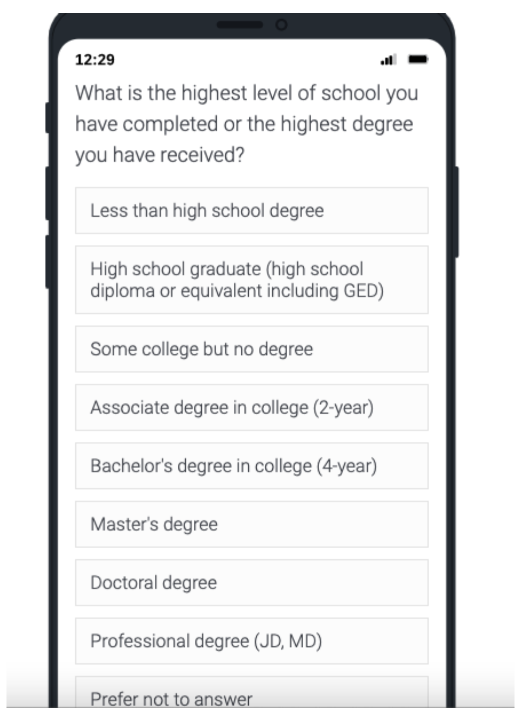
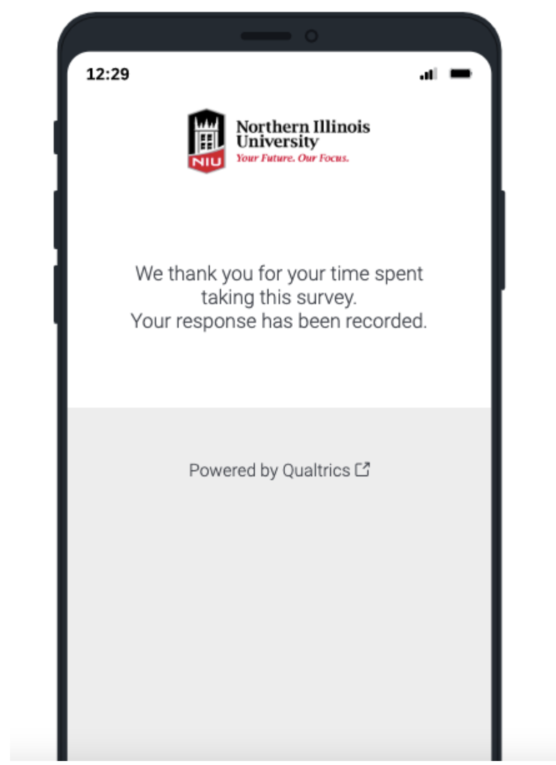

12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
NIU
Now, finishing up with some demographics, how do you describe yourself?
Male
Female
Non-binary
Other, please describe
Prefer not to say


What is your age?
18-22
23-26
27-30
31-35
36-40
41-50
51 and older


Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish
Middle Eastern or North African
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
White
Other, please describe


12:29
What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
Less than high school degree
High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
Some college but no degree
Associate degree in college (2-year)
Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
Master's degree
Doctoral degree
Professional degree (JD, MD)
Prefer not to answer


12:29
Northern Illinois University
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NIU
We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.
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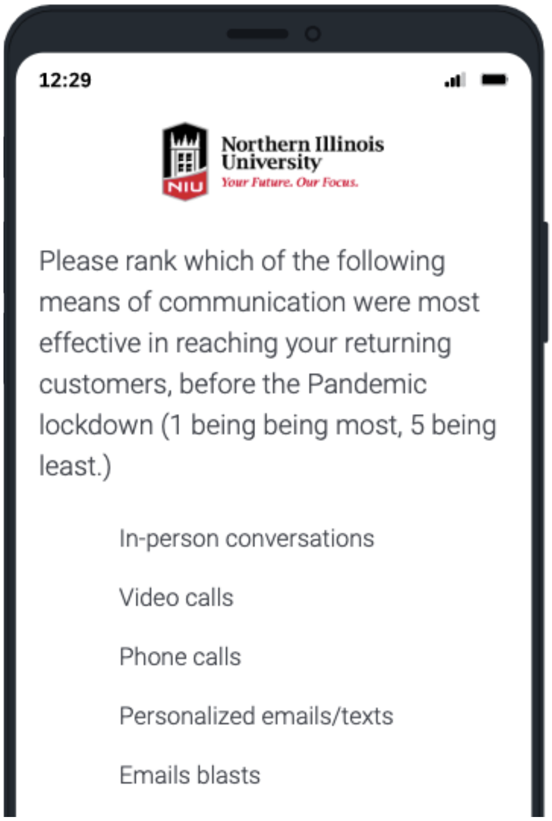
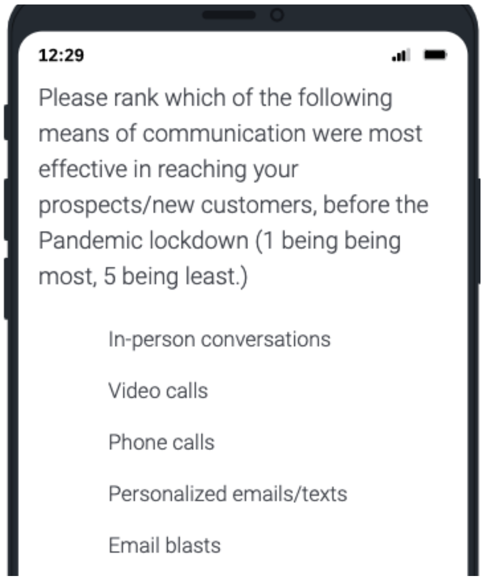
Sales:



12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
NIU
Please rank which of the following means of communication were most effective in reaching your returning customers, before the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)
In-person conversations
Video calls
Phone calls
Personalized emails/texts
Emails blasts



12:29
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Video calls
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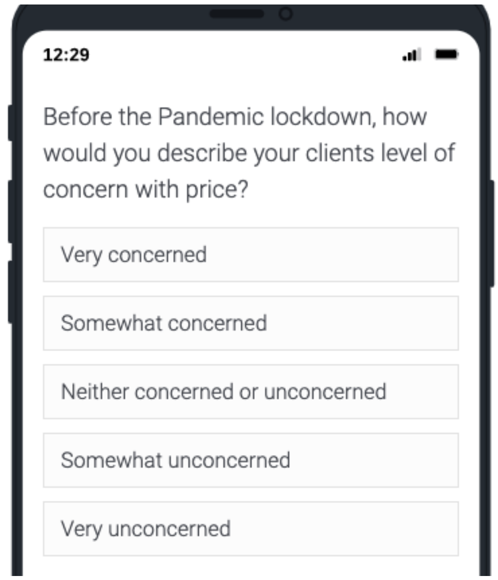
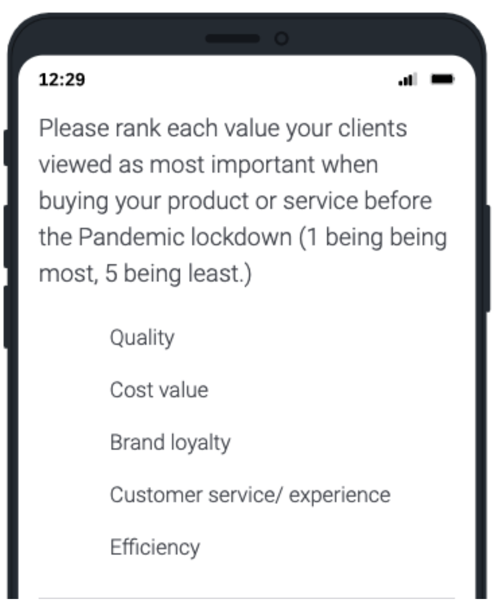
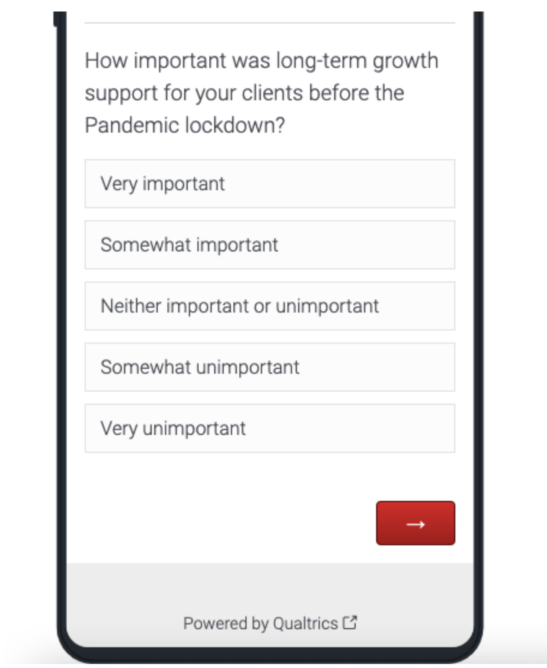


12:29
Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your clients level of concern with price?
Very concerned
Somewhat concerned
Neither concerned or unconcerned
Somewhat unconcerned
Very unconcerned



12:29
Please rank each value your clients viewed as most important when buying your product or service before the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)
Quality
Cost value
Brand loyalty
Customer service/ experience
Efficiency



How important was long-term growth support for your clients before the Pandemic lockdown?
Very important
Somewhat important
Neither important or unimportant
Somewhat unimportant
Very unimportant
→
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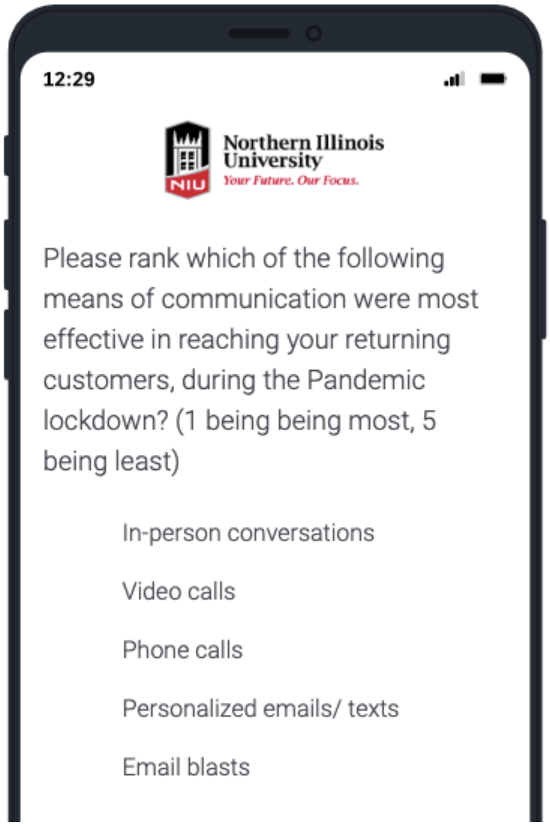
12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
NIU
Please rank which of the following means of communication were most effective in reaching your returning customers, during the Pandemic lockdown? (1 being being most, 5 being least)
In-person conversations
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Phone calls
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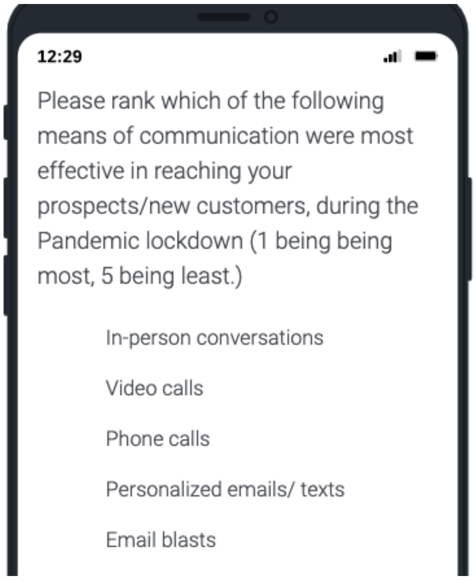
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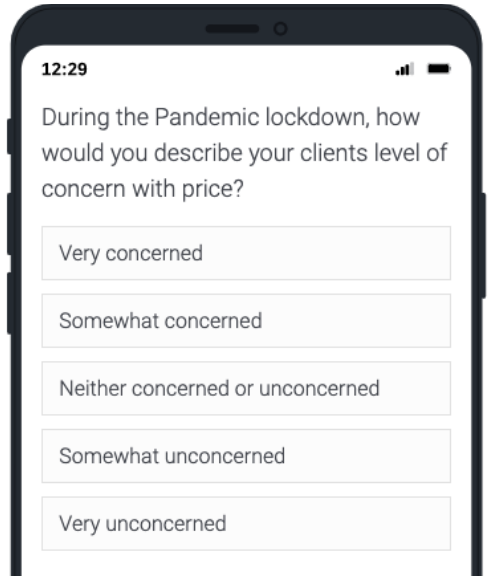
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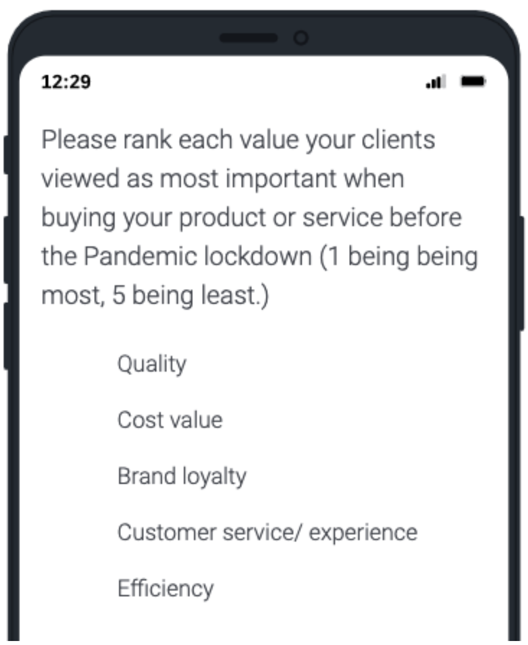
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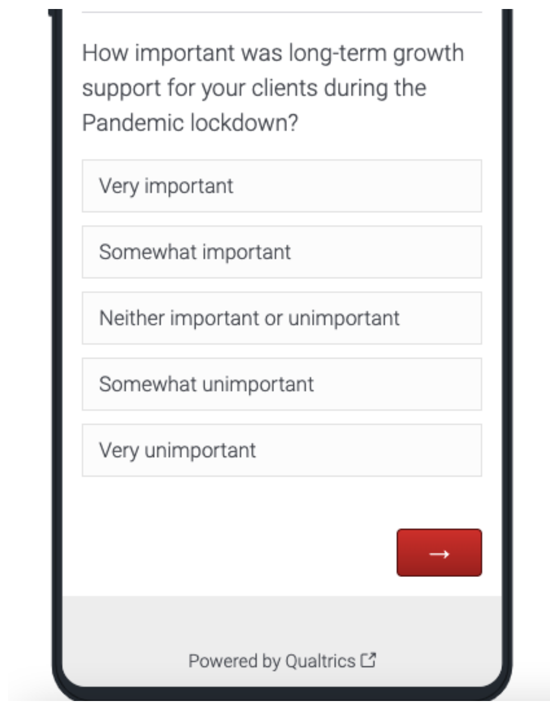
Brand loyalty
Customer service/ experience
Efficiency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Very unimportant
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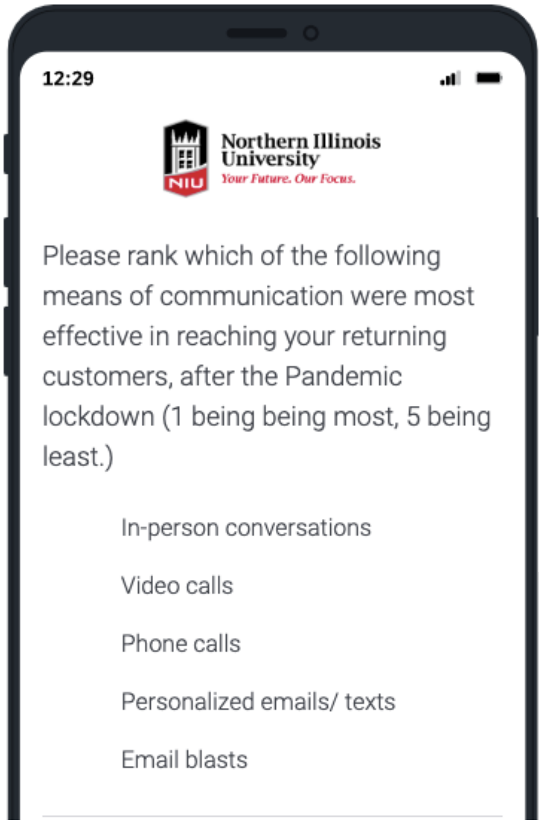
Powered by Qualtrics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Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Please rank which of the following means of communication were most effective in reaching your returning customers, after the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

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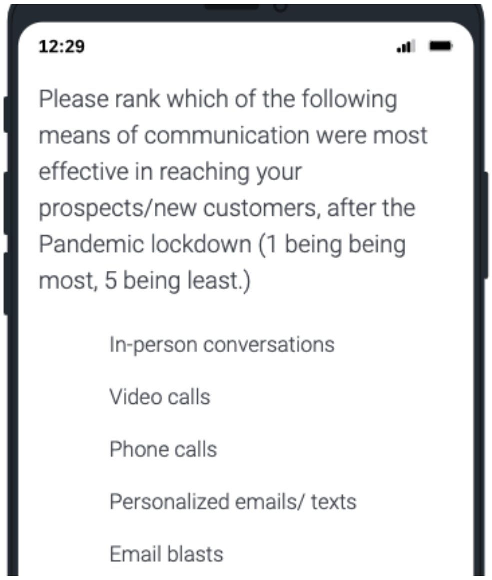
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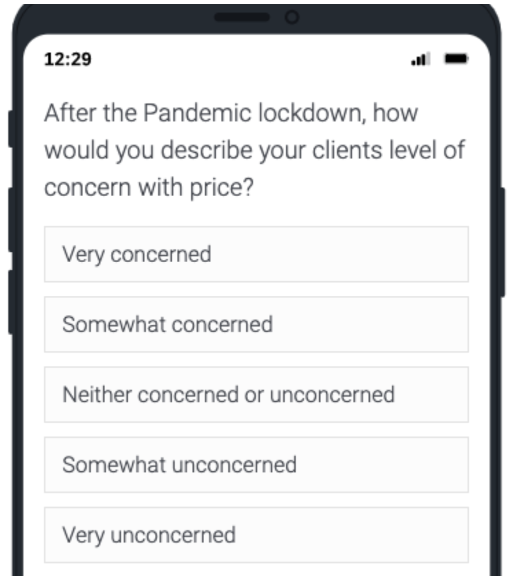
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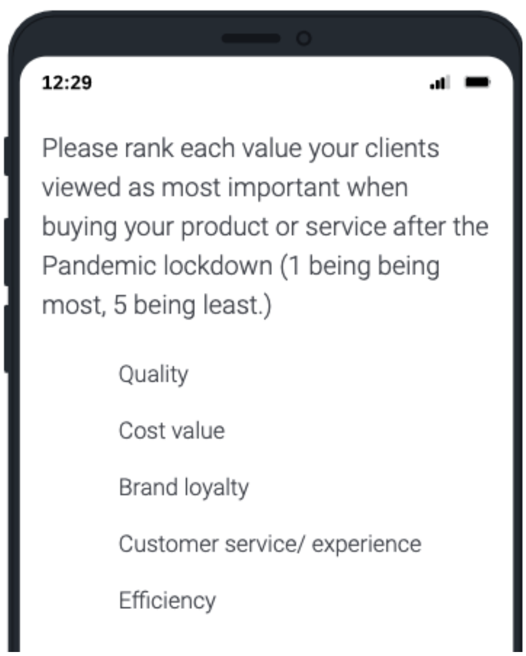
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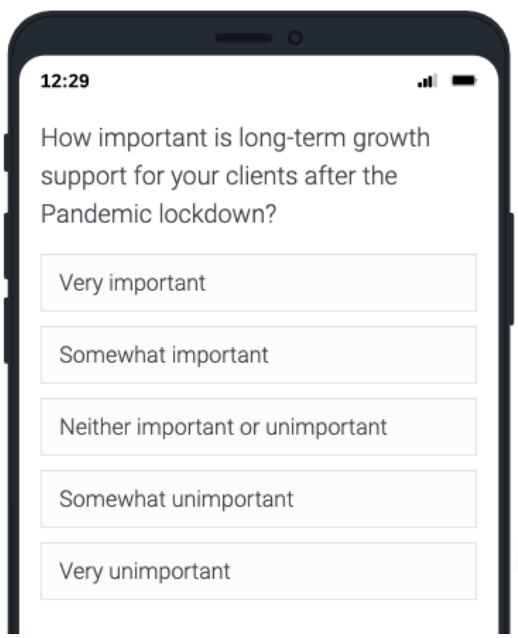
- Brand loyalty
- Customer service/ experience
- Efficiency


12:29

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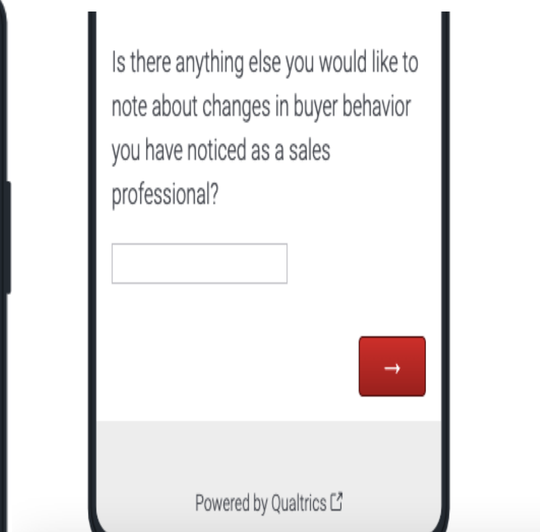
Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a sales professional?

→

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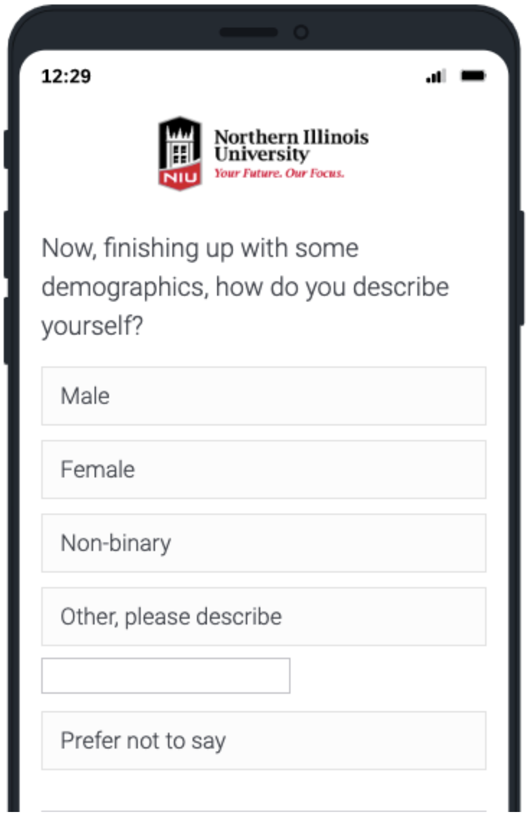
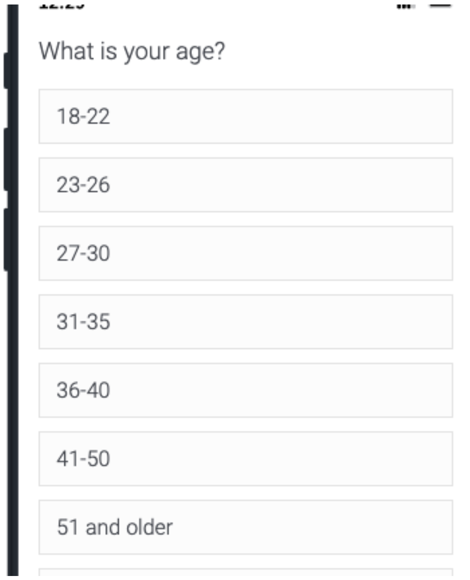
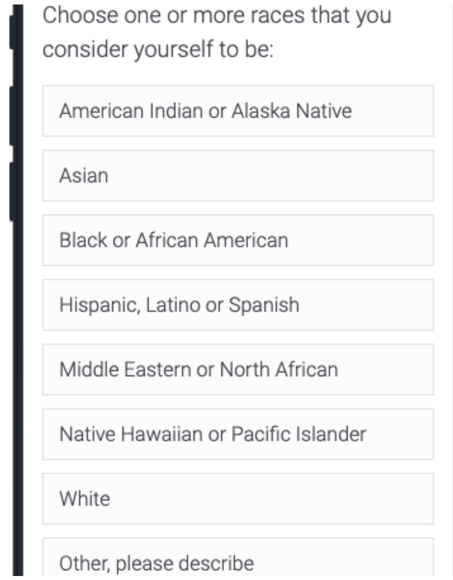
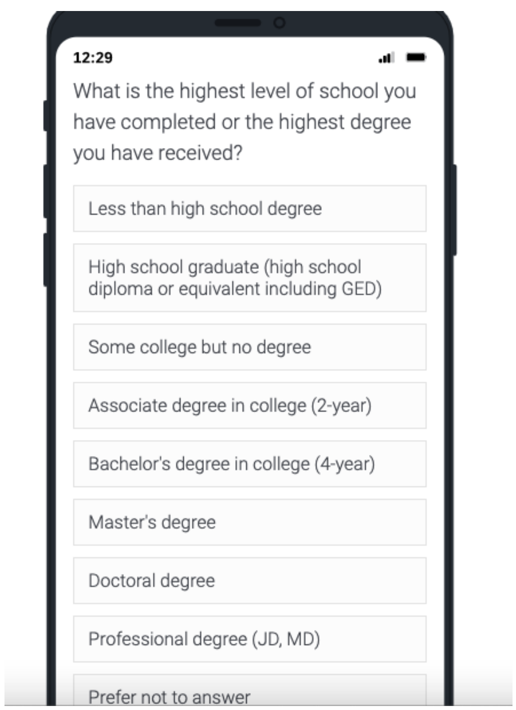

12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
Now, finishing up with some demographics, how do you describe yourself?
Male
Female
Non-binary
Other, please describe
Prefer not to say


What is your age?
18-22
23-26
27-30
31-35
36-40
41-50
51 and older


Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish
Middle Eastern or North African
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
White
Other, please describe


12:29
What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
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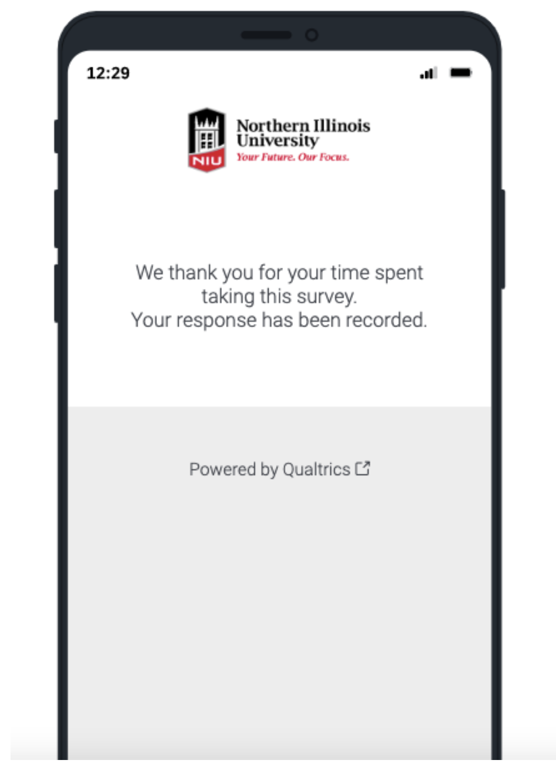
High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
Some college but no degree
Associate degree in college (2-year)
Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
Master's degree
Doctoral degree
Professional degree (JD, MD)
Prefer not to answer


12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.
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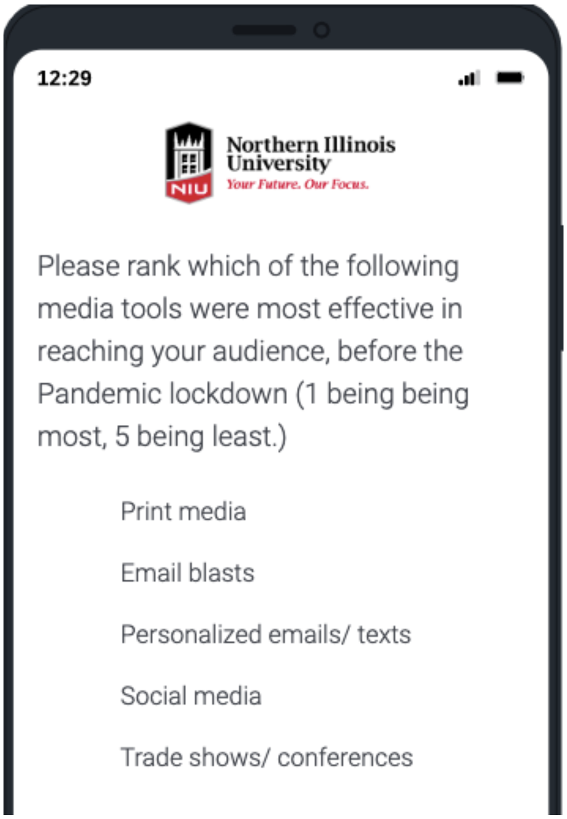
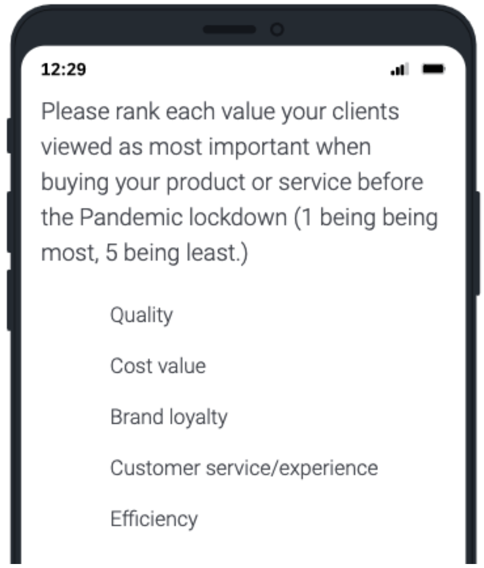
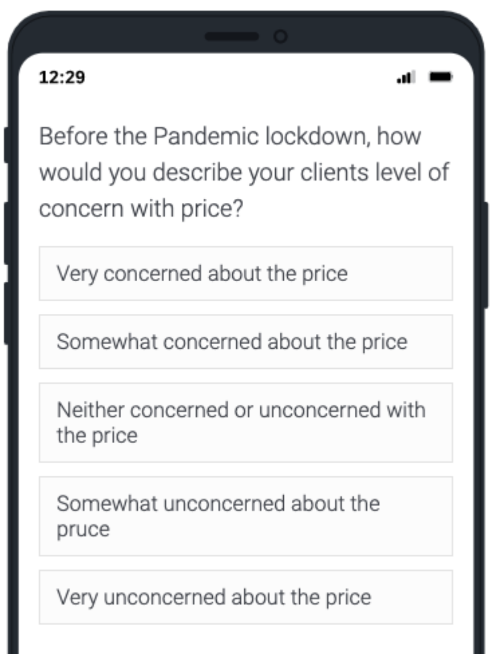
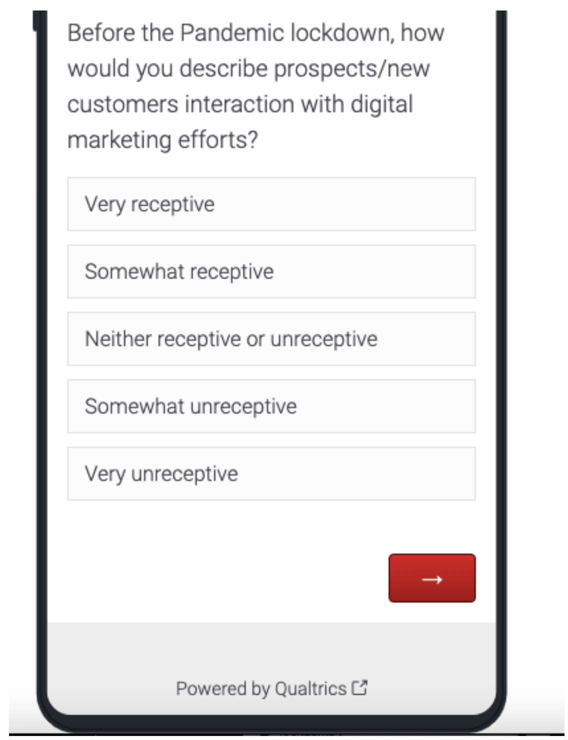
Marketing:


12:29
Northern Illinois University
NIU
Your Future. Our Focus.
Please rank which of the following media tools were most effective in reaching your audience, before the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)
Print media
Email blasts
Personalized emails/ texts
Social media
Trade shows/ conferences


12:29
Please rank each value your clients viewed as most important when buying your product or service before the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)
Quality
Cost value
Brand loyalty
Customer service/experience
Efficiency


12:29
Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your clients level of concern with price?
Very concerned about the price
Somewhat concerned about the price
Neither concerned or unconcerned with the price
Somewhat unconcerned about the pruce
Very unconcerned about the price


Before the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe prospects/new customers interaction with digital marketing efforts?
Very receptive
Somewhat receptive
Neither receptive or unreceptive
Somewhat unreceptive
Very unreceptive
→
Powered by Qualtrics

12:29

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Please rank which of the following media tools were most effective in reaching your audience, during the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

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Email blasts

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Social media

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12:29

Please rank each value your clients viewed as most important when buying your product or service during the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

Quality

Cost value

Brand loyalty

Customer service/ experience

Efficiency

12:29

During the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your clients level of concern with price?

Very concerned

Somewhat concerned

Neither concerned or unconcerned

Somewhat unconcerned

Very unconcerned

12:29

During the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe prospects/new customers interaction with digital marketing efforts?

Very receptive

Somewhat receptive

Neither receptive or unreceptive

Somewhat unreceptive

Very unreceptive

Did you made any changes to your marketing media approach during the Pandemic lockdown to best reach customers? If so, please briefly explain.

Yes

No

→

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12:29

Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.

Please rank which of the following media tools were most effective in reaching your audience, after the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

- Print media
- Email blasts
- Personalized emails/ texts
- Social media
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12:29

Please rank each value your clients viewed as most important when buying your product or service after the Pandemic lockdown (1 being being most, 5 being least.)

- Quality
- Cost value
- Brand loyalty
- Customer service/ expertise
- Efficiency

12:29

After the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe your clients level of concern with price?

- Very concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Neither concerned or unconcerned
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12:29

After the Pandemic lockdown, how would you describe prospects/new customers interaction with digital marketing efforts?

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Have you made any changes to your marketing media approach after the Pandemic lockdown to best reach customers? If so, please briefly explain.

- Yes
- No

Is there anything else you would like to note about changes in buyer behavior you have noticed as a marketer?

→

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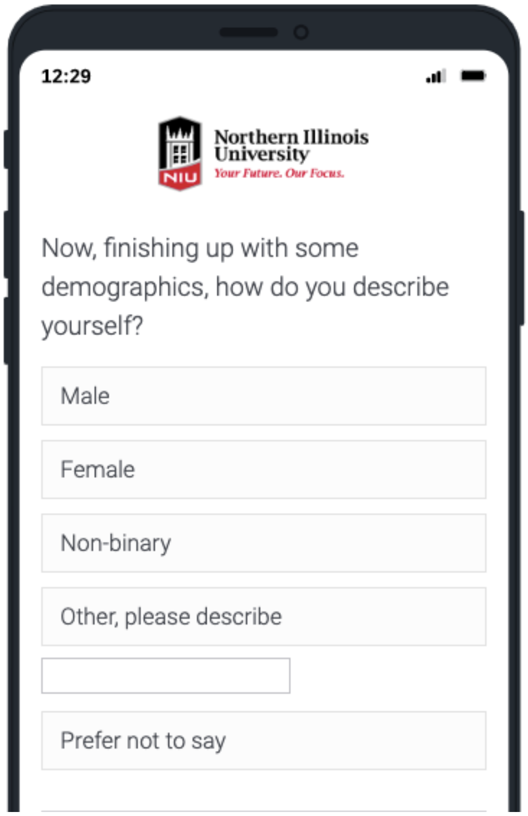
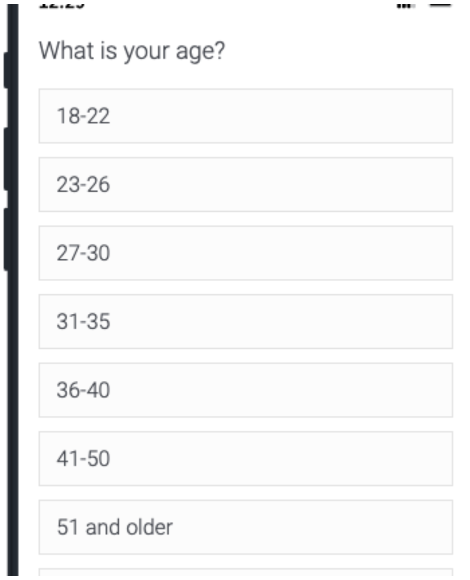
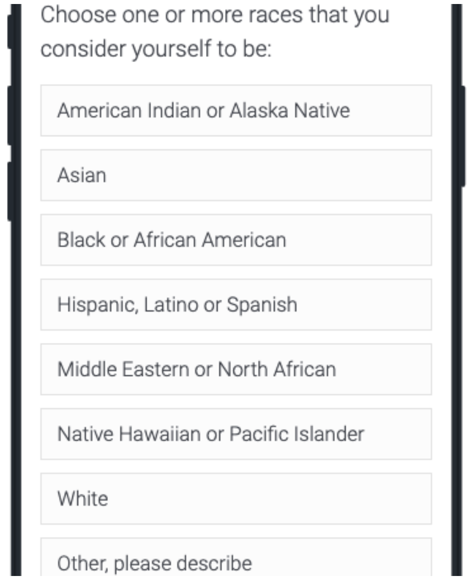
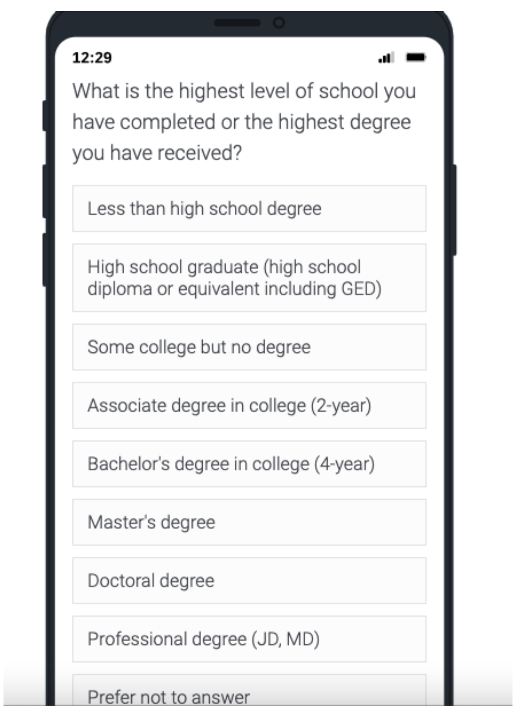
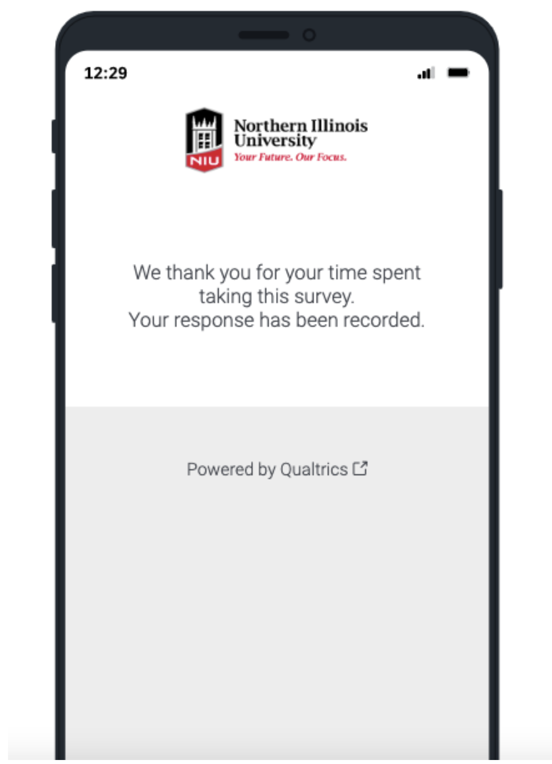

12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
NIU
Now, finishing up with some demographics, how do you describe yourself?
Male
Female
Non-binary
Other, please describe
Prefer not to say


What is your age?
18-22
23-26
27-30
31-35
36-40
41-50
51 and older


Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish
Middle Eastern or North African
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
White
Other, please describe


12:29
What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
Less than high school degree
High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
Some college but no degree
Associate degree in college (2-year)
Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
Master's degree
Doctoral degree
Professional degree (JD, MD)
Prefer not to answer


12:29
Northern Illinois University
Your Future. Our Focus.
NIU
We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.
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