



COVID - 19

*UM analysis
April 2020*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We stand with you.

The disruption the Coronavirus is creating is on the increase in EMEA and it is certainly creating a ripple of nerves across the advertising industry. Consumers are travelling less, events are cancelled, there is disrupted supply chains and delivery, reduced retail sales and cancellations of many forms of public entertainment.

In these distressing times it is important that we rally around a sense of community and be the beacons of optimism. We are hopeful that in the near future Covid-19 will pass and we can look forward to the recovery period, which will come. Best thing we can do in the short term is maintain an audience first approach, be fast, flexible and agile to cater to the shift in media consumption and entertainment sources and most importantly prepare a smart and solid action plan for when life gets back to normal.

Our thoughts are with all those who are affected and we are here if you need any support.

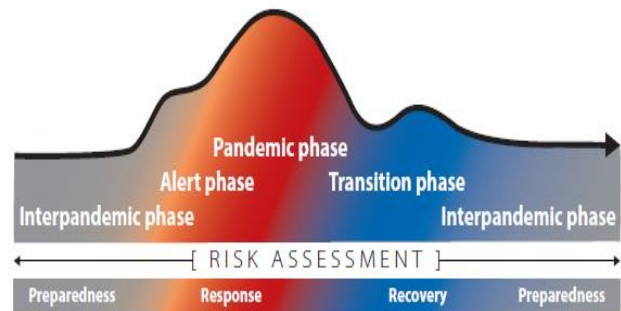
All our best,

INSPIRED UM TEAM

THE CONTINUUM OF PANDEMIC PHASES

Figure one shows the World Health Organization's "Continuum of Pandemic Phases," displayed as a distribution curve of the hypothetical global average of pandemic cases over time based on a continued pandemic risk assessment.

Figure 1. The continuum of pandemic phases^a

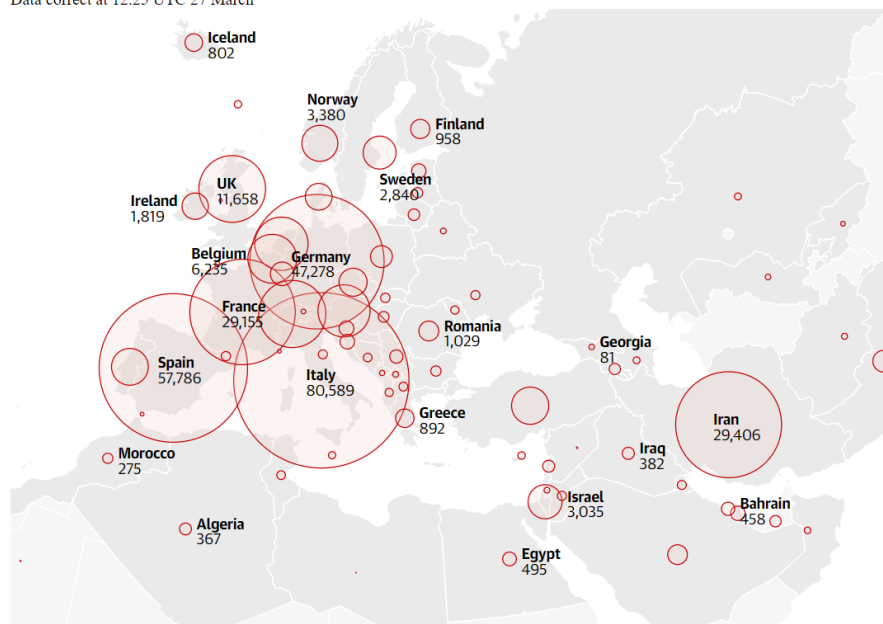


^a This continuum is according to a "global average" of cases, over time, based on continued risk assessment and consistent with the broader emergency risk management continuum.

A PANDEMIC WILL ALWAYS FOLLOW WITH A RECOVERY PHASE. WHILST WE NEED TO PREPARE FOR THE SHORT TERM THE LONG RUN WILL REMAIN JUST AS IMPORTANT

Confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Europe, Middle East and North Africa

Data correct at 12.25 UTC 27 March



Guardian graphic. Sources: Johns Hopkins CSSE, WHO, CDC, NHC and Dingxiangyuan

Source: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

WHAT COVID-19 MEANS FOR BRANDS



Maintain consumer First mindset

- Important to maintain a sense of optimism with sensitive brand messaging
- Reflect local consumers sentiment, emotional context and cultural norms with a utility approach
- Consider the context of media placements
- Maintain authenticity & support in messaging and content



Think short term But don't forget Long-term vision

- Have a short term calibration plan but also keep the long term vision in focus
- Responsibly maintain ad spend to win hearts and minds longer-term and SOV
- Continue mass awareness media activities but with the right message for the climate



Focus on digital & Social but TV still key

- Ensure right content and assets are available (mobile, vertical, short form, video)
- Utilize TV, video, streaming and online entertainment advertising opportunities to create connections with bored stay at home consumers
- Ensure all online communication is functioning adequately to respond to consumers in a timely manner and foster community



Accelerate Commerce Capabilities

- Invest in advertising, sampling and partnerships with food service and home delivery providers
- Be cognizant in not appearing to be capitalizing from panic buying
- Explore opportunities for social commerce



Maintain digital Effectiveness & quality

- Maintain likeability
- Keep messaging focussed
- Keep branding prominent
- Provide new information
- Stay relevant and targeted
- Listen, track and measure sentiment



Prepare for the Recovery now

- Capture the resurgence of demand
- Prepare for physical & mental availability
- Ready promotions and incentives
- Keep investments flexible to shift with the changing tide

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CHINA LEARNINGS

What we can learn from the epi-centre

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SECTOR IMPACT

Explore the sectors that will be hardest hit by Covid-19

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What is the impact that is expected on the advertising market

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BRAND RESPONSE

How brands and the community are responding to the pandemic

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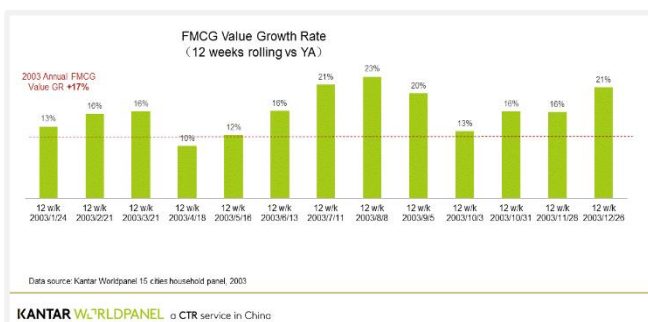
BRAND SAFETY

UM recommendations for brand safety



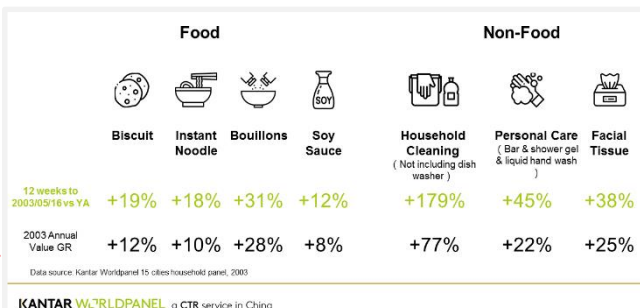
LESSONS FROM CHINA

- Prepare for short term, but maintain long term vision
- Ensure your creative is appropriate for the times and is inline with social / E-Comm strategies
- The recovery phase will be just as important as the response phase

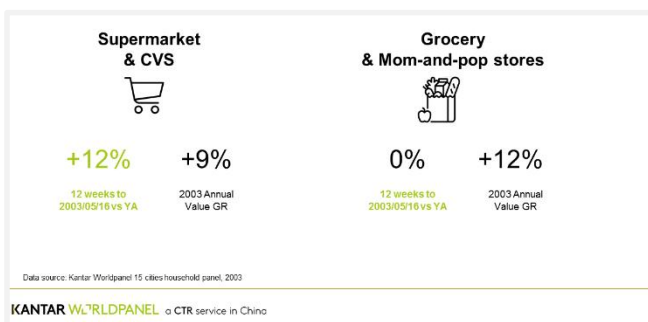


The initial shock for SARS in 2003 lead the way to explosive growth in recovery

It also resulted in longer term gains for in home essentials



With hyper local shopping as the only alternative to venture outside



CHINA AD SPENDING FORECASTS 2020

- Annual Ad growth rate predicted to fall from 7% to 3.9% (but also based on seeing slower performance in 2019)
- E-comm advertising to grow by 17.7%
- Social media to grow by 22.2%

CHINA COVID-19 RESPONSE 2020

- 47% of businesses significantly or severely impacted (but only 7% had ceased advertising)
- 22% had already changed creative and regional focus
- 14% moving budget from offline to online media

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

- Invest in ecommerce driving tactics but engaging with partners who can keep up with the demand
- Anticipate a shift budgets toward online, mobile and TV from OOH in the short term
- Re-consider short term advertising with travel partners / audiences and switch to short distance providers and local targeting



ECOMMERCE GROWS BUT BUCKLES UNDER PRESSURE



Vegetable deliveries increased 600% YOY over Lunar period



Online grocery sales grew 215% YoY between Jan - Feb

Demand is high, supply and fulfilment is limited.

- Increased pressure for online orders
- Concerns around contamination have led to contactless delivery
- Operating challenges and transport routes disrupted



The operating challenges change with the hour, and of course the path of the virus is unknown, making it very difficult to provide precise estimates of impact



Jon Moeller, CFO, P&G

INCREASE IN ONLINE & LINEAR TV CONSUMPTION



Daily time spent on mobile internet went from 6.1 hours to 7.3 hours



Weibo saw usage grow by 31%, TikTok by 102%



TV Viewership grew after Lunar New Year – when there would normally be a dip

Consumers fight boredom at home

- Movie theatres and theme parks shut down
- Cities go into lock down, traffic diverted
- People not travelling, staying at home
- Although staying at home they are also trying to spend less money



Despite a strong term, we are actively impacted from the budget cutback from advertisers whose businesses have been disrupted, following the coronavirus outbreak in China



FEI CAO, VP, WEIBO

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

TRAVEL IMPACTED BY OUTBREAK



Lunar New Year travel dropped 50%

One way ticket to nowhere

- The travel industry comes to a halt as major cities are put on lockdown
- Airlines cancelled flights in and out of China

“ *China's outbound and domestic travel markets won't fully recover until about 2023* ”
[TourismEconomics.com](https://www.tourism-economics.com)

WHAT CAN BRANDS DO

- Focus on building brand equity to support long term goals
- Show support in a community focussed grassroots ways
- Focus on demand opportunities – particularly around entertainment



Between Jan 20th & Feb 2nd, major influencers on popular video platforms were seeing a large increase in new followers.



Governmental organization and state run media accounts as well as TV & Radio experienced the most growth as people used these for the latest updates on the virus.



Comedy, Gaming, Food and Celebrity videos also saw an uptick in growth.

Additionally, Content related to health & fitness, children's games and crafts, working from home, gaming, live streaming, online learning apps all saw a massive uptick in users.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

Continue to build brand equity through the human connections you have. This is not a selling opportunity but an opportunity to be authentic and optimistic.

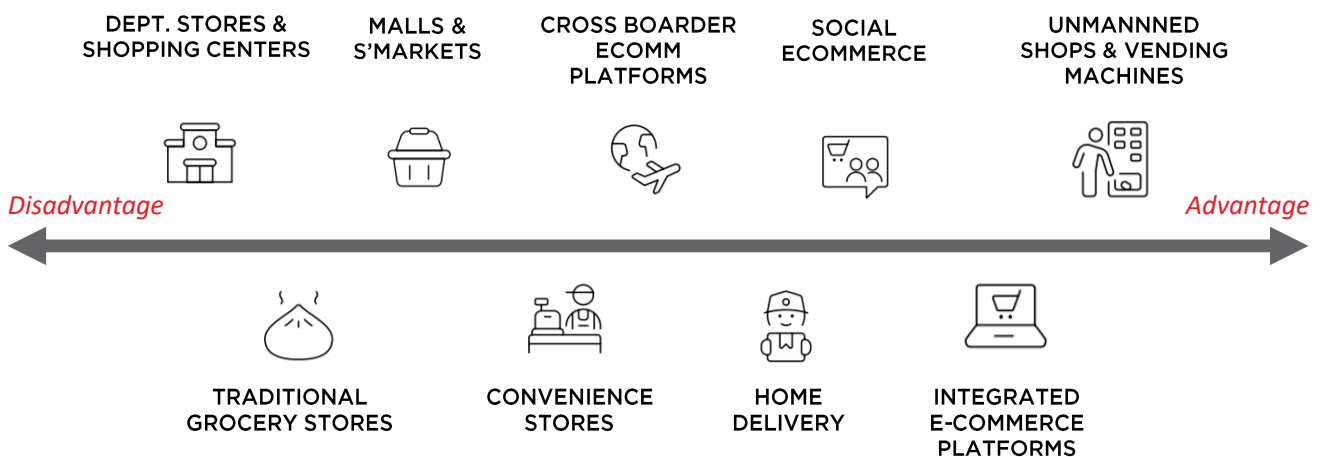
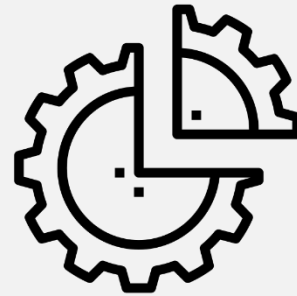
Through donations and good will news platforms and PR provide the best opportunity to show how your company is supporting the cause

With internet usage up focus on how you can facilitate or create ties with demand industries – particularly during times of quarantine! education, fitness, games and more relevant content to beat the inside blues.



RETAIL IMPACT

- Seize the opportunity to accelerate digital transformation
- Strengthen online promotions as well as contactless operations
- Apply digital tools, tech and maximise the utilization of your data

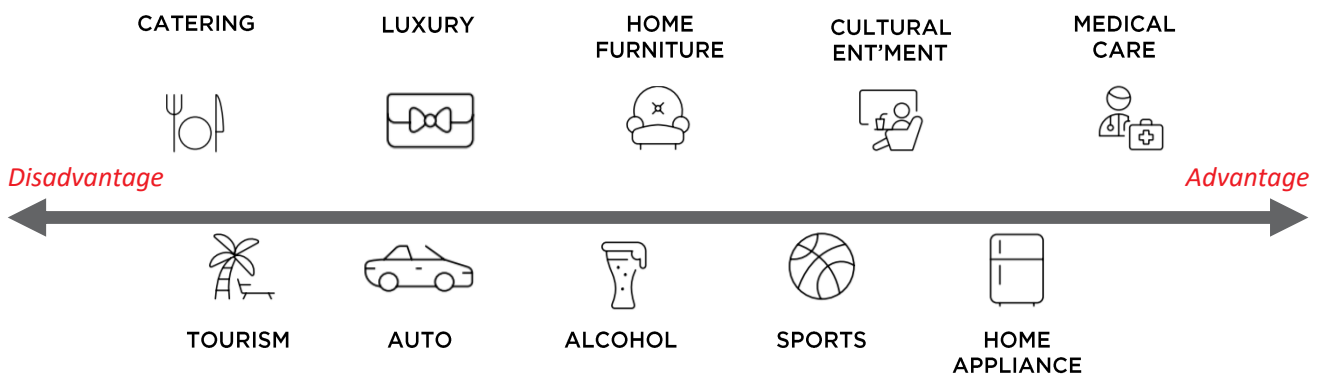


KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Maintain best practice and close relationships with online distributors
- Look after loyalty programs and ensure optimum utilization of data to personalize products and promote programs
- Ensure all communication technology is functioning to respond to consumer demands and questions (chatbots, apps, call centres)
- Create immersive online shopping experiences
- Push services / products through owned and 3rd party apps
- Reduce OOH advertising - particularly in shopping malls
- Maintain in store promotion and advertising
- Maintain advertising and authentic creative in local convenience stores where emotional ties of community are still preserved
- Consider sampling with local online ordering and pick up in store services
- Increase visibility on internet based purchasing platforms
- Post outbreak there will be more enterprise around vending machines as a sales channel
- Focus on unmanned supermarkets and vending machines that limit human contact
- Increase investment and promotion on home / O2O platforms
- Use social e-comm to unlock the power of a wider network of individuals ready to order online

INDUSTRY IMPACT

- Prepare for consumer mind-set shifts on purchasing habits post epidemic
- Discover opportunities for online cultural entertainment advertising opportunities
- Apply digital tools & tech as well as maximise the utilization of your data

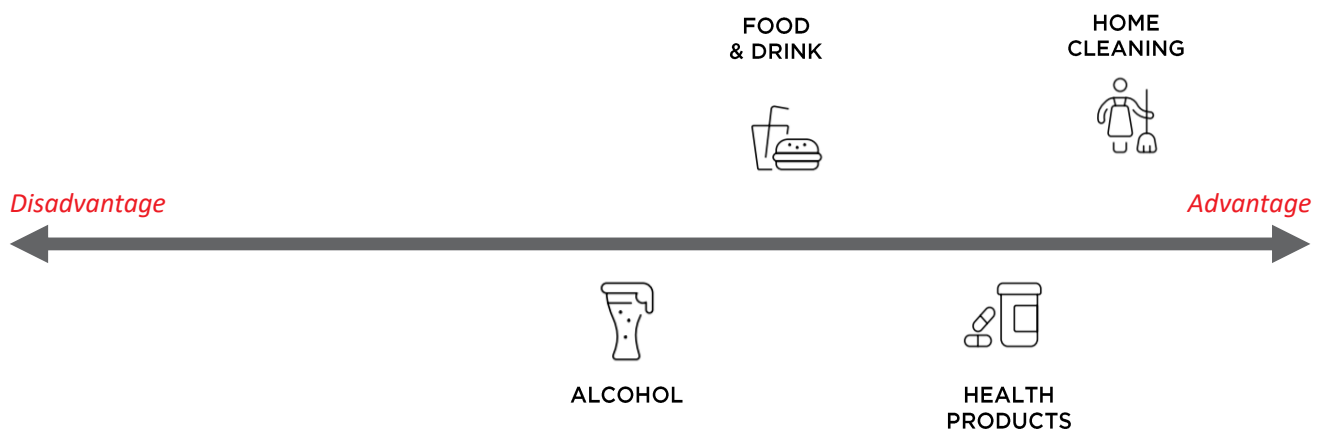


KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **CATERING:** Innovate with 'contactless meal taking', 'contactless delivery' and 'safe takeaway'
- Expect explosive growth in the O2O space
- **TOURISM:** Anticipate travel to peak in July / Aug & national Holidays
- Scale back travel retail and advertising with travel platforms / audiences in the short term
- Reassess travel advertising including airlines, railways and public transport
- **MEDICAL:** Online medical services will see explosive growth
- Medical e-comm will also surge
- Support reputable medical communities in educating the public
- **HOME FURNITURE:** People will be stimulated to make micro improvements to their home
- **AUTO:** Anticipate a potential post epidemic influx in car buying as people rethink the way they travel
- Anticipate increased in-car advertising opportunities as people prefer to use own transport and keep up to date with news
- **LUXURY:** Prepare for a re-shaping of consumer values and mind due to the epidemic on purchasing habits
- Realise opportunities for change in store experience and consumption environments
- Unlock opportunities for new consumption experiences through content and immersive experiences
- **CULTURAL ENT:** Expect more online experiences on streaming platforms (movie releases)
- Unlock advertising experiences in online virtual shows and exhibition halls
- Expect closures of major music events and theme parks
- **SPORTS:** Live streaming fitness and apps will increase
- Take positive action to use the time to improve health – social platforms / sport brands
- **HOME APPLIANCE:** More time at home will stimulate consumption of cooking appliances & health appliances

FMCG IMPACT

- Consider plans and budgets for key brands that have nutritional benefits within the portfolio
- Assess HORECA targets and promotion as well as the impact on alcohol complimentary products within' the portfolio
- Ensure product is easily accessible in store for quick purchase as well as on food delivery platforms

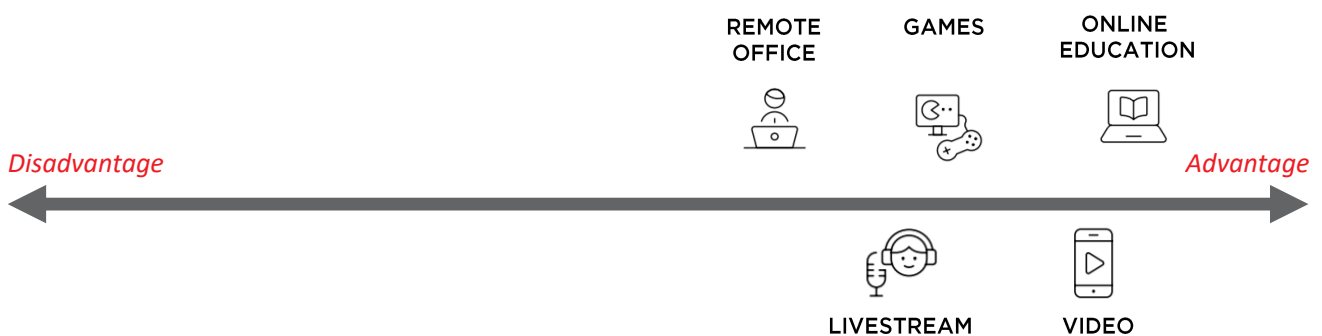


KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **FOOD & DRINK:** Is weakened in terms of terminal sales due to a slowing down of customers
- Raw material supply will be affected, logistics and transportation, factory operations etc.
- When people are restricted to go out they will look for more quick, convenience food and drinks that is packaged and long lasting
- **ALCOHOL:** May see a temporary slowing down in ready to drink channels (HORECA) as people prefer not to be in crowded spaces
- There will be greater emphasis on maintaining health and fitness during the pandemic
- Interestingly, alcohol with a high concentration of alcohol may become more popular as consumers ward off germs with a stiff drink at home
- **HEALTH PRODUCTS:** Consumer will rush towards products which will help them with strong immunity
- Products that have basic nutrition benefits will thrive – particularly those that contain vitamins, proteins, probiotics, dietary fibre or natural remedies such as ginger, turmeric etc.
- This pandemic will usher in a new growth for nutritional products in 2020
- **HOME CLEANING:** Disinfection related cleaning products will surge both on and offline

INTERNET SERVICE IMPACT

- The stay at home economy means an even bigger battle for attentive engagement on online platforms
- Short video, video website, news platforms, social media, TV and online music and podcasts will be a key battleground for advertising
- Consumers will look to brands to facilitate (not saturate) digital entertainment activities



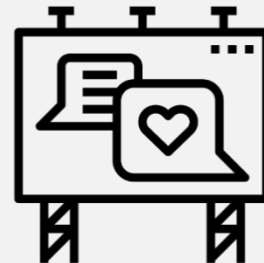
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The big winners will be the online streaming services which is ideal for binge viewing
- Gaming will peak online gaming, board games, mobile games will present more opportunity for brand integration
- 'Time Killers' will become imperative as time spent on video and social platforms surges
- Short video platforms will become important sources of information and entertainment
- Long video platforms will battle for traffic as consumers have more free time
- High quality content will be imperative to sustain attention
- More schools, universities, exercise classes etc. will go online to cater to the epidemic
- More consumers will turn to online platforms for education in a shift of mind-set following the epidemic
- Major brands plan to livestream activities to continue to stimulate consumer consumption demand and provide entertainment
- New and extended applications of livestreaming scenarios will appear such as music events, medical consultation, real estate showings etc.
- We should expect to see podcasting explode as well as advertising opportunities in this channel as consumers find ways to pass the time
- More brands will livestream in order to be able to directly communicate with their consumers in more meaningful, natural and authentic ways
- An influx of office applications will be downloaded and used during the epidemic
- Remote collaboration will become indispensable for business
- Brands that find opportunities to interact with file sharing / collaboration platforms could tap into a new era of marketing to the remote worker who is looking for pleasant micro distractions throughout their day



ADVERTISING IMPACT

- Consider the opportunity to gain SOV and consecutively SOM at reduced costs as most of category competition might reduce advertising pressure
- Unlock opportunities to create engaging content and authentic entertainment experiences for people at home, think how does your business can help people stuck in their homes and deprived from usual environment
- Continue to assess how your spending could change leading into Q3 to form new consumer routines



IMPACT ON THE ADVERTISING MARKET

Marketing activity may be hit harder than the overall economy for a couple of reasons. Advertising activity relies on a number of business categories that are currently closed for quarantine. Advertising clutter could be lower as much as 50%-60% for April-June period.

**Much lower
advertising
clutter**

IMPACT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND AUDIENCE SUPPLY

**INCREASE IN
TV & ONLINE USAGE
OF
ALL TYPES**

The obvious behavioural impact of a severe outbreak is that people will travel less and stay at home more to avoid exposure. This may be exacerbated further if companies begin to mandate working from home. We can reasonably assume that TV usage of all types & internet browsing will increase if this is the case; we see it play out each year during the winter months when people are indoors more often to avoid the cold weather. In our opinion, the big winners in this scenario will be home entertainment services.

IMPACT ON ADVERTISING COSTS

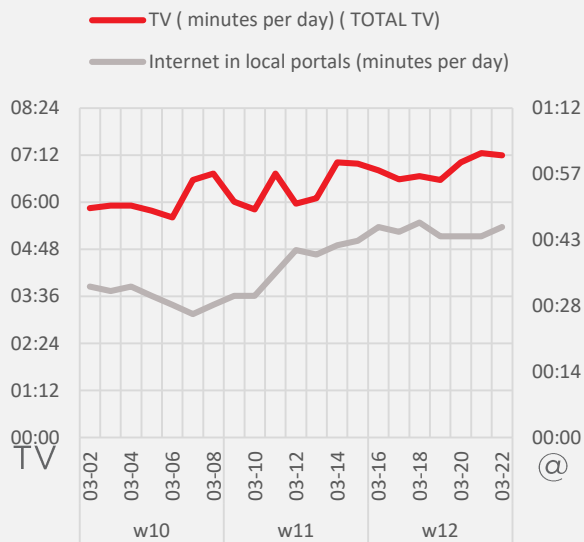
Increases in viewing and decreased demand from several economic sectors could potentially lead to lower media costs for advertisers, e.g. additional complimentary air-time or diminished online net prices at least for quarantine period. Thus lower prices are likely to happen in the short term and may present a good opportunity to increase SOV in this period of uncertainty, however we will caveat that this may not be a long term trend.

At the moment of issuing this report, media vendors do not consider situation as Force Majeure, meaning that all commitments and agreements still are in full force.

**POTENTIAL FOR
LOWER MEDIA
COSTS FOR
ADVERTISERS**

ADVERTISING IMPACT

Change in consumer behavior

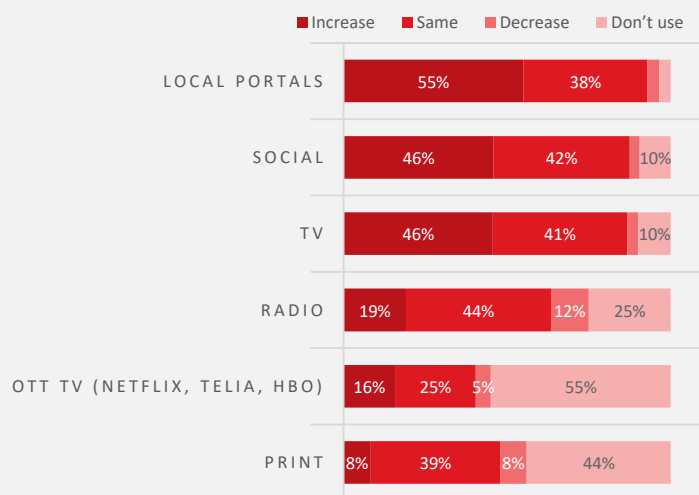


		DAILY REACH			
		W10	W11	W12	W12 VS W10
GENDER	All Lithuania	67%	68%	70%	4%
	Male	63%	64%	65%	4%
	Female	71%	71%	74%	4%
Size of residential area	> 200 t.	68%	69%	68%	1%
	100-200 Th.	67%	69%	69%	3%
	30-100 th.	65%	66%	69%	7%
	2-30 th.	70%	68%	77%	9%
AGE GROUPS	< 2 th.	65%	67%	68%	5%
	A4-14	48%	53%	56%	15%
	A15-24	30%	31%	33%	8%
	A25-34	61%	61%	60%	-1%
	A35-44	68%	71%	73%	7%
	A45-54	73%	70%	77%	5%
	A55-64	80%	80%	83%	3%
INCOMES	A65+	86%	87%	88%	2%
	< 150 Eur	57%	57%	59%	4%
	151-200 Eur	69%	70%	70%	1%
	201-250 Eur	70%	71%	74%	5%
	251-300 Eur	71%	71%	76%	8%
	301-400 Eur	68%	71%	71%	4%
	401+ Eur	67%	68%	71%	5%

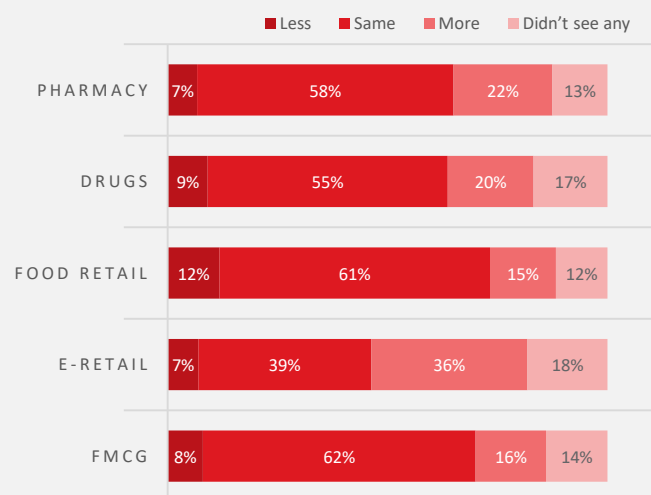
MEDIA CONSUMPTION IS RISING IN ALL CONSUMER SEGMENTS

People are consuming information on unprecedented scale. All media consumption (except for OOH) is increased. This can be seen in all segments, except for 25-34 age group in TV. This can be seen from hard data (tracking) as well as from peoples opinion (KOG research)

MEDIA CONSUMPTION



AD RELEVANCE



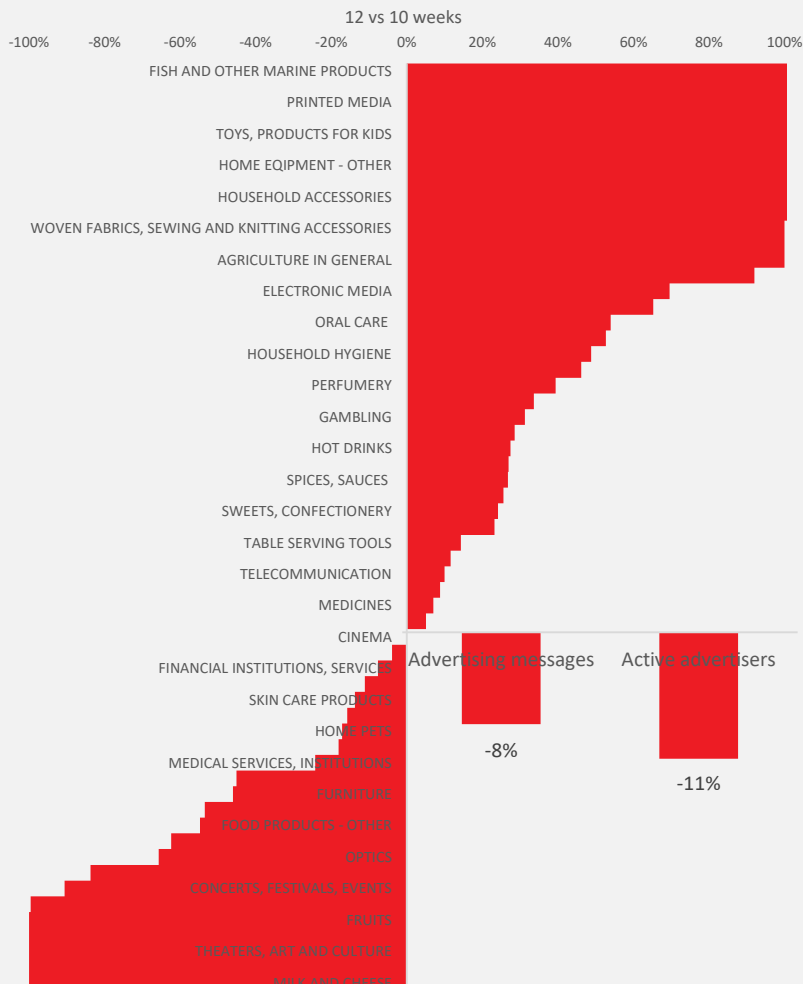
ADS REMAIN RELEVANT

What is more interesting, people didn't stop seeing ads. They think that information about daily products, health, entertainment and e-commerce are more relevant when ever.



ADVERTISING IMPACT

Change in ad market



TV TOP 15 BRANDS	WEEKLY GRP (W12)
TELE2	2 250
IKI	2 212
LIDL	1 829
RIMI	1 657
MAXIMA	1 129
PERLAS	1 017
SB LIZINGAS	901
EUROVAISTINĖ	874
BITĖ	869
TELIA	864
KINDER	804
EUROVAISTINE.LT	767
GO3	718
PILDYK	524
CAMELIA	463
TOP 15 OF NEW BRANDS	W12 GRP
EUROVAISTINE.LT	767
ERMITAZAS.LT	394
VIENASASKAITA.LT	389
PASKOLŲ KLUBAS	383
FERRERO ROCHER	326
AIR WICK	316
NASOMETIN	293
ACIC	265
AKADEMIJA.VZ.LT	255
CILLIT	246
DEICHMANN	243
OLIFĖJA	242
BTA	241
LSDP	233
DALLMAYR	228

ADVERTISERS REORGANIZE THEIR TACTICS. NEW BRANDS STEPS IN.

- The number of brands being advertised is decreasing but total ad amount is decreasing slower than advertisers. Remaining brands takes advantage of clutter-less air time.
- Retail remains the largest category in terms of advertising weights.
- Growing areas - Sweets, Mobile communication, Household hygiene, Gamble.
- Some categories remain stable and do not reduce weight – Medical service, Telecommunication, Insurance, Hot and carbonated drinks.
- Biggest advertiser Tele2 is also ahead of others in GRP growth (comparing 12 & 10 weeks) and is almost 3 times ahead of Telia in weights.
- There were a lot of new brands in week 12 (which haven't advertised in week 10). E-retailers - eurovaistine.lt and ermitazas.lt - had the highest GRP amounts.
- Overall, we observe increased sweets and household items categories appearing on the charts. (Brands: Kinder, Ferrero Rocher, Karcher, Air wick, Cillit and etc.)

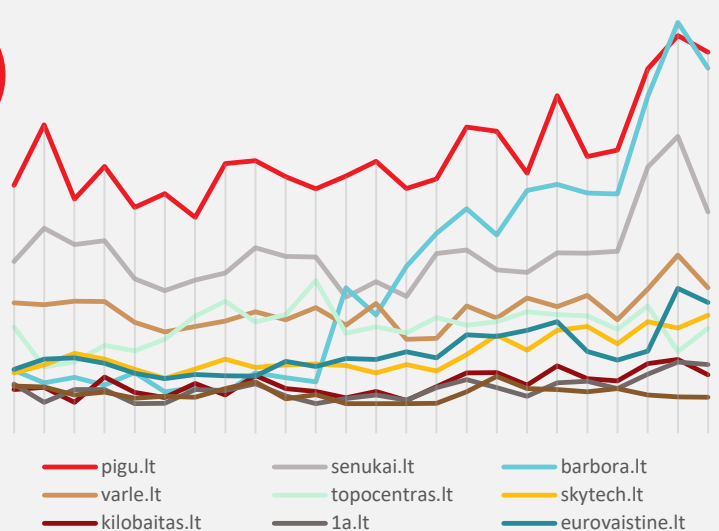
ADVERTISING IMPACT

Change in e-com

Online shopping with home delivery service

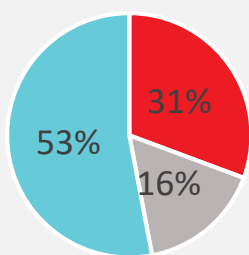


TRAFFIC OF THE MAIN LT E-SHOPS



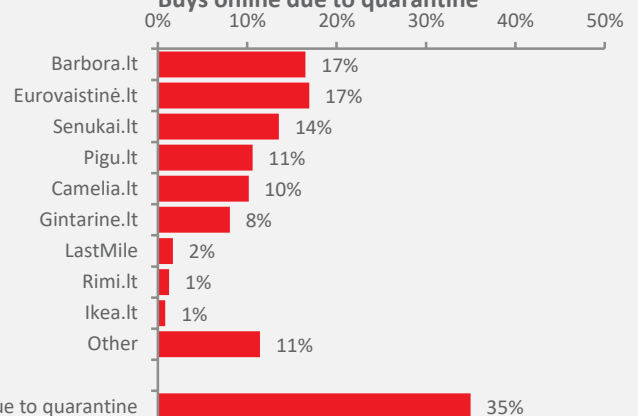
E-COM IN ON HIGH DEMAND

- Search for shopping online with home delivery jumped by 56%.
- Highest demand is for Barbora, Pigu, Senukai, Varle, Eurovaistine. However in general demand rises for consumer electronics, health, telecommunications and investments categories



- Start buying online due to quarantine
- Buys online as usual
- Didn't buy anything online

Buys online due to quarantine



31% TRIED E-COM DUE TO QUARANTINE

According to representative online research those 31% splits among Barbora, Eurovaistine, Senukai and Pigu in general.



CASE STUDIES

- Maintain empathy, kindness and sense of community and optimism in actions and messaging
- Discover new opportunities in virtual environments
- Always maintain safety and hygiene and don't seek to capitalize off the epidemic



EMPATHY & KINDNESS

- [Lush](#) is inviting people into its shops to wash their hands for free to help prevent the spread of coronavirus in the UK. The natural cosmetics company started promoting the service on Friday via its shop windows.
- [Microsoft](#) is offering a six-month free trial to the premium version of its Microsoft Teams business chat/collaboration application, a part of the Office 365 suite. The move comes as fears of the coronavirus outbreak cause many businesses to have their employees work from home.
- [Corona beer](#) has avoided making any public comments or acknowledgment of the name similarities on social media.

TIME TO GET VIRTUAL

- [E3](#), the most high-profile conference in the multibillion-dollar business of video games, has been cancelled this year, but that doesn't mean the industry is going to stop altogether. Instead of hosting a massive stage show at the Microsoft Theatre in downtown Los Angeles this summer, the Xbox team is moving the conference online.
- On January 31, the inaugural "[Bedroom Online Cloud Music Festival](#)" took place on Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing website similar to YouTube. The online rave event was organised by concert ticketing agency Music Festival RSS.
- How the [Red Cross](#) is using TikTok to keep Gen Z safe.
- People are flooding [TikTok](#) with memes and dark humor, as well as the precautions they're taking, to fight the coronavirus outbreak.

CASE STUDIES

ALL THE FEELS

- [Coca-Cola](#) donates medical supplies to support China's anti-virus fight.
- Online education apps [Youdao](#) & [Hundun University](#) are providing free online courses for those based in Wuhan.
- [Deserted Italian street](#) rings out with song as people lean out of windows to sing together during lockdown.
- Influencer [Bing](#), has identified a hospital in Wuhan that needs hand cream and she has shared the information with her followers to share with brands. The brands will then send product directly to the hospital.

SAFETY FIRST

- [Costco](#), [Trader Joe's](#) stop offering food sampling at its stores.is now plating to customers individually instead of keeping pre-plated samples on a platter for customers to grab.
- [Deliveroo](#) is giving consumers the option to receive their items with no contact if they wish.
- [Starbucks](#) has temporarily ended the use of reusable cups at its locations around the world.
- [Alaska Airlines](#) is waiving change fees tickets purchased between Feb, 27 and March 31.
- [KFC](#) has pressed pause on a series of ads designed to spotlight the deeply satisfying post-KFC finger lick.



BRAND SAFETY POV

- Do not block COVID-19 or Coronavirus, nor adjacent term such as CDC and WHO
- Consider running 'Brand Responsibility Ads' including info about your company response or link to official information
- Void creative that exhibits behaviours in advertising that are inconsistent with WHO and CDC guidelines (social distancing, hygiene, local regulations)



The COVID 19 and Coronavirus pandemic has presented advertisers with a unique brand safety challenge.

With wall-to-wall media coverage for the foreseeable future and a broad impact across every industry and publisher, should advertisers block the term or avoid advertising around this content?

UM'S RECOMMENDATION IS THAT ADVERTISERS SHOULD NOT BLOCK THE TERM COVID-19 OR CORONAVIRUS, NOR ADJACENT TERMS SUCH AS CDC AND WHO.

While there are reports from 3rd Party Verification vendors, such as IAS, that blocking of the term Coronavirus has skyrocketed, this is having a negative effect on the industry. Across all publishers, we have observed that blocking the terms results in a significant amount of inventory being flagged as unsafe, to the point where no ads are running on pages.

This is adversely impacting the ability for clients to deliver media and having a flow on impact on CPM's (media inflation) as all advertisers search for a "safe" environment. This is difficult given avoiding any coverage of the topic is becoming nearly impossible.

The blocking of Coronavirus (or associated) terms has other adverse impacts:

- It discourages publishers to provide the public with important and factual information
- Avoidance of the topic has opened the door to fraud/scam ads that endanger the public

The above two (2) topics have been covered in detail by [AdAge](#), [the New York Times](#), and in an Op-Ed on [AdExchanger](#) by UM's Global Brand Safety Officer. We recommend reviewing the above and a copy of the Op-Ed is included as an addendum to this POV.

We can appreciate that recommending that clients do not avoid COVID-19 and Coronavirus coverage may seem at odds with brand safety. However, this is a unique and difficult time for marketers, and if Coronavirus becomes the new normal, avoidance of advertising in and/or around the topic will not be sustainable. This is why it's important to lean in now and navigate the challenges rather than avoid the issue.

One recommendation we are providing to marketers who may still have underlying concerns around the terms associated with COVID-19, is to consider, for the near term, running "Brand Responsibility Ads." A "Brand Responsibility Ad" is a variation of a Public Service Announcement (PSA) and would either include information about your organization's response to the pandemic, or link to official information from your organization.

Brand Responsibility Ads should be prioritized on quality news sites (which are seeing a significant spike in traffic as people seek information) and/or contextually targeted to COVID-19 related terms. It has the added benefit minimizing the risk of disinformation and rumors surfacing about your brands, products, or organization and maximizing the number of people you reach (as email notices and corporate website banners lack the same effectiveness). Subject to local market conditions, it may also be an important way of communicating support or other services you are providing for communities being significantly impacted, e.g., availability of delivery, telephone service options, etc.

The recommendation that the terms COVID-19 and Coronavirus are not “unsafe” does not come without an important caveat for messaging and creative. Marketers should avoid creative that exhibits behaviors in advertising that are inconsistent with WHO and CDC guidelines on social distancing, public hygiene, and general mitigation of risk of infection, e.g., handshakes, hugging, kissing, etc. There should also be care taken to avoid messaging that goes against any specific local regulations, e.g., quarantines and travel restrictions, as well as messaging that may appear tone deaf, e.g., people at concerts, sporting events, etc.

Like all organizations, we are continuing to monitor the situation and will provide further guidance as the situation evolves.

ADDENDUM

This article was [originally published on AdExchanger, March 11, 2020.](#)

Coronavirus Underscores The Need For An Ad Industry Crisis Response Team

By Joshua Lowcock, Chief Digital / Global Brand Safety Officer UM

The unprecedented public health challenge of the coronavirus is also uncovering the challenges facing the ad tech industry around how to protect the public by combating the spread of misinformation. As with the virus itself, it's critical that the industry practices good hygiene and acts responsibly to protect society.


As with every major crisis, the public turns to news for information. News organizations are working overtime to provide extended coverage and, in some instances, dropping their paywalls. Free access to reliable information is paramount during this time, so people can make informed decisions.

The challenge with coronavirus is that for some advertisers, it is triggering brand-safety concerns. This is because its coverage includes hot-button keywords such as “illness” and “death,” both of which are typically found in keyword blacklists. But there's something different that makes this issue even more problematic: the uniqueness of the words, “coronavirus” and “COVID-19.”

Even advertisers that might not block “illness” and “death” may avoid the words “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” as if the words themselves are contagious. The result? Starving news publishers providing valuable and legitimate coverage of advertising revenue from Tier 1 marketers.

For the news industry that has both stepped up and lowered paywalls and that have already been repeatedly hit by advertising avoidance challenges, this has a real financial cost. So what do they do? Unsurprisingly, they turn to ad exchanges and networks to fill the glut of ad supply.

In the typical response during a genuine and severe brand-safety incident, such as a mass tragedy with a high death toll, news coverage peaks and then dissipates. Advertisers that may be sensitive to that incident can add to their keyword list temporarily and then, as coverage ends, remove those words to prevent false positives.



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The key differences between true major brand safety incidents and coronavirus now is that there is little to no room for opportunists to profit. The same keywords unique to “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” that are used to avoid perceived bad content are the same unique keywords that can be used by opportunists and conspiracy theorists to gouge people buying face masks and promote quack remedies. The result is a perfect storm: Ad demand from legitimate advertisers plummets and unscrupulous people can step in and fill that ad supply by targeting the same keywords.

Google, Facebook and Pinterest have taken proactive steps to stop ads for price gouging or false cures, and Amazon and eBay have looked to stop sales of products linked to price gouging. But bad actors will always find a way, especially where there are inconsistent policies across platforms and no coordinated response.

The advertising and media industry should follow the example from the computer security industry in the late 1980s when it developed CERT – the Computer Emergency Response Team – a way of coordinating information and behaviour during malware and virus outbreaks. No pun intended, but faced with a similar challenge, the ad industry should form its own Advertising and Platform Emergency Response Team (APERT) to combat the weaponisation of advertising during a crisis.

Through collective action of a response team like APERT, the ad tech industry could provide and prioritize free ad credits for organizations such as the World Health Organization and CDC, raising awareness of legitimate sources of information and providing public health officials with a way of reaching the communities that brands serve. It could also collectively share intelligence, identify and block the bad actors and, in some cases – such as where there is price gouging – report them to relevant authorities. In the absence of an entity like APERT, we find ourselves in our current situation with people sharing “gotcha” screenshots of overpriced face mask ads on news sites.

To be fair, APERT is only part of the solution. The other side of the coin is advertiser responsibility during a crisis. Not funding news and journalism is not healthy for society and democracy. Being both a brand safety officer and a pragmatist, I understand the challenges of advertising in what can be controversial environments, but there are ways to advertise in news and be sensitive to the issues.

Instead of blocking ads, a viable solution is to run a “responsibility ad” that sends people to information about how your organization is managing or supporting people during the crisis. Or, for forward-thinking organizations, they can run an ad saying that their brand is funding a news article as a public service to the community. In a world where so many corporations have “supporting community” in their lists of values, this solution should be consistent with their organizational principles.



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