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Study of the coronavirus' cultural impact by the USC Center for the Digital Future and Interactive Advertising Bureau finds rapid life changes and concerns – as well as enthusiasm – while Americans confront the pandemic

April 29, 2020 – Americans coping with the coronavirus pandemic are reporting changes in their lives occurring in days that previously took months or years, a wide-ranging study of life during the pandemic conducted by the USC Center for the Digital Future and the Interactive Advertising Bureau has found.

The study shows Americans report many concerns about their lives as well as increased loneliness and anxiety since the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, but they also describe strengthened relationships and enjoying the benefits of working at home.

Titled “The Coronavirus Disruption Project: How We are Living and Coping During the Pandemic,” the study also found significant percentages of Americans who had never previously banked online or bought from internet sources have now been pushed into the online experience because of the pandemic.

“We are exploring the biggest disruption of our lives,” said Jeffrey Cole, director of the Center for the Digital Future in the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. “Daily life is far more disrupted by the pandemic than after 9/11 or the beginning of World War II, and anxiety is at levels only seen after Pearl Harbor and the Great Depression.

“Yet in spite of the upheaval,” Cole said, “we also found that Americans have positive views about their relationships and hope for how their lives will proceed after the pandemic ends.”

The study results, said Brad Berens, senior vice president and head of thought leadership for the Interactive Advertising Bureau, “show that the coronavirus crisis is accelerating shifts in consumer behavior that will permanently alter the way Americans watch, read, listen, play, shop, work, and socialize.”

"It's too soon to pick particular winners and losers," said Berens. "But changing attitudes about the news, trust in government, new favorite video channels, upstart brands, and gaming habits are certain to emerge from the rubble – as will a new appreciation for the joys of cocooning. We anticipate that nothing our 650 member companies do will return to the status quo ante."

The Coronavirus Disruption Project explores about 100 questions involving views about life and behavior during the pandemic, including emotional concerns, loneliness, anxiety, parenting, online education, media and entertainment, shopping behavior, political views, and the problems and benefits of working at home.

"Without preparation or our permission, we are all participating in the greatest social experiment of our time," said Cole. "We are learning how to live our lives 24/7 on the internet – whether we want to or not."

Among the study's findings:

Activities missed – When Americans were asked about the activities they missed during safer-at-home guidelines, the five most common responses are "being able to go where I want and do what I please" (94%); "visiting relatives and friends I see regularly," and "visiting friends I see occasionally" (90% for each); dining in restaurants (89%); and shopping in brick-and-mortar stores (88%).

When asked what activities they missed "a lot," at the bottom of the list were: going to movies (23%) and drinking in bars (20%).

Activities liked – Large percentages of Americans also report many activities they enjoy while staying home. The top five include: participating in hobbies, personal activities, and creative pursuits (89%); catching up on chores and responsibilities at home (87%); catching up on TV programs and movies (87%); and family activities, and not having to commute or deal with traffic (85% for each).

Loneliness and anxiety – Thirty-seven percent of Americans say they are lonelier since the pandemic began, and 61% say they are more anxious. Low percentages report a decrease in loneliness (9%) or anxiety (4%).

Children and relaxed rules – Large percentages of adults with children in the household report relaxed rules for the children, including fewer restrictions on watching TV (87%), playing video games (85%), bedtimes (84%), and use of digital media (83%).

Eating, exercising, alcohol, marijuana – Forty-one percent of Americans are eating more and 11% are eating less, while 28% say they are exercising more and 36% say they are exercising less.

Of people who drink alcohol, 31% say they are drinking more, while 21% say their drinking has declined. Of those who smoke marijuana, 42% say they are smoking more, and 11% are smoking less.

Concerns about the pandemic – Almost three-quarters of Americans say they are concerned about getting the virus or that people important to them will be infected (73%).

More than half are worried about going to the store or running errands because of the coronavirus (66%), think it may be difficult to get food and essential supplies (59%), consider the pandemic will still be out of control in a few months (54%), or are concerned their local hospital does not have adequate facilities or medical provisions (52%).

Relationships improve in the home – In spite of the pressures of the pandemic, Americans are more likely to say their relationship with their spouse or partner is better (35%) than say it is worse (12%). A large percentage of Americans say their relationship with the children in their home is better (45%), while only a small percentage say it is worse (7%).

Working at home: benefits and problems – Large percentages of Americans report benefits to their unexpected and sudden need to work at home. Among the benefits cited for working online are no commute (66%), more flexibility (64%), relaxed dress/grooming expectations (61%), and control of their environment (59%).

However, smaller but still significant numbers also report several problems with working at home, including distractions such as children, pets, phone calls, or noisy neighbors (45%); erosion of the boundary between work and home (31%); too many online phone calls and conferences (18%); lack of privacy (16%); and concerns about supervision of children while working (11%).

Working: hours and effectiveness – Since the outbreak of the virus, 43% of survey respondents say they work about the same number of hours, and 15% say they work more hours than they did before, while 42% say they work fewer hours. Sixty percent of Americans who are working remotely at home say they work about as effectively there (61%), while 17% say they are more effective at home. However, almost one-quarter say they are less effective at home.

Almost three-quarters of workers (74%) say that at least a little of their job can be done online, while 26% report that none of their work can be done at home.

After the pandemic – Large percentages of Americans said they want to maintain the lasting effects of changes in their lives that began during the pandemic, including increased time with family (56%), more work at home (42%), and increased online purchasing (39%). However, 37% also said they will reduce their face-to-face contact with other people.

Use of digital technology and first-run movies – Large percentages report increased use of communication technology, especially video streaming on YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other services (73%); television viewing (68%); texting (67%); and video calls (64%).

First-run movies at home – While theaters are closed, Americans are reluctant to pay for first-run movies at home; almost half of Americans (49%) say they would pay only less than \$5 to watch a new first-run film at home.

Primary source of news – Americans say cable TV channels (CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News) are their primary source of news about the coronavirus (22%), followed by local TV stations (16%), online news sites or apps (15%), broadcast network news (14%), internet searches (9%), and online daily newspaper websites (4%).

Daily printed newspapers are the primary source of news about the pandemic for only one percent of Americans.

Advertising within news – The project also explored views about advertising and news coverage during the pandemic. More than one-third of Americans said that advertising within news programming is needed to support news organizations (34%), while 39% say they would disable an ad blocker at least selectively to support news websites.

Streaming services – Americans say they are watching a variety of streaming services, including Netflix (63%), YouTube (50%), Amazon Prime (43%), Hulu (35%), Disney+ (26%), and Apple TV + (5%). If money gets tight, Americans are most likely to jettison Netflix (20%), although more do not plan to change their subscriptions (34%).

Online learning – More than half of American students say they learn less online than in person (54%), while 61% say they feel more isolated from their learning community. However, more than one-third like the online learning experience more than learning in class (34%).

Shopping – Of the seven percent of Americans who had never bought online before the pandemic struck, 32% are now buying online for the first time.

Of those who were already online buyers, 44% are now buying products online they have never bought online before. Thirty-six percent of Americans are buying food online for the first time.

Almost half of Americans say they have seen or experienced price gouging (45%).

Public officials as sources of information – Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was cited most often as the public official relied on for information about the pandemic (45%), followed by “my own state’s governor” (35%), government online resources (30%), other experts (29%), and international/non-government resources, such as the World Health Organization (21%).

Donald Trump is relied on by 20% of Americans for information about the pandemic. Identified by political affiliation, the only group reporting a majority who rely on Trump for information were those who say they are “very conservative” (53%). Less than a majority of respondents in all other political groups rely on Trump: Those who label themselves as somewhat conservative (42%), middle-of-the-road (15%), somewhat liberal (4%), and very liberal (7%).

Government response to the virus (federal vs. state) – The actions by state and local governments are rated much better than the federal response to the pandemic. More than half (54%) say the state or local response was good or excellent, compared to one-third who report the same response about federal programs.

Thirty-nine percent of Americans rate the federal response as poor, while less than half of that number report a “poor” rating for state and local response (14%).

The Center for the Digital Future: revealing two decades of disruption

For more than 20 years, the Center for the Digital Future at USC Annenberg (<https://www.digitalcenter.org>) has explored the impact of digital technologies on the behavior and views of users and non-users. The center also studies disruption in the personal lives of Americans and the corporate world. Its research has included comprehensive studies examining the impact of disruption on major industries such as entertainment, banking, sports media, transportation (particularly car ownership and driverless cars), health care, and now the impact of the coronavirus.

"Just as the Great Depression profoundly affected the psyche of those who experienced it, so too may the coronavirus pandemic affect us," Jeffrey Cole said. "We may find a time when we mark our lives as 'BC' (Before Coronavirus) and 'AC' (After Coronavirus)."

Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB)

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (<https://www.iab.com>) empowers the media and marketing industries to thrive in the digital economy. Its membership is comprised of more than 650 leading media companies, brands, and the technology firms responsible for selling, delivering, and optimizing digital ad marketing campaigns. The trade group fields critical research on interactive advertising, while also educating brands, agencies, and the wider business community on the importance of digital marketing. In affiliation with the IAB Tech Lab, IAB develops technical standards and solutions. IAB is committed to professional development and elevating the knowledge, skills, expertise, and diversity of the workforce across the industry. Through the work of its public policy office in Washington, D.C., the trade association advocates for its members and promotes the value of the interactive advertising industry to legislators and policymakers. Founded in 1996, IAB is headquartered in New York City.

"Some behaviors and preferences will snap back whenever the coronavirus is finally behind us, but others will be different permanently, and this is of acute importance to IAB's constituents," Brad Berens said. "The Coronavirus Disruption Project is an exciting first step towards understanding and predicting what media, commerce, and life itself will be like in the new normal."

Coronavirus Study: Methodology

The findings in the Coronavirus Disruption Project are based on an online survey conducted in English during the week of April 6, using a sample of 1,000 respondents from an online panel. The sample is representative of Americans aged 18 and above from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points.

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The Coronavirus Disruption Project: How We are Living and Coping During the Pandemic

Credit: Center for the Digital Future and the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB)

Ten activities Americans miss during the pandemic

(Miss a little/somewhat/a lot)

1. **94%** Being able to go where I want and do what I please
2. **90%** Visiting close relatives and friends outside my home who I see regularly
3. **90%** Visiting relatives and friends outside my home who I see occasionally
4. **89%** Dining in restaurants
5. **88%** Shopping in brick-and-mortar stores
6. **83%** Casual personal contact (shaking hands, standing near others, chatting)
7. **83%** Close personal contact (such as hugs and kisses)
8. **81%** Having set routines in my life (e.g. regular sleep patterns and work schedule)
9. **80%** Travel
10. **78%** Going to work

Ten activities Americans enjoy during safer-at-home guidelines

(Enjoy a little/somewhat/a lot)

1. **89%** More time to participate in hobbies, personal activities, and creative pursuits
2. **87%** More time to catch up on chores and responsibilities at home
3. **87%** More time to catch up on TV programs and movies
4. **85%** No commute or traffic
5. **85%** More time for family activities (watching television together and playing games)
6. **84%** More time for sleep
7. **83%** More time to be by myself at home
8. **83%** More time for cooking
9. **83%** More time for reading
10. **82%** More time for increased contact with family and friends outside the home
online or by phone