

New consumption orientations in the COVID-19 era: Preliminary findings from a qualitative investigation

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is changing consumers' behavior (McKinsey, 2020). However, no studies have explored how such changes might have changed due to lockdown. The present qualitative research explores how consumers' consumption orientation may evolve during a pandemic as a consequence of the COVID-19 shutdown. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the study explores consumers' behavior before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown period. The study was conducted in Italy, the first Western country to be heavily affected by the pandemic, in April 2020, thus during the lockdown period, with a sample of young consumers. Results show that the lockdown experience aroused a sense of resilience and nostalgia in consumers, which activates a desire for a "new normalcy", characterized by some distinctions from the past. Essentially, the results indicate that, while striving to keep their established habits and lifestyles, consumers have become aware of the importance of engaging in more responsible consumption behaviors. This study contributes to the marketing literature in two different ways. First, it helps to better understand how consumers reacted during a lockdown period by highlighting potential changes in terms of desires, consumption preferences and priorities. Second, it contributes to the literature on nostalgia and resilience by shedding light on the meaning that such constructs assume during health crises like the current pandemic. Managerially, our results offer implications on how to improve marketing strategies after a health crisis.

2. Theoretical background: Resilience and nostalgia

The concept of *resilience* refers to the ability to react functionally to life's adversities, regaining enough mental energies to achieve one's mental and physical well-being after a particularly difficult event or period (Yates & Masten, 2004). Thus, being resilient implies an ability to move forward in life, despite crises, building a positive dynamic. Resilience can be seen as a trait construct that captures a personal characteristic that moderates the negative effects of stress and promotes adaptation (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Thus, resilience in the time of coronavirus may have led individuals to successfully cope with negative events related to the health emergency, for instance, by developing optimistic attitudes, remaining sensitive, and seeing opportunities even in bad situations. During the obliged social distancing, resilience may have led individuals to perceive home as a refuge rather than a prison and time as a resource that they found rather than lost.

Another affective state that individuals may have experienced during the lockdown period is *nostalgia*. This construct refers to a desire for the past, a desire for "yesterday" or a passion for possessions and activities associated with past. More specifically, Holbrook & Schindler (1991) defined nostalgia as a general preference towards some objects (people, places or consumer goods, experiences) that were part of one's daily life when younger (in the early adulthood, adolescence, childhood or even before birth) or at certain times in one's life. Thus, nostalgia is associated with a psychological state of sadness and regret for the distance from loved ones or places or for an event located in the past that one would like to relive, often remembered in an idealized way (Akhtar, 1996; 2018). Research shows how nostalgia can be generated by a memory of one's past (personal nostalgia: "the way I was") or by time in history before birth (historical nostalgia: "the way it was") (Baker & Kennedy, 1994; Stern, 1992). Therefore, nostalgia may have different origins and can take different forms, attributable to two fundamental categories: one is attributable to experiences lived by the individual, while the other is linked to experiences and periods not lived directly but transmitted from external sources. What is relevant for the resent research is how nostalgia influences human behavior by re-emerging the memory of a past lived and involving consumptions (Havlena & Holak, 1991). The present study sheds light on the role that these two fundamental dimensions may in reshaping consumption behaviors during a lockdown due to a health crisis.

3. Methodology

We conducted a qualitative survey by implementing some qualitative and interpretive techniques by writing answering the questionnaire (e.g., scratches and collages) according to Belk et al. (2003; 2012), and Zaltman (1997). We collected data from 33 undergraduate students ($M = 23.03$, $SD = 0.95$; 39.40%; 60,60% female) through an online platform. Each respondent completed a semi-structured depth interview, which lasted between one and one and a half hours, including a series of projective tasks focused on consumption. The interview began with some in-depth and open-ended questions regarding consumptions before, during, and after the lockdown period. The second part included some projective tasks such as collage constructions, fairy tales synonyms and antonyms of states and desired objects, associations with desired things and drawings of desires and behaviors (Belk et al., 2003), everything related to before, during and after the health crisis. Indeed, according to Belk et al. (2003), projective data seems to be very rich in capturing fantasies, dreams, and visions of desire. The collected interviews were analyzed by three researchers. First, each researcher has analyzed all the interviews, then the three researchers have discussed results together in several meetings.

4. Results

4.1 New meanings of resilience

The collected data suggest that resilience characterized consumers' behavior during the lockdown. Indeed, respondents started the survey by emphasizing their current purchasing of personal protective equipment (e.g., face masks, alcohol-based gels, gloves), thus underlining the new role of products that were specifically useful to self-protection. As shown by Figure 1, participants described their previous traditional purchases, mainly based on objects, brands and status (Panel A), their current purchases, represented by health-related products (Panel B), and their desired purchases for the future, mainly represented by experiences instead of products, without any particular brand in mind (Panel C).



Figure 1 (Respondent 28, age 23, Female)

The sense of self-protection and self-care, despite a desire to restart daily activities and to react positively to the situation, prevails: self-care becomes essential, as emphasized by the following excerpt of an autobiographical fairy-tale (where the participant talks about a guy deprived of its life and obliged to stay home):

“John is a quiet boy who spends his life hanging out with friends and going to university. He would never expect that he can no longer leave the house. John is therefore forced, to stay at home and to take online lessons. John tries to find her balance by looking for happiness in the family and in the social tools that allow her to talk to his friends” (Respondent 2, age 25, male)

Moreover, a sense of responsibility seems to become central to consumers during the lockdown. Everyone felt to have an active and positive role, as shown in the excerpt from the fairy-tale below:

“When the health crisis arrives, Luigi is forced to radically change his social and consumer habits. He lives the first days disoriented, without knowing how to pass the time. After the first week, he subscribes to a platform to communicate electronically with his friends and to play online. From the more general purchases of the period before the crisis, he moved on to the more functional ones, those useful for staying in touch with society and for spending time creatively” (Respondent 32, 24 age, male)

As underlined by the following draws (Figure 2), the desired hedonic consumer experience seems to become more cultural, driven by responsible reasons aimed at increasing one’s educational dimension.



Figure 2 (Respondent 32, 24 age, Female)

A further insight is also represented by a need to maintain a certain lifestyle, although through different methods, as represented by the following draws (Figure 3) where the respondent clearly illustrated her shopping habits changes, with a switch from offline to online purchases. The desire for shopping remains but consumers may enjoy different ways to buy products.

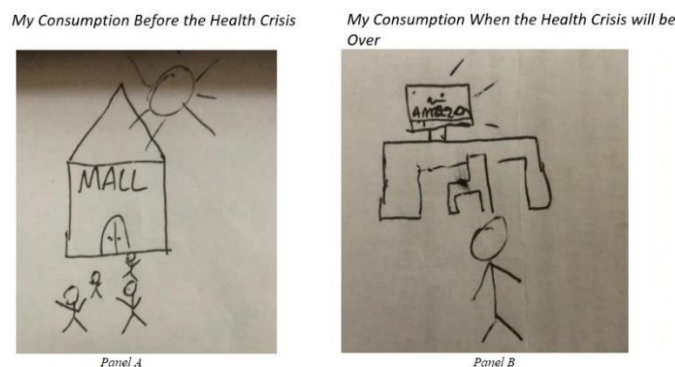


Figure 3 – (Respondent 21, age 22, Female)

4.2 New meanings of nostalgia

Another dimension that may influence consumers’ behavior during the lockdown is nostalgia, which refers to missing something from the past (Baker & Kennedy, 1994). In that period, consumers lost their daily routine and, therefore, all habits they are used to (Bailey & Fernando, 2012). However, results show that, while consumers lacked their daily lives by experiencing a state of nostalgia for their routine, they looked for a new sense of routine. This may reflect a consumers’ tendency to adapt to the new reality and establish new habits, which might be different from the old ones.

“I miss my life. I would go to my University and take a coffee with my friends. Sometimes we study together with Skype, but it sounds weird” (Respondent 4, age 24, male)

Emblematically, a respondent highlighted how her consumption before the lockdown was characterized by objects, mainly related to beauty and fashion, with relevance for brands. Differently from the past, she imagined her consumption after the crisis as represented by a different kind of hedonism, more intimate, more experiential and more linked to the environment, thus more balanced and responsible (Figure 4).

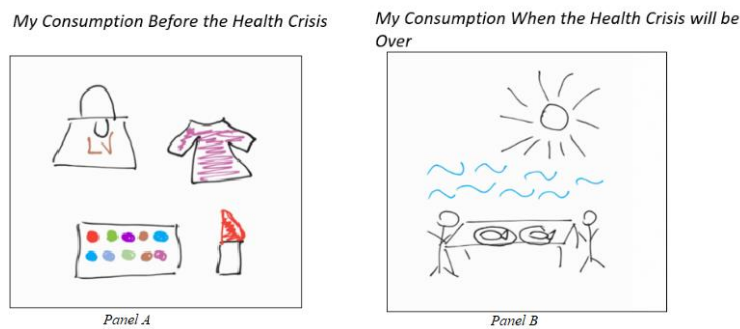


Figure 4. Respondent 23, age 23, female

To clarify, although the purchases prior to the pandemic were characterized by an intense hedonistic purpose (lipstick, bags, and in general – as shown in Figure 4 – with reference to luxury products), the sense of deprivation experienced during the lockdown likely distorted consumers' preferences. Their old desire for objects and material possessions (Belk, 1988; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004) turn into a new desire for a more balanced and more responsible life. In a way, nostalgia may act as a positive reinforcement (Wildschut et al., 2006) that may lead to a positive change, thus becoming a resource to exploit opportunities, instead of activating negative feelings, such as regret (Akhtar, 2018; Kaplan, 1987). It seems that people have their habits, routines, and gestures that they would struggle to abandon; however, after an initial state of disorientation during the lockdown, individuals gradually tried to reconstruct a new daily routine, made up of new gestures, actions, moments that served a reassuring function.

5. General discussion and conclusion

This research shed light on the role of resilience and nostalgia in consumer behavior during the lockdown period. Our findings suggest that the feelings of nostalgia and resilience that consumers likely felt during the lockdown take new connotations compared to their traditional ones. The sense of resilience was characterized by self-care attention, responsibility, and lifestyle maintenance. Nostalgia was especially felt with regard to old routines and took the form of a desire for more balanced and responsible consumption habits. From a consumer behavior perspective, our results indicate that a key consequence of the lockdown measures might be a deep change in consumption orientations. It is indeed likely that consumers replace their traditional desire for pure hedonic offers with a desire for consumption experiences characterized by a high degree of responsibility. Driven by a sense of resilience and nostalgia, consumers might be more prone to seek experiences that stimulate their intellect rather than mere pleasure and feed their soul rather than their ego. These might include, for example, visiting places, spending time with loved ones, and engaging in education or cultural activities. Their future choices might be thoughtful and seem to reflect a hedonic but responsible approach to consumption.

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