

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

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# A general overview

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- The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is changing consumers' behavior (McKinsey, 2020).
- The lockdown period, force people in their own home totally revolutioning their daily habits.
- As science has not yet developed resolute medical therapies to treat this disease, the only solution to contain the contagion has been recognized through social distancing guidelines and the use of personal protection devices (e.g., masks, gloves, alcohol-based disinfectants) during interpersonal interactions (Humphreys, 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.



# Theoretical Background

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## *Resilience*

- 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).
- 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.



# Theoretical Background

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## *Nostalgia*

- 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.

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), and could 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 recent research is how nostalgia influences human behavior by re-emerging the memory of a past lived and involving consumptions (Havlena & Holak, 1991).



# Methodology

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- 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.
- By following 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.



# Methodology

## A Sample

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2b. Which **words** come to your mind now thinking about your **current consumption** (during the health crisis)?

Please write down at least 5 words:

1. Unconsciousness
2. Love
3. Panic
4. Irrationality
5. E-commerce

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2c. Which **words** come to your mind now thinking about your **desired consumption** (when the health crisis will be over)?

Please write down at least 5 words:

1. Dreams
2. Freedom
3. Friends
4. Touch
5. Walk

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3a. Indicate which **categories** of goods and services you would include in the **consumption you were used to** (before the health crisis).

Please write down at least 3 categories:

1. Public transport
2. University
3. Food

Which brands?

- 1) Touchable
- 2) Lark
- 3) Carrefour

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3b. Indicate which **categories** of goods and services you would include in your **current consumption** (during the health crisis).

Please write down at least 3 categories:

1. Food
2. E-commerce
3. Internet

Which brands?

1. Conad
2. Amazon
3. Lidl

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3c. Indicate which **categories** of goods and services you would include in your **desired future consumption** (when the health crisis will be over)?

Please write down at least 3 categories:

1. Flight company
2. Public transport
3. Gym

Which brands?

1. Ryanair
2. Alitalia
3. Virgin Active

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4a. Collage - Consumption you were used to (before the health crisis)

«Normal life» with friends, family and the world.

«Check» below the table the box for the items, write down your interpretations, logical or not, of what this collage and/or the different images represent...

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4b. Collage - Current consumption (during the health crisis)

Please fill in 4 tables.

«Check» below the table the box for the items, write down your interpretations, logical or not, of what this collage and/or the different images represent...

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4c. Collage - Desired consumption (when the health crisis will be over)?

With the «freedom» you can do what you feel to do.

«Check» below the table the box for the items, write down your interpretations, logical or not, of what this collage and/or the different images represent...

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5a. Please imagine "touching" is a way of things" (objects, experiences, people and so on) that bring you to your best consumption experience you had before the crisis. Please identify these things and describe the situation you imagine to have in those contexts.

Please write down here:

1. Pleasure
2. Sun on your skin
3. Love
4. Freedom
5. Sound of the nature
6. Chatter of the children
7. Euphoria

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5b. Please imagine "touching" is a way of things" (objects, experiences, people and so on) that bring you to the best consumption experience you would like to have after the crisis. Please identify these things and describe the situation you imagine to have in those contexts.

Please write down here:

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6. Please write a **story** tale in which someone first has a **no experience with a health crisis**, but in the end they have lost it. Describe the **setting**, the **central character**, the **products** or **services** involved in **health experiences** (without having experienced a health crisis vs. after having experienced it).

Please write down here:

A primary school student boy named Tom started this year. There has a lot of fun with his classmates and studying, and waits for mom every day at the end. Suddenly Tom's mom said can no longer go to school, him begins to feel sad, starting to see his classmates in a video call. He begins to get used to it and the city comes that he returned everything as before and felt the happiest child in the world.

7a. Please list **intangible elements** that you associate to your consumption **before** the health crisis.

Please write down here:

- 1) Friendship
- 2) Love
- 3) Euphoria
- 4) Knowledge
- 5) Control
- 6) Normality

7b. Please list **intangible elements** that you imagine related to your consumption **when the health crisis will be over**.

Please write down here:

- 1) Happiness
- 2) Freedom
- 3) Anxiety
- 4) Panic
- 5) Self control
- 6) Touchable

8a. Please list **tangible things** that you associate to your consumption **before** the health crisis.

Please write down here:

- Body contact
- Work
- Physical store
- Cash

8b. Please list **tangible things** that you imagine related to your consumption **when the health crisis will be over**.

Please write down here:

1. Beaches
2. Nightlife
3. Classrooms
4. Good hamburger





# Results: Emerging meanings for resilience

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- Data suggest that resilience characterized consumers' behavior during the lockdown.
- 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 (Fig. 1). 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)





# Results: Emerging meanings for resilience

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- 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)

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)



# Results: Emerging meanings for resilience

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- 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)

- Moreover respondents seems to 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.

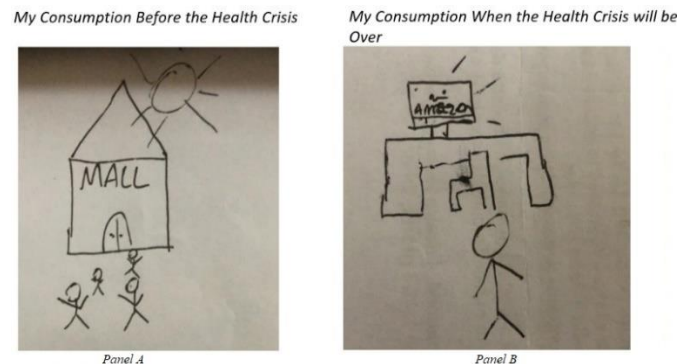


Figure 3 – (Respondent 21, age 22, Female)



# Results: Emerging meanings for nostalgia

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- 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).

*“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)



# Results: Emerging meanings for nostalgia

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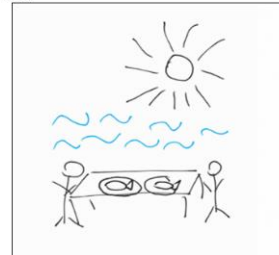
- Emblematically, a respondent highlighted how her consumption before the lockdown was characterized by objects, mainly related to beauty and fashion, with relevance for brands.
- Differently from the past, she imagined her consumption after the crisis as represented by a different kind of hedonism,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

*My Consumption Before the Health Crisis*



*Panel A*

*My Consumption When the Health Crisis will be Over*



*Panel B*

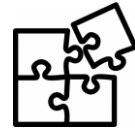
Figure 4. Respondent 23, age 23, female



# Discussion and implications

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- 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.



# Conclusion

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## Theoretical implications

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We underline how consumers' desires, preferences, and priorities change during a health crisis in which individuals could be limited in their daily behaviors and habits.

We contribute to the literature on nostalgia and resilience by shedding light on the meaning that such constructs assume during a pandemic and, generally during social distancing scenarios. More specifically, we offer new possible dimensions regarding resilience in terms of self-care attention, responsibility, and lifestyle maintenance, and in regard to regards nostalgia, in terms of routine nostalgia, happiness nostalgia and freedom nostalgia.

We contribute to the literature on sustainable consumption by introducing the new concept of "responsible hedonic consumption", which emphasizes a new form of consumption that may emerge from a lockdown due to a pandemic and that merges hedonism and sustainability

## Managerial implications

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Marketers and managers could improve their strategies during, and immediately after a health crisis, by leveraging on the highlighted consumers' behaviors and experienced emotional states.

Moreover, findings may be of help to managers who need to better understand how consumers' consumption patterns change during a lockdown, thus, to better react in terms of communication and product offering.

Companies must be able to balance the two components by changing their offerings or by introducing new products and/or services. Importantly, outdoor activities become important for consumers, thus companies, in different sectors, may consider this insight in order to reshape some of their offerings, with the aim to associate their products or services to the opportunity to enjoy nature.



# Thank you!

## Any suggestions?



### Keep in touch

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