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Uncertain consumption practices in an uncertain future

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Abstract

This special issue of Cadernos EBAPE.BR sought to provoke a reflection focused on uncertain consumption practices in an uncertain future. While prior marketing and consumer research has explored consumer practices framed by an institutionalized, known, and more or less predictable context, the set of articles approved in this edition reveals different nuances. From experiential accounts of grief to the role of music in coping with the struggles of isolation to the overlap of social roles, these papers may help us to reflect on what we can do together, as a society, to tackle the challenges brought by COVID-19 not only at the local level but also globally.

Keywords: COVID-19. Coronavirus. Pandemic. Consumption. Consumer culture.

Práticas de consumo incertas em um futuro incerto

Resumo

Esta edição especial do Cadernos EBAPE.BR buscou provocar uma reflexão focada em práticas de consumo incertas em um futuro incerto. Enquanto pesquisas anteriores de marketing e consumo têm explorado práticas de consumo circunscritas em um contexto institucionalizado, conhecido e mais ou menos previsível, o conjunto de artigos aprovados nesta edição revela nuances diferentes. De relatos experienciais de luto ao papel da música no enfrentamento do isolamento e da sobreposição de papéis sociais, os artigos publicados podem nos ajudar a refletir sobre o que podemos fazer juntos, como sociedade, para enfrentar os desafios trazidos pela COVID-19, não apenas em nível local, mas também globalmente.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19. Coronavírus. Pandemia. Consumo. Cultura do consumidor.

Prácticas de consumo inciertas en un futuro incierto

Resumen

Este número especial de Cadernos EBAPE.BR se propuso provocar una reflexión centrada en las prácticas de consumo inciertas en un futuro incierto. Si bien investigaciones previas de marketing y consumo han explorado prácticas de consumo enmarcadas en un contexto institucionalizado, conocido y más o menos predecible, el conjunto de artículos seleccionados para esta edición revela diferentes matices. Desde relatos experienciales de duelo hasta el papel de la música para sobrellevar el aislamiento y la superposición de roles sociales, estos artículos pueden ayudarnos a reflexionar sobre lo que podemos hacer juntos, como sociedad, para enfrentar los desafíos planteados por la COVID-19 no solo a nivel local sino también global.

Palabras clave: COVID-19. Coronavirus. Pandemia. Consumo. Cultura de consumo.

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INTRODUCTION

As of February 2022, over 5 million people worldwide have died after contracting COVID-19 (Weitemeyer, 2022). The USA, Brazil, and India are the most brutally affected countries, which combined reported total of more than 1.5 million deaths to date. As Ward (2020) and others note (e.g., Aboelenien, Arsel, & Cho, 2021; Lee & Goldsmith, 2022), the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic go beyond its biological complexity and capacity for mutations. It has, indeed, changed social life “as we know it” through the numerous adjustments imposed on us by governments or chosen by us. During the pandemic, we witnessed a lack of oxygen in many healthcare units leading to patients dying of suffocation (Maisonnave, 2020), cases of harassment of healthcare professionals, especially women workers (Souadka, Essangri, Benkabbou, Amrani, & Majbar, 2020), and the limited first-dose vaccines distribution to poor countries rich countries receive double doses plus booster shots (Singh & Chattu, 2021). Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and now Omicron are all variants of the coronavirus in terms of its biological characteristics and for attempting to address the global inequality in public healthcare to tackle the pandemic (Tatar, Shoorekchali, Faraji, & Wilson, 2021).

In times of COVID-19, there is a new popular saying that goes: “We are not in the same boat. We are in the same storm, but definitely not in the same boat. Your ship can be shipwrecked and mine might not be. Or vice versa.” And to cope and navigate such a turbulent storm, people have employed different strategies given their personal affordances and structural constraints (Budimir, Probst, & Pieh, 2021). The tensions between micro and macro, mine, and yours, public and private, fair, and unfair, rights and wrongs became stronger, prompting adaptation and resignification of many consumption practices. Consumption ideologies — ideas and ideals manifested in consumers’ social representations and communicated in their actions in marketplaces — thus have a meaningful role here (Schmitt, Brakus, & Biraglia, 2021). In the case of working from home, for example, the use of video-streaming platforms, such as Zoom, have transformed our private living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and any available space in the house into shared public spaces. Online-at-home business meetings, pep talks, lectures, training, happy hours, and so on are now liminal spaces where real and surreal eventually meet. Some of us wear our favorite Batman socks with pajamas pants, but a fine, fit, and fashionable shirt to “look good” on screen. Some of us, tired of all the lack of temporal boundaries between work and play, use apps, such as L’Oréal’s Signature Face filters (Pays, 2020), to mask dark circles under eyes — and, why not “feel good, look pretty, healthy, or okay” (Chen et al., 2021; Leong et al., 2021). We can now buy virtual clothing to go with our virtual presence on meeting apps. And many of us, for better or for worse, transform our rooms with Zoom backgrounds that may work as a symbolic escape route to personal dreams (e.g., a beach in Rio de Janeiro) or simply to mask the real-life chaos behind the screen (Schmitt et al., 2021).

Two years into the pandemic, people are still involuntarily juggling between here and there, hoping to find old and new meanings in their everyday activities. In many ways, the dismantlement of what was individually and collectively understood as an ordered collapse (Andreescu, 2021). Our ontological security (Giddens, 1991), the sense of confidence that we, as individuals, have in the continuity of our self-identities and social roles, and the constancy of our surrounding social and material environments are not easily perceived. This is especially challenging when governments contribute to such insecurity by attributing no value at all to human life. In response to such unsympathetic reactions, Purnell (2021, p. 2) aptly notes one mark of the pandemics: “embodied subjects live in a socially-politically constructed world where somebody seen and known as an absolutely loved and irreplaceable person to one can become reduced to and known as “only” their body.” Sadly, much like out of date products, human beings have become even more disposable in the eyes of some.

In the middle of this complex scenario, many of us questioned the very notion of time and, perhaps, more than ever, felt its relativity (Robinson, Veresiu, & Rosario, 2022). The time spent with our beloved ones may be too short for life is unpredictable, so is the coronavirus (Losada-Baltar et al., 2021). Some parents enjoyed the chance to follow every early development of their children because of lockdowns, but at the same time, they felt guilty for their lack of socialization with other infants of the same age (Mazza et al., 2021). In many places, such as Belgium and the UK, pilots of a four-day workweek are a reality in attempts to reduce the time spent working (Martens & Pronina, 2022). The consequence, Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi (2020) show, may be greater satisfaction, joy, and happiness — a silver lining in this pandemic for some. When it comes to consumption, questions that may come to our minds are: What kind of souvenirs are we going to keep to forget (Marcoux, 2017)? What are the possessions that we will keep as part of our selves that may involve nostalgia of a difficult time, such as the current pandemic (Belk, 1988)? For such subjective questions, no answer is correct.

THE PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

It is true that the pandemic has a global impact, but certainly most of our experiences are very locally contextualized. And one of them that may be experienced by all of us in the current pandemic is grief, which is the theme of the first paper of this special issue (SI).

In it, considering the disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to understand how consumers respond to this scenario, Fernanda Scussel and Maribel Carvalho Suarez's netnographic work, **"Consumer grief: understanding how consumers deal with the loss of extraordinary experiences"**, explores the loss of an extraordinary experience with would-be marathon runners. They argue that consumers deal with the loss of the experience through a process composed of five mechanisms, mediated by social media, which enable consumers to reverse, reframe and reimagine their experience. The mechanisms of refutation, despair, abstention-compensation, transgression, and acceptance show how consumers behave in different times of grief, allowing them to build their trajectories through the grieving process, individually and collectively.

In the second paper, **"Vulnerabilizing invulnerable: pandemic and the consumption of affluent elderly,"** Elisa Priori de Deus, Roberta Dias Campos, and Ana Raquel Coelho Rocha investigate nuances of consumer vulnerability. Their paper explains how consumers experience the vulnerability perceived in the pandemic and the role of consumption to deal with the effects of such vulnerability. Their interpretative research was conducted through in-depth interviews with 31 Brazilian affluent elderly, and other sources were also collected as memes, journalistic articles, and advertisements. Their findings show that consumption was revealed as part of the strategy to deal with the consequences of vulnerability, and the market response helped the elderly resume their feeling of invulnerability.

Considering vulnerability from a different perspective, Camilla Pinto Luna, Rosana Oliveira da Silva, and Denise Franca Barros explore gender issues during the pandemic. In their work **"COVID-19 as a gender market issue: is it a call for action against vulnerability?"** the authors show that there has been a considerable increase in the occurrence of gender-based domestic violence in Brazil. They sought to understand how market practices can prompt discussions of social issues such as women's vulnerability in the face of domestic violence. Market practices, such as Magalu's app for protecting women, can be influential in the fight against gender violence. But the authors stress that this creates an imminent danger by relegating the defense of women to the market sphere, while in contrast, the creation of resilience is, necessarily, the result of joint action by society as a whole.

The fourth paper in this special issue, details a phenomenon that many of us, professors and researchers, have been experiencing: online teaching. In their paper **"Professor or youtuber? The COVID-19 pandemic, changes in social practice, and the adoption of technologies for distance education,"** Breno Giordane dos Santos Costa, Helga Silva Espigão, and Marcelo de Rezende Pinto discusses the results of research whose aim was to understand how the migration from proximate to distance learning occurred (and continues to occur) due to social distancing practices stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is based on theoretical framework of practice theory. One of the conclusions is that mastering a certain technology is not enough for an individual to use it in professional activities. Concerning the professors interviewed, it was necessary to change a few subjective elements; more specifically, they needed to modify some understandings and the chains of value and projects inherent in the practice of classroom teaching.

In the last but not least paper, **"The rise and fall of live online music event consumption during the pandemic: an analysis from the perspective of practice theory"**, Frederico Leocádio Ferreira, Juliana Maria Magalhães Christino, Laura de Oliveira Cardoso, and Ana Luíza Silva Noronha investigated a unique phenomenon brought on by adapting to social distancing and lockdowns. The phenomenon of watching online live music events became popular during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to consume leisure events inside the home. For three months, these virtual concerts entered the routines of Brazilians and others, only to then lose its audience exponentially. This trajectory was studied under the prism of practice theory and sought to understand the elements that form this consumption practice, its synchrony with other everyday routines, as well as external phenomena that act in the consolidation (or not) of a practice. The findings provide clues as to why the practice declined, with emphasis on the overlapping of practices belonging to the new routines created by practitioners in response to social isolation and reduction of the initial originality (understanding) of more intimate lives that get lost in the search for innovations in practice.

CONCLUSION

The papers in this SI combine to offer an understanding of uncertain consumption practices in an uncertain future. From experiential accounts of grief to the role of music in coping with the struggles of isolation, these papers may help us to reflect on what we can do together, as a society, to “get out of the storm even in different boats,” especially those who do not have a boat at all.

From a methodological point of view, all papers in this special issue are based on qualitative or conceptual methodologies. While we, the guest-editors, would like to include papers based on multiple methods, the explorative phase that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests, inspired more qualitative than quantitative papers. Having said that, future research may further explore the themes and phenomena outlined here by means of different methodological approaches. This could be especially relevant for policymakers in the case of longitudinal works and big datasets. Another aspect we believe worthy of further investigation ties into the designing of post-COVID public places. In such an uncertain future, how can consumers experience ephemeral moments of comfort, security, happiness, well-being, and so on in restaurants, hotels, theme parks, universities, hospitals, among others? Regardless of the context, these future insights may eventually allow us, as a society, to prepare for better tomorrows; whatever they may be. May all of us keep our hearts, heads, and hopes in the right place. Stay healthy, stay safe.

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