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Consumer grief: understanding how consumers deal with the loss of extraordinary experiences

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Abstract

Despite the interest in the role of consumption in the bereavement process, the concept of consumer grief and the process consumers experience when grieving remain undertheorized. This article aims to conceptualize consumer grief considering the disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to understand how consumers respond to this scenario, understanding the mechanisms consumers create to deal with loss. In view of the importance of extraordinary experiences due to their embodied, social, and transformational power, in this netnographic study, we explore marathon runners' loss of an extraordinary experience. Consumers deal with the loss of an experience through a process composed of five mechanisms mediated by social media, which enable consumers to reverse, reframe, and reestablish the experience. The mechanisms of refutation, despair, abstention-compensation, transgression, and acceptance show how consumers behave in different moments of grief, allowing them to build their trajectories in the grieving process, individually and collectively. As a contribution, we expand the literature on consumer grief by focusing on the specific concept of consumer grief, explaining the processes consumers go through when they deal with the loss of an experience. Additionally, we present a collective perspective on the grieving process, shifting the analysis of the grief of an individual or a family unit to the socialization of grief.

Keywords: COVID-19. Consumer Grief. Grief. Extraordinary Experience.

Luto do consumidor: entendendo como os consumidores lidam com a perda de experiências extraordinárias

Resumo

Apesar do interesse pelo papel do consumo no processo de luto, o conceito de luto do consumidor e o processo através do qual os consumidores vivenciam o luto permanecem pouco estudados. Considerando a ruptura trazida pela pandemia da COVID-19 e a necessidade de entender como os consumidores respondem a esse cenário, este artigo tem como objetivo conceituar o luto do consumidor, entendendo os mecanismos criados pelos consumidores para lidar com a perda. Tendo em vista a importância de experiências extraordinárias e seus efeitos transformacionais no corpo e no tecido social, neste estudo netnográfico exploramos a perda de uma experiência extraordinária a partir da investigação com corredores de maratona. O artigo evidencia que o consumidor lida com a perda da experiência por meio de um processo composto por cinco mecanismos, mediados pelas redes sociais, que permitem ao consumidor reverter, reenquadrar e restabelecer a experiência perdida. Os mecanismos de refutação, desespero, abstenção-compensação, transgressão e aceitação mostram como os consumidores se comportam nos diferentes momentos de luto, permitindo-lhes construir suas trajetórias no processo de luto, individual e coletivamente. Como contribuição, expandimos a literatura sobre o luto do consumidor, explicando os processos pelos quais os consumidores passam quando lidam com a perda de uma experiência. Além disso, apresentamos uma perspectiva coletiva sobre o processo de luto, deslocando a análise do luto de um indivíduo ou de uma unidade familiar para a socialização do luto.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19. Luto do Consumidor. Luto. Experiência Extraordinária.

Duelo del consumidor: comprendiendo cómo los consumidores afrontan la pérdida de experiencias extraordinarias

Resumen

A pesar del interés en el papel del consumo en el proceso de duelo, el concepto de duelo del consumidor y el proceso que experimentan los consumidores cuando están en duelo siguen sin teorizarse. Considerando la disrupción provocada por la pandemia de COVID-19 y la necesidad de comprender cómo los consumidores responden a este escenario, este artículo tiene como objetivo conceptualizar el luto del consumidor, entendiendo los mecanismos creados por los consumidores para lidiar con la pérdida. En vista de la importancia de las experiencias extraordinarias y sus efectos transformadores sobre el cuerpo y el tejido social, en este estudio netnográfico exploramos la pérdida de una experiencia extraordinaria a partir de una investigación con corredores de maratón. Los consumidores afrontan la pérdida de la experiencia a través de un proceso compuesto por cinco mecanismos, mediados por las redes sociales, que les permiten revertir, replantear y restablecer la experiencia perdida. Los mecanismos de refutación, desesperación, abstención-compensación, transgresión y aceptación muestran cómo se comportan los consumidores en los diferentes momentos del duelo, permitiéndoles construir sus trayectorias en el proceso de duelo, de forma individual y colectiva. Como contribución, ampliamos la literatura sobre el duelo del consumidor enfocándonos en el concepto específico de duelo del consumidor, explicando los procesos que atraviesan los consumidores cuando enfrentan la pérdida de una experiencia. Adicionalmente, presentamos una perspectiva colectiva sobre el proceso de duelo, trasladando el análisis del duelo de un individuo o una unidad familiar a la socialización del duelo.

Palabras clave: COVID-19. Duelo del consumidor. Duelo. Experiencia extraordinaria.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's lives worldwide, through the need of people to elaborate coping strategies to deal with the insecurity of the new reality (Belk, 2020), shedding light on the need of addressing the losses wrought by the pandemic (Walsh, 2020). On consumer research, Belk (1988) was the first to propose that the loss of possessions can diminish consumers' sense of self, and lead consumers to mourn the identity invested in their possessions, in a grief transition. This notion, endorsed by Hill (1991) and Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, and Hill (1995), shows that there is a grieving process consumers go through in the case of the loss of possessions, expectations, and experiences. Research on consumer grief has been dedicated to the role of consumption in the grieving process (Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012), rituals of material disposal (Canning & Szmigin, 2010), or consumers' elaborations after loss (Bonsu, 2007; O'Donohoe & Turley, 2005), without a specific focus on consumers' process of bereavement. Thus, the concept of consumer grief and the process consumers experience when grieving remain undertheorized.

Considering the disruption brought by the COVID-19 and the need to understand how consumers respond to this scenario (Belk, 2020; Campbell, Inman, Kirmani, & Price, 2020; Walsh, 2020), as well as the need of comprehending the changes in consumer behavior (Belk, 2020), this paper focuses on the process of consumer grief. Based on the assumption of Gentry et al. (1995, p. 68), that "you grieve the loss of something that makes you who you are", and the fact that consumption experiences stimulate consumers' sensory pleasures, flow of feelings and emotional responses, being a source of symbolic meanings (Holbrook & Hirshman, 1982), we wonder: how do consumers deal with the loss of the experience?

More specifically, we investigate the context of extraordinary experiences, a type of hedonic experience characterized by intensity, emotional content and transformational power (Arnould & Price, 1993). It promotes impacts on consumers' connection with their bodies (Scott, Cayla, & B. Cova, 2017), socialization (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), sense of productivity (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011), and identities (B. Cova, 2020). Extraordinary experiences became an important source of escape for consumers, who find opportunities for stressing relief in such activities, to breakout from daily life burdens, and to build a more powerful sense of self (B. Cova, 2020; Scott et al., 2017). Taking into account the importance of extraordinary experiences, it is reasonable to say that the loss of such experience can initiate a process of bereavement, being an adequate case for the purpose of this paper, which is to conceptualize consumer grief and understand the mechanisms created by consumers to deal with loss.

To address this objective, we conducted a study with marathon runners who were in preparation to run a marathon in 2020, after the mandatory cancellation of marathons because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Runners commit to an intense and demanding training routine in order to prepare for marathons from 16 to 20 weeks (Rupprecht & Matkin, 2012). They form a homogeneous group that shares habits, practices, beliefs, and a sense of identification with the practice, affecting the way these individuals perceive themselves and create a social identity (Robinson, Patterson, & Axelsen, 2014). Moreover, the marathon is capable of conducting individuals to transcendental dimensions, promoting a dissociation from reality (Garcia & Marinho, 2010), in alignment with the idea of escape fostered by extraordinary experiences. The cancellation of the marathons worldwide interrupted the process of preparation, socialization, expectations of self-renewal and identity projects, allowing us to investigate the purpose of this paper.

GRIEF IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

The traditional grief process was elaborated by Kübler-Ross (1973), who revealed five stages people go through when they deal with the possibility of death or loss a loved one. Denial is a refusal to accept the situation; anger indicates the wish to fight back the unlucky destiny; bargaining suggests a negotiation with hope and reality; depression is the phase of sadness, hopelessness, and frustration; and in acceptance individuals recognize the loss and recreate a new reality. Neimeyer (2001) expanded this understanding by discussing that the unwelcome losses individuals go through demand the reconstruction of the world of meaning. In this sense, bereavement can be experienced in stressful life events that promote severe impact on the individuals' psychological well-being, demanding them to cope with a new reality.

In consumer research, Belk (1988) was the one to propose that the loss of possessions can trigger a trauma due to the diminishment of one's self. In addition, it launches an attempt at self-restoration, which could be compared to the process of grief (Gentry et al., 1995; Hill, 1991).

Further research on consumer grief covered three main perspectives. The first concerns consumers' elaborations, encompassing the feelings and emotional responses encompassed subsequent to the loss, including how individuals arrange their relationships with the memory of the deceased (Bonsu, 2007; O'Donohoe & Turley, 2005) and the role of funeral rituals (Bonsu & Belk, 2003). The second perspective focuses on the disposal of material possessions, in relation to the way consumers deal with the objects left by the deceased (Canning & Szmigin, 2010; Guillard, 2017; Kates, 2001). The third perspective looks at consumption practices during the grieving process, such as transitions consumption patterns following the death of a family member (Gentry et al., 1995), the role of consumption as a tool for consumers to create a new narrative to deal with loss (Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012), and the practices around funeral services consumption (O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006).

Those three perspectives show how consumption acts when individuals are facing the loss of a friend or family member. Despite the interest of consumer researchers on the loss of possessions (Belk, 1990; Belk & Costa, 1998), literature lacks an understanding of the specific process consumers go through when they deal with the loss of experiences. Due to the role of experiences in helping consumers in their identity projects construction (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; B. Cova, 2020; Doson, 1996; Scott et al., 2017) and the impact of losing something that give us a sense of self (Gentry et al., 1995; Neimeyer, 2001), covering the loss of an experience becomes an important issue in consumer research. Additionally, we foresee the contribution of unveiling the process of consumer grief through the comprehension of experience loss. This matter becomes even more relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals had to face not only the loss of family and friends but also the loss in different areas of life, like a job, normality, and personal identity (Walsh, 2020).

As consumer researchers, we are called to shed light on the phenomena of post-pandemic consumption (Belk, 2020) and of consumers' adaptive responses (Campbell et al., 2020). In consideration of the gap regarding consumer grief, we investigate consumption experience loss, more specifically the case of extraordinary experiences, a highly emotional context that promotes consumers' socialization, identity creation and self-construction. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the interruption of an extraordinary experience triggers a grieving process, being a suitable path to explore the grieving process experienced by consumers.

EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

Since the introduction of consumer subjectivity on consumption experience research (Holbrook & Hirshman, 1982), extraordinary experiences arise as a special type of experience based on high levels of emotional intensity and interpersonal interaction in experiential settings outside the realms of modern life (Abrahams, 1986). More than a break from routine and an escape from daily obligations through intense adventures (Arnould & Price, 1993), these intense and highly emotional experiences help individuals to assess new meanings and perspectives, also, to reduce anxiety and develop a new sense of self (Abrahams, 1986).

According to B. Cova (2020), the basis of extraordinary experiences is escapism: extraordinary experiences are linked to being away, with disconnection and the distance from daily life. The desire to escape contemporary life has led consumers to use fantasies as an escape route from the urban lifestyle (Belk & Costa, 1998); to engage in high-risk sports (Celsi et al., 1993; Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 2013) and to face painful experiences to reconnect with their bodies, awakening from a saturated reality (Scott et al., 2017). Literature also shows extraordinary experiences as an opportunity to discover a new pace of life (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019) and to find a connection between body and mind, as a path to spiritual awakening (V. Cova & B. Cova, 2019). Recently, B. Cova (2020) presented the concept of self-escape from the assumption that extraordinary experiences go beyond routine escape. More than a need to be away, consumers seek experiences that enable them to escape from themselves and use physical pain as the connection with their forgotten corporality.

Beyond the desire for fun and pleasure or the emotions from a novel adventure, extraordinary experiences are a path for consumers to create their own narratives about themselves, to restore their relationship with their bodies and to construct a new self from which they take pleasure and enjoyment. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals throughout the world were asked to stay home, a situation that demanded consumer adaptation in various aspects of their lives, including the cessation of all engagement with extraordinary experiences and, along with this, interrupting consumers' personal projects. Due to the highly emotional content of extraordinary experiences, its interruption resembles the diminishing of the self that is promoted by the loss of a possession (Belk, 1988), which leads us to further explore consumer grief.

METHOD

This research began in 2018 with an initial goal of understanding the processes and dynamics involved in runners' journey to live the extraordinary experience of running a marathon. In the first phase of this ethnographic project, the leading author immersed herself in a subculture of marathoners in Brazil. From 2017 to 2020, she developed an ethnographic diary covering her experience running three marathons, along with photos and videos, and 33 interviews (30-40 minutes average), totaling 192 pages of transcriptions. This phase extended until the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, with the cancellation of the marathons.

In the second phase, due to the impossibility of training outside or personally meeting the marathoners, we implemented a netnographic strategy, following the guidance of Kozinets (2015), from March 2020 to March 2021. We followed the personal profiles on Instagram of the 33 runners interviewed in the first phase, along with several other accounts from the online running community, including runners, digital influencers, and running coaches. Netnography also included WhatsApp conversations between the leading author and several running partners and a running group. Additionally, we monitored two of the most popular running channels on YouTube (288k and 148k subscribers) in Brazil, watching more than 30 videos and tracking the followers' comments. During the second phase, we collected over 100 screenshots with photos and descriptions about the effect of the pandemic in their training routine and selected 45 YouTube comments about the topic. Lastly, in March 2021, with the new protocols of running outside in Brazil, interviews were conducted personally with two marathoners (20 minutes average), whose Instagram profiles were tracked during the netnographic strategy. Those participants were both female (28 and 45 years old), who had run 5 and 2 marathons before the pandemic, with marathon plans cancelled due to the pandemic.

For data analysis, we followed a hermeneutical process (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2015) with multiple readings, analysis, and comparisons. The focus of the analysis was the data from the second phase of the research (netnographic data and two interviews). The data from the first phase was a useful content to help us understand the changes lived by consumers when facing the loss of the experience. First, we organized the screenshot photos, consumers' online narratives, quotations transcribed from the YouTube videos, consumers' comments on YouTube, and the research diary notes in a chronological line. Afterwards, we used the codification process proposed by Saldaña (2015), which starts with the codification of the data.

Visual material (photos and videos) were coded considering its elements (training location, equipment, brands), interactions (if individuals ran alone, accompanied, or supervised by coaches), and feelings that were identified, considering the context of the research. For this type of data, we followed the recommendations of Schembri and Boyle (2013), who argue that visual material can contribute to the analysis of social and cultural experiences that build consumption phenomena. For the authors, what allows the analysis of visual materials is the researcher's immersion process in their field.

Finally, the codes were grouped into categories, which signalized different stages of an ongoing process, which we considered the consumer grief process.

FINDINGS

Consumers cope with the loss of the experience through a process composed of five independent mechanisms mediated by social media. This process enables consumers to reverse, reframe and reestablish the experience through the socialization with the online community. With similarities to the phases of the traditional grieving model (Kübler-Ross, 1973), the mechanisms of refutation, despair, abstention-compensation, transgression, and acceptance show how consumers behave differently in distinct times of grief, which allows them to build their trajectories in the grieving process, individually and collectively.

Refutation. Sharing characteristics with the denial and the bargaining phase of the traditional grieving model (Kübler-Ross, 1973), the mechanism of refutation indicates the way consumers negotiate with the reality involving the pandemic context and the cancellation of the races, with a strong distrust on the situation and an attempt to minimize news and scientific reports about the COVID-19. We illustrate this situation with a comment from a YouTube video about running safe during the pandemic:

“I try to analyze the numbers coldly. 80% of Brazilian municipalities do not even have 1 confirmed case of the disease. Others have a few dozen. The study takes into account that you will be running in a location WITH people nearby, which the vast majority of people (I include myself) are not doing. I bet it's easier for you to die running over on the street than to get sick. The street commerce in my city has already been released. Thousands of other professionals haven't even stopped since the beginning. Apart from schools and other sectors, life is proceeding normally. Nor am I going to go into the credit of the vast majority of people even showing symptoms if they get sick. There is no reason to question his solo race on the street. My opinion”.

The lack of definition in the institutional sphere about what can and cannot be done and the constant changes in the prohibitions in Brazil validate this mechanism, leaving the decision of staying at home or maintaining their routines on their hands. When the president of Brazil questions the scientific guidelines, discourages lockdown and social distancing, and disagrees with the Health Minister's position about the pandemic (Ortega & Orsini, 2020), consumers are helpless in the sense of making right choices. In the absence of public health agreement, the decisions about consumption practices lie on consumers. Hence, to avoid changes in their consumption activities practices, which could let them to live the uncomfortable feelings brought by the acknowledgement of loss (Gentry et al., 1995), consumers find alternative ways to keep running during the pandemic.

This behavior is reinforced by the productivity and efficiency logic that guides experiential consumption (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011) and the performance ideology around extraordinary experiences (Scott et al., 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 2013). Refutation is also motivated by the news about how athletes share a healthy immune system (Yousfi, Bragazzi, Briki, Zmijewski, & Chamari, 2020), what could protect them from the contagion. In this perspective, running is understood as a prevention resource, as keeping the exercise routine could be a driver of immunity. This discourse finds resonance in consumers' need of writing their own heroic narratives from living extraordinary experiences (Scott et al., 2017). In the impossibility of running the marathon, runners refuse to accept reality, also constructing their heroic identity based on the refutation mechanism. Several runners decide to keep running outdoors, sharing on social media what they have been doing to exchange information about the possibilities of running during lockdown. More than an online environment to build their narratives (Scott et al., 2017), social media became the place where runners could meet, replacing the prior socialization outdoors with the online interaction through sharing their running experiences during the pandemic. On Instagram, many posts about running with masks start to appear, for example:

“Outdoors, always on mask. To run, I can't. That is why I run close to home, in circuits of 200/400 meters. I can increase to 1000 meters with hills. I lower the mask and if I pass by someone, I cover my mouth and nose. And I follow like that, going out for running and only for essential stuff”.

Beyond the refusal to appropriately wear the mask, this post demonstrates that consumers see running as an essential activity. Thus, we can compare the loss of the experience of losing an important part of their extended self (Belk, 1988),

which enhances consumers' refusal in stop running. Thus, the refusal to stop training is a way of "doing something to not lose myself", a defense mechanism and a protection from negative feelings. Unlike the traditional grieving process (Kübler-Ross, 1973), in which the loss of a loved one is unavoidable, the loss of the experience initiates a negotiation with loss, an attempt to reframe it, challenging the imposed reality. Moreover, the attempt to reverse the loss of the experience by running in alternative times and places resembles the consumption practices transitions consumers live after the death of a family member (Gentry et al., 1995). It reaffirms consumers' decision to push pain behind and focus on the refutation behavior.

Despair. The mechanism of despair concerns consumers' attachment to feelings like sadness and hopelessness during the loss of the experience. Similar to the depression phase of the traditional grieving model, when individuals begin to realize the certainty of the loss (Kübler-Ross, 1973), consumers transform their frustration with the cancellation of the races and the interruption of training in sorrow, initiating a low mood state. Typical comments on YouTube were:

"My first reaction was to be very sad, I cried, I was pissed, I was thinking, well, I prepared for this race for almost six months, so I lived it all for almost six months, I lived the dream, visualized it, imagined it like it was going to be, and now the race has been canceled. I was sad, I cried, I got home and it felt like I was living in a movie, I felt like it wasn't happening to me".

The loss of the experience is not only about a cancelled event, but the preparation, time and effort put in the process of building performance (Scott et al., 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2013) that is interrupted, and consumers suffer an instant change in their world (Fuchs, 2017). As the previous lines reveal, consumers feel the loss of time, effort, expectations, dreams and possibilities. This means detaching not only from tangible aspects but also from the subjectivity involved in extraordinary experiences. Research has shown that extraordinary experiences help consumers to connect with a better version of themselves (Arnould & Price, 1993). In the case of marathoners, such feelings are connected to the chance of rebirth and the entrance in a superior human condition (Garcia & Marinho, 2010). Thus, the extraordinary experiences become a part of consumers' extended-self (Belk, 1988), initiating a process of bereavement when the experience is lost. This is related to the diminishment of one's self concept in the case of losing material objects, in a restorative transition that shares similarities with grieving (Hill, 1991).

Literature on grief recognizes that loss promotes a transformation of the subject felt primarily in the body, including mood swings, loss of or excess appetite and sleep disturbances (Fuchs, 2018). Some participants stopped exercising or changed eating behaviors, using food to compensate for the emptiness left by the loss of the experience. They also dealt with anxiety and feelings like sadness and hopelessness, similar to the depression phase of the traditional grief process (Kübler-Ross, 1973). Some interviewees reported an aversion to activities and mourn what could have been if the loss had not happened. The following quotation illustrates this situation:

"I started running to lose weight and after I lost weight, I really fell in love with running and it became my therapy, my escape, my freedom, my leisure time, my moment to take my soul for a walk, my moment. And stop running was that. I gained weight, I reduced my conditioning a lot, I was doing a marathon smoothly, I suffered, of course, but I did it quietly, and today a 10km race I don't know if I sign up. I regressed my fitness a lot and I gained weight, because until then the race was keeping me thin. My body has changed. I increased my weight, changed my measures, changed my strength, changed my breath, changed everything, hit despair" (Lily, 45 years old, interview in January 2021).

Lily's speech evidences how marathon cancellation impacted different aspects of her life, including a path for escaping (B. Cova, 2020) and a connection with corporeality (Scott et al., 2017). Additionally, consumers' identity projects (Belk, 1988) are transformed when they lose the marathon, which serves as a path for a better life for driving positive changes. Training for the marathons awakens a productive and efficient self (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011), replicated in other spheres of life, and becomes a foundational element for self-appreciation and self-care. When experience is interrupted, the maintenance of that self is put in risk. Just like individuals must face dealing with the material possessions left by a deceased (Canning & Szmigin, 2010; Guillard, 2017; Kates, 2001), consumers living the loss of an experience must face the challenge of dealing with the terrifying perspective of losing their bodies, hopes, dreams and identities along with the experience.

As Fuchs (2018) explains, the depression caused by grieving promotes a feeling of ambiguity that connects presence and absence, present and past, the old and the new world. In the case of consumers, we see the rise of nostalgic practices as a way of keeping consumers' sense of identity (Belk, 1990). This return to the past is seen in many posts on social media describing runners' previous experiences. In June 2020, the first author published the following post in her personal Instagram account, stimulating a discussion with over 30 comments about "how I miss myself":

"I will use the nostalgic vibe on the day of #TBT and talk about my great longing in these strange times: me! Crazy that I am, in full social isolation, I miss me. It was a chat with my psychologist in the last two weeks that took me to this longing, to this place where I meet, reconnect and recharge. And that moment happens on the street, in the wind, in the sun. It is in the race that this all happens. You know very well that I like goals and plans. But it is more than that. I need them. I have a tendency to not appreciate anything that is easy, so I love the feelings that a complex and challenging thing brings me. I really like this woman! Today's me is a little too lazy, too condescending. At the same time that all conscious voices tell me to take it easy, this search for less is difficult to swallow here. I have a crush for damage. So, while agglomerations are not allowed and the sweaty hugs after the test are only in memory, I keep reliving my virtual albums and making plans - and only they already take me to a tastier place!".

More than representing how consumers change their relationship with their memories (Bonsu, 2007; O'Donohoe & Turley, 2005), this quotation demonstrates consumers' attachment to the productiveness ideology that permeates contemporary society, even in leisure activities (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). There is sadness in decelerating (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Deceleration is a driver of bad feelings and the encounter with a self that consumers do not appreciate. The interruption of the experience deprives consumers to reach their better self, a loss that is nostalgically missed. Beyond the disconnection from the productive self, the previous quotation indicates the impossibility of escaping routine. Extraordinary experiences are known by their escapism nature, with the power of detaching consumers from everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Scott et al., 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 2013). However, during the pandemic, consumers must stay home and face routine without the possibility of escape, enhancing negative feelings and a sentimental celebration of the past.

Before the pandemic, social media was a place used by consumers to show others their accomplishments to others, along with photos and descriptions of their challenges overcome (Scott et al., 2017). Now, from a place of celebration, social media becomes a nostalgic place to connect consumers through the pain of losing the experience. In this sense, the online running community acts as a counselling group, where consumers find comfort in the texts shared by other runners living the same situation, in a collective grief. Just like consumers need the group to live the extraordinary experience (Arnould & Price, 1993; Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 2013), consumers need the group to go through the grieving process and to heal from the loss of the experience.

Abstention-compensation. The mechanism of abstention-compensation arises from the consumers who interrupted their running practice. It is a physical response of the body to the interruption of the experience, potentialized by the subjective sensations of isolation. Since escapism is the essence of extraordinary experiences (B. Cova, 2020), and high volumes of running training can trigger exercise addiction (Ertl et al., 2017), the non-voluntary interruption of extraordinary experiences led consumers to feel angry, stressed and frustrated for having their actions constrained. An excerpt from the first author field notes during the pandemic illustrates these feelings:

"I am missing that rush, that feeling of completely forgetting reality and transporting myself to a place of pure ecstasy. I never used drugs before, but I always joked that the feeling of running should be as close as I had experienced to getting high. Now, there is no more. This became clearer now, locked at home, as I seem to be having an abstinence crisis: sulky, angry and with the constant feeling that something is missing".

In our interviews prior to the pandemic, people constantly used the expression “addiction” to reveal the power of running in promoting escape, with a peak moment in the day of the marathon. Extraordinary experiences are biosocial phenomena, once the physical sensations that emerge from such activities are potentialized when shared with other people, what causes an addiction character for such experiences (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, & Canniford, 2009). By ceasing these moments, the lack of physiological sensations combined with social distancing promote an absence state, marked by “very high stress, which led to bad mood, anxiety, tiredness, weight gain” (Mary, 28 years-old, interview in January 2021).

To relieve the symptoms of abstention, consumers resort to a compensation mechanism, by reframing practices in order to reestablish bodily routines and fulfill the whole left by the loss. Some participants start with routine adaptation (Phipps & Ozzane, 2017), exercising at home or engaging in nutritional plans to manage weight gain during the pandemic. Some of them improvised with what they have at home, using bottles and boxes for strength training and static runs inside the house. As the pandemic continues, some resort to the market in order to buy treadmills, indoor bikes and strength training equipment, stimulating a market around indoor exercise. Routine adaptation includes the practice of changing equipment with other runners from time to time. Since many gyms were closed due to the pandemic, they started to rent their equipment. These activities helped marathoners relieve body sensations and mental states derived from abstention. Enabling exercise routines also reinforce runners’ identity. A digital influencer posted her exercise routine at home, stating: “doing my 1% to recover my marathon runner essence”.

Routine adaptation, however, cannot retrieve different types of emotional and symbolic benefits provided by the lost experiences. Consumers continue to mourn the intensity and the emotional content (Arnould & Price, 1993) that extraordinary experiences enable, such as the elaboration of a better version of themselves (Scott et al., 2017) and the amplification that the experience sharing evokes (Goulding et al., 2009). The interruption of extraordinary experiences promotes a deeper suffering, considering the effects in the body, and the social and escape dimensions. In this sense, routine adaptation has limited impact on consumers and does not fulfill entirely the benefits that the original experience used to provide.

This can be explained by the fact that practices are not only about doing something, but the occasion and the context in which the practice happens (Schatzki, 1996). In the case of marathoners, the challenge of reaching the goal, the peak moment on the day of the race and the related socialization. Equally important, the dissatisfaction with routine drives this type of consumption experience (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019; Scott et al., 2017). This creates a paradox as consumers seek extraordinariness in their routine lives; nevertheless, a change of perspective, despite consumers’ efforts, is insufficient.

Transgression. In the marathon context, the search for performance (Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 2013), the sense of productivity/efficiency (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011) and the heroic narratives usually associated with extraordinary experiences (Scott et al., 2017) serve as a fuel for a non-conformist and entrepreneurial attitude to cope with the limitations imposed by COVID-19. As our analysis suggests, the mechanism of transgression stimulates consumers and the market to create new configurations that enables the promulgation of a quasi-extraordinary experience, despite the recommendations of the health authorities during the pandemic, which asked people to stay at home as much as possible and respect isolation and social distance, avoiding crowding of all kinds.

Consumers and companies become allies developing new products, ranging from sophisticated masks to virtual marathons. They also demonstrate how consumption works as a tool for consumers to create a new narrative of dealing with loss (O’Donohoe & Turley, 2005; Turley & O’Donohoe, 2012). Promoted by one sport event organizer, one virtual marathon race, for instance, reproduced part of the experience of the marathon. The event required runners to pay to subscribe, and then receive a kit for the race and run the race wherever they chose, on the road or treadmill. Each runner submits the results. After comparing the scores, the organizers announced winners from the podium and distributed virtual medals. The following comment, posted on a YouTube video, evidences company and consumer alliances to keep the running community alive:

“Virtual races are also a way to keep the competitiveness flame alive. Even running in the place where you train, the spirit of competition and the desire to have a good time to be registered in the race makes a little difference, in addition to helping businessmen in the field. Of course it doesn’t compare with the traditional race, but in those times any alternative is valid”.

Virtual races combine an individual practice and a collective activity through technology, partially addressing the social interaction promoted by extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993). It also evokes the focus on goals that emotionally charge the body and the feelings of competitiveness.

However, the virtual experience does not replace entirely the context of the original experience, reinforcing the need for socialization to reach the peak moments. Netnographic data amassed several photos of consumers running virtual races together. Reproducing the normal life before COVID-19, they share their preparation for the race and their celebration after the races, on social media in dinner parties registered on Instagram. Similarly, we observed the organization of independent marathons, without the branded events, in which consumers meet to reproduce, in an autonomous way, the context of an extraordinary experience. The following post is from a sports consultancy's Instagram profile that organized an internal marathon for their runners:

"Last Sunday the continental seaside was the scenery for the XXXX Marathon 2020. The sunny day cheered up over 80 participants in the modalities of 21 and 42km during the event with full structure and safety. Congratulations to all the red warriors, you are winners since the beginning".

We understand that the transgression present in reproducing the elements of an extraordinary experience (escapism, social interaction, body dimension, self-renewal and transformation possibility) is an attempt in healing from a collective loss, a collective grief that must be faced in-group, with those who understand the dimensions of the loss they have lived. Just like bereaved individuals search for healing resources such as group counselling and therapy (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014), the loss of the experience drives consumers to seek in the community a restorative path. In this sense, the ethos of the community and its values helped consumers go through the loss of the experience. Therefore, more than a practice adjustment (Phipps & Ozzane, 2017), the transgression mechanism reveals a collective resistance for accepting loss and grief. The related non-conforming and entrepreneurial facet, however, does not exempt its followers from suffering.

Acceptance. The mechanism of acceptance shows consumers' realization on the need of changing practices (Phipps & Ozzane, 2017) to adjust their feelings about the extended self (Belk, 1988) and accept the reality (Belk, 2020; Walsh, 2020). This is when consumers let go of the expectations and illusions of living an extraordinary experience during the pandemic, sharing similarities with the acceptance phase of the traditional grieving process, when individuals understand the loss and reorganize their emotion in order to start a new phase of life (Kübler-Ross, 1973). The following comment was posted on a YouTube video about the lessons learnt in 2020, illustrating the final phase of consumer grief.

"I confess that I went through some phases of mood; despair, anger and finally, acceptance. I posted things I shouldn't have, I offended without wanting to offend, maybe I even lost a friend from real/virtual life and I apologize for the moments I acted out of anger and incomprehension. Other than that, I am training at home as much as possible, taking care of myself physically/mentally and trying to occupy myself in a productive way. I'm not making plans by now, because it doesn't make sense; it is still too early. I am following the events that are being rescheduled and seeing what will be possible or not. That is, living one day at a time, trying to maintain optimism and the flame of hope alight".

Those lines reveal consumers' engagement with a new way of living after the loss. Acceptance does not mean the end of suffering, but an accommodation of the emotional pain and the creation of strategies to deal with the loss of the experience – some decide to keep the individual running practice, some combine individual practice with eventual group practice, some quit exercising and focus on other activities, some engage in other practices. More than changing practices, we observe a profound comprehension of the lessons learnt and the adaptation of the body and mental states.

The mechanism of acceptance encompasses a reconciliation with routine. Extraordinary experiences represent consumers' desire to escape from daily life (Arnould & Price, 1993; B. Cova, 2020; Scott et al., 2017), however, during the pandemic, individuals were asked to stay home, facing the routine they try to escape from when engaging in extraordinary experiences. The need of self-escape (B. Cova, 2020) is also revisited during this phase, as consumers do not have the opportunity of escaping themselves anymore, having to face their inner world and creating strategies to deal with their identities without escaping from it. Such changes, adaptations and lessons help consumers to create a new self after the loss, a new identity project that arises when loss is finally accepted.

Just like people who lost a family member needs to rearrange consumption practices and reorganize role structure (Gentry et al., 1995), consumers need to adapt their habits, feelings and even their identity projects in order to continue living in community. For Neimeyer (2001), this means the reconstruction of the individuals' world of meaning, including the structures of everyday life and how people face the social world. The acceptance mechanism allows consumers to accept the individual and the collective bereavement, in an attempt to recreate a new reality.

Our findings enable us to propose consumer grief as a set of five independent mechanisms – refutation, despair, abstention-compensation, transgression and acceptance. However, such mechanisms do not obey a linear continuity. Consumers are able to choose their coping strategies individually while they live a collective bereavement. During the process of consumer grief, consumers can migrate from one mechanism to another, experiencing different coping strategies to try to adapt to the loss of the experience. There is no linear trajectory in consumer grief, and the mechanisms are used simultaneously from individuals in different situations, finding in the group a collective shelter. All consumers eventually find the acceptance mechanism, which regards the reach of a new way of living after mourning the loss.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to explore how consumers deal with the loss of extraordinary experiences to understand and conceptualize consumer grief. We have found that consumers deal with the loss of the experience in a process mediated by social media affordances that enables consumers to internalize and accommodate feelings and emotions that emerge with the loss of the experience, collectively developing coping strategies that allow them to restore their practices, narratives and identities. This process encompasses by five independent mechanism that help consumers to reverse, reframe, and reestablish the experience.

Prior works on consumer grief focused on the role of consumption in supporting individuals during their bereavement processes, with no attention dedicated to the processes regarding the loss of consumption acts or experiences. Our findings propose an advance in such body of knowledge by focusing on the specific matter of consumer grief, shedding light on the processes consumers go through when they deal with the loss of an experience, which engenders the main contribution of this paper.

Additionally, more than providing guidance to investigate other losses lived by consumers, such as the loss of a job, a lifestyle or the sense of normality (Walsh, 2020), we present a collective perspective on the grieving process, shifting the analysis of the grief of an individual or a family unit to a broader community spread globally. From an individual model of grief related to death and definitive loss, when individuals tend to isolate sorrow or even hide their suffering because of fear or shame (Kübler-Ross, 1973), we have found a socialization of grief. As socialization has been a paramount element in extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 2013), consumers seem to find on the online community a source of understanding, information, shameless sharing, experience exchange and possibilities to deal with their losses in different ways. The power of the group transforms the collective grief into a source of energy to adapt personal routines and to create new practices. Although the loss of the experience is individual, there are collective processes that enable the reversion of grief and the accommodation of pain, which represents a collective grief that respects the individuality of each member of the community.

Similar to when individuals search for support in group counselling (Neimeyer et al., 2014), the loss of the experience drives consumers to seek a restorative path in social media. Thus, social media legitimizes restorative practices, identities, and narratives, in a stage where consumers share their grief, receiving support and advice to deal with pandemic setbacks. In the initial phase, consumers find understanding, consent and sense of belonging through social media forums. As the pandemic continues, this collective emotional work contributes to the elaboration of grief feelings, allowing runners to accept the loss and reorganize their practices based on the inspiration and understanding found in the community. This in turn relates to an attempt to find a “new normal”, an expression coined during the pandemic. In this sense, social media has become an important partner of individuals to socialization, entertainment, and the stage for businesses relationships (Belk, 2020), breaking resistances to social media interaction and accelerating the process of digitalization of life (Kothgassner & Probst, 2020). Thus, we understand social media not only as a connection tool but also as a means of enabling people to restore and recreate their way of living.

Considering extraordinary experience literature, the process of consumer grief reinforces the relevance of extraordinary experiences as part of consumers' extended-self, a path for escaping (Arnould & Price, 1993; B. Cova, 2020) and a connection with corporeality (Scott et al., 2017). The loss of such experience also help us to question the foundational value of performance and productivity that became naturalized in our society, guiding not only people's routine, but also their escapes (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). If the pandemic has been characterized as an opportunity for us to rethink our way of living (Belk, 2020; Campbell et al., 2020; Walsh, 2020), we foresee the opportunity for future research to investigate our suffering in decelerating, also our difficulties in facing routine, in socializing with our family and friends, and our need of a heroic identity.

In this sense, it is plausible to think that consumer grief is affected by the main dilemmas of our society during the pandemic. The negotiation of consumer grief in the heart of the community also represents the collective grief the society is facing, a context in which individuals living different situations negotiate their sorrow. While a group of people suffer from boredom and mourn their constraint freedom, others grieve for a lost job, a bankrupt business or the impossibility of putting food on the table, as is the case of lower income classes. Departing from the notion of consumer grief, future research can also explore the social inequalities and the political and cultural divergences that arise during the grieving process, particularly in the online arena structured by social media affordances, unveiling social media's power in both amplifying the suffering and affecting the dynamics of healing.

Along with those possibilities, future works can address the interaction between consumers and the marketplace during the different mechanisms of consumer grief, exploring the role of consumption practices in the specific process of consumer grief or, on the contrary, can put them at risk during the grieving processes.

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