



Cadernos EBAPE.BR

ISSN: 1679-3951

Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Escola Brasileira de
Administração Pública e de Empresas

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Cadernos EBAPE.BR, vol. 20, no. 3, 2022, May-June, pp. 352-368

Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública e de Empresas

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120210049x>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=323272113003>

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Vulnerabilizing invulnerable: pandemic and the consumption of affluent elderly

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Abstract

Consumer vulnerability is a condition that imbalances the consumer-market relationship, causing consumers to lose control of that relationship. The COVID-19 pandemic is an external event that has contributed to this imbalance. This article explains how consumers experience the vulnerability perceived during the pandemic and the role of consumption in dealing with the effects of such vulnerability. We study retired affluent consumers with health and cultural capital to carry out their plans. Interpretative research was conducted through in-depth interviews with 31 Brazilian affluent older people, and other sources were collected, such as memes, journalistic articles, and advertisements. We found that the external event made elderly vulnerable consumers only because of their age. These consumers did not perceive themselves as vulnerable before the pandemic. Also, consumption was revealed as part of the strategy to deal with the consequences of vulnerability, and the market response helped this population resume their feeling of invulnerability.

Keywords: COVID-19. Consumer Vulnerability. Elderly Consumer. Consumption and Culture.

Vulnerabilizing invulnerable: pandemic and the consumption of affluent elderly

Resumo

A vulnerabilidade do consumidor é uma condição de desequilíbrio na relação consumidor-mercado que leva o consumidor a perder o controle nessa relação; e a pandemia da COVID-19 é um evento externo que tem contribuído para este desequilíbrio. O artigo explica de que maneira o consumidor vive a experiência da vulnerabilidade percebida na pandemia; e o papel do consumo para lidar com os efeitos dessa vulnerabilidade. Nós estudamos o consumidor idoso aposentado, com saúde e capital cultural para realizar seus planos através de pesquisa interpretativista, usando entrevistas em profundidade com 31 idosos brasileiros, e outras fontes, como: memes, artigos jornalísticos e propagandas. Encontramos um evento externo que tornou consumidores idosos vulneráveis apenas pela idade, consumidores esses que não se consideravam vulneráveis antes da pandemia. Adicionalmente, o consumo revelou ser uma estratégia para lidar com as consequências da vulnerabilidade, e a resposta do mercado à pandemia ajudou a devolver a sensação de invulnerabilidade desses consumidores.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19. Vulnerabilidade do Consumidor. Consumidor Idoso. Consumo e Cultura.

Haciendo vulnerables a los invulnerables: pandemia y consumo de ancianos acaudalados

Resumen

La vulnerabilidad del consumidor es una condición de desequilibrio en la relación consumidor-mercado, que hace que los consumidores pierdan el control en esa relación. La pandemia de COVID-19 es un evento externo que ha contribuido a este desequilibrio. El artículo explica cómo los consumidores experimentan la vulnerabilidad percibida en la pandemia y el papel del consumo para hacer frente a los efectos de dicha vulnerabilidad. Estudiamos a los adultos mayores adinerados jubilados, con salud y con capital cultural para llevar a cabo sus planes. La investigación interpretativa se realizó a través de entrevistas en profundidad a 31 adultos mayores ricos brasileños, y también se recopilieron otras fuentes como memes, artículos periodísticos y anuncios. Descubrimos que el evento externo hizo vulnerables a los consumidores ancianos solo debido a la edad y que dichos consumidores no se consideraban vulnerables antes de la pandemia. Además, el consumo se reveló como parte de la estrategia para enfrentar las consecuencias de la vulnerabilidad, y la respuesta del mercado a la pandemia ayudó a devolver la sensación de invulnerabilidad de esos consumidores.

Palabras clave: COVID-19. Vulnerabilidad del consumidor. Consumidor anciano. Consumo y cultura.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought different experiences of vulnerability for each person and group in a short period. Vulnerability is defined as the absence of the necessary attributes to take advantage of the structure of opportunities made available by society (Vignoli, 2001). Consumers may experience vulnerability more than once in life (Hamilton, Dunnet, & Piacentini, 2015). It arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions and messages (S. M. Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005) and is a non-permanent condition. However, the literature remains silent in incorporating structural factors that may drive more permanent forms of vulnerability, particularly in emerging countries, related to poor welfare, social inequality, poverty, or illiteracy (Canclini, 1999; R. O. Silva, Barros, Gouveia, & Merabet, 2021).

The pandemic brought social vulnerability not always experienced by the elderly. Some elderly consumers used to not identify themselves as vulnerable (Nitahara, 2020), especially those between 60 and 70 years old, from the middle and upper classes. However, the population over 60 experienced a 'new reality' when they were characterized as a risk group by the media and had to remain isolated at home to be protected. Such a phenomenon has interrupted the activist trajectory in defense of the occupation of social spaces by the elderly. The trend towards a greater appreciation and recognition of the signs of age on bodies, faces, and gray hair was also affected.

To exemplify the consumer's process vulnerability, S. M. Baker et al. (2005) take advantage of personal characteristics, emotional states, external conditions, contextual factors, and natural disasters. Nevertheless, they did not investigate issues related to the pandemic nor focus on the elderly population. Berg (2015) discusses vulnerability and the physical and cognitive conditions of the elderly consumer. However, the author does not explore the role of environmental, internal, and external issues associated with consumer vulnerability. Thus, we seek to contribute by contextually analyzing the vulnerability of older adults in a sanitary phenomenon of indefinite duration.

To make the contribution mentioned above, we investigate the experience of such vulnerability in the sphere of consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic. The type of vulnerability experienced and perceived (Hill & Sharma, 2020) by elderly consumers impacts relations permeated by consumption in different social spheres such as family, friends, and work. Also, for many Brazilian affluent elderly, the pandemic gives birth to a state of vulnerability.

Some questions guide this research: How does the consumer experience consumer vulnerability promoted by an external event of indefinite duration? What is the role of consumption in consumer vulnerability strategies? How does the market respond to this impinged consumer vulnerability? Methodological procedures include in-depth online interviews (McCracken, 1988) with 31 affluent Brazilian elderly. Also, we collect data from various sources, such as secondary data from public and private institutes, memes about the elderly that circulated in the pandemic, and observations of elderly-oriented marketing campaigns. Finally, we analyze, code, and categorize data to reflect upon the phenomenon of interest.

This research contributes to consumption studies associated with the elderly experience of vulnerability. Findings show that the pandemic environment impels the elderly consumers to deal, often alone, with vulnerability conditions. It requires them to be creative in their consumption strategies, mainly through digital media consumption.

In the lines to follow, we present some definitions of consumer vulnerability. Next, we detail this study's methodological procedures and characterize the Brazilian elderly population. Finally, we discuss results, theoretical and managerial contributions, and research limitations.

CONSUMER VULNERABILITY

Consumer vulnerability is a “state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or characterizes the consumption of marketing messages and products” (S. M. Baker et al., 2005, p. 134). This state of powerlessness stems from an individual experience in which the consumer feels vulnerable regarding consumption or she is perceived as vulnerable by others who “detects and identifies [the vulnerability condition], regardless of whether the observed individual does” (Hill & Sharma, 2020, p. 554).

Consumer vulnerability does not correspond to a status, a dormant state inherent to the individual, but a circumstantial condition that reflects the consumer’s total or partial lack of control in interacting with the market (S. M. Baker et al., 2005; R. O. Silva et al., 2021). For example, this phenomenon might occur when there are indications that the market exercises power over the consumer, making the latter dependent on marketing practices and generating, to a certain degree, adverse effects regarding the identity of the consumer (S. M. Baker et al., 2005).

This type of vulnerability can also be understood as a ‘state of individual fragility in the face of market practices’ (R. O. Silva et al., 2021 p. 12). It can be identified in several studies that do not necessarily focus on it. For instance, Rocha, Campos, Nascimento, and Casotti (2020) uncover the racialized facet of the market, which, due to the lack of appropriate offers, contributes to promoting black consumers vulnerability; Hemaïs and Casotti (2017) state that governments and companies that do not establish connections with low-income consumers end up preventing this group from fully exercising their rights as consumers. Hamilton (2009) highlights that social exclusion discourse stigmatizes low-income consumers and symbolically helps to support and perpetuate their material deprivation. Penãlosa (1995) says that cultural differences make the immigrants’ consumption experience difficult. In a nutshell, these studies show that consumers can be potentially vulnerable if prevented from consuming, and they lose control over their personal experiences (S. M. Baker et al., 2005; Hamilton et al., 2015).

S. M. Baker et al. (2005, p.134) attempt to establish the consumer vulnerability conceptual limit: ‘[It] is not the same thing as a protected consumer or consumer protection [...] [it] is not the same thing as discrimination or prejudice [...] is not the same thing as stigmatization [...] [it] is not the same thing as a disadvantage.’ These boundaries help to clarify that, for instance, being old is not a vulnerable condition per se unless the elderly consumers have to deal with some adversities (e.g., limited knowledge, physical or mental disease) that constraint their control and access to resources (Hill & Sharma, 2020).

The literature indicates that internal and external factors related to the consumer can lead to a condition of vulnerability in consumption (S. M. Baker et al., 2005; Hill & Sharma, 2020). Internal factors characterize the consumer and his situation in society, whether biophysical or psychosocial. Biophysical characteristics are linked to an individual’s biological and physiological aspects (ex: grief and depression), and psychosocial elements are related to behavior (ex: cognitive age, patterns of behavior, and feelings). External factors, in turn, are those that consumers cannot exert any kind of control, such as structural and social problems, natural disasters, stigmatization, distribution of resources, market language, among others (S. M. Baker, 2009; S. M. Baker & C. N. Baker, 2016; Clough, 2015).

Shultz and Holbrook (2009) offer another perspective on a consumer’s vulnerability in consumption. They propose that consumer vulnerability is characterized by the presence or absence of economic and cultural capital, which may eventually place consumers in a vulnerable condition. According to this perspective, a consumer’s vulnerability is centered on her economic and cultural characteristics and not on the imbalance in the relationship between the market and the consumer, as argued by S. M. Baker et al. (2005). Thus, Shultz and Holbrook (2009) classify consumers according to their situation of vulnerability: a) doubly vulnerable (low cultural and economic capital), b) economically vulnerable (high cultural capital and low economic capital), c) culturally vulnerable (low cultural capital and high economic capital), d) Invulnerable (high cultural and economic capital). It should be noticed that the authors do not consider non-capital aspects, such as those related to psychological aspects, as elements in consumer vulnerability.

For S. M. Baker et al. (2005), consumers who go through vulnerable situations develop coping strategies to escape from such a condition. They “are not just passive recipients of bad things that come their way” (S. M. Baker et al., 2005, p. 132). S. M. Baker et al. (2005) also state that strategies to respond to vulnerability are essential to enhance consumer participation in

society. Other researchers investigate attempts to revert vulnerability, often related to consumption, such as the resistance of immigrant consumers to market stigmatization (Peñaloza, 1995) and the sharing of objects as a tool that helps reconstruct community identity (S. M. Baker & C. N. Baker, 2016). The work of Phipps and J. L. Ozanne (2017) illustrates some strategies for reversing vulnerability in consumption in the face of a natural disaster. These strategies show the community's importance in successfully reframing and restructuring their routines and controlling consumption (L. K. Ozanne & J. L. Ozanne, 2021). We consider it safe to claim that extant literature would benefit from investigating strategies individually adopted to overcome consumer vulnerability.

Some marketing programs produce consumer vulnerability by adopting questionable practices, such as using strategies that drive children to consume inappropriate food (Pereira, Barros, & Hemais, 2019). The market may also cause a detrimental effect upon consumer vulnerability whenever it does not provide clear information on the packaging labels (R. O. Silva, Barros, & Gouveia, 2017). Speaking broadly, the market sometimes violently imposes its products on consumers by subjecting them to unfair practices (Almeida, Bagattini, Ássimo, & Pinto, 2017). It also helps to promote social exclusion by not considering certain groups as potential consumers (Faria & Casotti, 2019; Rocha et al., 2020). Indeed, extant literature does not portray the market as an entity that helps consumers deal with their vulnerability in consumption.

The present work investigates the Brazilian affluent elderly, a group of consumers whose financial and cultural resources make them develop a self-perception of invulnerability (Schultz & Holbrook, 2009). Such a phenomenon is particularly prominent in a society marked by inequality. Many of those individuals have started experiencing consumer vulnerability due to an external event: the COVID-19 pandemic. Although S. M. Baker et al. (2005) have studied consumer vulnerability in natural disasters, the duration of such type of external event is more than often predictable. The COVID-19, on the other hand, is a time-indefinite event since it is not known a priori how long this pandemic will last, nor how much time it will take for the complete population to be immunized (Milaković, 2021).

Consumption has already been studied associated with the construction of the elderly identity (Barnhart & Peñaloza, 2013). However, scholars do not commonly focus on consumption as an alternative to escape from a vulnerability condition caused by an external event. Barnhart and Peñaloza (2013) give prominence to the elderly consumption under the guidance of others, not exploring the elderlies as protagonists of their own consumption choices. We seek to contribute to the literature by investigating the experience of a sudden vulnerability of older adults in the occurrence of a specific event. We concentrate efforts in understanding and describing the consumption strategies these consumers adopt to deal with such a condition and the role played by the market in response to the vulnerability inflicted to a consumer that is in many ways invulnerable.

METHODOLOGY

Context Research – Notes about Elderly Consumers

For the World Health Organization (WHO), the notion of an elderly individual varies according to the stage of economic development. In developing countries such as Brazil, people over 60 years of age are considered elderly, and developed regions adopt a five years higher threshold (US = 65) (WHO, 2002). Brazil has about 28 million elderly (13% of the Brazilian population) (Perissé & Marli, 2019), representing a large and essential economic segment. The primary source of income within such a group is the retirement of Social Security (59.64% of the total) and the Continued Payment (BPC) (40.36%). The Getulio Vargas Foundation (Fundação Getulio Vargas [FGV], 2020) reports that elderlies correspond to 17.44% of the wealthiest 5% in the country. In 19.3% of households with elderly individuals, they support the family financially (FGV, 2020). In sum, elderlies often financially support sons and daughters, help them raise their grandchildren (Camarano, 2020) and constitute a relevant and growing consumption group (Trentmann, 2020).

The well-being of older adults results from physical, social, and psychological factors (Menezes et al., 2018). Retired elderlies overcome their old age stigma by carrying out projects and dreams that could not be executed and fulfilled during their productive time (Ferrigno, 2016). Goldenberg (2018) states that the elderly phase in one's life is a period of significant change and that the key would be shifting focus from living to others to living to yourself, perhaps for the first time.

Due to social stigmatization, it is expected that the elderly progressively lose identification with youth and productivity (Goldenberg, 2018). Thus, if having an advanced age is not a vulnerable condition per se (Hill & Sharma, 2020), social pressure may lead elderlies to a weak position in society. The pandemic has added to these social pressures. The event brought up concerns about the elderly health, given that this group represents the bulk of the deaths (73,8%) (Camarano, 2020). It also has raised concerns regarding social (interpersonal relationships suspension), demographic (a gradual aging society), and economic (family financial supporting) affairs. Such a process has put the elderly in evidence while making them increasingly vulnerable. This study explores the extent to which such a condition relates to consumption.

Method

This qualitative study (Hirschman, 1986) seeks to comprehend how invulnerable consumers experience consumer vulnerability. It aims to understand and describe the role of consumption in strategies used to cope with consumer vulnerability during the pandemic. Also, the study looks to identify the mechanisms through which the market responds to this imposed consumer vulnerability. We conduct in-depth interviews to understand the phenomenon from the consumers' perspective (McCracken, 1988). The 31 interviewees are women and men over 60 years old, residing in Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and Rio Grande do Sul (RS) states, locations that comprise a significant percentage of the Brazilian elderly population (FGV, 2020). In addition, the respondents are affluent consumers and represent the middle and upper strata of the Brazilian socio-economic pyramid.

Interviews are conducted according to a script that includes the following items: i) Daily routine and domestic environment (with whom the interviewees live and what activities are carried out daily); ii) The risk of being infected with COVID-19 and associated feelings regarding the pandemic; iii) Common practices and changes that took place during the pandemic (whether something was altered, if someone has moved in, interpersonal relationships management, etc.); iv) Consumption-related activities (new configurations of purchasing and social-related tasks and actions); v) Internet use.

The first author takes advantage of a projective technique to structure each question in a way that resembles the following example: *Imagine that you traveled back in time and visited yourself ten years ago. How would you report this moment to yourself in the past?* As can be noted, interviewees are expected to reflect on their feelings and the challenges faced during the pandemic.

Colleagues of the first author indicated the initial elderly. After this initial step, new names were suggested by each interviewee following a snowball approach (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2008). The first author conducted the interviews in the last months of 2020, and the exact date and time were defined accordingly to the interviewees' convenience. The first author used Zoom and WhatsApp to interview elderlies from home, given the pandemic. Video was activated whenever possible to allow for a more personal connection with interviewees and better observe their reactions. All respondents answered the calls by themselves, without any help. Each interview lasted, on average, one hour. Once transcribed, interviews generated a total of 531 pages. Box 1 presents the interviewees' profiles.

Box 1
Interviewees' Profile

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Profession	Location
Ana	72	Retired	Teacher	RJ
Beatriz	66	Retired	Teacher/ Psychopedagogue	RJ
Carolina	61	Retired	Babysitter	RS
Denise	71	Retired	Economist	RJ
Elizabeth	86	Retired	Housewife	RS
Fabrcio	76	Consultant/ Retired	Engineer	RJ
Gabriela	71	Retired	Teacher	RJ
Igor	74	Retired	Engineer	RJ
Joana	62	Retired	Teacher	RS
Lúcia	68	Retired	Teacher	RS
Mariana	68	Retired/ Tenant	Federal Public Servant	RS
Nádia	64	Retired	State Public Servant	RS
Olívia	64	Retired / Craftswoman	Federal Public Servant	RJ
Patrícia	66	Retired	Psychopedagogy	RJ
Rafaela	75	Retired	Teacher	RS
Sandro	77	Retired / Trade Representative	Trade Representative	RS
Teodoro	73	Retired/ Screenwriter	Engineer	RJ
Úrsula	61	Babysitter	Babysitter	RS
Vagner	64	Photographer	Photographer	RS
Xavier	75	Retired	Engineer	RJ
Yuri	69	Retired	Engineer/ Manager	RJ
Zenaide	65	Retired/ Manager	Manager	RJ
Amanda	83	Retired	Teacher	RJ
Bianca	65	Retired	International Business Consulting	RJ
Cássia	60	Retired	Economist	RS
Dalila	72	Retired	Psychologist	RJ
Edite	87	Retired	State Public Servant	RJ
Francisca	69	Retired	State Public Servant	RS
Gil	64	Retired	Bank Officer	RS
Helena	73	Retired	Lawyer	RJ
Ismael	75	Retired	Engineer	RJ

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The relative prominence of elderly consumers in cultural texts (Hirschman, 1988), such as advertising campaigns (Araujo, Casotti, R. C. M. Silva, & Pessôa, 2015), and entertainment programs (Abreu & Casotti, 2018), encouraged us to collect additional data. The new data sources helped us gain familiarity with the context and access public discourses underlying the interviewees' experience. Also, the intertextuality inherent in cultural texts depicts circulating values, beliefs, and ideologies through mass-mediated programs (Hirschman, 1988). Box 2 specifies this data collection procedure and summarizes the main contribution of each source.

Box 2
Elderly in cultural texts

Description	Dates	Focus	Summary Sample	Predominant Contributions
TV Series and Movies	March 2020 to March 2021	Understanding the way aging is portrayed.	02 episodes of <i>Gilda and Lucia</i> (Brazil), <i>Responsável</i> (Brazil), 07 seasons of <i>Gracie and Frankie</i> (USA), <i>Aos Olhos de Ernesto</i> (Brazil).	Symbolic meanings of aging: behavior, challenges, and lessons learned by elderly consumers.
Newspaper	March 2020 to March 2021	Learning about old age with an expert.	20 articles about aging in 21 st Century.	Aging process: learnings and practices, including the ones concerning the pandemic.
Memes	March 2020 to May 2020	Examining representations about the elderly during the pandemic.	25 memes portraying the elderly in the eyes of others.	Consumer vulnerability projected: contrasts between self-image and the image other generations build of elderly.
Journalist Report	March 2020 to March 2021	Following the elderly condition during the pandemic.	30 journalist reports regarding the everyday life of the elderly.	Symbolic effects in experience consumption.
Advertisements	October 2020 to March 2021	Analyzing elderly prominence and market-consumer communication.	19 advertisements aimed at the elderly audience.	Unusual elderly protagonism in advertisements.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

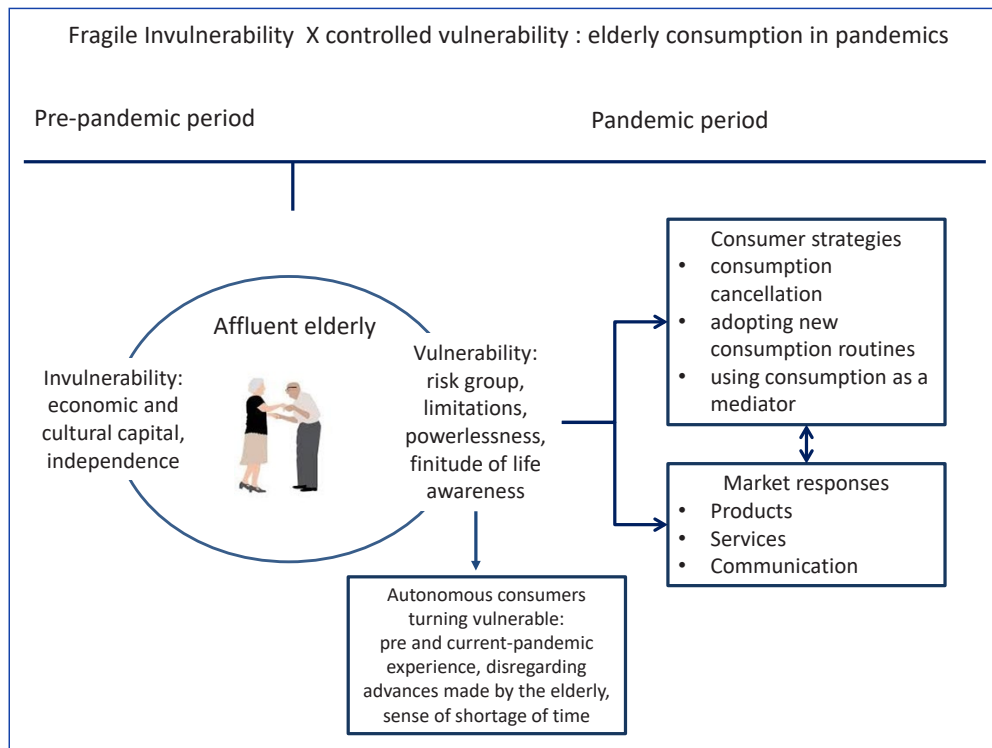
Interviews and cultural texts constitute the primary analysis effort. Content is coded and categorized (Saldaña, 2009) with the help of the Atlas TI 9 software. Taken as a whole, the analysis includes the following steps: 1) Transversal codification of the interviews according to the research question (codes were grouped by similarity and regularity, creating connections that resulted in the first analysis categories); 2) Revisiting the literature and identifying additional categories; 3) Execution of new rounds of data collection and categorization (same criteria); 4) Confrontation of elements found in the literature with results obtained in the field in a continuous circular process that goes until data saturation.

RESULTS

As a result, three categories emerged: a) Autonomous consumers turning vulnerable, who are elderly individuals with financial stability, good health, and time to take advantage of their retirement plans, that are forced to stay at home to avoid the risks of contamination by COVID-19 and, because of that, had their sense of autonomy and freedom harmed; b) Consumption-related strategies to deal with vulnerability developed by the elderly consumers to cope with the feeling of vulnerability perceived during the pandemic; c) Market responses, including but not being limited to communication efforts that encouraged new consumption practices, that helped consumers who were facing vulnerability produced by social isolation.

Figure 1 summarizes how elderly consumers experience consumer vulnerability during a pandemic and shows how they react and how the market responds to their reaction. Amongst other things, we found that if consumers are forced to recognize the fragility of their alleged invulnerability, they struggle to adapt to retain some control of the degree of vulnerability they have to face.

Figure 1
Fragile invulnerability X controlled vulnerability: elderly consumption in pandemics



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Autonomous consumers turning vulnerable

Pre and current-pandemic experience

In general, the interviewees involved with this research either live alone or with their partners. Most of them are already retired from their careers, have reached a certain level of financial independence, support their homes, carry out routine activities, and make plans with autonomy and independence. Also, they do not depend on their children or caregivers to coordinate their daily activities. Despite their age, they did not consider themselves elderly until the beginning of the pandemic. They used to perceive themselves as healthy and economically active. As Amanda (83 years old, RJ) tells us:

I would go out to lunch every Sunday and occasionally go to the cinema; These are everyday things for the retired.

Their pre-pandemic social lives were guided by external consumption activities, essential landmarks in their daily routines. They are active consumers of tourism, cultural spaces (cinemas and theaters), and qualification courses, in addition to practicing physical activities in gyms and outdoors. We find it quite interesting that these physical activities in gyms and class participation are both described as ways to create new friendships. Dalila (72 years old, RJ) reports her experience in carrying out a collective sports activity:

It also has a very social aspect, because the canoe is made up of six people, so you form a group [...] You become a friend. There are other programs after canoeing, and there is a canoeing exercise every time you go out.

The official announcement of the pandemic in March 2020 substantially changed the lives of the elderly, impacting the logic used to conduct their daily routine. Such logic was centered on the world outside the home and got confined to the domestic environment from that point on. Besides, the process of recognizing oneself as elderly is accelerated by pandemics.

Such recognition becomes clear when interviewees declare that discovering that they are the most vulnerable to COVID-19, a fact much talked about, had a tremendous impact upon such a perception. Carolina (61 years old, RS) exemplifies:

I never saw these 60 years weighing so much and being so remembered.

Also, the distance from the loved ones accentuates the feeling of missing something, as Lúcia (68 years old, RS) explains:

[The distance] from friends has been more difficult. We communicate via WhatsApp but not in person anymore, and I miss it.

Some interviewees call attention to the losses imposed by the new context. The presence of such a feeling is crystal clear in what Zenaide (65 years old, RJ) says:

Staying away from [grand]children is very difficult because I was always with them [...] I have the impression that I am missing part of their growth.

In a similar tone, Denise (71 years old, RJ) and Igor (74 years old, RJ) find themselves trapped:

The loss of freedom to come and go [...] So, we are like that, prisoners connected but confined to prison (Denise).

You lose the routine you used to execute outside your home (Igor).

We interpret these fragments of speech as resembling those in the *Gilda and Lúcia* episode, where Fernanda Montenegro, a 91 years old actress, plays the role of a mother whose daughter upsets her by confining her in a country home. The daughter claims to be protecting her mother from contracting COVID-19 (Waddington, 2020). Indeed, we consider the elderly vulnerability to be expressed in this cultural text by their lack of power to resist others' authority.

Although the pandemic has affected the whole population, it raised many concerns on the finitude of life, particularly amongst the elderly who are between 60 and 80 years of age. For this group, the horizon of life ahead is narrower, making the experience of waiting for the end of the pandemic more challenging to handle. The 60-year-old group finds itself transitioning between the productivity stage and the beginning of the retirement phase.

We are elderly. We are on our feet on the street [free from labor responsibility], right? (Lúcia, 68 years old, RS).

In comparison, the elderly in their 70s are eager to carry out all the plans made for the retirement period. They have a sense of urgency caused by the perception that they have just a few years of health and autonomy ahead of them, and the pandemic is taking that valuable time away.

The elderly over 80-years-old seem more resigned, accepting what life brings to them. It appears that they understand the pandemic as another stage of life.

I do not feel bad [regarding the effects of the pandemic]. I try to be the best I can be here [...] to maintain myself healthy (Elizabete, 87 years old, RS).

Whether in the 80-years-old or not, the pandemic is described as the event - not old age - that turns the elderly socially vulnerable by interrupting their interaction with other people, postponing their plans, and making their daily routines impossible. First and foremost, the pandemic illuminates the fact that they do not have total control over their lives.

So, it is not about when I want such a thing to happen anymore. It is about when it will be possible (Beatriz, 66 years old, RJ).

In sum, the pandemic causes a mix of sensations that go from absolute surprise (life is getting close to its end) to resignation (a new stage of life).

Disregarding advances made by the elderly

Old age is not a vulnerable condition per se. Nevertheless, Brazilian public discourses have unveiled symbolic associations to the elderly that, in many ways, contrast with their achievements. We found some cultural representations of the elderly wholly departed from the group investigated in this research. For example, in the comedy video 'Responsável' (Porta dos Fundos, 2021), someone under the age of 60 is treated as an elderly person by others who indicate what this individual can or cannot do during the pandemic. It is supposed to be funny. However, this piece received strong criticism and gave birth to a public discussion about 'elderlyphobia' (Goldenberg, 2018). We emphasize that unlike the autonomous and somehow exciting pre-pandemic life described by our interviewees, the video mentioned above displays old age as a derogatory condition likely to be joked about.

Similarly, although intended to entertain those who consume them, memes collected throughout this research picture the elderly in a condition of forced confinement induced by others. Such cultural artifacts (memes) disregard elderlies' conquered independence. For example, figure 1 shows a lady being prevented from going out by her dog, who says: 'Stay at home. Do you want to die, crazy old woman?'. Such text reveals a fragile autonomy, which suspension can occur at any socially authorized moment, and exposes the elderly vulnerable condition under the gaze of others.

Figure 2
Meme about elderly in the pandemic



Source: Unknown (2021).

Sense of shortage of time

The interviewees have been experiencing an amount of vulnerability they claim they have never experienced before. The social status of these elderly, who possess sufficient economic and cultural capital (Shultz & Hoolbrook, 2009), used to allow them not to suffer from any condition of social vulnerability. However, as we mentioned elsewhere in this study, many interviewees commented that they retired with health and money, but their plans had to be temporarily suspended due to the pandemic.

I would travel in May to France, Holland, and Belgium. I canceled it, so [...] I postponed it (Joana, 72 years old, RS).

Indeed, time is essential for the elderly. This importance exists during the age transition process, when older adults have to execute the plans cultivated for retirement, or when they need to be resilient to conditions arising from getting older (Goldenberg, 2018). Undoubtedly, the pandemic brought up a sense of finitude to those who were not necessarily there before. If not for this external event, retirement-related events, for example, could have been experienced simply as the beginning of a new stage in their lives.

Also, it should be noted that the unpredictable duration of the pandemic turns the experience of vulnerability into something perceived (Hill & Sharma, 2020) as perennial by the interviewees. Thus, this pandemic differs from natural disasters and other events of precise duration or reversible condition (such as some accidents), leading to an even stronger state of vulnerability (S. M. Baker, 2009). It seems that the uncertain duration of the pandemic causes the investigated group to develop the feeling that time will be scarce to carry out many of their plans, which is a psychological type of vulnerability that not even economic and cultural capital prevent them from experiencing.

Strategies to deal with vulnerability

Facing the threat: consumption concealment

The effects of the pandemic are a particular threat to the lives of the elderly, a group commonly classified as being at a higher risk. When the pandemic began, no one knew how the virus was transmitted. One of the first impacts of the pandemic on the consumption routine of the elderly was the necessary cancellation of some routine activities. The elderly justify their renunciation of daily habits as measures to protect themselves. Thus, pandemics' arrival imbalances their perception of invulnerability (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009), making them vulnerable as they need to abandon or suspend certain consumption practices, given the risk of compromising their physical integrity.

We noted several changes in their patterns of consumption. Those modifications go from the simple things, such as the suspension of newspaper subscription (*Newspaper was the thing I suspended [...] because we thought it could be a transmitter*), passing through the temporary suspension of the cleaning lady's services (which would involve proximity to others), to the cancellation of very anticipated trips. They also gave up choosing items that habitually were part of their list of grocery products. Some of them decided not to go to the supermarket or fruit market in person, delegating to the sales representative the selection of each item in their lists. As an example, Beatriz (66 years old, RJ) says:

When the street markets reopened, a woman was selling fruits [...]. So, I sent her the list via WhatsApp, and she delivered it to me.

When the interviewees understood that they belonged to the risk group, they canceled activities such as non-urgent medical consultations.

We are not going to the doctor (Ana, 72 years old, RJ).

Pandemic also impacted cultural activities. As cinemas and theaters closed, part of the group's leisure was compromised.

We are very much into cinema, but we abandoned such a habit six months ago (Fabrício, 76 years old, RJ).

In addition, friends and family had to remain distant. The same thing happened to service providers such as maids and cleaners. Consumption related to social gatherings, such as parties, was also suspended.

I always had a cleaning lady who came every fifteen [days], but with the pandemic, it was interrupted (Joana, 72 years old, RS).

The interviewees left their consumption routines voluntarily due to the risks that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to their lives. Consumption concealment by elderly consumers is not voluntary abandonment due to resistance to a market practice that makes them vulnerable (Penãloza, 1995). For these consumers, consumption concealment is a strategy to regain security (Phipps & Ozzane, 2017) lost due to the pandemic's effects.

Preserving life: adopting new consumption routines

After the first impact of the pandemic on the elderly, which imposed them a condition of vulnerability, the investigated group adopted strategies to deal with this moment of limitation. In the absence of a protective national public policy, those elderlies took measures to take care of themselves within the private and domestic realms.

The group said that they followed the safety protocol indicated by WHO, including using a mask and alcohol-based gel and remaining in isolation.

The mask [on the face] is continuous. We are careful, washing hands all the time, alcohol is passed [in the hands]. The idea is that we remain isolated.

Carolina (61 years old, RS) recognizes that for some, it was not so easy to adhere to this protocol:

Diego would forget about the mask [...] when he is upfront. Then I shout: Remember the mask. He comes back.

Also, they began to pay more attention to food, physical exercise, learning alternatives, and better adoption and use of technology (especially social networks and apps for virtual meetings). Such a process can be identified in the following excerpts:

I was more concerned with food. I have a nutritionist [...] I followed the recipes [by Whatsapp messages] and made low carb rolls, now that I am at home (Ana, 72 years old, RJ).

Our findings suggest the existence of specific concern with adopting and maintaining practices that, in the last decades, helped to build the 'healthy elderly' of the 2000s (Debert, 2003). The interviewees believe that taking care of their health will contribute to dealing with the virus's symptoms if they get it. They also think that these measures will serve to maintain their mental and physical health, as Ana says (72 years old, RJ).

I'm eating right. I'm exercising right. I'm doing meditation every day. I don't skip a day. You don't go to the gym every day [...], I'm eating healthier than before the pandemic [...].

It is noticed that the term *protocol*, widely used in the health area to define a set of procedures to be used in the treatment of patients, has been incorporated into people's discourse. They adopt this word to describe step by step what they do when they need to leave the house:

I follow a rigorous protocol when shopping because I go alone, and the purchasing agent here never changes. I clean the cart, I'm already wearing gloves, and [...] at home, I clean everything. I go out wearing specific clothes [...] then leave them outside, exposed to the sun. [...] I wash the fruits, wash everything [...] according to the protocol (Igor, 74 years old, RJ).

Igor's speech suggests that the term *protocol* is not a mere expansion of vocabulary. Still, it brings up a symbolic dimension of rigidity with which, ideally, WHO guidelines should be used. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed on the elderly new consumption routines that helped them rebuild their identity (Barnhart & Peñaloza, 2013). In this research, we found that the elderly adopts consumption strategies by themselves, without the help of relatives or caregivers.

Resuming security: using consumption as a mediator

In times of compulsory isolation at home, digital consumption facilitates reconfiguring activities once performed in a face-to-face fashion. It reinstates a certain sense of security (Phipps & J. L. Ozanne, 2017). The excerpt from Patrícia's interview (66, RJ), about courses and a play, exemplifies such an aspect:

I attend a lot of lives about literature. Nowadays, there are a lot of courses and plays being streamed live on the Internet. I just finished reading "A Peste" [...], and I watched a play Saturday, and it was a version of "A Peste." So, it was great; I had never been to the theater via the internet.

Digital shopping, chatting, and using video apps have become part of the routine of the elderly in the pandemic. They moved their outdoor activities into the screens of smartphones, tablets, and computers.

I'm here on Youtube listening to music, listening to the news, a little bit of everything (Sandro, 77 years old, RS).

Among the social media used by the elderly, WhatsApp seems to be the one whose use increased the most in frequency and importance.

What I use the most, what we need, is WhatsApp. There is no way you don't have WhatsApp', Amanda, 83 years old, RJ).

Once a month, we have a [WhatsApp] meeting, people make their food, drink their wine, and that's how everybody gets together (Zenaide, 65 years old, RJ).

Such an app contributed to overcoming barriers of isolation and loneliness, facilitating and intensifying contacts throughout the day. Those elderly who did not use it before inevitably learn how to use it. Using this kind of app to make video calls became a mechanism that brings family and friends closer, now that they were distanced by social isolation.

Although Youtube and Whatsapp are the most prominent apps mentioned in the interviewees' reports, they are not the only ones. Zoom and Google Meet were also used to mediate socialization moments in consumption, replacing what would previously be done in person. An excellent example of such a transformation is Gabriela's French lessons (71-year-old, RJ):

The teacher teaches [French lessons] over Zoom. I think it's more practical. When you have several people involved, Zoom is better, right?

Those attempts to obtain confirmation from the interviewer, someone they may see as a member of a tech-savvy generation, denote that seniors somehow accumulated competence in the use of applications to the point that there is some pride associated with letting others know about it. Hence, we consider it safe to claim that they ended up overcoming the digital barriers and embracing new forms of digital consumption to rebuild their elderly identity (Barnhart & Peñaloza, 2013).

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic propelled 'the elderly out of the old furniture (Quebrando o Tabu, 2020) by forcing them to appropriate and intensify digital consumption to break the isolation. Indeed, social interaction is vital for the elderly, and it helps them maintain mental and physical health (Goldenberg, 2018). Life had to be transferred to the screens of computers, smartphones, and tablets. Thus, the use of social media platforms resembles the practices adopted by Australians during the drought experienced between 2007 and 2012 to recover their sense of security. Adaptations needed to be made in the consumption routines they lost during that period (Phipps & J. L. Ozanne, 2017).

Market Responses

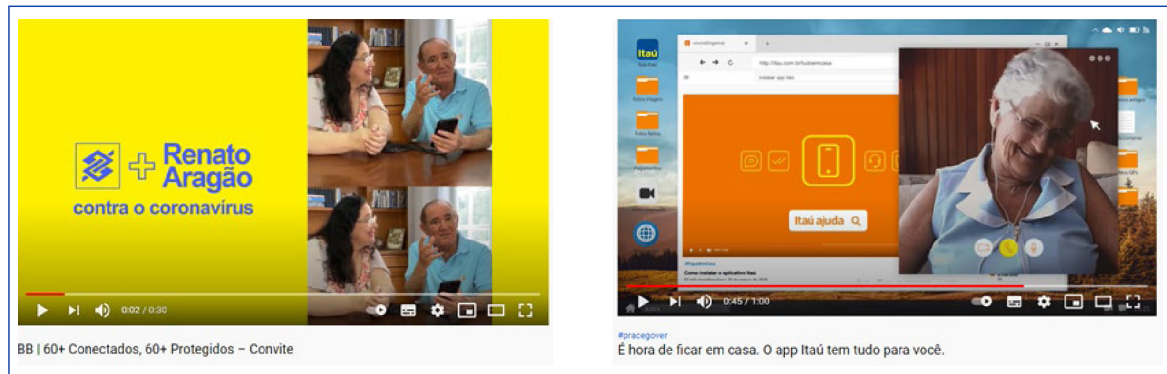
Differently from what is described in other studies (Almeida et al., 2017; Faria & Casotti, 2019; Pereira et al., 2019; Rocha et al., 2020; R. O. Silva et al., 2017), *the market* did not have a detrimental effect upon the elderly's vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic. It helped those consumers face isolation, thus reducing the perception of vulnerability amongst them. Indeed, it responded in such a way that, to some extent, made it easier for consumers to deal with new pandemic-induced forms of vulnerability.

As per of the above, we have identified advertising campaigns (Figures 2 and 3), primarily disseminated through digital media, which encourage online supermarket purchases (Supermercado Now, SP), promote and teach how to use bank applications (Brasil Bank and Itaú), stimulate specific business development for elderly consumers in digital format (Gerontec, PE), and encourage the elderly to use the apps to buy food (Ifood).

Like many other western countries, Brazilian society praises youth (Goldenberg, 2018). That makes the elderly commonly not play the roles of protagonists in general advertisements (Debert, 2003). Nevertheless, we noted that the inclusion of the elderly among priority risk groups encourages some companies to focus on this consumer group. It is noteworthy that none of the interviewees declare a reduction in their income during the pandemic, probably because they depend essentially on retirement and savings. Therefore, despite the inevitable losses caused by the pandemic, this group remains prominent in its consumer condition.

Figure 3

Marketing campaigns on youtube to teach and encourage elderly consumers to use banks' apps



Source: Banco do Brasil (2020); Itaú (2020).

Figure 4

Ifood marketing campaign targeting elderly consumers further encourages them to use the app. Campaign broadcasted on Youtube and television



Source: Ifood (2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic bound the market to pay attention to elderly consumers. As a result, the market changed some marketing practices and adapted language to promote the elderly consumer's inclusion instead of exclusion, which the market usually produces (Hamilton, 2009; Hemais & Casotti, 2017; Rocha et al., 2020). Our research shows situations in which market actors communicate products, services, and advertisements using appropriate language to the elderly consumers (Clough, 2015), placing these consumers in the center of the message. During the pandemic, this new market behavior demonstrates that consumption can be a way for the elderly to deal with the already mentioned pandemic-induced vulnerability. Such a process made it possible for the elderly to develop new consumption-related skills (Ekström, 2006) and readapt their routines.

FINAL DISCUSSION

This article aims to analyze the experience of consumer vulnerability in a group of affluent elderly who see themselves as invulnerable. An external event of indefinite duration pushes those over 60 years of age into a state of vulnerability. Different meanings and practices to feel and deal with vulnerability are imposed on the elderly.

The literature refers to the elderly as not a vulnerability status per se (S. M. Baker et al., 2005; Berg, 2009; Hill & Sharma, 2020; Shultz & Holbrook, 2009). The pandemic transforms this group into vulnerable consumers while defining them as those subjected to a higher amount of risk. Thus, the pandemic converts the construct *age* into a variable connected to the vulnerability level. The elderly are identified as the risk group regardless of their physical, mental, emotional, economic, and cultural condition.

Our study reveals how this group deals with the limitations produced by the vulnerability mentioned above. Generally speaking, an above-average income allows those elderly consumers to create and execute strategies to overcome the barriers posed by COVID-19's risks. Also, our findings show that other factors such as having future projects and a good network of friends positively contribute to consumers' ability to escape from the vulnerable condition. Those factors can be further explored in future studies.

Historically, Brazil has built public policies that helped the elderly retire and access their rights (Debert, 1997). During the pandemic, not only the elderly but the whole population found themselves without a leader interested in unifying and coordinating federal policies to fight the virus. In many ways, Brazilians, including the elderly, have to take care of themselves during the pandemic. Such a relative level of abandonment induces the development of strategies to deal with health-related issues. Such a context makes the average citizen deepen her knowledge about hygiene care and, at the same time, cause people to share the methods used to overcome digital barriers. The elderly develops new online consumption routines to replace what they used to do in a face-to-face fashion.

Consumer vulnerability is attributed to consumers' lack of control in their relationship with the market. However, during 2020, the pandemic, not the market, was responsible for transforming the consumers into vulnerable ones. Our research shows the market contributing to the reversal of the vulnerability scenario by encouraging and making the socialization of the elderly. An excellent example of such a role is the creation of new and innovative e-commerce websites and apps. Thus, the acquisition of new skills and more determined socialization efforts expand the spectrum of alternatives for the elderly, offering solutions to the vulnerability process imposed on them.

As we say elsewhere in this article, members of the interviewed group did not have financial and cultural restrictions before the pandemic. The changes caused by the pandemic transformed the social environment to the point that even they started to experience vulnerability. They were kept away from circulation and lost their autonomy and freedom. They were unable to visit family and friends for more than a year. They had to interrupt their external activities. They lost their power of choice and needed to suspend plans such as traveling. Yet, the market understands their importance as active consumers and invested in responses to minimize the vulnerability imposed by the pandemic. Having said that, we consider it possible that if we had studied low-income elderly consumers, we would have found a different type of market response.

This research has many limitations. This study is qualitative, which means that it cannot be statistically generalized. The elderly investigated, considered invulnerable in the pre-pandemic period, represent just a portion of the Brazilian population of elderly consumers. Low-income elderly consumers or individuals who live in small and medium-sized cities may experience vulnerability differently during the pandemic. Also, our results suggest that the investigated group will not behave as Belk (2020) predicted for the post-pandemic era. Consumers want to execute their travel plans and return to their daily activities, and we found that such personal projects have symbolically sustained them before and during the pandemic. Indeed, our research indicates the existence of a research opportunity that may be relevant to studies of consumption and culture: the post-pandemic consumption experience of these elderly.

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