

The Emergence of the Deconstructed Consumer: Exploring Shopping and Buying Behavior During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) that swept across the US has dramatically impacted consumer behavior. The abruptness of pandemic for individuals brought forth an opportunity for understanding the influence of COVID-19 on consumer responses. While there is a growing understanding that household spending has changed in response to COVID-19, there is a lack of a deeper understanding behind changes in consumer behavior, including consumer sentiment and motivations to alter consumption during this critical time. Therefore, this study explores the nature of buying behavior during the pandemic using an in-depth qualitative approach. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, four major themes emerged from the data that comprise what authors term the “deconstructed” consumer. The deconstructed consumer was based on the following thematic areas: (i) “Do-it-Yourself” culture or DIY, (ii) passionate pursuits, (iii) community, and (iv) self-reflection and discovery. By exploring changes in consumption attitudes and behaviors as the crisis unfolds, we can develop an understanding of the consumer and suggest potential retailer strategy shifts that can be deployed to maneuver during uncertain times of crisis.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, COVID-19, qualitative interviews, deconstructed consumer

1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) that swept across the US has dramatically impacted consumer behavior (Cai et al., 2023). First detected in China in December, 2019, COVID-19 was quickly declared a global pandemic only a few months later by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; US Department of Labor, 2020). As a result, the CDC implemented a series of recommendations to community members and businesses in order to reduce community spread of the virus, including remaining six feet from others (i.e., social distancing), wearing personal protective equipment (e.g., face masks) and a series of self-quarantine guidelines. The abruptness of pandemic for individuals brought forth an opportunity for understanding the influence of COVID-19 on consumer responses. Industry analysis indicates that as a result of the pandemic, individuals are living and thinking differently and their consumption patterns are likely to reflect this change (Cai et al., 2023). Essentially, consumers have fundamentally altered their consumption patterns due to the pandemic (NRF, 2020, 2023). Long-term trends (e.g., online shopping, consciousness in shopping) have accelerated and are likely to be of permanent effect, well beyond the crisis (Accenture, 2020; NRF, 2020, 2023). Labeled ‘the adjusted consumer’, individuals are likely to be attentive to a retailers’ personal story, shop more consciously, have greater awareness of their consumption effects beyond their uses, such as the protecting the environment, and there is a greater focus on health outcomes, cleanliness of stores, convenience in shopping and seeking value for money (Alexander & Karger, 2020; Cai et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; NRF, 2020, 2023). Though, surprisingly, consumers seem to be less focused on promotional efforts, such as reductions in prices (Accenture, 2020).

Although some research has been conducted on consumer behavior during COVID-19 (e.g., Addo et al., 2020; Cai et al., 2023; Jackson & Ivanov, 2023; Müller-Pérez et al., 2023; Prentice et al., 2020), it is still in its early stages. Early research has been primarily transactional data driven, such as focusing on analyzing changes in spending patterns and shifts in consumer income (Alexander & Karger, 2020; Baker et al., 2020), rather than an exploring underlying or fundamental aspects of consumers’ changes in shopping behavior. While there is a

growing understanding that household spending has changed in response to COVID-19 (Baker et al., 2020), there is a lack of a deeper understanding behind changes in consumer behavior, including consumer sentiment and motivations to alter consumption during this critical time. Therefore, this study explores the nature of buying behavior during the pandemic using an in-depth qualitative approach. By exploring changes in consumption attitudes and behaviors as the crisis unfolds, we can develop an understanding of the consumer and suggest potential retailer strategy shifts that can be deployed to maneuver during uncertain times of crisis. Thus, this research can help to inform retailers about key consumer behavior changes during times of natural disasters, future pandemics or other types of accurate disasters.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Influence of Disasters on Consumer Behavior

While consumer research on the current pandemic is advancing, research on consumption behaviors during stressful events (e.g., natural disasters, epidemics) over the last few centuries, is has been conducted. Previous investigations show economic effects and consumer behavior changes associated with these events. Research studies have shown that consumers generate ongoing fear when natural disasters, potential terrorist events or cyber-attacks occur (Business Wire, 2020). Specifically, consumers exhibit psychological responses to these disasters, such as anxiety and sadness, when coping with a catastrophic event (Choi & Lin, 2009; Jin et al., 2012; Kim & Cameron, 2011). In some cases, consumers exhibit more positive responses, such as coping strategies, that allow them to overcome stressful events (Folkman, 2013; Lim et al., 2019). Some consumers also exhibit optimism about future economic situations, despite difficult situations (Puri & Robinson, 2007). Regardless of generated and associated feelings related to disasters, it is likely to alter consumer decision making (Addo et al., 2020; Larson & Shin, 2018; Witte & Allen, 2000). For instance, research investigating consumer behavior following Hurricane Matthew in 2016 indicated that feelings towards the event drove purchase behavior. Specifically, researchers found that those that were fearful of disaster generated increased concerns around shopping, such as concern for waiting in lines, encountering crowded stores or the notion of paying higher prices for items (Larson & Shin, 2018). While consumer behavior is often frenzied and fragmented during time of disaster, it moves consumers to modify their consumption and purchasing behaviors (Elmore, 2017; Larson & Shin, 2018).

2.2 Influence of COVID-19 on Consumer Behavior

While little research has been conducted on consumer behavior as a result of COVID-19, preliminary articles shed light on the topic. For instance, the article titled "I'll trade you diamonds for toilet paper", accurately describes consumer behavior during the onset of the pandemic. Authors document several unusual consumer behavior patterns observed during the early days of COVID-19 (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Particularly, researchers highlight that consumers began to consume and hoard products as a preparation mechanism, a result, suppliers could not keep up with demand of cleaning products, toilet paper and water, resulting in widespread stockouts (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; Zwanda & Buff, 2021). This indication was confirmed through transaction data that consumers' uncertainty about the pandemic lead to higher stockpiling of products when consumers first become aware of COVID-19 (Baker et al., 2020). Given the urgency of product needs, consumers are less likely to be brand loyal, instead reaching for any in-stock items to satisfy their need (Shopkick, 2020). Supply chain disruptions prompted consumers who couldn't find their preferred product, to try something new, leaving brands and retailers scrambling to meet consumer demand.

Additionally, social distancing (i.e., maintaining distance from others) and limiting personal contact lends itself to shifts in how consumption occurs. For instance, in an effort to avoid others' contacts, sales through e-commerce increased, including strategies to order online and pick-up in store. Industry reports indicate that many product categories saw growth of 10 percent or greater in the online channel, and that these trends are likely to remain as consumers become accustomed to new ways of shopping and living (Arora et al., 2020; Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Other consumer behavior has been influenced by a stark increase in the influx of those working from home, blurring the boundaries of work and life (Seth, 2020). Namely, there has been a great embracement of digital technology to meet consumer interest (Seth, 2020), such as online fitness classes or home gyms, access to new movie releases and virtual social meetups (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Additional time at home also led more consumers towards a do-it-yourself attitude; homebound activities including baking, gardening and home renovations indicates that consumers were more willing to try co-creation themselves as a sustainable hobby or activity (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020)

As consumers are reassessing their consumption behavior, there has been a shift in conscious shopping. That is, industry reports indicate that consumers during this time seek to limit waste, buying more sustainable options

and shopping with cost consciousness (Accenture, 2020). As a result of this shift, consumers are showing signs of action and accountability towards brands (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). In the large worldwide snapshot of 12,000 consumers, the Edelman Trust Barometer survey indicated that two-thirds of consumers are being more critical of a brands' response to the pandemic, noting that future purchases are impacted by a brands' response (Rogers, 2020). Consumers not only expect brands to showcase awareness of the pandemic, but want brands to show how their products are assisting with consumer coping during this critical time.

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly affected the way individuals live their lives. Government-imposed curfews and lockdowns as well as stay-at-home recommendations and voluntary self-quarantine have forced consumers to change not only their daily routines but their shopping and buying behaviors. As the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States increased, consumers started to stock up on products such as toilet paper, paper towels, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant sprays and wipes. This increase in demand put a strain in the supply chain and ultimately led to a product shortage. Empty shelves in stores across the U.S. put in evidence the extent of the problem. With consumers stuck at home, fitness equipment, puzzles, and even hair dye have also seen a significant increase in demand (Chasark, 2020; Doubek & Silverman, 2020; Griffith, 2020).

While important work has been done to understand consumer behavior during these trying times, available research has been conceptual or focused on transaction data only. While patterns in consumption behavior can be detected from these data points, there isn't a true understanding of consumers' experiences as they move through these consumption transitions as a result of COVID-19. Reports of consumers panic-buying and stockpiling amid the COVID-19 pandemic suggest changes in shopping motivations and practices. Research on this phenomenon is scant with reports available focusing on trends, thus proving little insight into the "whys." To this end, the purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of consumers shopping and buying practices and experiences amid the COVID-19 outbreak. The study will explore consumers' shopping and buying practices prior and during the pandemic with the goal to uncover how and why these practices may have changed, and its significance to the consumer. Thus, this research works to fill this significant gap in understanding by conducting in-depth interviews of individual consumers to explore the scope of consumption and the impact on them during the pandemic and beyond.

3. Methodology

Following approval of the IRB, qualitative research interviews were conducted to with 16 participants to address the purpose of the study in depth. The number of participants lent itself to an in-depth and extensive exploration of consumer experiences and behaviors and enhanced the validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry (Crouch & McKenzie, 2016). As very little research has been conducted, this qualitative approach allows for research that illuminates the phenomenon where there is a lack of understanding (Rashid et al., 2016). Through an in-depth understanding of specific consumer experiences, participants shared their personal points-of-view, which, in turn, allowed researchers to develop detailed interpretations of these accounts.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in summer 2019 and continued for 6 months until saturation of the data. This research was independent in that it was not part of a larger research study.

At the time of initial data collection, states were under a state of emergency order. Social distancing and mask wearing were encouraged. Virtual in-depth interviews (via Zoom) were conducted since at the time of data collection, a state of emergency was ordered, encouraging many consumers to stay home. Consumers were recruited through convenience sampling using researchers' connections and snowball sampling was utilized thereafter. By utilizing this data collection protocol, it allowed for a diverse pool of participants. Table 1 provides details of participant data. In total, 16 individuals participated in this research, including 12 females, 3 males and one un-reported gender, between the ages of 18 and 64 years old. The sample was represented from all five U.S. regions (Northeast, Southwest, West, Southeast, and Midwest). Of the participants, 50% reported being fully employed at the time of the interview, while the others were either employed part-time (19%), full-time students (25%), or not-employed (6%).

Table 1. Participant data

Participant Pseudonym	Location	Age	Gender	Race	Education Level	Marital Status	Employment Status
Charlotte	SE, US	45–54	F	White	Bachelor's	Married	Employed part-time
Elizabeth	SE, US	24–34	F	White	Bachelor's	Married	Employed Full-time
Sarah	SE, US	25–34	N/A	White	Master's	lives with partner	Employed Full-time
Juliette	SE, US	35–44	F	White	Doctorate	Married	Student
Dee	SE, US	25–34	F	White	Master's	Married	Student
Mike	SE, US	18–24	Male	Black	Some college	Single (never married)	Student
Cate	SE, US	18–24	F	White	Some college	Single (never married)	Employed part-time
Maddie	SE, US	18–24	F	White	High School	Single (never married)	Employed Full-time
Matthew	MW, US	45–54	Male	White	Bachelor's	Married	Employed Full-time
Teresa	SE, US	45–54	F	White	Bachelor's	Divorced	Employed Full-time
Kelly	SE, US	55–64	F	White	Bachelor's	Married	Not employed
Sally	W, US	35–44	F	Mixed	Some college	Divorced	Employed Full-time
Victoria	NE,US	25–34	F	Mixed	Master's	lives with partner	Employed Full-time
Katie	SE, US	35–44	F	Black	Master's	Single (never married)	Student
Uma	SE, US	35–44	M	Black	Doctorate	Married	Employed Full-time
Zoe	NE,US	35–44	F	White	Master's	Single (never married)	Employed part-time

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and was audio and video recorded with participant consent. To ensure systematic approach to the data collection process, the researchers followed an outline comprised of 20 questions and followed a semi-structured interview process. Participants were first asked, “tell me a bit about yourself” and proceeded with questions related to their shopping experiences before the pandemic, “e.g., Can you describe your typical shopping and buying behavior before the outbreak?”, during the pandemic, “e.g., How has your shopping and buying behavior changed since the COVID-19 outbreak?”, and theoretically after the pandemic, “e.g., How do you see your current shopping and buying behaviors changing in the future, if at all?”.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were utilized for confidentiality of participants. Following the interpretive process proposed by Spiggle (1994), each interview was analyzed separately by each researcher and then merged into a consistent whole. Transcriptions were analyzed manually and coded for common themes that emerged from the data. This back-and-forth process proposed by Spiggle (1994) was utilized, where researchers compared, contrasted and grouped themes according to common consumer experiences. Researchers discussed the interpretation of data to refine themes and capture additional internal consistency of the interpretive data (Van Manen, 1990). Data collection and analysis continued until data saturation was reached. Thus, the interpretive methodological approach allowed for deep understanding to evolve through a focus on the subjective or “lived” experiences of individuals (van Maanen, 1982) during COVID-19.

4. Interpretation

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, four major themes emerged from the data that comprise what authors term the “deconstructed” consumer. The deconstructed consumer was based on the following thematic areas: (i) “Do-it-Yourself” culture or DIY, (ii) passionate pursuits, (iii) community, and (iv) self-reflection and discovery. Below details the interpretation of data.

4.1 Deconstructed Consumer

At the outset of the research we predicted consumers would be fueled by hoarding and stockpiling behaviors, and our research did see some evidence of that, but it was slight and the participants self-consciously played by the rules and purchased within mandated limits. In some cases, buying extra “just-in-case items” may have been motivated by a perceived scarcity of essential goods. For example, when asked about her feelings on the shortage of goods, Victoria expressed her frustration, “Because you see it [the empty shelf] and because you have seen in other stores that they are out of stock too, this sort of creates a trauma and you say, ‘Hell! I will have to buy it because they are going to go out of stock, and I don’t know when they will be available next. Let me get one, just in case.’” Some participants confessed purchasing in order to feel better and/or take back control in uncertain times. One participant (Sally) stated, “I’m trying to buy happiness. I’d just go straight to the store and buy happiness. That’s about it.” While the research confirms participant consumption behaviors to stock up on essentials such as non-perishables, paper products, and cleaning products were motivated by fear, anxiety and frustration, broader indications of overzealous stockpiling were relatively minor. As the pandemic unfolded, many of the participants accepted these mostly temporary outages as part of their new reality. While scarce, these items were eventually available or consumers were able to procure reasonable substitutes. For example,

Dee shared,

My husband was mostly concerned about meat. He wanted to be sure that we had enough meat, so he and everyone else in Knoxville and the world [laughing] bought out all the meat at Costco, and he now knows what day and time they get certain meats at Costco. So, yeah, that's what we stocked up a lot on was meat, bread. We just wanted to make sure we had stuff like that that we could easily make a PB and J or whatever we needed. Even though I don't think I stocked up as much as other people did. Um, we usually pick up a case of water when we go to Costco, so we had like one case of water bottles and toilet paper and things that we already had... don't feel like we ever panicked like that, but we did buy a little bit more as a buffer.

Thus, stockpiling behaviors were present, however a much deeper theme emerged, one that portrays in the midst of the early stages of the pandemic, a consumption shift from the rush to shop for basic needs/essential items to a focus on consumption of activities, interests and personal development, suggesting a consumer "deconstruction." That is, consumers deconstructed their traditional consumption view and sought experiences that centered on personal growth that connected with their views of what was important to them. In this sense, we see these deconstructed consumers as individuals that have accepted the current situation and strived to move beyond the frustration and anxiety of purchasing for basic needs. These consumers have turned inward to pursue meaningful endeavors. Our data suggests these deconstructed consumers seemed to pare back and reject the notion of "normal" materialistic consumption in favor of passionate pursuits, self-reflection, self-discovery and community, thus supporting the notion of the "post-modern consumer", whereby, consumers seek to attach symbolic meaning to their consumption, often in the forms of experiences versus physical goods (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

Although some participants reported feeling isolated at times, all confessed that the lockdown and social distancing recommendations allowed them to pause, and focus on areas that brought personal joy, such as endeavors related to do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, entrepreneurial projects such as hobbies and skill building. Furthermore, many participants took "needed" time for self-reflection and ultimately, self-discovery. Participants saw a silver-lining within the time of the pandemic to slow down and refocus and re-connect with others.

4.2 DIY

An important element of the time of pause during the COVID-19 pandemic was that it allowed participants to re-visit DIY projects that they would have otherwise passed on given normal times. Participants reveled in their new "gift" of time and appreciated it. While it is recognized that others may have been time deprived during the pandemic (such as working mothers who needed to also remote teach; Miller, 2022), participants in this study found themselves with extra time that they utilized for their own personal projects. For example, (Matthew) stated that "saving the time (by not driving) to work and back really made a difference and also has allowed me to spend more time around the house doing things that I just don't normally have time to do". Participants put their time to good use, and started DIY projects, such as re-furbishing their homes, or simply enjoying time outside gardening. Charlotte shared, "In March or April I asked for two raised garden beds, so what started as two raised garden beds has turned into like 10 beds at our house and plants". DIY projects helps participants through the pandemic by focusing their energy and keeping them busy, while also producing a sense of accomplishment. Participants were spending longer than usual time at home, and this allowed them remain in a Covid safe space while enjoying their home surroundings.

4.3 Passionate Pursuits

Consumers' passionate pursuits emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, participants took time to pursue activities that they enjoyed and sought to spend more time doing. These activities varied, but what remained common was the participants' sense of enjoyment of the process. They simply completed their activities for the joy of them, rather than any sense of accomplishment or achievement. For example, (Mike) shared that "for the first eight or nine weeks (of the pandemic) I recorded some songs posted to YouTube", (Zoe) shared that "I used to love to paint and because of my busy schedule I didn't have the time to do it. So, I definitely returned to painting". Physical exercise, a common theme among many participants, was one of these passionate pursuits that served as an avenue for self-improvement. For example, (Kelly) shared that she started exercising and that "is something I have never done before". Others, such as Teresa found that exercising was a way to enjoy being outside while also "focusing on health". Interestingly, while participants reported that they returned to previously enjoyed or new activities, they also reported their desire to continue these activities due to the sense of joy it brought.

4.4 Community

Importantly, respondents' passionate pursuits also had an altruistic component. Several participants reported the

pull to support local and felt compelled to shop through small businesses. Participants expressed an emerging concern for local businesses who have been significantly affected by the pandemic due to business lockdowns. For instance, Kelly commented, “Just knowing the struggle of being shut down for so long. [...] I think it’s made me more aware of the smaller businesses and just how they really need us for their livelihood. I don’t want to see those close.” Similarly, Teresa stated, “When we eat out, we pretty much try to focus 100% on locally owned... now we try to go to just the local places to help support them.” As (Sarah) stated, participants felt “more political” with where they spent their money and wanted to “only patron small businesses and local eateries”. Other resources, such as time, was also directed towards helping others, as seen through (Elizabeth’s) experience by volunteering her time to help foster animals. She stated, “I just remember thinking this is a shutdown, you need to be home, and I’m out at animal shelters”, “what I remember most [from the pandemic] is that moment of being like on the back porch thinking about foster dogs”. Participants’ concern for others suggests a less self-centered and more thoughtful, conscious consumer. By pursuing activities that are most passionate for respondents, they felt greater fulfillment and community engagement.

4.5 Self-Reflection and Discovery

A clear aspect of consumer experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic was their focus on deeper self-reflection and subsequently self-discovery. Slowing down and taking time to pause for their own personal endeavors suggested that many participants used their time during COVID-19 pandemic for self-reflection and relationship building. Juliette shared that “This [time] has shown me that if I can work on me, and fix me, and be happy with me, and be safe with me... that’s what’s important. Charlotte expressed that during her time at home she tried “to find meaningful connections with friends and family that I might have let fall to the wayside by being busy earlier...it’s given me the great pause, right; is that what they call it?”. While (Cate) “[used to] use shopping to cope from a stressful work week or something”, she expressed that “you can use other things. I am in a quieter place already” and also “values those more rare experiences [than going out shopping]”. Likewise, Uma expressed how he used the time to slow down and reflect upon “important areas my life, faith, friends and family”. These deeper thoughts and experiences of self-reflection helped to further inform the participants’ sense of self-discovery, thus disconnecting old forms of material consumption.

Self-discovery was reported by respondents as a surprising, yet welcoming, experience as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many respondents felt that their re-evaluation of their lifestyle choices or how they spent their time and energy, had directed them to a place where they feel more comfortable and confident. For instance, (Sarah) shared, “I have really focused my energy into better places. I feel like I am focusing more on the present than ever before. I mean I talked to my partner for the first time in our entire lives about starting a family. Like conversations about really matters to us have been happening”. In other words, expressed well by [Sarah] participants “reevaluated where [they] put my energy”. [Sarah] further expands on this idea through an example:

In France, this is the example my father used growing up. You know, every morning in France they eat breakfast. You have your juice and your croissant outside and smell the flowers and you go to the coffee shop and you go to work. And then on your way home you walk past the bodega, and you get your French bread and your vegetables and its 4 o’clock and your wine, and you go home, and you make dinner, and you eat with your family and then side outside and drink wine...In America work 50 hours a week. We don’t even have time to enjoy a meal, we eat in our car. I never want to drink coffee in my car again. One of the things that brings me joy the most is my cappuccino. Why am I drinking it on my way to school? Why can’t I take two minutes to sit and enjoy this? I can do that. I don’t want to eat in the car. I don’t want to mindlessly eat. I want to be present in the space with my food. I want to really appreciate it.

Respondents felt the need to pause and slow the pace of their experience consumption. They felt the need to enjoy the moments and discover aspects they enjoyed in everyday living. [Katie] expresses this idea well, “Just being in touch with what makes yourself happy. I think self-discovery, maybe. I think that spending more time alone has led to a lot more self-discovering of what makes you happy. How to make yourself happy”. While the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly brought distress and frustration among many, these respondents have highlighted the benefit of meaningful self-discovery that forges the deconstructed consumer.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Consistent with previous research on disastrous events, participants in the study reported engaging in projects and home-bound activities as a way to cope with feelings of isolation and lack of control. However, our research uncovered how consumers saw an opportunity in the face of adversity to use the time to deconstruct their “pre-COVID self” to emerge more conscious and self-aware. Attitudinal changes, based on surviving the pandemic onslaught and then seeking opportunities to improve one’s self and surroundings, suggests an

emboldened new consumer that is less self-centered in materialistic consumption, one that we call the deconstructed consumer.

Importantly, these findings contribute to previous literature centered on accurate disasters, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior (Cai et al., 2023). While it is clear that the advent of disasters can swiftly alter consumer behavior, research has primarily been concerned with the identification of how consumer behavior changed over a certain period of time, including product selection (e.g., Baker et al., 2020; Chasark, 2020; Doubek & Silverman, 2020; Griffith, 2020) and shopping channel behavior (e.g., Arora et al., 2020; Müller-Pérez et al., 2023; Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). From limited research, it is clear that there is a lack of an in-depth understanding of consumer behavior and the leading reasons why shifts have occurred during times of acute crisis. Research on this phenomenon is limited with the majority of literature focusing on consumer trends, thus proving little insight into the “whys.” This research fulfills this theoretical gap within literature on disaster management and suggest new forms of consumption emerge, whereby, consumers are intent on deep self-awareness and self-improvement.

Moreover, this research adds to the theoretical understanding of consumers during time of crisis by identifying the characteristics of a deconstructed consumers, whereby, during times of crisis, consumers deconstructed their traditional consumer views and seek out experiences that center themselves on their personal growth and connection with meaningful outcomes. These individuals tend to consume peace with their current situation of crisis and seem to move beyond any frustration towards basic need obtainment. While this term is coined within this research context, future research should explore typology creation of a deconstructed consumer to understand more about its impact on consumer behavior during times of crisis.

This research also contributes to a practical understanding of consumer behavior during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic. First, it is clear from the data that local retail businesses whom serve this deconstructed consumer should look for new ways of constructing meaningful marketing messages that connect brand and consumers’ values. Furthermore, retailers can benefit from developing new offerings that align with this new consumer mindset. The deconstructed consumer is characterized as seeking experiences that contribute to personal growth and well-being, including a focus on DIY projects that were skill building and contributed to self-discovery. These individuals rekindled their passionate pursuits with more time spent on them. Through these endeavors, the deconstructed consumers connected with their local community and generated greater fulfillment. These activities also contributed to self-discovery as a product of self-reflection.

To capitalize on this shift in consumer behavior, retailers should consider avenues to personally connect with individual consumers and seek to build a consumer-brand connection and brand experiences. For example, rather than marketing products and its’ technical features, retailers should consider personal storytelling of makers or founders, expound on product features from local producers tied to the community, and promote of products that contribute to consumers’ well-being. The focus of marketing should be more oriented towards long-term gains (e.g., relationship building, meaningful experiences), rather than short-term gains (e.g., sales promotion and transactions).

While this research addressed several gaps within literature and practice, additional research should be conducted to further understand shifts in consumer behavior during times of crisis. It is recommended that future research consumer to understand more about the deconstructed consumer and how to best market this new consumer typology. Additionally, while this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recommended that additional research be conducted during other types of disasters (e.g., natural disasters), to more clearly understand shifts in consumer behavior during times of acute crisis. Lastly, as this research was conducted during the height of the pandemic, further research into post-pandemic consumption may shed light on how these patterns have been maintained or changed among consumers.

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Authors’ contributions

Drs. Thomas Turner and Michelle Childs were responsible for study design, data collection, interpretation of data and contributing to the draft and final review of the research manuscript. Dr. Childs contributed to the literature review and Dr. Turner contributed to theory application and discussion of research findings. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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