



# Luxury

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# Consuming to Cope: The Luxury of Consuming in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Yasmin's PhD focused on the consumption patterns of second-generation Asian Indians. Yasmin is an active researcher focusing on consumption, culture, and identity. Her most recent work explores the meaning of luxury to children, having successfully won an initial bid to explore consumption, luxury and children from a cross cultural perspective, Yasmin undertook this research in several countries to fully understand consumption decisions made by children across different nations in relation to luxury, design, well-being, and happiness. Most recently Yasmin has been exploring the consumption of luxury as a coping strategy in the pandemic.  
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**ABSTRACT** Set in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic this paper examines the consumption choices of participants during the pandemic, presenting an exploratory study of how consumption was used as a means of coping with the crisis. It investigates the nature of consumption decisions and the key factors that influenced these choices. The findings suggest that the uncertainties, the pressures, and the unknown aspects of COVID-19 influenced participants. Government and media communication did little to inform the public and with the lack of information, consumption was used as a coping strategy. Moreover, the article details the pleasure experienced by participants of consuming luxury in the crisis and the hedonic nature of luxury consumption. These findings have direct relevance to future research on how luxury consumption is perceived and used to cope with crisis situations.

**KEYWORDS:** luxury, consumption, pandemic, media, communication, consumption and coping

## **Introduction**

This paper presents an exploratory study of consumption as a means of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. It investigates the nature of consumption decisions during the pandemic and how consumption was used to cope with the uncertainties, the pressures, and the unknown aspects of COVID-19. The pleasure of consuming luxury and the hedonic nature of such consumption became central to individuals' behaviours, influenced by constant media and governmental messages and communication throughout the pandemic.

The term and definition of "pandemic" has received much academic and scientific consideration. Although pandemics have historically affected millions of people, there remains an elusiveness about the definition of what constitutes a "pandemic."<sup>1</sup> From medical research the definition of a pandemic focuses and highlights key distinct features: wide geographic extension, disease movement, novelty, severity, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, infectiousness, and contagiousness.<sup>2</sup> Covid-19 is not the first pandemic to impact society; historically, there have been other pandemics and major health crisis throughout time. Arguably the COVID-19 pandemic, can be labelled the modern-day crisis. However there have been others. Such pandemics including the Spanish Flu (1918), more recently SARS (2002–2004), Swine flu (2009–2010), Avian influenza (2013), Ebola (2013–2015), Zika (2015–2016), historically cholera (1831–1832), smallpox and the plague.<sup>3</sup> The impact of COVID-19 however has and continues to be far reaching. Such health crises have negative impacts, not just on health but also on society, including the economy, the environment, politics as well as individuals' general well-being.<sup>4</sup>

This paper explores how the COVID-19 pandemic and the media and governmental messages at that time, impacted consumers decision making and the type of goods they consumed to cope with the uncertainties and pressures on a day-to-day basis as well as exploring how participants turned to luxury consumption and gained pleasure from hedonic consumption to cope with the daily reality, restrictions, and fears of the pandemic.

## **Media Communication and the Pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic there were a plethora of methods by which consumers were informed and updated regarding the pandemic, this included the news and other government announcements *via* various channels, including online, websites, the news, and news conferences. News is central in shaping the public perceptions and understanding of the pandemic and for many individuals

was the primary source of information regarding the severity and ongoing status of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> It is suggested that *“the role of the Internet and social media alongside that of mainstream press outlets cannot be underestimated”* in the context of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The news is fundamental in framing the extent, the response, and the understanding of a crisis like the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, media coverage is used by governments and authorities to communicate, raise awareness, and arguably alarm during pandemic outbreaks, and have been *“central to the framing of public and policy debates there on national security and health emergencies.”*<sup>8</sup>

The media portrayal through the pandemic took mostly a negative tone, for example many of the headlines included *“panic buying”* in the title, as well as footage in news reports of individuals involved in actual panic buying. Arafat et al.,<sup>9</sup> also outlined the role of media and the *“negative media transgressions”* that included blaming the public for stockpiling, blaming the government and businesses for not having the necessary stock to cope with the crisis, therefore taking a dramatized tone to the communication, positive reporting was less frequently observed. Social media was also central to the communication used in the pandemic, Leung et al.<sup>10</sup> analysis of “tweets” relating to panic buying included humour, sarcasm, profiteering, opinions, and emotions (e.g., anger and scepticism) as well as personal experiences of COVID-19. Leung et al.,<sup>11</sup> study also suggested that the government needed to *“utilise the power of social media, as to monitor sentiments and efficiently identify and address public concerns by issuing pertinent state-wide announcements, especially to tackle mass panic and anxiety.”* The importance of media messaging is paramount in helping to protect the public, to help avoid anxiety and fear. Also, the tone and style of media messaging will either enhance the public’s sense of control of the pandemic, or result in feeling a loss of control, which can result in ill-informed or panicked decisions. Brivio et al.<sup>12</sup> considered this in the context of perceptions of the pandemic and the need to restore a sense of control and behavioural empowerment.

The media representation of the pandemic included a diverse range of headlines, from celebration, appreciation, commiseration, blame, responsibility to vulnerability and calls for action. These headlines were focused on COVID-19 and became the main source of information for the public, example headlines below:

The media headlines and communications from the government focused on celebrating the work being done to fight the pandemic, the public were able to see this repeatedly through the different media forms, including TV, online, social media. There were examples of praise for the front-line workers, women, armed forces, as well political, religious and science leaders. Example of such headlines included, *“our civil servants have risen to the occasion of the pandemic,” “PM hails ‘herculean effort’ of life science companies to defeat coronavirus.”* Another focus of the headlines was the

representation of understanding those at-risk groups, the government communicated those at risk of becoming very ill due to COVID, arguably these types of headlines caused fear, making individuals feel more at risk and vulnerable. Much of the government communication focused on the risk factors but did not focus on what had caused these structural inequalities, rather focusing on research, public reviews, and subsequent policy developments. The unequal death rates and hospital admissions amongst certain groups was highlighted, mentioning biological, environmental, cultural, and structural factors, including causes such as lack of vitamin D, socio-economic disadvantages, poverty, genetics, and underlying health problems. These reports enhanced and exacerbated the fear felt by the public. The media narrative also focused on “*calling for action*,” how the public all had a part to play in overcoming the pandemic. This included media stories around the rate with which certain groups are or are not being vaccinated, coverage of people disregarding social distancing rules, and media stories calling for increased community support. In summary media reporting covered various aspects and stories of COVID-19, some messages were based on scientific data while others were focused on sensationalising the pandemic, as Mach et al.<sup>13</sup> found in their study of Covid-19 reporting, it varied regarding its scientific quality and levels of sensationalism depending on the content and publication or media outlet.

Although government communications can help reassure the public during a public health emergency, and is fundamental during a pandemic, helping to establish trust in leadership, provide a sense of reassurance as well as ensuring the relevant health and official communication is provided to the public,<sup>14</sup> a warlike posture is not helpful and can instead, instil unnecessary fear and paranoia among the public. Research suggests that this communication is important because, an “*infodemic*” of misinformation, misunderstanding and therefore panic can take place.<sup>15</sup> Engagement with the media is, therefore, crucial in spreading the right messages, ensuring they are appropriately targeted and decoded correctly.<sup>16</sup> Accurate information is required and needs to be a priority, however the UK government’s communication of the COVID-19 pandemic included war like language and propaganda.<sup>17</sup> In World War I and II, the British government’s communication appealed to the nation for a strong sense of duty and the need to defend the weak,<sup>18</sup> the collective sense of solidarity to ensure the nations citizens all helped each other, much of the UK government’s communication through the COVID-19 pandemic was similar to World War communications, however the public’s trust of the communications was under scrutiny.

While the communications used by the government cannot entirely be positively correlated to citizens’ behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic, it can play a key role in both managing people’s reactions and providing a level of reassurance and guidance.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, government communication along with social and

normative influences (e.g., family, friends, other media, even behaviour of strangers), triggers protective behaviours, such as panic buying, to regain a sense of security and control, and to avoid risks and potential future regrets, as well as a means of trying to cope with a crisis.<sup>20</sup>

### **Consumption and the Pandemic**

Traditionally the concept of consumption means satisfying an individual's needs and desires, as Torlak<sup>21</sup> states "*consumption could be defined as spending tangible and intangible values that are ventured to meet some demand, whether real or fake,*" therefore implying consumption can have both a utilitarian and hedonistic value to the consumer. Throughout the pandemic there was both a consumption of information, primarily through the media, the government and news reports, as well as consumption of basic commodities and luxury. The consumption of media, in all its forms by the public was to satisfy individuals desire for information and guidance on coping with the crisis, however its impact was the opposite to informing, but rather provoked enhanced anxiety, and feelings of not truly understanding the pandemic and its impact. Kotler and Keller<sup>22</sup> purport individuals use consumption to satisfy their wants and needs in different contexts and situations. Central therefore to consumption theory is motivation, there are different motivations that drive the consumer to buy; for example, Belk,<sup>23</sup> argued that "want" is the basic motivator in contemporary consumption. Other researchers have argued that ultimately consumption is used as a means of fulfilling one's satisfaction. As Marx<sup>24</sup> wrote "*a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by the properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether for instance they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference*" (33). Consumption therefore is multi-layered, its significance depends on the consumer, their motivations, their desires and their reason and rationale for consuming. The notion that the act of consumption signifies and reflects different aspects of an individual's life has been significant for consumer research, traditionally there have been studies that focus on research themes including symbolism, cultural consumption, identity formation and self-image portrayal, all focus on the meaning, the role, and the significance of consumption decisions. Consumer research has also extended to focus on the survival psychology of consumption, how certain behavioural patterns give the consumer a perceived sense of control and coping of their circumstances.

### **Consumption and Coping**

Coping has historically been defined as "*constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the*

resources of the person.”<sup>25</sup> There are generally three categories with regards to coping in research, first is problem-focused coping, which involves the individual understanding the situation and using different options to cope or change the situation, secondly coping that is focused on emotional reactions, therefore attempting to take control of the situation to reduce the stress and issues related to it; thirdly the avoidance of coping, which focuses on not thinking about the situation or using a strategy to “remove” it by avoiding thinking, studies have found that the consumption of alcohol (Carver et al. 1989)<sup>26</sup> as well as compulsive buying<sup>27</sup> are one of the responses used to cope with the stressful situation.

Compulsive buying, as defined by O’Guinn and Faber, is the “chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings,”<sup>28</sup> therefore it is a means to manage, handle and cope with what consumers perceive as stressful and potentially negative situations. More recently Eccles<sup>29</sup> found compulsive buying as a mechanism to cope with stressful situations, labelling her participants as “mood repair addicts,” therefore consumption is a mechanism with which to avoid addressing the trauma or the worry faced by the individual. Panic buying is another form of consumption that is used by individuals to buy large amounts of products in anticipation of impending actual or perceived disaster. Yuen et al.<sup>30</sup> investigated specifically the psychological causes of panic buying because of the COVID-19 pandemic, categorising four key reasons for this type of consumption: (1) perception, (2) fear of the unknown, (3) coping behaviour and (4) social psychology. The results indicated that “when consumers perceive the probability and consequences of contracting a disease to be high, they are motivated to undertake self-protective activities, including panic buying, to minimise perceived risk” (167). Ballantine et al.<sup>31</sup> also asserted that the rationale and reasoning for panic buying is for the individual to gain a sense of control and power, especially where there is a perceived sense of uncertainty and unknown.

Scant studies exist that focus particularly on the concept, consuming to cope in the context of a crisis, while the psychology of panic buying exists, there are only a few studies that have explored how consumption is used to deal with crisis, for example recessions,<sup>32</sup> natural disasters<sup>33</sup> and most recently pandemics,<sup>34</sup> Jain et al.,<sup>35</sup> refer to these as “collective tragedies,” however they state that “a comprehensive consumption coping model for global pandemics such as COVID-19 is required” (1470).

Covid-19 also evoked changes in consumer behaviour, Loxton et al.<sup>36</sup> study investigated the panic buying and a herd mentality towards consumption of certain goods, stating “during periods of stress or shock, such as during the COVID-19 period, herd mentality manifests itself in several different key areas including stock prices, consumer purchase behaviours and collective societal anxiety,” the consumer seeks to affiliate with “in-groups” and follow their decision

making, which can lead to consumers within their network being influenced by others. Consumers respond to perceived threat and through consumption feel a sense of self protection, *“hoarding behaviour prior to or during a disaster, which can be viewed as form of self-protection behaviour is considered as a self-interested, planned behaviour in an attempt to minimise risk.”*<sup>37</sup> In this context *“reactance theory”* can also be applied to consumers, which is *“when something threatens or eliminates people’s freedom of behavior, they experience psychological reactance, a motivational state that drives freedom restoration,”*<sup>38</sup> therefore there is an increased attractiveness of these products. This is further supported by Kaur and Malik, stating that in crisis situations, consumers are concerned with anticipated regret, *“if people do not hoard today and forgo the decision of hoarding, regret would be evoked if the not hoarding decision comes out as a result of a worst-case scenario.”*<sup>39</sup> In a crisis the fear of the unknown, the lack of control gives purchases a heightened sense of value that arguably give a sense of comfort, security, and escape.

Consumption therefore has social meaning and is part of a social statement that consumers make, that form part of their identity and their belonging to a particular community and the wider society. From a social psychological perspective, the social influence has a direct influence on individual decision making. *“Individuals are members of a society. Therefore, their decisions can be influenced by the attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of the larger group.”*<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the meaning given to certain goods and products consumed is linked to one’s public and private self. Consequently, consumers possess certain goods based on these two selves.<sup>41</sup> One’s private self is linked to one’s emotions, desires as well as individual impulses, while one’s public self is focused on the social role’s consumers have and relationships with family, friends, and peers (Webster and Beatty 1997). Kaur and Malik in their 2020 study to understand the psychology of panic buying, found that even without pressure from family, friends and peers, *“consumers tend to imitate others based on observations and consider themselves less knowledgeable and act on the basis of how others’ behave during the stressed time. They believe that others have a better assessment of the situation, and panic buying is the rational choice”* (5). Prentice et al.<sup>42</sup> in understanding the antecedents of panic buying during the pandemic discussed *“crowd psychology”* through the term *“social proof,”* which is *“rooted in the principle of social validation, which refers to the idea that individuals monitor how others think and behave, and then, act accordingly”* (8).

As the literature suggests in a crisis, consumption is used as a means of coping. The most obvious and prevalent in the COVID-19 pandemic was panic buying and the herd mentality towards consumption. Panic buying during the pandemic was a behavioural response driven by incomplete information, a loss of control and the fear of the unknown, consumers felt choices were limited and so



responded in a manner that enabled them to gain control of the situation.<sup>43</sup> While a plethora of literature post pandemic outlines the panicked nature of consumption there is scant work and literature on the hedonic nature of consumption and the consumption of luxury through the pandemic.

### **Hedonic Consumption**

Traditionally hedonic consumption has differentiated from utilitarian consumption, with the latter focusing on emotionally and multi-sensory driven decisions and the exhilarating satisfaction of consuming, however utilitarian consumption is more cognitively driven. Dedeoglu et al.<sup>44</sup> stated that hedonic value includes feeling of novelty and potentially sensation-seeking that therefore enhance the emotional value to the consumer. This contrasts with the utilitarian value of consumption, which relates to the more economic rather than emotional aspects of the service experience or product consumption. Overby and Lee<sup>45</sup> summarise the utilitarian values as the more functional benefits of consumption.

Kim et al.<sup>46</sup> investigated consumption through the pandemic with a focus on the hospitality sector, proposing *“the salience of the infectious disease threat will increase an individual’s utilitarian rather than hedonic value in consumption situations”* (3). Their findings revealed that customers prioritised the utilitarian value over sensation seeking due to their concerns of the disease and the potential risks to health. More recently Indrawati et al.<sup>47</sup> stated that the hedonic motives *“illustrates the buying process about pleasure, luxury and solace and is intrinsically based upon self-interested needs, curiosity, entertainment, self-expression”* (232). Arguably in a pandemic situation where the media is communicating the dangers, fear and the impact of the disease, hedonic consumption may be used to cope and escape from the unknown and a means to overcome fear. Pleasure is central to hedonic consumption, as Vieira et al.<sup>48</sup> purport, buying motives that are hedonic in nature relate to experiencing a sense of enjoyment, and are driven by the consumer wanting to experience entertainment, and personal satisfaction. Bakirtas and Divanoglu,<sup>49</sup> state that *“joy and pleasure”* are central to hedonic consumption decisions, in contrast to utilitarian consumption. Utilitarian consumption is considered as the purchase and consumption of products to meet the basic and essential needs of the consumer. The motivation for utilitarian consumption is defined as task oriented, more cognitive focused, without the emotional aspects of consumption, therefore consumption is viewed through the lens of convenience, practicality, and functionality.<sup>50</sup> This paper investigates the consumption decisions of participants, focusing also on their experiences of luxury and the hedonic nature of consumption.

## Methodology

For the purposes of this study, in-depth interviews were used. The use of in-depth interviews means the author was able gather descriptions from the participants of their experience of COVID-19 and how this impacted their consumption choices. This study wished to understand how individuals responded to the pandemic through their consumption patterns, the role of the media, as well as the types of consumption they engaged in, this meant discussing the pandemic and its impact on them personally. These key areas needed to be understood from the participant's perspective and so became the main areas for framing the questions for the research. The in-depth interviews meant that the researcher was able to understand the different contexts within which participants consumed during the pandemic, having the opportunity to discuss the pandemic was important to understand the relevance of consumption decisions and the impact of media in decision making, as Mears<sup>51</sup> stated "*in-depth interviews are purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn... what that person has experienced, what he or she thinks and feels about it, and what significance or meaning it might have*" (170). Using in-depth interviews, also meant that sensitive and personal topics relating to the pandemic could be dealt with accordingly. Where appropriate further probing took place and in some circumstances the researcher was able to avoid certain topics and discussions because of their sensitivity. The participants valued the opportunity to discuss the pandemic and their coping strategies, as Berent<sup>52</sup> suggests, "*the unusualness of being listened to, which, together with the anonymity, gives the respondent a feeling of empowerment*" (Berent<sup>53</sup>, cited in Stokes and Bergin).<sup>54</sup>

The informants were interviewed over a period of three months. A total of ten individuals participated, with an age range of 19–35 years. The participants all lived in the South of England, where agreeable the interviews were recorded, where participants were not agreeable notes were taken to capture the discussions. The data was coded to identify the most relevant themes, this was undertaken through the analysis of the transcripts/notes which helped to induce themes into the research.<sup>55</sup> The data was categorised allowing the researcher to identify the key areas of importance.

After the data analysis the key themes were identified below:

- Media Influence on Consumption
- Anxiety and Consumption
- The Luxury of Consumption

## Media Influence and Consumption

A fundamental influence on consumption was the media. Participants discussed how the media became their main source of information of the pandemic and this impacted their mental well-being, their knowledge and understanding of the pandemic as well

how they responded in terms of consumption. As outlined previously the media coverage and government communication included a wide variety of headlines, from the severity of the pandemic and the lives lost, to those vulnerable as well as the need to take collective responsibility and fight COVID-19.

The interviews revealed how the media had influenced participants well-being, emotions, and subsequent consumption decisions.

I felt it was a horrible, anxious and stressful time, I was far away from my family, flights were cancelled, and the worst bit was I had no way of knowing what was happening, I was relying the on the TV to understand it all, what did we really find out, nothing that made us feel better, it was scary, you felt like it was all getting out of control. (Female, 24)

I used to watch the headlines, sometimes I would switch over, I didn't want to know, it was too scary, I started to buy all these cleaning products, I kept thinking that the cleaner the flat was and if I stayed clean, cleaned all germs, I would be ok, the news kept repeating the number of people that had died, that made me more frightened, I felt like I had to do something, I bought detergents, chemicals to clean and I feel I was obsessed with cleaning. (Female, 28)

The government communication and media reporting had a direct impact on consumers, they are inclined to purchase products that make them feel more in control and that help to alleviate the anxiety they are experiencing.

I have to be totally honest, I found the media totally scary, the news reports I started to buy healthier foods, I was spending more time on cooking, make myself fresh food, things definitely changed, how I spent my time and my money, I felt I was doing something by buying more products, I would listen to the government messages and see the headlines and I knew I had to do something, I started to buy organic products, normally they are luxury for me, but I started to buy this, I wanted to spend on luxury in my view, spend more on the 'right' things, as no one knew what really was going to happen. (Male, 35)

Consumption becomes a means of coping, the participants share how they were consuming in their opinion, luxury, the fear of COVID-19, fear partially induced by the media and government communications impacted what participants purchased, therefore "*healthy foods*," "*organic foods*" are chosen to cope, these are deemed as luxury to help allay fears and anxiety. Participants discussed how they had become more focused on their health, went for walks, and wanted to become more active, it helped them to feel in control and to handle the situation. The media and government related communication has a direct impact on the participants emotions, the findings show that the tone of these messages, which primarily were negative

lead to consumption that gave participants a sense of control of the situation, they use the word “luxury” to refer to their consumption decisions and had a propensity to consume products, (cleaning, health related) to give them a means to cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Anxiety and Consumption**

The participants discussed how they had experienced heightened states of anxiety that stemmed from not being near family, not being able to travel and not knowing the current and long-term impacts of COVID-19. There were discussions relating to high levels of stress and how it had also impacted their mental health. Both their physical and mental health became a focal point, participants discussed how the news updates had a negative impact on them, enhanced their anxiety, some had decided to give up on watching the news, *“it didn’t help me,” “everyone was talking about the pandemic, it was scary.”* Another factor that augmented their anxiety was the lack of information, while there were daily government updates, news reports, headlines, participants still felt ill-informed, they were not sure which source of information was correct, *“who or what they should believe,”* this related to the pandemic, the choice of whether to vaccinate or not and the true impact of the disease.

During the pandemic, my self care and skin care became important, I needed to do things that made me feel better, every time I turned on the TV, there were more reports of those that had COVID and how some were surviving, while others weren’t, we had no control. That’s when I started to do things that made me think, at least I am doing something, I bought moisturisers, I know it sounds silly, I wanted to take care of myself, my skin, my health. Although I also bought different pieces of jewellery as it made me feel better. (Female, 29)

I suppose the anxiety I felt, I didn’t like the reports, it was everywhere, the crowded hospitals, the updates telling us how bad things were, on reflection, made me buy more, it was helping to cope with the situation, I bought exercise equipment, things that I knew were good for me, that would help me and then I felt I was actually a little bit more in control, I remember ordering vitamins, exercise equipment, I kept thinking I need to stay healthy. (Male, 35)

the biggest thing for me was my health concern, nobody was really telling us what was going on, not sure if they, doctors, the government, really knew themselves. I just started to motivate myself to be more active, I was trying to enjoy as much as possible, so that I would feel better and not feel alone, I remember ordering different colour leggings, stupid I suppose, but at least I was doing something. (Female, 25)

I started to keep voice recordings, a diary, reflecting on the day, how I feel, how I am doing with my study, the work I had to do, my worries, I needed to talk to myself as I was alone, I felt alone and I had to motivate myself, I started to buy things relating to improving my health and well-being, a yoga mat, doing yoga, I was trying to be healthy in case I got COVID. (Female, 20)

Participants discussed how during COVID self-care became a priority, consumption focused on exercise equipment, vitamins, healthy foods, consumption was used to overcome and manage the anxiety in a crisis. Arguably consumption became a form of self-control, with a deficit of meaningful information and understanding of COVID-19, consumption was used to feel in control of the crisis.

### **The Luxury of Consumption**

The participants reflected on having the luxury to consume in the pandemic, the very act of consumption was considered a luxury. With the media, particularly the news reporting the daily death rates, participants discussed how being healthy, surviving this pandemic made them realise the luxuries that they had, one being the option to consume. They discussed how they enjoyed searching the internet, fantasising of different consumption experiences and consuming. The luxury of consumption was central to their decision making, participants shared how they were *“happy,” “willing” “desired”* to spend more on certain products, especially those that they deemed as luxury, to overcome the fear of the unknown, the disease, the pandemic and to cope with the apprehension and nervousness of the pandemic.

I wanted to buy sportswear, some of it was expensive, not things that I would have got before, it was higher end, but I thought who knows what’s going to happen, I should just get it. (Female, 29)

I used to look at lots of jewellery, I would search on the net, luxury brands, somethings I knew I could never afford, there were others that I thought about buying, normally I would never have thought about it, never really even searched, but I felt scared, and this allowed me to escape. (Female, 20)

The fear of the unknown impacted participants and consumption is used to gain control of the situation and to overcome the uncertainty of the pandemic. Consumption of potential products and searching the internet is seen as a form of escape that gives the participants other things to focus on, the reminder from the media of those contracting COVID, the constant updates on the severity of the pandemic causing anxiety and fear and is controlled by escaping into the world of consumption. Participants discuss their desire to *“search”* for luxury and to consider the consumption of luxury brands.

I bought Chanel trainers, it was odd, as I actually knew that they were really expensive, but I liked them, how they looked, it made me feel good, when I got them I was really happy, but I still have not worn them, haven't taken them out of the box, I know they are there, I open them up and look at them, not wearing them yet, I felt good and still do thinking about them, in the middle of it all it was good to have them, I could escape, I know it sounds silly. (Female, 30)

Luxury consumption is a form of escape, buying “Chanel” trainers during the pandemic gives the participants something positive to focus on, this experience is repeated by focusing on the new possession, “*I open them up and look at them,*” the new item is bought but not worn. Arguably the participants are using “*consumption coping*” strategies to deal with this “*collective tragedy*”,<sup>56</sup> furthermore there is a desire for luxury brands, brands previously that were not considered but now are central to escaping the daily reality of the pandemic.

The findings show that dependent on the tone of the message, which primarily was negative, induced fear, made participants feel they lacked vital information on COVID-19, lead to utilitarian consumption, for example buying items to feel “*healthy,*” “*not get Covid*” became an important motivation in the consumption journey. Also, the negative tone of media communications, dramatizing panic buying lead to feelings of anxiety and fearing the unknown. It is clear from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, messaging has been fundamental to the public’s decision making, from the take up of vaccinations, to following governmental rules as well as consumption decisions. Arafat et al.,<sup>57</sup> in the context of the pandemic stated, “*many a time, people develop much-unexplained behaviour which differs from country to country, culture to culture.*” This paper advances on recent studies regarding Covid-19, by also concentrating on the hedonic, luxury, and emotionally driven motivators of consumption in a crisis, that lead to a preference for consumption to enhance individual well-being and a desire to experience luxury in all its forms.

## Discussion

Covid-19 had a notable impact on the consumption patterns and behaviours of the participants. The motivations for different consumption choices during Covid varied, including the need for the participants to feel a sense of control of the crisis, overcome their anxiety and focus on their well-being. Covid-19 heightened the participants’ focus on health-related and hygiene products. While other participants regarded this as an opportunity to explore, experience and consume luxury. Media in all its forms, from TV headlines, news reports and government updates failed to keep the participants updated, there was an overwhelming sense of the unknown and fear of the pandemic which led to the consumption of products that

helped to alleviate these feelings and provide escape from the day-to-day reality of the crisis.

The desire to explore and consume luxury was a coping mechanism and provided a sense of escape from the pandemic, there was a sense of enjoyment in consuming luxury, the experience of luxury in all its forms, searching, buying, receiving, and consuming luxury became a focal point for participants that helped them to escape from the pandemic and the negative communications surrounding it. The hedonic nature of consumption is prevalent in the findings, ironically with the removal of sensory capacity, touch and smell due to Covid, there is desire to indulge in the hedonic nature of consumption. The stress, the anxiety, the fear, and the lack of understanding of the pandemic heightened the participants desire to use consumption, particularly luxury consumption to cope. Participants priorities shifted due to the pandemic, due to the uncertainties including a focus on one's health and therefore the consumption of athleisure, vitamins as well as products that enhanced their general well-being.

The findings also reveal participants responses to Covid included the need to cope with the realities of the pandemic, while there were several mechanisms used to cope, from exercising, undertaking self-care, focusing on well-being, consumption was also fundamental to this. The process of consumption as a coping mechanism has concentrated previously on areas such as loneliness, divorce, life transitions, there is scant work on consumption and coping within a global pandemic. The findings revealed a coping strategy in response to Covid is to engage in consumption activities that give the participants a sense of control of their daily realities, especially where media and government communication threatened their feelings of stability. Participants tailored their consumption for example on health and exercise related products to regain power and consistency over the unknown. Thus, research suggests that consumption rather than being a negative force in a pandemic is used to maintain a sense of stability and power and so enhancing the daily well-being of participants. In addition, connections with luxury brands, through searching these brands online, imagining the consumption of these brands and in some cases actual consumption, gave the participants a distraction, and served as a means of surviving the harsh experiences of the pandemic. The hedonic nature and benefits of consumption were sought, and luxury became a consideration for participants to engage in world that previously had not been considered.

### **Summary**

Coping as a motive for consumer decision making is central to this paper. Government messages and communication in all their forms instilled a level of fear and a lack of confidence in understanding the risks, the implications, and threats of the pandemic, as a result individuals used strategies that helped them to cope and manage the daily realities of Covid. Messaging in all its forms, the "war" like tone

used by the government caused anxiety, dread and panic that encouraged participants to make self-care a priority, leading to the consumption of healthy foods, vitamins, and exercise equipment. Furthermore, to cope, luxury consumption was considered and explored to get away from the disheartening and demoralising media. Luxury was a form of escape, a distraction, that allowed the participants to concentrate on an idealistic and utopian state that did not include the despair of Covid.

Consumption became a form of self-control, with a deficit of meaningful information and understanding of COVID-19, consumption was used to feel in control of the crisis, these self-developed and arguably logical remedies were effective in reducing the loss of control and being able to cope. Further research is required on whether these strategies will continue to be used post the pandemic, will participants continue to engage with the luxury brands, or will their consumption patterns follow and revert to a more utilitarian rather than hedonic motivation. The findings give a deeper contextualisation of consumption decisions in the pandemic, arguably the realities of Covid were being avoided through changes in consumption behaviour, these behavioural changes give individuals a greater sense of control of the crisis. These coping behaviours have changed consumption habits, triggered by a sense of loss of control and understanding, as well as the management of stress. Understanding further the consumption coping process and the motivation for consumption in a crisis gives organisations, particular luxury brands an insight into to consumer behaviours that are motivated by the need to handle and survive an unexpected crisis.

### **Disclosure statement**

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### **NOTES**

1. Qiu et al., "The Pandemic and Its Impacts."
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid; Morens et al., "What Is a Pandemic?"
4. See note 1 above.; Amat et al., "Pandemics Meet Democracy"; Moraci et al., "Cities Under Pressure"; Bayer et al., "The Coronavirus Stimulus Package"; Tisdell, "Economic, Social and Political Issues Raised by the COVID-19 Pandemic."
5. Mach et al., "News Media Coverage of COVID-19 Public Health and Policy Information."
6. Pieri, "Media Framing and the Threat of Global Pandemics," 73.
7. Dry and Leach, *Epidemics*; See note 5 above.
8. See note 6 above, 75.
9. Arafat et al., "Panic Buying."
10. Leung et al., "Anxiety and Panic Buying Behaviour During COVID-19 Pandemic."
11. Ibid.
12. Brivio et al., "Empowering Communication in Emergency Contexts."



13. See note 5 above.
14. Davis et al., "We Became Sceptics"; Prentice et al., "Antecedents and Consequences of Panic Buying"; Barnes et al., "Understanding Panic Buying During COVID-19"; See notes 10 and 12 above.
15. Ratzan et al., "Enhancing Global Health Communication During a Crisis"; Piller et al., "Linguistic Diversity in a Time of Crisis."
16. Graham, "Government Communication in the Digital Age."
17. Roberts, "Pandemics and Politics"; Nyamutata, "Do Civil Liberties Really Matter During Pandemics?"
18. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I*.
19. Prentice et al., "Antecedents and Consequences of Panic Buying"; Barnes et al., "Understanding Panic Buying During COVID-19"; See notes 10 and 12 above.
20. Yuen et al., "The Psychological Causes of Panic Buying Following a Health Crisis"; Barnes et al., "Understanding Panic Buying During COVID-19."
21. Torlak, "Consumption," 17.
22. Kotler and Lane Keller, "Marketing Strategy."
23. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self."
24. Marx, "1976. Capital, vol. 1."
25. Lazarus and Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, 141.
26. Lazarus, "Psychological Stress and the Coping Process"; Billings and Moos, "The Role of Coping Responses and Social Resources in Attenuating the Stress of Life Events";
27. O'Guinn and Faber, "Compulsive Buying"
28. Ibid, 155.
29. Eccles, "The Lived Experiences of Women as Addictive Consumers."
30. Yuen et al., "The Psychological Causes of Panic Buying Following a Health Crisis."
31. Ballantine et al., *Changes in Retail Shopping Behaviour in the Aftermath of an Earthquake*.
32. Kumar and Singh, "The Effect of Recession on the Buying Behavior of Consumers in New Delhi During the Economic Slowdown of 2013"
33. Sneath et al., "Chronic Negative Circumstances and Compulsive Buying"
34. Laato et al., "Unusual Purchasing Behavior During the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic"; Seale et al., "The Community's Attitude Towards Swine Flu and Pandemic Influenza."
35. Jain et al., "Consumption Coping to Deal With Pandemic Stress."
36. Loxton et al., "Consumer Behaviour During Crises."
37. See note 30 above, 15.
38. Rosenberg and Siegel, "A 50-Year Review of Psychological Reactance Theory," 1.
39. Kaur and Malik, "Understanding the Psychology Behind Panic Buying," 4.
40. See note 30 above, 9.
41. Wallendorf and Arnould, "My Favorite Things"; Richins and Dawson, "A Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism and Its Measurement."
42. Prentice et al., "Antecedents and Consequences of Panic Buying."
43. Ibid.
44. Dedeoglu et al., "The Impact of Servicescape on Hedonic Value and Behavioral Intentions"
45. Overby and Lee, "The Effects of Utilitarian and Hedonic Online Shopping Value on Consumer Preference and Intentions"
46. Kim et al., "Threat-Induced Sustainability."
47. Indrawati et al., "Utilitarian, Hedonic, and Self-Esteem Motives in Online Shopping."
48. Vieira et al., "A Meta-Analytic Review of Hedonic and Utilitarian Shopping Values"
49. Bakırtaş and Divanoğlu, "The Effect of Hedonic Shopping Motivation on Consumer Satisfaction and Consumer Loyalty"

50. Overby and Lee, "The Effects of Utilitarian and Hedonic Online Shopping Value on Consumer Preference and Intentions"; See note 48 above.
51. Mears, "In-Depth Interviews."
52. Berent, "The Depth Interview"
53. Ibid.
54. Stokes and Bergin, "'Methodology' or 'methodolatry'?", 27.
55. Miles and Huberman, "An Expanded Sourcebook Qualitative Data Analysis"; Carson et al., *Qualitative Marketing Research*.
56. Jain et al., "Consumption Coping to Deal With Pandemic Stress."
57. Arafat et al., *Psychological Underpinning of Panic Buying During Pandemic (COVID-19)*.

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