

Self-definition of Virtual Identity: Post Covid-19 Consumer in Details

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the habits of consumption significantly. Moreover, it also challenged a common understanding of who the consumer is, how he/she identifies his/herself and how he/she relates to his/her identity outside the consumption. Distinction between a virtual and physical reality has become even more blurred – working remotely and consuming culture online, establishment of new virtual hobbies; even the closest interactions with friends and families are largely digital.

Segovia and Bailenson (2009) have suggested that brain cannot distinguish between an authentic experience and a synthetic one. It means that our lives during Covid-19 pandemic have become digital and virtual by default. [5] All of the above has been largely influential in the rise of a new consumer's identity. The aim of the paper is to understand self-definition of virtual identity of post-Covid-19 consumer in details – what defines post-Covid-19 consumer?

Keywords: self-defined profile, virtual identity, consumer, modern consumer, post-Covid-19 consumer

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will specifically focus on the aspect of the self-definition of consumers in context of time experience (Covid-19 and post-Covid-19; throughout the text, term “post-Covid-19 consumer” is used to designate the consumer from the very beginning of Covid-19 pandemic period and throughout it). Since pandemic has not come to the end yet, there are lack of empirical research base, therefore in this article the author will develop thesis, based on general features of pandemic. These theses will be justified with theories, thus building the base for empiric research in the future. The main research question of the article is – what defines post-Covid-19 consumer? Some sub-questions of the research:

- I. Does post-Covid-19 consumer consume for consumption?
- II. Is there any possibility that during pandemics the consuming has become default?

In this article, these questions will be analyzed theoretically, thus building a basis for an empirical research. This is why one of the aims of the paper is to develop appropriate questions for interviews. The qualitative research methodology used in the following study will be conducted on the basis of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of different demographic identities. This qualitative research approach is chosen because it allows to unveil the social structures in specific context – during Covid-19 pandemic period. [15] IPA most often have been selected as an appropriate method to study identity changes associated with important life transitions. [19] Covid-19 pandemic period and following post-Covid-19 period is considered an important life transition for all society together and for each individual separately. One direction of life transition is from real life to virtual life – with open opportunities to establish virtual identity, virtual habits, values, experiences. In future, this research will help to explore the role the virtual profile plays in the process of self-definition. So far, it appears to play a much bigger part than demographic profile in this process.

2. DEFINING MODERN CONSUMER

By definition consumer is a person who consumes, especially one who use the product, also a purchaser of goods and services. [5] It means that consumer is defined by the action – of using product or buying product, or combination of both.

Historically, consuming usually took place in defined space – markets, shops, cafeterias, bars, stock exchange etc. The relationship between consumer and the product could be defined as merely “physical”, and the act of

consumption included exchange of physical objects – goods or money. One becomes consumer, by entering merely into physical space. It includes communication – verbal as well as bodily appearance and language. Later on, with appearance and fast spreading of availability of Internet (2000) and also e-wallets (credit-cards, debit-cards, i-banks etc.) money became more virtual, but the act of consumption usually stayed alike as it was historically with some exceptions (for paying receipts on-line, or shopping on-line). Still, there was always a choice – to shop on-line or to shop in personal presence. With the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic, there was no such choice anymore.

However, during Covid-19 some new aspects of consumption appear – for example, “panic buying” or consumption in condition of mortality salience. Study ““The greedy I that gives” – The paradox of egocentrism and altruism: Terror management and system justification perspectives on the interrelationship between mortality salience and charitable donations amid the Covid-19 pandemic” confirms that people donate more when there is a death threat such that participants in the treatment condition. [7]

Consuming Product

Consuming product is defined by the action. ‘Consumer’ as interest object of science first is dated at Scopus in 1885 (search limitation: titles, all documents) in R. H. Thurston’s article “On the theory of the finance of lubrication, and on the valuation of lubricants by consumers”. It illustrates how consumer in the very beginning of starting of use of the term (consumer) is perceived through the lenses of the product. Conversely, during the pandemic of Covid-19 (2019) there is an observable increase of interest in science of consumer, (see Fig. 1).

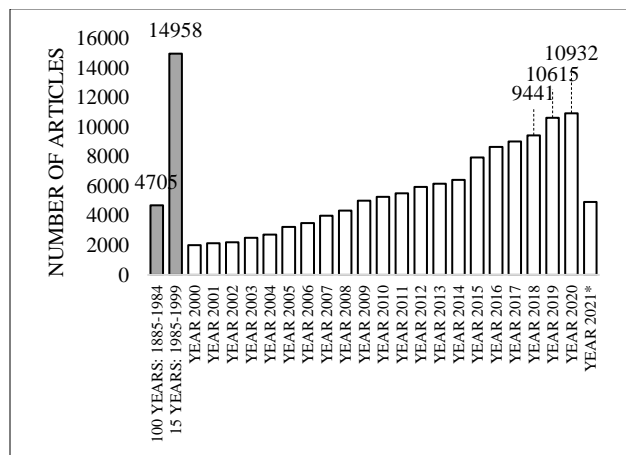


Figure 1. 'Consumer' in titles of articles (sum of SCOPUS and WEB OF SCIENCE)** 1885–2021 (published till 08.06.2021.)

If analyzed by subject areas, consumer as subject of interest moved from medicine to business, management and accounting since the very first mention (fixed in databases SCOPUS and WEB OF SCIENCE) of the term

‘consumer’ (see Table 1). Within more than hundred years consumer from the subject of medicine has become a subject of interest of business, management and accounting – the profile of the consumer becomes more consumption-oriented. If, at the beginning, the physical needs of the person were in the center of the attention, now, a person is described using consumption parameters. In a scientific reflection a person has become consumption-oriented.

Table 1. Number of articles with 'Consumer' in the title by research subject areas in SCOPUS 1885–2021*

YEAR 1885-1984			YEAR 2019-2021*		
TO P 10	Subject area	No. of articles	TO P 10	Subject area	No. of articles
1	Medicine	1374	1	Business, Management and Accounting	3138
2	Economics, Econometrics and Finance	1044	2	Social Science	2019
3	Social Science	1037	3	Agricultural and Biological Sciences	1483
4	Engineering	689	4	Engineering	1331
5	Business, Management and Accounting	686	5	Economics, Econometrics and Finance	1261
6	Agricultural and Biological Sciences	330	6	Environmental Science	1260
7	Psychology	247	7	Computer Science	1255
8	Environmental Science	228	8	Medicine	947
9	Arts and Humanities	143	9	Energy	813
10	Chemical Engineering	100	10	Psychology	597
	Decision Science	100			

*2021 – published till 08.06.2021.

Consuming for Consumption

Sociologist Colin Campbell in his classic study about romantic ethic and spirit of modern consumerism argues that consumption is usually mixed with other attitudes – such as hedonism, greed etc., if it is not understood historically and culturally correctly. [3] In analysis of Campbell’s study Sean J. McGrath finds three features of consumerism which are also in the focus of this research paper: [1] emphasis on the subjective enjoyment; [2]

craving for novelty; [3] insatiability. [14] The historical analysis of consumption is not the object of this research, but the author will analyze how three above-mentioned features are affected and most probably changed by the touch of the virtual reality and will try to explain why consumption can be defined as the desire to consume more. Is there anything these three features can tell us about post-Covid-19 consumer, and do they point out to some possible traits in his/her self-definition?

More radical changes appeared during pandemic of Covid-19 – everything was consumed online, and also the life of consumer became more and more attached to virtual reality. It definitely changed not only the consumer as a self, but also the understanding of the product which became more virtual.

3. SELF-DEFINED IDENTITY IN VIRTUAL REALITY

In research which addresses consumer behavior in virtual world, Christian Hinsh and Peter Block mention also the common word, used for human representation in virtual world – avatar. As the research was conducted in 2009, and the word itself was quite new, they also explain the etymology, which leads back to ancient India where word “avatar” was used to describe the god’s presence on the earth. Using the example of videogame *Second World*, they analyze the “making of an avatar”, or the virtual-second self of the user – by demographic parameters it may be similar to user, who creates it, but there is always also a chance to make an avatar completely different, or, completely other. [22] Analogy with videogame, of course, is a bit old and probably exaggerated, still, the principle is similar – in the beginning of 2020 all world suddenly moved to virtual sphere – working, learning, socializing was on-line, and so was shopping, consuming culture etc. The possibility for historical space and personal communication of consumption rapidly reduced. There was not a possibility to create avatar for oneself while working remotely, but there was always a choice to turn off camera during lectures, for example. This digital turn made people simultaneously more anonymous and more present or more other. [10] On the other hand, this turn made people also even faster than they were. In his classic study, *Tyranny of the Moment* Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen wrote that “speed is contagious, but it also creates dependency”. [4] If, before Covid-19, we were fast because of globalization and possibilities to travel, then, after Covid-19, we became fast because we were always present, always on-line. Eriksen also uses analogy – it is easier to fasten the exchange of information, not reduce that, and it is the same with necessity to achieve higher level of material life, not lower it. [4]

What kind of self-definition is possible, when one is simultaneously present and anonymous and fast? If an identity is the feeling of continuity of I, awareness of oneself in society and life, self-identification may differ,

because the concept of “I” itself includes perception of the self and self-assessment. [12] These two may differ in any normal times, but virtual environment may even extend the gap. It is split by definition – one can be in *Zoom* meeting and simultaneously answering e-mails or chatting on *Whatsapp* and *Facebook*. And why not? Living virtually, you can create numerous avatars or multiply yourself endlessly. And so can other people. Is also consuming unlimited? Can you become a consumer of no choice?

There is not enough research of how marketing and sale changed during pandemic, but it is clear that almost everything went online to survive. The virtual reality was technology-dictated, but how it affected details which defines post-Covid-19 consumer?

4. DETAILS WHAT DEFINES POST-COVID-19 CONSUMER

How do three “mythical” features, described by Campbell, change their meaning in virtual reality? Do they help to define consumer and if so, then how? Some of them have changed the focus, and some needs redefinition. As we saw, the term ‘consumer’ firstly was a subject of medicine, but more than 100 years later – a subject of business, management and accounting. Is it possible that, after 2020-2021, the term will become a subject of IT? More important – how does consumer think of his/herself? In the research, dedicated to media habits of teens in Latvia, the authors came to the conclusion: “It may seem that the Internet is very ‘natural’ part of teens’ lives, but these contrasts show that in their mindset, at least in some ways, teens distinguished between the internet and ‘real life’ as two separate things.” As a paradox, simultaneously teens cannot tell if they are consuming Internet, because they are “there and together” all the time. [6] The conscious self-identification of the post-Covid-19 consumer also is possible only in the programmed frame – there and together.

Novelty

During pandemic, most of the humankind was forced to learn how to work remotely – it was some kind of a novelty by learning new tools (*Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, *Slack* etc.). Besides, there was always news coming in about the pandemic situation in separate countries and worldwide. The news became an essential product of consumption because being informed sometimes could mean to survive. Not only literally, but also psychologically – safety is second of the basic needs in Abraham Maslow’s pyramid. [13] The news was enthroned of all novelty, but not by conscious choice of consumer. In Italy, for example, percentage difference of time spent online on mobile devices accessing current events and global news in March 2020 compared to March 2019 had growth for 180%, but in US – even 215%. [16]

In accordance with *Apple* statistics, between applications, the highest increase in the period of 2020 Q2 was for shopping apps – +40,1%. [1] Thus, the novelty also declared itself in the form of technologies – not only because of the new platforms which were necessary for work or shopping online, but also digitalizing of culture, education etc. The digitalization of everything demanded new updates, new skills and new competences. Here, the question for the empiric research is – did the improvement of digital skills and competences decrease other (professional, innovative etc.) skills and competences? Did form dominated over content? For example, if one wanted to consume opera show, did the necessity to use new tools was an obstacle for it?

Subjective Enjoyment on Communal Enjoyment

By definition, enjoyment is an experience of taking delight or pleasure. [20] Still, the consumption still was a basic need – not only because of virtual products and needs, but also because basic needs of people. On the one hand, people there was “panic buying” (see further), but, on the other, the emphasis somehow shifted from the subjective/egoistic enjoyment to more communal. People began to donate more – in order to justify feeling as nonstop consumer, they monetarized their time in order to feel “better” in the closeness of real death threat. For donating, time and money became valuable resources. “Donations of time activate a mindset and goals related to emotional well-being, whereas monetary donations elicit a mindset and goals associated with economic utility and value maximization”. [7] Time became an exchange object. So, we can say that the subjective enjoyment was gained through everyday consumption (as it was before) and donation of money. The bonus of the profile of post-Covid-19 consumer is that he/she is clearly related also to communal enjoyment by donating time. Both forms of donation correlate with each other in the same way as subjective and communal enjoyment. Such diversity of consumption – everyday consumption (shopping, working remotely, using technologies), donation (money and time) and consuming news, culture and education – noticeably accelerated the speed of consumption. Unlimited possibilities of forms, places and time of consuming made consuming default. If a person is online all the time, it is almost impossible not to consume, at least somehow. Consumption does not need an act of buying anymore – it happens unconsciously. So, the questions for empirical research from this would be: did a person donate more than before Covid-19? How does a person evaluate the enjoyment from the consumption?

Insatiability

The very beginning of Covid-9 pandemic was marked by “panic buying” – it is a phenomenon, which appeared more in some countries than in another, and also products differed – mostly, it was a hysterical need to buy stock of food and toilet paper. It can be interpreted “as a selfish way [...] to cope with insecurity, uncertainty, and loss of control”. [7] Later on, the direct fear of survival changed

its form variously. Actually, it signalized about consuming by default – at the beginning of Covid-19 it was conscious and affected by panic. Step by step, consumer “moved into” virtual space with endless possibilities and variations of consumption. A person gets used to anonymity and at the same time being present; get used to the speed of the multifunctionality and began simply to desire for more unconsciously. This desire can be recognized only by the lack of something.

5. CONCLUSION

The features of post-Covid-19 consumer expose fundamental changes:

- 1) consumption by default;
- 2) more craving for (undefined) novelty; more consumption of novelty;
- 3) the balance between subjective and communal enjoyment;
- 4) more sophisticated technology skills;
- 5) “being there and together”;
- 6) time monetarization and time as exchange currency;
- 7) core product value about which modern consumer is ready to pay for.

As theoretical research shows, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the life of the consumer essentially – firstly, because everything, like work, shopping, consuming culture etc. – happened remotely and the time, spend in virtual world, increased significantly. Secondly, consuming news, new applications, and unlimited possibilities of forms, places and time made consuming default – this is why there is a possibility to argue that post-Covid-19 consumer consume for consumption and that the consuming has become default – because of the endless and variable availability of new consuming forms.

The next step for defining the profile of post-Covid-19 consumer is empirical research – interpretative phenomenological analyses (please, see questions for interviews below). Few respondents have already been interviewed, and their responses seem to show that the thesis of theoretical research seems to affirm (respondents – women 30-40 y.o., actively represent themselves in social networks (*Facebook* or *Instagram*, or both).

References to novelty:

“...I am buying a lot – I need this and that, this and that, but in reality, maybe I could live with less – not so much.” [23]

“I like buying cheap items. In quantity. With that thought, if I don’t like them later, I can give away.” [23]

References to insatiability:

“Lots of things are needless, even I did not need them, I know that I can live with less.” [23]

"I just need this process of buying." [23]

References to subjective enjoyment:

"Maybe the moment when I am buying is the main one..." [23]

"I am thinking how I can characterize this (feeling) – well, maybe it is that maybe nothing is missing." [23]

"It is joy, quite a great joy. The firstly it is – oh! – it is me who buy The Leaf (green plate in the shape of leaf)! Some else could notice the first, but it was me! I was the first who got it! (Laughing)" [23]

References to consumer by default:

"...well, I would like to think that I am in control for my consumption and needs, but maybe it is not quite so, well so..." [23]

Questions for Discussion

Discussing the term "profile of consumer" in post-Covid-19 time, the thesis can be raised: also, the concept of "consumer" and "new product" has significantly changed. Does the classic definition of Karl Marx that "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" [11] still works and is true? In nowadays, most commodities, which has something to do with sustainability of the society, are non-physical, virtual. More commodities are consumed virtually and exchanged to virtual money or time.

If consumption is by default, what does it say about satisfaction of needs? Is it absolutely essential to satisfy someone's needs?

Questions for Empirical Research

In this research, the fundamental changes of the features of post-Covid-19 consumer were theorized, and some questions appeared for the design of further empirical research. In the focus of empiric research is authentic experience of being consumer in post-Covid-19 times. The main research question of the empirical research is – what is value proposition of the product or service perceived and valued by the modern consumer and which is dominating profile in decision making process – the defined demographic profile of the consumer or the self-defined virtual profile?

From this research, following research questions will be useful for empirical research:

- I. Can you become a consumer of no choice?
- II. What features characterize consumption by default?
- III. How do three "mythical" features, described by Campbell, change their meaning in virtual reality?
- IV. The virtual reality was technology-dictated, but how it affected details which defines post-Covid-19 consumer?

- V. How does a person evaluate the enjoyment from the consumption?

All of the above-mentioned trajectories of the profile of consumer have been largely influential in the rise of a new consumer's identity. Next step should be to explore the role the virtual profile plays in the process of self-definition of post-Covid-19 consumer. So far, it appears to play a much bigger part than demographic profile in this process.

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