Chapter

The Future of Sustainable Consumption after the Pandemic, Optimism or Pessimism?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused not only a temporal disruption in consumption habits but may have also triggered permanent changes in sustainable consumption. It was observed that during lockdowns, forced changes in consumption generated both positive and negative impacts on green-house emissions (e.g., less air travel but more plastic packaging). Furthermore, the consumer had to adjust their consumption decisions according to external circumstances in an unprecedented way. How much sustainable consumption will change in the long run? This chapter approaches that question from two possible angles based on consumer behavior theory. 1) We argue that changes in sustainable consumption may occur in both positive and negative directions depending on the way the disruption acted upon the interaction of drivers of behavioral change (social influence, habit discontinuation, individuality, emotions/beliefs, and tangibility) with consumption categories. 2) We argue that the influence of the disruption on sustainable consumption may accelerate the transition toward a post-consumerist society. We examine the potential validity of our propositions by reviewing empirical studies that captured sustainable consumption during the pandemic. The still scarce data indicate that in spite of both positive and negative short-term effects on sustainable consumption, there are reasons for optimism in accordance with our theories.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, COVID-19, habit disruption, post-consumerism, behavioral change

1. Introduction

Hundreds of millions of people around the world were confined to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Following a few weeks of severe quarantines and lockdowns, many months of extended consumption restrictions remain in places around the world. This resulted in the largest natural consumption pattern modification experiment in history. The effects of lockdowns on the overall economic dynamics can be large and manifold, and the question to focus on is whether such measures could boost sustainable consumption permanently. Sustainable consumption is broadly defined as the consumption that "simultaneously optimizes the environmental, social, and economic consequences of acquisition, use, and disposition in order to

meet the needs of both current and future generations" [1]. Hence, it spans three dimensions, namely, sustainable development, consumption stages, and intergenerational considerations. The pandemic may influence the three: altering the balance and priorities of the social, environmental, and economic aspects of sustainable development, interrupting consumption stages, and refocusing the temporal considerations of consumers.

We posit that the issue of how the pandemic may influence sustainable consumption, in the long run, can be addressed based on at least two different approaches. The first is related to the short-term shock effect on people's decision-making brought about by the economic situation, leading to decision-making patterns, some of which are favorable toward sustainable consumption. Among such new patterns, some can be maintained in the long term. The second approach is the moderating effect of confinement as an accelerator of change in already emerging consumption patterns (e.g., voluntary simplification, collaborative consumption) toward a post-consumerist economy, brought about by boosting social and entrepreneurial innovation in keeping with sustainable development. In this chapter, we use consumer behavior theory to suggest plausible scenarios of post-pandemic sustainable consumption. In spite of the still high uncertainty regarding the actual changes in sustainable consumption after the pandemic, there is solid theory and knowledge to anticipate possible scenarios in order to inform both academic and practice-oriented readers. This is the objective of this chapter. The topics touched upon in this chapter are widely researched, but our purpose is not to undertake a full review, but instead, based on the most salient literature, we offer a framework to analyze the potential long-term effect of the pandemic on sustainable consumption. Hence, this chapter offers informed suggestions about potential scenarios. We complement such analysis using the still scarce empirical evidence available in recent publications. Such evidence, nonetheless, is mostly related to consumption during the lockdown, not after the pandemic. There are, nonetheless, industry reports that show post-pandemic significant changes in consumption patterns and rationales that may indicate good news for sustainability [2]. We discuss comparative data from a consumption survey conducted in Colombia right before the lockdown period (December 2019) and repeated when most of the major restrictions had been lifted (October 2020).

2. Approach 1: changes to consumption patterns conducive to sustainability

Conditions of confinement de facto and abruptly change supply and demand dynamics, significantly altering household consumption patterns. To identify whether lockdowns can cause a permanent shift toward more sustainable lifestyles, we need to ask at least three questions: (1) Does confinement activate behavioral change factors that consumer science has already identified as effective behavior modifiers: (2) Are these conditions juxtaposed with areas of consumption that have environmental impacts; and, perhaps the most difficult question, (3) could the positive effects on sustainable consumption that may appear during lockdowns spill over into post-confinement, and consolidate as stable patterns. We can anticipate that the post-confinement period will be characterized by a crisis of trust and confidence in the immediate surroundings, coupled with heightened global awareness of collaboration and interdependence. Moreover, Ramiksson [3] has theorized that the

combination of pro-social and pro-environmental behaviors observed during lockdowns may have long-lasting effects on well-being, which contributes to long-term adoption.

The following consumption categories, widely used by multilateral and national policies and interventions [4], will be used for the analysis: (1) Use of water, electricity, and gas; (2) Transportation; (3) Eating habits and forms of supply; and (4) Organization of consumption needs and priorities. Meanwhile, the following five categories of social mechanisms have been identified as having an influence on promoting pro-environmental consumption [5]: Social influence, habit change, individuality, emotions and beliefs, and tangibility. Based on its definition, each of these aspects is assessed to determine whether it has been triggered by confinement and whether such triggering has affected the aforementioned categories of sustainable consumption. **Table 1** summarizes the linkage between behavioral triggers and consumption categories. For those effects that are likely to have positive impacts on sustainable consumption, we examine whether they will continue in the medium and long term or whether they will disappear once the confinement measures are fully lifted.

2.1 Social influence

This is manifested through social norms, identification with influential groups, and social desirability of behaviors [6]. Confinement to mitigate COVID-19 triggers new social dynamics and the population tends to share a lot of information about the situation and their experiences in adapting to the conditions of consumption under confinement using electronic messaging [7]. This flow of information can give rise to descriptive norms, as well as increased communication and identification among influential groups, that share something in common such as place of residence or social, work, or study groups. The sustainable consumption categories that can be subject to this social dynamic are transportation, food, and some aspects of product and service consumption reordering and prioritization. For example, members of a WhatsApp group can start using certain food suppliers and share it through their social media, creating a descriptive social norm. These changes tend to favor sustainable consumption as they are related to reduced and optimized mobility and transportation, better eating habits including new places and modalities of purchase, and a reconsideration of necessary and non-necessary consumption. Early works on

	Social influence	**Habit discontinuation**	**Individuality**	**Emotions and beliefs**	**Tangibility**
Improved resource use	No impact	—	No impact	—	++
Transport	++	++	+/−	—	+
Food	++	+	+	—	+
Reordering of consumption priorities	+	+/−	+	+/−	++

No impact, + slight positive effect, ++ strong positive effect, and − negative effect.
Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1.
Effects of confinement as a result of triggers and sustainable consumption categories.

content analysis of social media during the pandemic reveal that lifestyle topics were part of the communications [8].

2.2 Changing habits

Consumption habits are repetitive and routine behaviors that play a key role in sustainanble consumption [9]. Confinement discontinues habits in a significant portion of consumption spaces, including the four categories of sustainable consumption mentioned above. In some cases, confinement includes different forms of penalties and incentives associated with specific behaviors (e.g., mobility). However, the impact on sustainable consumption categories can be both positive and negative. Under lockdown, households tend to increase their resource use (e.g., longer baths, greater use of household appliances, and frequent washing of clothes with low loads and high temperatures), while they reduce their use of transportation to the bare essentials, and eating habits tend to be regulated and balanced with new products and smaller portions. Finally, the reordering of consumption priorities can shift in multiple directions; for example, the suspension of habits connected to the hyper-consumption of clothing, while sustainability criteria in recycling habits, use of plastic bags, etc., may diminish in favor of practicality and hyper-hygiene. Habit discontinuation for several weeks significantly opens the possibility of changing behaviors permanently toward whatever situational influence occurs during the interrupted period, including sustainable consumption [9]. We suggest that the consumption situations experienced during lockdown may have such an effect.

2.3 Individuality

Aspects of an individual's self-perception and identity are reflected in his or her consumption patterns [10]. Some of these aspects are self-efficacy, self-concept, self-consistency, and self-interest [5]. Confinement has mixed effects on these dimensions, which could indirectly affect sustainable consumption. On the one hand, the confined consumer's consumption range is radically restricted disrupting the connection between consumption and individuality, which is then coupled with a sense of disempowerment and lack of control, which is an antecedent of pro-environmental behaviors [11]. However, confinement also brings with it a persistent message of connection with others through the common purpose of safeguarding everyone's protection and health [3]. Thus, consumers' self-efficacy diminishes while they face greater difficulties in maintaining self-consistency. At the same time, lockdown poses a challenge to self-interest in favor of more pro-social behaviors, which may open the door to changes regarding selfless nature -concept, especially through consumption. This situation could be reflected in the emergence of more sustainable consumption patterns, especially in food and in the reordering of consumption priorities, guided by pro-social criteria and by renewed roles within the family dynamics [3]. The post-confinement choice and use of transport can become either more or less sustainable depending on the direction of the change in self-concept, the symbolic weight of this decision, and the contrast with other criteria such as safety, hygiene, and efficiency. For example, the intention to buy a vehicle may decrease if its social symbolic value has been reevaluated, but it is more convenient from a distancing and hygiene standpoint. With very little relation to self-concept and with reduced self-efficacy due to the effect of confinement, resource use would have a minor bearing.

2.4 Emotions and beliefs

Consumer behavior in general is influenced by a very complex mix of emotions, information, and beliefs. However, behaviors consistent with promoting sustainability have a distinctive feature, namely the so-called attitude-behavior gap or value-action gap [12]. That is, although people—in many cases, well informed—report a great concern about the environment [13, 14], behaviors change to a much lesser extent. Can lockdowns exert an effect in reducing such gap? Confinement has both emotional and cognitive effects that could influence sustainable consumption in different directions. On the one hand, the worrying negative emotions experienced during the confinement period trigger emotional self-regulatory effects aimed at reducing such emotions through immediate gratification [15]. This would increase resource use and food cravings and may lead people to imagine consumption scenarios that increase their intention to travel, buy vehicles, or reorder consumption priorities during and after the crisis, considering short-term satisfaction rather than sustainability criteria. However, the increased flow of information can promote learning about climate change and sustainable development. This in turn may enhance the perception of environmental protection being a collective challenge. In any case, the emotional effects of confinement are quite significant and its negative effects on sustainable consumption possibly outweigh the positive effects of increased information.

2.5 Tangibility

A significant percentage of consumers still think of sustainable development as something abstract and distant. Even if people believe that climate change is real and that companies should do something about it (see Nielsen global report, [14]), there may not be enough urgency in such beliefs to motivate short-term individual actions. This makes sustainable consumption changes difficult to define and incorporate into frequent consumption patterns. The occurrence of a pandemic and the reality of confinement elevates the perception of a subjective probability of events that could be considered distant and improbable. It brings a temporal and physical approach to an event with global concrete implications. This affects the way climate change is temporally construed [16]. That is, the psychological distance to the global level crisis is reduced. Such tangibilization can increase the proximity and reality of climate change as a global problem with real and intrusive implications in people's lives. This can have positive consequences in all categories of sustainable consumption, especially the most proximate and controllable ones, which in this analysis are resource use and the reordering of consumption priorities. Transportation and food decisions may be less affected because they are connected to aspects slightly further away from immediate control, such as available infrastructure and food availability.

Table 1 Summarizes the speculated crossed effects of the pandemic on behavioral change drivers and consumption category.

In short, the strongest and most generalized effect of lockdowns and restrictions on sustainable consumption through the impact on short-term consumption patterns occurs through the tangibilization of global challenges and high impact on people's lives that can result in stronger beliefs about the collective challenge of curbing climate change. Next in importance and generality is the effect of social influence on three of the sustainable consumption categories. Habit changes and ambivalent messages about individuality and collectivity have positive and negative effects

depending on the consumption category. Finally, the negative emotions engendered by confinement may decrease sustainable consumption.

3. Approach 2: accelerated replacement of the economic growth model based on hyper-consumption

The literature on sustainable consumption has identified signs of an evolution toward a post-consumerist society and a new economic model [17]. The paradigm of economic growth based on the promotion of fast-paced consumption, with great prominence on planned and perceived obsolescence, shows signs of weakness in North American and Western European economies. These weaknesses have been slowly growing but have led many industries to support their growth in emerging markets. Can global confinement accelerate the transition to post-consumerism and deepen the weaknesses of the hyper-consumerist model? According to Cohen's [17] review, such weaknesses include the following:

a. The demographic transition of major developed economies to older populations.

b. The disappearance of the middle classes as defined in the 1950s to 1980s (the golden age of consumerism), making the concept of mass consumption disappear, giving way to personalized models in more unequal societies where income distribution is bimodal.

c. The emergence of new consumer preferences that move away from traditional symbols of achievement such as vehicles, suburban housing, jewelry, and other possessions, directing spending toward experiences and services.

d. Reduced access to cheap and abundant natural energy resources, mainly hydrocarbons.

e. The disappearance of the political consensus that dominated the second half of the twentieth century in the face of the economic development model based on growth and consumption.

f. The proliferation of social innovations, inconsistent with a mass consumption economy (e.g., collaborative consumption), which favors business innovation in order to take advantage of these new social dynamics.

Confinement can accelerate the weaknesses described in b, c, and f. First, confinement and social distance negatively impact employment, income, and firm performance of the middle classes. This deepens inequalities and accentuates income bimodality. Sustainable consumption in these circumstances can be affected in opposite directions. On the one hand, families may reduce their total consumption volumes, but reorient their spending toward the satisfaction of more basic and immediate needs with little consideration of sustainability attributes and with greater sensitivity to price. Such a reduction in the perception of well-being does not favor the consolidation of sustainable consumption patterns, as it reduces consumers' willingness to pay for certified products and may result in a rebound effect when economic conditions recover. With respect to c, the drastic reduction of many consumption

spaces during the confinement and in the following months may accelerate the reconsideration of traditional symbols of consumption-based well-being and increase the search for experiences and services through technology and virtuality. If the consumer finds satisfaction and well-being in these new experiences, they will quickly share this on social media platforms and the great symbols of middle-class suburban life will weaken at an accelerated rate, favoring the search for sustainability through consumption.

Finally, regarding f, confinement interacts with emerging social innovations engendering greater collaboration among consumers. The quarantine has made local products visible and highlighted the importance of loyalty to reliable and local brands. This can deepen social and entrepreneurial innovation in favor of consumption and reuse communities; artisanal businesses; and, in the midst of this, the value of environmental care. In recent years collaborative consumption and voluntary simplicity have gained popularity and have triggered multiple entrepreneurial initiatives in many countries. They may play an accelerating role in the effect of lockdowns on new social dynamics. Voluntary simplicity is the free decision to reduce consumption and live a simpler life (see Rebouças and Soares [18] for a recent review of the concept), which is usually motivated by environmental concern, among other factors. Collaborative consumption [19] is based on facilitating access and sharing mostly services but also products among consumers. Moreover, forced teleworking and the combination of work and family life can open the door to completely new dynamics where companies take the risk of revising work models by permanently reducing the need for transportation for thousands of workers, especially office workers. It will also favor the rise of e-learning and the value of being at home. There will, however, be a hyper-hygienic social dynamic that will lead to an avoidance of mass transit, which may encourage individual and less sustainable forms of transportation.

4. Preliminary empirical evidence

During the severe lockdown weeks and the following months when various types of consumption restrictions remained, research in different contexts examined consumption patterns. A subset of such research has focused on sustainable consumption. One of the largest studies was conducted in Isreal during the confinement period by Tchetchik, Kaplan, and Blass [20]. They found significant increases in recycling and a remarkable intention to consume less. These behavioral changes were catalyzed by the perception of threats and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, ecocentric beliefs and informational associations between COVID-19 and climate change increased how serious the environmental crisis was perceived. This is consistent with the expected effects of increased tangibility explained before. In addition, food consumption patterns seem to be one of the most affected categories in different countries. Under lockdown, people significantly modified eating and cooking habits [21, 22], which may reduce food waste, as some its determinants are affected (e.g., planning meals). Consistently with our theorizing about the link between tangibility, beliefs, and more sustainable food consumption, Castellini et al. [23] found that in Italy, people exhibited increased awareness of environmental issues related to food (e.g., animal welfare) and sustainable diets. In other categories, there is still a dearth of academic research, but industry surveys [24] show some tendencies. For instance, consumers in Europe report to have increased their intention to use sustainability criteria in connection to lifestyles in general, and to recycling, sustainable packaging, and clothing

in particular, which supports our propositions about the effect of habit discontinuation on the reordering of consumption priorities.

The various studies mentioned above, show cross-sectional evidence of consumption patterns during the lockdown weeks. The question of how such patterns would unfold after the lockdown remains largely unanswered. Trujillo et al. [25] report comparative data on various sustainable consumption categories measured by the same questionnaire in Colombia, a few weeks before confinement (Decembre 2019) and right after the major restrictions had been lifted (October 2020). They found significant improvements in recycling/disposing but less sustainable consumption in water and energy use, as well as in sustainability criteria in purchases. However, they found an increase in ecocentric beliefs and a shift in the way such beliefs relate to sustainable consumption. These results may reflect some still short-term effects of lockdowns (e.g., longer showers and extremely hot laundry based on fear of contagion), but long-term belief changes toward sustainable behaviors. These findings are consistent with the proposed negative effects of emotion regulation and impulsive coping that may characterize the initial post-pandemic period, but also shows that structural beliefs may increase sustainable consumption in the long term. Furthermore, increased ecocentrism may accelerate the transition to a post-consumerist society by enabling the appearance of new innovations in the sense put forward by Cohen [17] as explained above.

5. Conclusion

This chapter offers a prospective argumentation of what may be the future of sustainable consumption in the post-pandemic period. There are possible positive and negative effects, but overall, we believe that there are reasons for optimism. We proposed a framework to examine the effect of lockdowns on the interaction between known drivers of behavior change toward sustainability [5] and target consumption categories [4]. We also argued that confinement impacts at least three factors that undermine the hyper-consumerist economic model. However, it does so by favoring sustainable consumption, and by accelerating the development of consumption preferences that privilege experiences and services through technology and virtuality, as opposed to the traditional symbols of suburban life (house and car). Preliminary empirical evidence seems to support not only some of the proposed specific effects (e.g. food, reordering of consumption priorities) but also the potential to accelerate the weakening of hyper-consumption by accentuating social and business innovations that harness the rise of collaborative consumption, voluntary simplification, teleworking, blended family dynamics, and minimalism. The way unemployment and income may reduce sustainable consumption remains an open question. Overall, we think there are enough reasons for optimism but it is necessary that both public environmental policy and private action take advantage of the potential positive effect of habit discontinuation on sustainable consumption in order to maximize the opportunities.

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