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# Happy Campers or Unhappy Prisoners: How Materialism Punishes Us in Lockdown Times

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**Abstract** - COVID-19 and the resulting lockdowns created an unprecedented upheaval in consumers' daily lives and lifestyles. The purpose of this research was to understand the psychological experience of life under lockdowns and the role of individual difference variables in that experience. Using survey data from U.S. consumers, the research identified two opposite feelings, coexisting: happy camper feeling or unhappy prisoner feeling. Younger, lower income, and less educated consumers felt more like prisoners than campers. Ability to maintain life as usual, and positive pre-pandemic life conditions (health, social network, and job satisfaction) led to happy camper feelings. In contrast, pre-pandemic materialism led to a prisoner-like experience. As we enter the now reopening marketplaces, we should ask: How shall we, as consumers, live our post-COVID lives. The research findings also suggest some directions for future research.

**Keywords** - COVID-19, Lockdowns, Psychological Experience, Life conditions, Materialism

**Relevance to Researchers and Practitioners** - All scholars of consumer psychology will find it of interest that certain pre-COVID life conditions led to the positive or negative emotional experiences of the pandemic. And that materialistic consumers would suffer negative emotions more than their less materialistic counterparts. Social marketers can use the findings to promote in consumers the habits and perspectives that make them psychologically better resourced in the face of future catastrophes.

## Introduction

The *Covid-19* pandemic began in early December 2019, arising in the Wuhan city of China. By February 2020, it had spread worldwide (AJMC Staff, 2021; Moore, 2021). World Health Organization (WHO) and public health agencies in cities and towns in countries around the world had begun to impose preventive measures such as hand washing, social distancing, and lockdowns that closed the offices, schools, and marketplaces (BBC News, 2020; CDC, 2020). Most work shifted to homes and restaurants and cultural and recreational establishments closed down either fully or partially (Chappell, 2020). It was an upheaval in our daily routines on a scale and scope the likes of which most of the populations had not experienced before. What was the psychological experience of such upheaval in our everyday lives? This research sought to investigate this psychological experience.

As the world increasingly reopens, how shall we lead our post-Covid lives as individual consumers? A critical input into our choice of new paths in our individual lives should be our experiences during Covid-19. Could we learn any lessons from our experiences during this historic catastrophe?

COVID-19 presented a double threat: risk of getting infected and loss of job or reduction in wages. In addition, we were restrained from meeting people face-to-face and confined to staying

at home. While the infections and job losses happened selectively, the lockdown affected everyone. In this research, we considered it important, therefore, that we understand how the lockdown affected people/consumers, psychologically speaking. The purpose of this research was to understand consumers' subjective experience of life under lockdowns. We wanted to understand as well demographic and lifestyle correlates of variations in this subjective experience (Kemp *et al.*, 2021).

## **Hypothesis Development**

### **Psychological Experience of the Lockdown**

Not everyone experiences an event the same way (Bender & Pannett, 2020; CDC, 2020). The variation in the psychological experience depends on one's life history and one's outlook on life and on the nature of the world (Barzilay *et al.*, 2020; Ekici & Watson, 2021). This is true of our perception of everyday objects and events, and it is true of major events such as the pandemic. The events of the pandemic also bring different levels of personal adversity to people. To some the disruptions in everyday life brought distress. To others, the lockdown closures meant more free time and disruption in everyday life meant a reason to rethink one's life (Kien & My, 2021). Thus, the psychological experience can be viewed as being either of the "happy camper" feeling type or of an "unhappy prisoner" feeling type. Below we develop hypotheses as to the drivers of this psychological experience.

### **Factors Affecting the Psychological Experience**

#### ***The Role of Demographics***

The specific psychological experience of the pandemic and the lockdown would depend, logically, on our station in life, marked by our demographics—i.e., our ages, education levels, income levels, stages of family formation, etc. However, it is unknown which direction the effects of these demographics will take. For example, will younger people feel more stress or less, will higher levels of educational attainment (and likewise higher income) make the psychological experience more stressful or less? Men or women could feel more unhappy than the other sex depending on who has more housekeeping chores fall on them or whose work-routine is more disturbed. As to age, all else being equal, younger people will be expected to feel unhappier than older people because they led a more active street life (Arpino & Pasqualini, 2021; Caselli *et al.*, 2021). Lower income people are likely to feel unhappier due to their work being affected more by COVID and the lockdown (Palomino *et al.*, 2020). While these are tentative expectations, more logical and therefore more certain is the likelihood that those whose employment was affected more adversely and who expected their financial situation to not return to normal will feel more like unhappy prisoners. Therefore,

H1. Selected demographics: (a) being younger, (b) less educated, (c) lower income, (d) suffering job loss or wage reduction increased the feeling of being an unhappy prisoner and diminished the feeling of being a happy camper.

### ***Ability to Lead Life as Usual***

Observation of friends and family and routine conversations with others revealed that for some their daily routine had been turned upside down by a shift of work location and closure of schools. For families with school-age children, home schooling, cooking, and housekeeping chores multiplied. And for many, working from home was a hassle and depressing (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). At the opposite end, many were able to maintain their old routine as they continued to work at the same work location; or work actually became easier or less time-consuming due to cutting out the commute and meeting times. Also, some found working from home at one's own pace and in more comfortable clothing brought more comfort (Kroesen, 2022). And many found the increased family time a blessing. These opposite situation of work and family time likely affected the happy camper/unhappy prisoner feeling experience. Thus,

H2. Consumers who were able to maintain their life as usual during the lockdown experienced feeling less like unhappy prisoners and more like happy campers.

### ***Engagement in Productive Projects***

Observation of friends and family and routine conversations with others revealed that many people had found more free time during the lockdown. They had therefore taken up new DIY projects or had engaged in more hobby-like recreational activities around the house (e.g., cooking, gardening). Subsequent research corroborated these observations. (Cohen *et al.*, 2020; Finnerty *et al.*, 2021). It is logical that those who engaged in such productive projects felt less like a prisoner and more like a happy camper. Thus,

H3. Consumers who engaged in productive and creative projects during the lockdown experienced feeling less like unhappy prisoners and more like happy campers.

### ***Effect of Prior Life Conditions***

The pandemics or the lockdowns do not affect everyone identically. Prior life conditions undoubtedly affect how new conditions will be experienced. For example, those with relative affluence will be able to withstand temporary financial adversity without much adverse effect on their lifestyle or purchase ability (Morosanova *et al.*, 2021). Those who enjoyed their jobs (including the social-cultural environs of the workplace) are likely to feel the suspension of that work environment as an unwelcome development; in contrast, those with boring jobs are likely to feel the shift of work to home as a desirable change (Kroesen, 2022). Those in good health might be less likely to be infected, or at least they were in the habit of staying active and thus not let the lockdown curb their active lifestyle. Finally, people with good social network will have that network still available to connect to, whereas those with no friends or weak social network will find the suspension of contacts with colleagues and sales and service staff and strangers on the street more isolating (Elmer *et al.*, 2020). Therefore,

H4. Consumers with more positive pre-pandemic life conditions: (a) financial security, (b) having an enjoyable job, (c) good health, and (d) good social network, were able to cope with the lockdown better and therefore felt more like happy campers and less like unhappy prisoners.

### ***Effects of Materialism***

Of great interest to us from marketing and consumer behavior standpoint is the role the lifestyle factor of consumption might have played in mitigating or exacerbating the stress of the lockdowns. A core underlying trait that motivates all our consumption, especially of discretionary products and service experiences, is *trait materialism*. (Belk, 1985). Materialistic people are more habituated to buying expensive and new goods from the marketplace and being seen using those products (Joung, 2013). Lockdowns take that opportunity away, both the opportunity of buying and of going out and of displaying our materialism in the form of clothes, jewelry, car, and other visible consumption..

H5. The more materialistic the consumer was (pre-pandemic), the more they experienced the lockdown as an unhappy prisoner and less like a happy camper.

## **Method**

### **Survey**

The data for this research was collected by a survey of consumers in a large metropolitan city in the U.S. In April 2020, when most people had experienced a month or more of lockdowns, we gave our students (for whom the class format had by now been modified from face-to-face to online) a survey to fill by themselves. In turn they also gave the survey to three unrelated adults (a convenience sample). We obtained a total of 242 surveys (63 students themselves and 179 other adults).

### ***Sample Demographics***

The respondents comprised 45.5% males. By age, 18-21 were 14.3%, 22-35 were 29.7%, and 36-55 were 53.4%, and 55 + were 2.5%. By education, high school or less were 12.8%, “some college” were 43.8%, graduates were 34.3%, and post-graduate were 9.1%. All income groups were also included: <10K, 10.5%; 10 to 30K, 21.4%; 31 to 60K, 34.8%; 61 to 100K, 21.3%, and >100K, 11.7%. Although not a randomized sample of the population-at-large, the sample included all demographic categories.

### ***Measures and Analysis***

Our key dependent variable was the subjective experience of life under the lockdown. We measured it by two items: “Staying home, I have been having good times” and “I am very unhappy about staying home, unable to do what I used to do.” The intercorrelations between the two statements turned out to be  $-.478$  ( $p < .05$ ). In the analysis below, these two items are treated as

individual measures of the extent to which respondents were happy staying home or, in contrast, troubled and unhappy with the regimented life. We call these two tendencies as “happy camper syndrome” and “unhappy prisoner syndrome” (hereafter, simply, “campers” and “prisoners”). Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo (2001) have shown that two opposite emotions can and do coexist in humans. An example is the thrill and fear we feel simultaneously driving our off-road vehicles in a challenging terrain (see Sheller 2004). Consider, for example, that the pre-pandemic strength of character and calmness will neutralize the unhappy camper experience but is unlikely to increase the happy camper experience.

Among the hypothesized correlates of camper/prisoner experience, we construed the first three factors as merely organizing categories, and, accordingly, formulated their measures based on everyday language, our routine conversations with a variety of people since everyone was living the lockdown in that time period, and our intuitive reflections. Ability to lead life as usual was assessed by three statements: “I am keeping up with life as usual, with not much changed”; “I am able to able to maintain my fitness and exercise activities”; and “I am connecting more with friends and family now.” Engagement in productive projects was measured by four items; “I am using this time to finish up projects I did not have the time for before”; “I have taken up new hobbies and projects and am enjoying them”; “I am reading books, watching news, watching entertainment much more”; and “Free time has been a blessing to me for accomplishing more.” Pre-pandemic life conditions were assessed by four items: “Financially, I am well-off”; “I find my job: Boring and just a job 1 2 3 4 5 Enjoyable and meaningful”; “(Before coronavirus): I was in overall: poor health 1 2 3 4 5 in very good health”; and “(Before coronavirus): With my social relations (family, friends) and social life, I was/am: Very dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very Satisfied.”

Finally, we measured materialism by three items: “I admire people who own expensive clothes, cars, and home, etc.”; “I like to buy new stuff (like clothing, shoes, cosmetics, furnishings, etc.) even though I could easily manage with what I already have”; and “I like to own things that impress people” (Richins & Dawson, 1992). For exploratory purpose, we also added an ad hoc item to reflect materialism: “My wardrobe is: Small and minimal 1 2 3 4 5 Large with a varied collection.”

The demographic variables (e.g., sex, age, education, income, and employment status) were measured as categorical responses. In addition, we measured whether the respondents’ employment was affected by COVID and whether they expected their financial condition to return to normal or stay worse.

## Results

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present correlations of hypothesized influencing factors with the two opposite strands of the lockdown experience—campers and prisoners. Note that these are not two separate groups of respondents; rather they are camper versus prisoner experience strands of all of the respondents. A grouping of respondents into camper and prisoner groups and then an analysis of the differences between the groups is presented later. Presently, we examine the role of the influencing factors by reviewing the correlations.

## Demographics as Influencers

The correlations between demographics and each of the camper and prisoner experiences are shown in Table 1. As that table shows, the tendency to feel a camper or a prisoner did not differ across the sexes. Age was positively related to being a camper (although unrelated to feeling like a prisoner). Income definitely helped cope with the lockdown, with high income individuals feeling more like campers and less like prisoners. Also educated people managed to feel more like campers. Finally, it were the fully employed people who felt more like prisoners, possibly because they experienced the most disruption in their daily routines.

We also asked the survey respondents whether Covid-19 had affected their employment adversely and also whether the deterioration in their financial situation, if any, was likely to be temporary or enduring. As is logical, those with a worse effect on their employment felt being unhappy prisoners; correspondingly, those who expected their financial condition to return to normal did not feel like prisoners. Thus, H1 was supported.

**Table 1. Demographics of (Happy) Campers and (Unhappy) Prisoners during the COVID Lockdown**

(Biserial Correlations)

	Campers	Prisoners
<b>Demographics</b>		
1. Sex (M=1, F=2)	-.014	.093
2. Age (actual years)	.131*	-.084
3. Income	.170*	-.152*
4. Education	.118**	-.095
5. Employment (None, part time, fulltime)	-.025	.206*
6. Employment affected by COVID (Scale: 1. Not at all - - - 5. Much worse /lost the job)	-.025	.206*
7. Post-COVID expected Financial Condition (Remain worse 1 2 3 Return to normal)	.062	-.194*

Note: **Campers:** Score on “Having to stay home, I was: Happy vs Unhappy”

**Prisoners:** Score on “I am very unhappy having to stay home, unable to do what I used to do”

\* Significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p < 0.1$

## Life Conditions and Engagements as Influencers

We construed this set of factors under three categories: (1) ability to maintain our daily lives as usual; (2) engagement in productive activities; and (3) our pre-pandemic life conditions (financial, health, job satisfaction, and social relations). Tables 2 present the corresponding correlations. As mentioned before, we treat these factors as formative (as opposed to reflective) factors. Therefore,

we treat these factors as organizing categories, and because the content of each item is in itself of independent meaning and utility, we examine the role of each item individually.

As would be logical, being able to keep on “living life as usual” had a strong positive effect in feeling like a happy camper and avoiding feeling like a prisoner. In the same vein, being able to maintain one’s fitness routine was positively correlated with the happy camper feeling. Also, those of us who were able to stay connected with friends and family experienced the happy camper feeling more. Thus, H2 was supported.

Did people who spent their lockdown time in productive projects experience the lockdown differently? As Table 2 shows, the clear answer is a yes! Those who took up new projects, pursued their hobbies more, took time to read and watch media, and, in effect, actually found the newly available free time as a blessing, found themselves living the happy camper life rather than a prisoner life. Thus, H3 was supported.

**Table 2. Temporal and Enduring Life Conditions for Campers and Prisoners**  
(Biserial correlations)

	Campers	Prisoners
<b>Life As Usual</b>		
1. I am keeping up with life as usual, with not much changed.	.304*	-.412*
2. I was able to able to maintain my fitness and exercise activities.	.244*	-.177*
3. I am connecting more with friends and family now.	.257*	-.023
<b>Productive Projects</b>		
1. I am using this time to finish up projects I did not have the time before.	.200*	-.095
2. I have taken up new hobbies and projects and am enjoying them.	.210*	-.089
3. I am reading books, watching news, watching entertainment much more.	.213*	-.033
4. Free time has been a blessing to me for accomplishing more.	.361*	-.173*
<b>Life Conditions.</b>		
1. Financially, I am well-off.	.170*	-.134*
2. I find my job: Boring and just a job 1 2 3 4 5 Enjoyable and meaningful	.159*	-.022*
3. (Before coronavirus): I was in overall: poor health 1 2 3 4 5 in very good health	.012	.039
4. (Before Coronavirus): With my social relations (family, friends) and social life, I was/am: Very dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very Satisfied	.193*	-.009

Note: **Campers:** Score on “Having to stay home, I was: Happy vs Unhappy”

**Prisoners:** Score on “I am very unhappy having to stay home, unable to do what I used to do”

\* Significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p < 0.1$

Finally, the study measured four elements of our permanent life condition: financial well-off-ness, our job being boring or enjoyable, being in poor or good health, and having or not having a good network of social relations. Among these, pre-Covid health did not have any effect. Financial wellness had a positive effect on helping us feel like happy campers, and so did having an enjoyable job and having a good social network. Thus, H4 was partially supported.



## The Role of Materialism

Of the highest interest to us as marketers and consumer researchers is the question of whether or not the style of consumption affected how we coped with this catastrophe. As we know, not all humans approach their consumption and marketplace engagements with the same mindset (e.g., Flynn and Goldsmith, 2016). As an index of consumption style, we assessed trait materialism. As Table 3 shows These items had significant correlations with the camper/prisoner feelings. Notice our data also showed that consumers with larger wardrobe felt more like prisoners! Thus, H5 was supported. (Although, materialism is a reflective factor, we examined the biserial correlation for each individual item. (In a factor analysis, the four items did merge into a single factor, with 58% variance captured, and item factor loadings of .77, .79, .77 and .68; this factor correlated -.137 with happy camper and .280 with unhappy prisoner experience.)

For exploratory purposes, we had also measured how eager our respondents were to get back into the marketplace. The prisoners were very eager (correlations are positive): eager to travel ( $r=.128$ ), eager to go out to restaurants etc. ( $r=.233$ ) and eager to go shopping even for stuff not needed ( $r=.285$ ); in contrast, happy campers were not eager at all.

**Table 3. Life as a Consumer for Campers and Prisoners**  
(Biserial Correlations)

	Campers	Prisoners
<b>Materialism</b>		
1. I admire people who own expensive clothes, cars, and home, etc.	-.088	.200*
2. I like to buy new stuff (like clothing, shoes, cosmetics, furnishings, etc.) even though I could easily manage with what I already have.	-.199*	.216*
3. I like to own things that impress people.	-.128*	.212*
4. My wardrobe is: Small and minimal 1 2 3 4 5 Large with varied collection.	-.089	-.201*
<b>Eagerness for Post-COVID Engagement in the Marketplace</b>		
<u>As soon as coronavirus is over, you expect to:</u>		
1. Take a vacation/travel	-.076	.128*
2. Go out more to restaurants, movies, fun activities, etc.	-.071	.233*
3. Go shopping more and buy stuff I don't necessarily need.	-.163*	.285*

Note: **Campers:** Score on "Having to stay home, I was: Happy vs Unhappy"

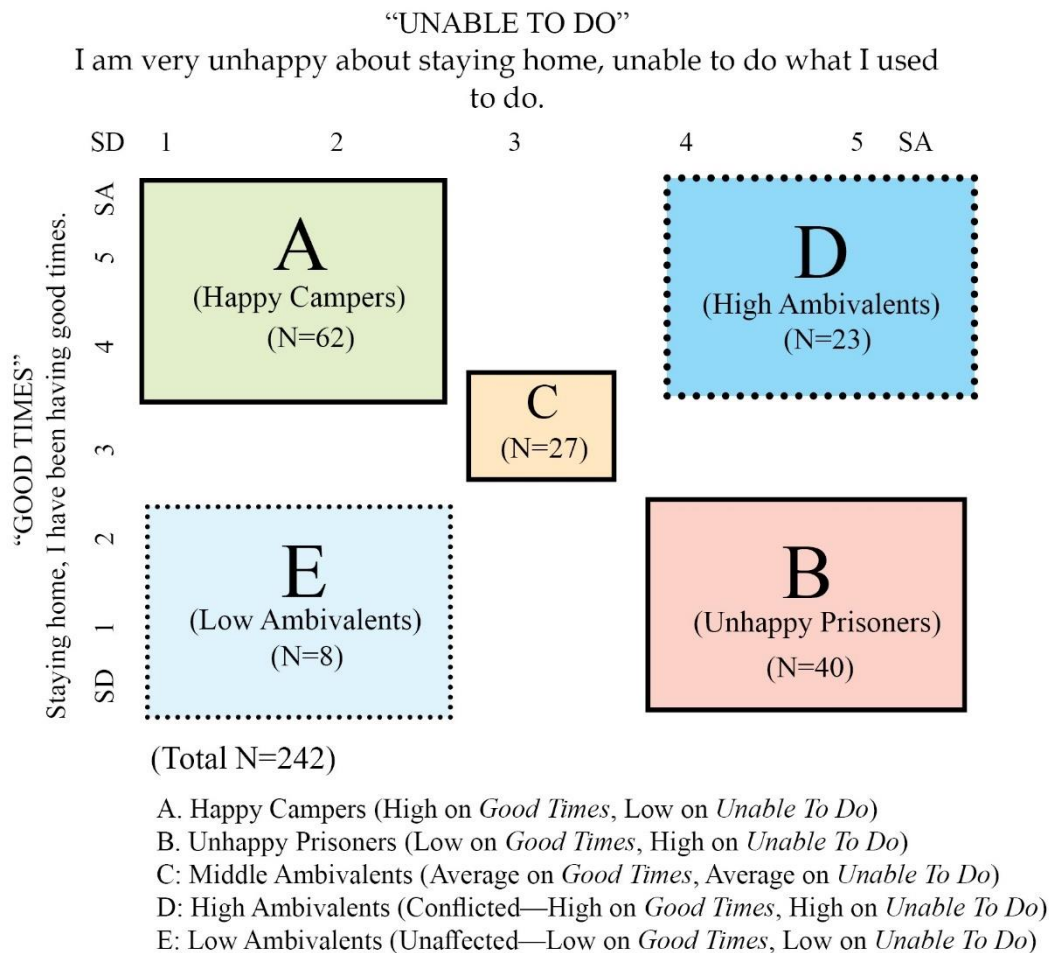
**Prisoners:** Score on "I am very unhappy having to stay home, unable to do what I used to do"

\* Significant at  $p<.05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p<0.1$

## True Campers, True Prisoners, the Ambivalents, and the Conflicted—Variety of Lockdown Responses

Recognizing that “the happy camper” and “the unhappy prisoner” feelings could reside in a person independently and simultaneously, for this next analysis, we grouped respondents into five groups: A: Happy campers; B: Unhappy prisoners; C: the Middle Ambivalents; D: High Ambivalents; and E, Unaffected. (See their description in Figure 1.) These groups formed 25.6%, 16.5%, 11.15%, 9.5%, and 3.3%, respectively, of the total number of respondents. See Figure 1. The remainder of the sample comprises those who were either low or high on one of the two feelings and middle on the other; these are deemed blurred categories. And, due to small size (N=8), Group E is not analyzed further.

**FIGURE 1. Happy Campers, Unhappy Prisoners, and the Ambivalent**



## **Demographic Profiles of the Four Groups**

The cross-group comparisons are reported in Table 4. Of most interest among the four groups are Groups A and B, for their exact opposite camper/prisoner feelings. Briefly, Happy Campers (Group 'A') are more males (50.8% among Happy campers vs. 40.0% in the Unhappy prisoner group). Students are a bit more likely to feel as prisoners (32.5% among prisoners vs. 22.6% among campers). In terms of age, younger people felt more like prisoners. And so did the less educated. Income-wise, low-income people felt more like prisoners. However, these differences, notable in magnitude, fell below statistical significance, possibly due to small sample sizes in each of the subcategories of any single demographic. Found statistically significant were employment statuses, pre- and post-pandemic. Full-time employed people felt more like campers (87.1 vs 65%). The survey had also asked if the pandemic had affected their employment status and also whether they expected their finances to deteriorate or return to normal, post-Covid. Those with employment adversely affected felt more like prisoners; and those with finances adversely affected also felt more like prisoners (32.5% vs. 17.7%). Directionally, these results corroborate those of the continuous variable analyses (reported in Table 1).

Moving next to Groups C and D in Table 4 (which reports statistical coefficients such as Cramer's V, Chi-square value, and phi), none of the demographics differentiated Groups C and D from each other or from Groups A or Group B.

**Table 4. Campers, Prisoners and the Ambivalents Under the Lockdown Experience**  
**Demographic Profiles (Proportions, add to 100 vertically)**

	Happy Campers 'A' N=62	Unhappy Prisoners 'B' N=40	Middle Am- bivalents 'C' N=27	High Ambivalents (Conflicted) 'D' N=23	Total Sample N=242	Chi-Square Cramer's V Phi 'P' < Groups
<b>Demographics</b>						
<b>1. Sex</b>						
Males	50.8	40.0	51.9	52.2	45.5	
Females	49.2	60.0	48.1	47.8	54.5	
<b>2. Student</b>						
No	77.4	67.5	85.2	69.6	73.1	
Yes	22.6	32.5	14.8	30.4	26.9	
<b>3. Age Groups</b>						
19-22	18.3	22.5	11.1	21.7	19.3	
23-35	18.3	30.0	22.2	26.1	24.8	
36-45	33.3	22.5	22.2	30.4	24.4	
46-60	30.0	25.0	44.4	21.7	31.5	
<b>4. Education</b>						
HS or less	11.3	17.5	11.1	4.3	12.8	
Some colleg	38.7	45.0	37.0	52.2	43.8	
Bachelor's	40.3	27.5	33.3	39.1	34.3	
Post-Graduate	9.7	10.0	18.5	4.3	9.1	
<b>5. Income</b>						
Up to \$30K	22.6	40.0	26.9	26.1	32.2	
31 to \$60K	35.3	35.0	23.1	43.5	34.7	
>\$60K	41.9	25.0	50.0	30.4	33.1	
<b>6. Employment Status</b>						
Not employed	1.6	10.0	11.1	0.0	4.5	Chi-Sq=7.74 V = .276
Part-time	11.3	25.0	7.4	21.7	15.7	Phi = .278
Full-time	87.1	65.0	81.5	78.3	79.8	p = .021 A vs. B
<b>7. Employment Affected by COVID</b>						
. Fully employed	56.7	38.5	38.5	39.1	45.0	Chi-Sq= 6.51 V=.170
. A little worse	16.7	10.3	23.1	17.4	18.6	Phi=.170
. A lot worse	18.3	30.8	19.2	39.1	11.1	p = .071
. Became unemplyed	8.3	20.5	19.2	4.3	12.0	A vs. B
<b>8. COVID's effect on Finances</b>						
. Will be worse	17.7	32.5	22.2	26.1	21.9	Chi-Sq = 2.94 V = .170
. Be normal	82.3	67.5	77.8	73.9	78.1	Phi= .172 p = .072 A vs. B

Note 1. All numbers are percentages, adding up to 100 in each column. \*\*

Note 2. Chi-square, Cramer's V, Phi, and p values reported only for those contrasts for which it was significant.

### ***Activity and Psychographic Profiles***

Table 5 presents the activity and psychographic profiles of the four groups. Looking at Groups A and B first, almost all of the variables were significantly different: respondents who were able to maintain life as usual and who engaged in productive projects tended more to feel like happy campers; good life conditions and subjective happiness also were higher among the campers.

Materialism and being an ardent consumer (indicated by the size of their wardrobe) made them more of a prisoner. And those who were feeling like prisoners were, naturally, more eager for travel, restaurants, and shopping post-Covid. Most of the constituent variables were statistically significant (Table 5).

The two ambivalent groups (C and D) showed profile scores with values in between the values of the two extreme groups. However, for these two groups few of the variables achieved statistical significance.

**Table 5. Campers, Prisoners and the Ambivalents Under the Lockdown Experience**  
**Life and Activity Profiles (Mean and S.D.)**

	Happy Campers 'A' N=62	Unhappy Prisoners 'B' N=40	Middle Am- bivalents 'C' N=27	High Ambivalents (Conflicted) 'D' N=23
<b>Life As Usual</b>				
1. ... Kept life as usual ...	3.45 (1.14) <sup>ab</sup>	2.08 (.97) <sup>bc</sup>	3.04 (1.19)	2.57 (1.12) <sup>da</sup>
2. ... able to maintain fitness	3.26 (1.31) <sup>ab</sup>	2.32 (1.35) <sup>bc.1</sup>	2.81 (0.96) <sup>ca.1</sup>	2.08 (0.97) <sup>da</sup>
3. ... connecting with friends	2.23 (1.17) <sup>ab</sup>	2.60 (1.15)	2.93 (1.07) <sup>cd.1</sup>	3.48 (1.12)
<b>Productive Projects</b>				
1. ...finish up projects.	3.53 (1.37) <sup>ab</sup>	2.88 (1.24)	3.33 (1.14)	3.13 (1.48)
2. ... took up new hobbies	3.06 (1.49) <sup>ab</sup>	2.40 (1.32)	2.89 (1.18)	2.61 (1.19)
3. ... reading books, etc.	3.84 (1.06)	3.48 (1.24)	3.33 (1.47) <sup>ca.1</sup>	3.43 (1.19)
4. ... A blessing for accomplishing	3.68 (1.33) <sup>ab</sup>	2.42 (1.06) <sup>bc.1</sup>	2.85 (0.91) <sup>ca</sup>	2.78 (1.17) <sup>da</sup>
<b>Life Conditions.</b>				
1. Financially, well-off.	3.48 (.78) <sup>ab</sup>	2.93 (.97) <sup>bc.1</sup>	3.41 (1.34)	3.30 (1.26)
2. ... job: Boring Vs. Enjoyable	3.74 (1.16)	3.50 (1.45)	3.37 (1.27)	3.74 (1.36) <sup>da</sup>
3. ... Health (poor/good)	3.87 (.96) <sup>ab.1</sup>	3.78 (1.05)	4.00 (0.74)	4.00 (1.13) <sup>da</sup>
4. Social relations (Dis/satisfied)	4.26 (.85)	3.93 (.97)	4.07 (0.83)	3.78 (0.99) <sup>da</sup>
<b>Materialism</b>				
1. ... admire people w. expensive clothes	2.47 (1.15) <sup>ab</sup>	3.00 (1.17)	2.81 (1.27)	2.70 (1.27)
2. I like to buy new stuff ....	3.11 (1.26) <sup>ab</sup>	3.75 (1.26)	3.30 (0.99)	3.48 (0.99)
3. ... own things that impress people.	2.24 (1.14) <sup>ab</sup>	2.90 (1.32)	2.63 (1.24)	2.74 (1.24) <sup>da.1</sup>
4. My wardrobe is: small/large	2.98 (1.21) <sup>ab</sup>	3.60(1.29)	3.37 (1.15)	3.26 (1.32)
<b>Post-COVID, I expect to:</b>				
1. Take a vacation/travel	3.44 (1.56)	3.73 (1.43)	3.56 (1.08)	3.43 (1.44)
2. Go out more to restaurants, etc.	3.71 (1.27) <sup>ab</sup>	4.30 (0.91) <sup>bc.1</sup>	3.81 (1.11) <sup>cd.1</sup>	4.39 (0.99) <sup>da</sup>
3. Go shopping more ...	2.16 (1.26) <sup>ab</sup>	2.95 (1.41)	2.89 (1.25) <sup>ca</sup>	2.43 (1.12)

\* All numbers are M and sd on 5-point scales: 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree.

Superscripts ab means the Groups A and B differed at  $p < .05$ ; ab.1 at  $p < .1$  level. Superscript bc means Group B and C differ significantly; ca means Groups C and A differ; da means Groups D and A differ; bd means Groups B and D differ; cd means Groups C and D differ.

## Discussion

### Summary of Findings

Many of the consumer demographics had significant correlations with the feeling of being happy campers, and some with feeling like prisoners, but not both (Table 1). Among the lifestyle variables, some had correlations with both types of consumer feelings (with appropriate valences, of course, but a few had a significant correlation with either the happy camper feeling or with unhappy prisoner feeling but not both (Table 2). This shows, as expected, that the two feelings, despite being of the opposite kind, could be harbored by a person simultaneously. This finding was also corroborated in the grouping of people by these two feelings: five distinct groups were identified: i. high campers, low prisoners; ii. low campers, high prisoners; iii. low on both; iv. high on both, and v. the middle ambivalents (Group C). That is, groups with simultaneous presence and simultaneous absence of the two opposite feelings were found! (Groups D and E. See Figure 1.) However, only the first two groups—predominantly campers (Group A) or predominantly prisoners (Group B), 25% and 16%, respectively, of the respondents—showed being significantly influenced by all the investigated drivers (Tables 4 and 5, Groups A and B)). The middle groups (the ambivalents and the conflicted) showed the effects in the expected directions but below statistical significance (Tables 4 and 5, Groups C and D).

Our correlational analysis (Table 1, 2, and 3) showed all of our hypotheses supported. Age, Income, and education showed correlations with the tendency to feel campers versus prisoners: the older, more educated, and upper income respondents felt more like campers. These demographic effects (noted in correlational findings) were corroborated in the high camper versus high prisoner groups (in the comparative analysis of categories, Table 4) but not at the level of statistical significance, possibly due to small sample sizes. For example, when respondents in the high camper category (Group B, N=40) are spread over the four education groups, the resulting sample sizes in individual cells are in single digits.

All other proposed drivers had significant effects on the camper/prisoner feeling, a result that emerged both in correlational (Tables 2 and 3) and in the “comparison of categories” (Crosstabs, Table 4 and 5) analyses. Specifically, (a) ability to maintain life as usual, (b) engaging in productive activities, and (c) positive life conditions of finances, health, job satisfaction, and social network, all helped to produce a happy camper experience, and their absence, the experience of being the unhappy prisoners. Finally, in our role as consumers, materialism made us feel more like a prisoner.

## **Corroboration in Prior Literature**

Although not directly relevant, prior literature in psychology at large suggests that these findings are in line with the body of prior findings in similar and general life contexts. Keeping active during the lockdown was found by Cronshaw (2021) to lead to consumer wellbeing during the lockdown. Walton et al. (2012) showed the power of social connections (a facet of life condition in our study) in coping. Cauberghe et al. (2021) showed that adolescents used social media to cope with feelings of loneliness and anxiety during Covid-19 lockdown. Munyon et al. (2021) found financial security (another facet of life condition in our study) to affect mental health during adversity.

As to materialism, a study with 1,567 consumers from mainland China found that pursuit of material goals had a negative impact on the respondents feeling of subjective wellbeing. Informed by these recent studies, we suggest directions for future research below.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited both in its size and its geographic inclusion. Many of the demographic effects, present in magnitude, fell below significance, possibly due to small cell sizes in various demographic subcategories within individual respondent categories (i.e., categories A, B, C, and D).

Second, the public pulse was assessed at one point in the lockdown period, when the opinions and self-perceptions of one's experience may have still been fluid. Third, there is a hint of an ad hoc nature to some of the measurements employed, both in the limited number of items and in their specific wording. Reader opinions may also differ on the particular analytical strategy pursued here. Some might prefer to see individual predictors computed as factors; in contrast, we construed some of the predictors as mere organizing categories, and the retention of individual items allows readers to see the non-uniform role played by the individual variables. This is useful because each variable even within the same predictor category has an empirical context separate from those of the others (e.g., health condition is different than financial condition). Therefore, it is of interest to examine the individual effects of these individual explanatory variables, and this is enabled by our chosen analysis strategy. Still, all measures would benefit by more theory-based item constructions in future research.

## **Directions for Future Research**

The limitations shine a path to bridging the gaps in future research as well as to expand the scope of the enquiry. First, the most important imperative is to measure the dependent construct of happy camper versus unhappy prisoner feelings more richly. Second, all predictor (or explanatory) factors also need to be measured with multiple items and greater theoretical contemplations. For example, life conditions are all assigned to a single category. In future research, each of the subcategories like financial wellness, health condition, etc. need to be measured with multiple items and then the composite of each subcategory treated as a factor by itself to examine its role.

One key predictor that proved significant was "life as usual": those who were not able to keep life as usual experienced feeling like prisoners more. In future research, it would be of interest to unravel the composition of "life disruption," i.e., in what different ways was life disrupted (e.g., work hours increased or decreased, work from remote, remote work became easier or harder, household chores increased, removal of socialization opportunities, closure of places of entertainment, being confined in the home, and the like), and which of these forms of disruption caused the experience of prisoner feeling to a greater extent. In turn, it will then be possible to investigate whether different life conditions, materialism, and other lifestyle characteristics affected the prisoner/camper feeling differently when anchored in diverse sources of life disruption.

A key feature of the present research formulation was the proposition that a person could simultaneously harbor the opposite feelings of being a happy camper and an unhappy prisoner. This important theme should be examined in future research, most aptly first with qualitative exploration, and then with quantitative measurements and verifying analyses.

## Contribution

For all of its limitations, the study reveals many interesting findings. First, that in a prolonged life duration such as the month- and year-long pandemic and lockdowns, a person could simultaneously harbor the two opposite feelings of being a happy camper and being an unhappy prisoner. This possibility was verified in the present data, in which significant number of consumers were found in the ambivalent and conflicted categories (see Groups C and D in Figure 1). It remains to be seen what the psychological dynamics of these ambivalent and conflicted persons is; for example, on some overall measure of mental tranquility (or lack of it), will the ambivalents or the conflicted consumers score lower or better than the decidedly unhappy prisoners?

Second, the study has revealed that ability to maintain life as usual is a strong explainer of a happy camper feeling. This is sensible and thus it merely offers the comfort of confirming what would be intuitively self-evident (e.g., no disruption, therefore no decrease in normal state of happiness). What is less self-evident, and therefore more interesting, is the finding that those who were able to utilize the altered daily routines to accomplish productive projects succeeded in thwarting the unhappy prisoner experience and instead felt the happy camper experience. In a study (though not in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns), Millar and Thomas (2009) found engagement in creative activities led to feeling happiness. Notice that most of the demographic characteristics (except the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic expected employment status) had none or tangential explanatory role in the camper/prisoner feeling (Table 1). Rather, it is the lifestyle factors and productive engagement (Table 2 and 3) that seem to have resulted in the variations in the camper/prisoner feelings.

Of most direct interest to marketers and scholars of humans as consumers is the finding of the adverse effect of a person's materialism and centrality of consumption (measured here imperfectly by the size of the wardrobe). This finding deserves a contemplation by all people as to their over-indulgence in their pursuit of the goods of consumption and the adverse effect it may have on their wellbeing (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2021). In a sense, materialism, especially at the extreme levels, is maladaptive consumer behavior (Boland, Martin, & Mason, 2020) that comes to haunt us more during times of adversity.

## Conclusion

How did we feel under the spell of the pandemic and the resultant lockdowns and what personal individual-difference variables contributed to feeling happy or feeling unhappy? This is an important question for everyone personally, and for social scientists and public health professionals at large. The present study is perhaps the first empirical study of this relationship.

Although with mixed evidence, the study found younger, low income, and less educated persons felt more like unhappy prisoners whereas the opposite demographics felt more like happy campers. More clear evidence was found for the role of employment: full-time employed persons felt more like prisoners as did those whose finances were adversely affected, a finding that makes sense.

More insightful are three sets of findings. First is the role played by how we engaged ourselves during the lockdown: Those of us who engaged in productive activities felt more like happy campers, even viewing the lockdown time as a blessing; in contrast, the unengaged felt more



like prisoners. A second insight was that those whose pre-pandemic life conditions were more upbeat maintained their happy stance despite the pandemic. And third, our deeper immersion in consumerism (materialism) made us a prime target of the prisoner-like unhappiness. Put together, these findings reveal a core life wisdom: How we felt during the pandemic and the lockdowns depended on what kind of persons we were pre-pandemic. Materialistic and consumeristic immersion in the external world made us susceptible to psychological injury by any external calamity; developing inner resourcefulness (Pre-pandemic life conditions) helped us maintain psychological positivity even in the face of external adversity.

Although the study can benefit from replication research with more representative data, more comprehensive measurements, and inclusion of more covariates. And yet, broad threads of core insight have emerged from this study with adequate certainty, for consumer researchers and other social scientists to reflect on and seek avenues of harnessing for greater public wellbeing.

While the present study is situated in the episodic context of COVID-19, which is now happily receding, the time to cultivate positive life conditions is during normal times, such as the post-COVID era. Also, the present study can serve as a prototype for future research, not necessarily in its exact execution but in overall purpose of discovery and research framework, in times of future catastrophes of diverse kinds, which sadly will visit upon us from time to time.

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