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Is self-love a vanity or a coping strategy? An auto-ethnographic reflection on self-care during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Key words: Self-care; self-love; pandemic; hedonic consumption; auto-ethnography

Short abstract

A global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 *virus* created changes in how we socialise, work and consume. This auto-ethnographic research explores self-care practices and identifies self-love as a coping strategy to survive the pandemic. Prioritising one's personal needs through hedonic consumption counteracts the adversities of social lockdowns.

Extended abstract

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event that affected every household worldwide and especially those that consist of a single person. Social lockdowns changed our habits and practices. The changes permeated our personal and professional spheres and were evidenced in how we socialised, worked and consumed in early 2020. This working paper captures the impact of the global pandemic on consumption and through auto-ethnographic reflections brings to the fore the importance of prioritising one's personal needs in coping with the adversities of social lockdowns. Self-care with the elements of self-love stands out as a coping mechanism to survive the pandemic.

Literature review

Research on self-care in the marketing discipline has gained some attention. Past research looked at how men and women take care of their physical appearance (Petrylaite and Hart,

2021; Ferguson et al., 2020; Woodruffe-Burton and Ireland, 2012; Ostberg, 2012; Souiden and Diagne, 2009; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Self-care is noted to improve one's health and wellbeing in a range of ways (e.g. attending spa services: Petrylaite and Hart, 2021; or engaging in bodywork: Ferguson et al., 2020; Woodruffe-Burton and Ireland, 2021). Health conscious consumers practice self-care by opting for organic produce when making purchasing choices (Apaolaza et al., 2018; Thorsøe et al., 2016) and even, through ethical and fair-trade consumption, consider the wellbeing of those working in the production and supply chain in the developing world (Balineau, 2019; Ma et al., 2012). But self-care can also be related to meeting one's psychological needs and increasing happiness which contributes to being effective and content in all spheres of life including professional. Consumption, be it materialistic or experiential (Pham, 2015), utilitarian or hedonic (Burton, 2002), related to virtue or vice (Yang, et al. 2021), can help achieve this inner feeling.

Consumer research presents self-love expressed through consumption as one of the elements of self-care. This psychological and physical nurturance of oneself can be associated with narcissism (Woodruffe-Burton and Ireland, 2012). Other researchers linked nurturing behaviour to compensatory consumption as a form of managing one's self-deficits (e.g. lack of skills, abilities or lower status) (Kim and Gal, 2014). Kim and Gal (2014) argued that by accepting oneself, the consumer moves from compensatory consumption to adaptive consumption which helps to improve self-deficits instead of compensating them through economic exchange. Whilst in the usual circumstances consuming for the purpose of making oneself feel good can be viewed as compensatory or adaptive, in the context of a global pandemic it can be regarded as a strategic move for survival. This type of consumption is a healthy expression of self-love essential for the functioning of the whole body including its physical, emotional and psychological sides. Self-love has the capacity to make the whole body work in unity: be happy and spread that happiness beyond one's personal life. In the context of a global pandemic, such consumption does indeed compensate for the missing social interactive elements due to imposed lockdowns or other restrictions. However, at the same time it ensures that the individual is in healthy unity when the social elements are removed from their life.

Research method and data

This qualitative study looks into how personal consumption habits changed in the global pandemic and how they assisted in coping in other domains – both personal and professional. To capture these changes and coping strategies, an auto-ethnography was adopted. Reflections

on subjective personal experiences in consumption and their consequent effect on a personal and professional level were gathered in May 2020 to capture the real picture of life in a social lockdown.

Auto-ethnography is a research strategy that allows researchers to step into their own cultures (Farrell et al., 2015) and explore them through self-observations and reflections. These data collection techniques have been used in various disciplines starting with anthropology and then permeating other research realms, including medical research (Farrell et al., 2015), sociology (Anderson and Austin, 2012), marketing and consumer behaviour (Hackley, 2007). Auto-ethnographical research has a close link to creative nonfiction (Hackley, 2007) and generates new knowledge about the world in which the researcher is situated and shares it meaningfully with others (Farrell et al., 2015). Auto-ethnography goes beyond reporting individual experience and can reach and resonate with the audience from the same settings (Farrell, et al., 2015). Through a narrative lens subjective personal introspections explore a specific reality and make it better understood, especially its daily aspects (Farrell et al., 2015; Hackley, 2007). Inward reflections situate the author as an active participant of the social world (Anderson and Austin, 2012) and engage them in reflexive conversations with the readers of the work (Farrell et al., 2015).

A reflective work was constructed around a few questions to keep subjective introspections in focus. They were linked to the main theme that is the impact of social lockdowns on consumption habits and life during the first lockdown in 2020. The questions were around personal experiences and feelings emerged as a result of being in a social lockdown; changes in consumption patterns; factors that influenced purchasing decisions, and the overall impact on life at personal and professional level.

Findings

The data gathered was analysed using a thematic approach. A theme of self-care emerged strongly in reflective narratives. The importance of looking after oneself was a key survival strategy during the lockdown. Consumption habits changed due to enforced social changes worldwide and occurred as coping strategies for survival in a lockdown. Auto-ethnographic reflections on consumption revealed hedonic experiences. Self-love, entertainment and indulgence were the key elements of self-care. They were effective in managing personal and professional life through hedonic consumption.

Conclusions

This paper argues that in times of global economic and social uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 virus, hedonic elements of self-care were not a sign of vanity or narcissism. The global pandemic brought to the fore the importance of prioritising one's personal needs to cope with the adverse impact of social lockdowns. Hedonic consumption with the elements of self-love, treat and entertainment were the survival strategies in managing one's personal and professional life.

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