

Not all Crises are Alike: Comparing and Contrasting Retail Consumers during a Pandemic
Lockdown Versus Consumers hit by Economic Recession

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Abstract

During a crisis, unusual consumer behavior has been observed globally. This paper aims to unveil the roots of changing consumer behavior when consumer habits are being disrupted by a crisis, albeit a pandemic or a strong recession, and to capture consumer buying behavior in these unique situations based on detachment theory. To fulfill the objectives of the research, 10 focus groups were conducted. The results indicate that consumers are learning to improvise by adopting new purchasing habits. In times of economic recession, consumers experience sudden and unintentional detachment from a grocery/ supermarket brand due to their inability to dispose of the necessary income, whereas, in times of the Covid-19 curfew, consumers try to dispose of the surplus of their disposable income by pursuing variety and freedom in their shopping decisions.

Keywords: *Economic Recession, Covid-19, Retail consumer*

1. Introduction

The expansion of economic crisis and now, the spread of Covid-19 with lockdown restrictions wreak losses on the global economy. The economic and medical crises, which have been raging since 2007, have created imbalances in the global economy and have affected consumers psychologically and behaviorally. In these turbulent years of recession, retail and consumer services suffered from this unusual situation in several ways, so people have changed their buying habits and brand their marketing tactics (Kaytaz & Gul, 2014). The changes in consumer behavior impacted not only retail stores, convenience shops, services stores but also supermarkets and in general the whole supply chain. Most recently and due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the world's economy was shut down almost overnight (WHO, 2020). Relatively, unusual retail consumer behavior, such as the emptying of supermarket shelves, was reported all over the world when the Covid-19 virus escalated into a pandemic (Miri et al., 2020). Basically, the initial rush for some product categories caused shelves to empty, while a surplus was created for others (Laato et al., 2020). The theories of reactance and detachment are examined and analyzed in order to explain the consumers' psychological pressure during these crises.

The existing literature contributes to the creation of some key questions, which have not been answered adequately yet. During the recent economic crisis, a qualitative investigation was conducted among Greek consumers, in order to explore the causes that have provoked the change in their consumption behavior. It was used to gain more knowledge about emotions and how Greek households have been affected by and responded to the crisis. The present study duplicates the research amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, attempting to compare the determinants of changing retail consumer behavior in a period of prolonged, severe crisis to the behavioral effects of Covid-19 disease. This paper appears to be a frontier study, critically comparing the possible effects of the Greek recession and Covid-19 pandemic on consumer behavior. The conduct of the research and its results are presented below.

2. Literature Review

Crises, Recessions, Destructions or Economic Depressions have been recorded many times in history. Claessens, Kose and Terrones (2009) identified in 21 countries, 122 recessions, 113 crunches, 114 and 245 real estate declines, and busts for the period 1960 - 2007. The results of this report highlighted the interdependence between macroeconomic and financial variables, which can determine the severity and duration of an economic crisis. According to NBER (2010), there are two perspectives for the definition of economic crisis. On the one hand, the recession is defined as two consecutive quarters of negative economic development of a country and on the other hand the recession is defined as a significant reduction in national economic activity, which is lasting more than a few months (NBER, 2010). Therefore, the Economic Crisis could be described as a period of gloomy economic performance, at which there is an accumulation of leverage, the value of the financial market shrinks at an unprecedented rate, and production is too low, resulting in failure to meet the demand levels (Samanta, 2014). It is identified by the impact on the Real GDP, on the contraction of real income and production, on the increase of unemployment, on the reduction of consumption, and therefore of sales and on the contraction of investments (Mankiw, 2013). All of the above indicators, as reported in the literature, have been affected in both cases the Greek recession and the influence of the Covid-19.

Since 2008, Greek GDP decreased 26%, unemployment in Greece reached at 28%, Greek gross disposable incomes had slid close to 40% and Retail Sales Volume was reduced

by 40% (Statistics.gr, 2017). In the context of such a dramatic crisis, consumers are not only focusing on shopping efficiency, reducing consumption and general expenditures but they also suffer from high levels of distress (Treanor, 2015), which has been documented to reach a state of major psychological depression.

Several epidemic outbreaks have observed in recent history, for example, Ebola, SARS, MERS etc (Balinska & Rizzo, 2009). Most prominently, epidemics have an impact on two categories of human behavior: (1) consumption behavior (Laeeto, 2020) and (2) health risk mitigation behavior (La Torre, 2019). However, due to healthcare crises, severe macroeconomic implications are noticed causing uncertainty, unemployment and, typically, an economic recession.

The SARS epidemic of 2003 prompted many researchers to study the impacts of and responses to diseases (Ala`a & Albattat, 2019), including consumer behavior. The Covid-19 research shows that retail consumer buying patterns have changed too (Laato et al. 2020). Increases in purchasing of food, gloves, face masks, and other items perceived to be important for surviving the pandemic have been noted. Furthermore, due to the lockdown, consumers have to stay at home and they are buying in excess food and home products (Naeem, 2021). In addition, consumers stockpile goods that have late expiration dates, increasing thus the pressure on supermarkets and suppliers. As a result, shoppers left the shelves of supermarkets empty of essential household items, such as pasta, rice, sanitizers and more. Furthermore, consumers sought a high level of variety in order to feel freely to choose more and different options in multiple choice settings such as food, stationery, or travel decisions (Kim, 2020).

As Covid-19 has now spread to more than 200 countries (WHO, 2020) many governments have imposed unprecedented restrictions on the movements and behavior of their citizens, as a result worldwide economic activity has rapidly decreased. In addition to the health measures and social restrictions (Gamma et al., 2020), healthcare crises are expected to have a significant impact on retail consumer behavior. Reactance and detachment theories could explain these consumer changes.

According to reactance theory, when freedom and feeling of control are limited, people are motivated to restore their control (Brehm, 1966). The theory of reactance was developed almost 50 years ago by Jack Brehm (Brehm 1966, 1972). This theory is based on social psychological theories such as cognitive dissonance theory which was used as main pillar. According to Brehm's (1972), "the basic idea of the theory is that a person is motivationally aroused any time he thinks one of his freedoms has been threatened or eliminated. This motivational arousal, ... moves a person to try to restore his freedom". The theory examines how people react when their freedom of choice is restricted, when they perceive that their free choice is very important (Clee & Wicklund 1980). So, two conditions are necessary for the theory's application. The first one is that the individual should feel free of choices and, secondly, it should arise some threats which impinge upon that freedom (Lessne & Notarantonio, 1988).

In general, people are convinced that they have freedom of behavior, although there are times when they can't, or at least feel that they can't. Reactance operates as a motivational state in order to protect individuals' capacity to choose whatever they want. From the customers' perspective, there are so many alternative options, such as selections among products, brands, stores, services to name only a few. Given these ubiquitous freedoms, it becomes important to consider the often encountered loss of freedom or, alternatively, threats to loss of freedom (Clee & Wicklund 1980). Customers who are persuaded to buy a particular product at the grocery store, who are barred from buying a product category in which they used to, or who are instructed to limit the quantity to a category of product are all examples of threats to freedom of behavior. In other words, reactance theory mentions that "the consumer

whose decision alternative is blocked (partially or wholly) by a barrier should become increasingly motivated to obtain that alternative" (Clee & Wicklund, 1980, p. 39). For example, the change of freedom of behavior increased by some government restrictions, such as there is a limit on the number of products that can be bought at one time or the limitation of operating hours in convenience stores (Naeem, 2021).

The theory of detachment was first introduced by Bolwby (1969). Detachment is a state subsequent to attachment and has been established in psychology, in the process of developing the attachment theory. Both reactance and detachment are psychological states and they are affective and cognitive, as well as behavioural.

In marketing, detachment is related to defense mechanisms that a consumer activates in order to deal with a product or service failure and/ or an unpleasant event (Romani, Grappi & Dalli, 2012). Detachment describes the distance with a brand/ store/ product/ people, resulting from the weakening or the dissolution of the affective bond existing between the customer and it (Pierrin-Martineq, 2004). It is manifested by a partial or complete loss of consumer's emotional reactions and by casting a doubt on the privileged place of it in his mind (Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli & Friedmann, 2009). The most common is the brand detachment, the relationship between a consumer and a brand. The process of brand detachment as a dissolution process of the relationship between the brand and the consumer has been found to demonstrate weak correlation with decreasing brand evaluations and appraisals, but strong correlation with decreasing attraction to it (Coulter & Ligas, 2000). In addition, negative emotions towards the brand, may also fail to develop during the dissolution stages of detachment (Romani, Grappi & Dalli, 2012).

The detachment does not correspond to a strong negative emotional state towards the brand like rejection. Brand detachment is demonstrated by the partial or total loss of certain positive affective reactions, it does not necessarily imply the appearance of negative affective reactions (Pierrin-Martineq, 2004). If there are relatively weak negative affective reactions (such as tiredness, disappointment) characterized the process of detachment, when the individual is detached, it means that the consumer no longer has negative feelings towards this brand and the brand has simply lost its dominant position in the his mind. So, the feeling of detachment does not necessarily mean that the consumer no longer has a positive appreciation for the brand. During the crisis, consumers can be removed from a brand, but still consider it a good brand, even if it no longer attracts him.

This study examines how customers are dealing with the changes of their purchasing patterns, which were caused either consciously, or compulsorily, or imposed on them. However, despite the extensive researches about the consequences of reactance and detachment, there has been little exploration as psychological states during a crisis. Do crises lead to behavioral, affective, and cognitive effects, and what exactly causes these effects?

3. Methodology

Qualitative research was conducted in order to explore this research problem. The qualitative research method is used for recording the attitudes and opinions of the respondents, so representative and realistic answers are obtained (Neuman, 2014). Qualitative research uses focus groups, in-depth interviews, projection techniques, observation, etc. in order to draw conclusions about the research problem through a relatively unstructured process of personal interviews (Creswell, 2009). Krueger (1988) suggests the discussion between participants, as an attempt to exchange opinions and speak each other in a friendly

context. From the participants' perspective, focus groups have been described as more motivating in expressing opinions and reveal their thoughts (Neuman, 2014).

To fulfill the objectives of the research, 10 focus groups were conducted overall. The initial 5 took place during the recent Greek economic crisis and were conducted in late 2015, whereas the remaining 5 were conducted in December 2020, amidst the second Covid-19 lockdown in Greece. Groups consisted of 8 participants with the same age category but different marital status, following the structure of Greek society based on data collected by the Greek Statistical Authority (2020).

The power of vision and visual stimulation has been studied by many researchers (Donoghue, 2010). The use of images in focus groups, and more generally, the use of tasks is well documented as an efficient method of extracting more data (Wilkinson, 1998). So, we had asked to participants to create a collage about their feelings as retail consumers during crisis in order to interpret their psychological state and attitude.

4. Results

The participants were responsible for household's purchases and the composition of the groups described a representative sample of the Greek population, as the demographic criteria were met. The discussion of economic crisis impact highlighted three major categories of consumers: consumers who blame everyone else except from them (usually older and married), consumers who undertake a part of responsibilities (usually the middle-aged with children), and consumers who are not concerned with shifting the responsibilities, but they are concerned with how to survive in this situation (in most cases the young and some elderly). However, the discussion about healthcare crises concluded that there are two categories of consumers: consumers who resolve to panic buying by buying in excess and consumers who being afraid of staying in the retailers environment for long, adopt a quick and impulsive buying pattern.

All participants declare that the advent of the crisis has affected them, less or more. The group A, the young people, who created independent households during the recession, stated that had less impact. The influence was so personal and emotional that it is reflected in the consuming habits of the participants. The main feature is that most people now *follow the list* they have prepared from home, as a lady said, "As an employee, I always made a list. I did not always follow it, in the past I missed a lot from the list, now very little. "Once we could have done a little more shopping, now we are quite limited.". From the other hand, Covid-19 crisis has a direct and strong influence on the group 1, aged up to 30. They mentioned that they *feel trapped and lonely*, even though they are the ones who can easily manage technology and use it to their advantage. Their need for personal contacts is increased.

In addition, participants were asked to rate the behavior of other consumers. The participants of economic crisis survey claimed that consumers were more restrained, abrupt, and more skeptical. It was typically reported that "People have now learned to *count the money* they have at their disposal.". However, nowadays due to the coronavirus crisis, other consumers seem to be anxious. It was mentioned from group 4, aged 40-55, that "people seem to have money by now *count their words* and are being social isolated by refusing to talk to other consumers or the front-line employees...".

In relation to the question of whether the Greek consumer has changed habits, it was mentioned by all groups of that they have *changed, both their shopping routine and their way of living and having fun*. Travel, clothing, cosmetics and entertainment routines have changed. At this point, it is worth mentioning the question from group C, aged 35-45, participant

addressing the others with a tone between joking and serious, "When we say we have changed our behavior, do we all mean we have *reduced purchases* or is it just my family?". While someone older participant, from the group E, aged 55+, said "The entertainment is now on monthly basis, somewhere in the first of each month". On the contrary, a smaller percentage from other groups stated that nothing has changed and the Greek consumers will continue purchase as they have used to. This is supported with a general reference "The Greek always finds the solution and survives". For the coronavirus crisis, the respondents mentioned that they forgot their status as customers due to lockdown. Someone from group 5, aged 55+, answered back humorously the question "*What is this? Retail shopping?*". Online shopping has entered the lives of consumers, whether they proceed it themselves or delegate it to younger. Moreover, the majority of consumers have postponed or cancelled their purchasing options for durable products.

Under discussion for purchasing preferences during economic crisis, most participants reported that they go retail shopping (except grocery stores/ supermarkets) only when there is real need. Some participants from group B, aged 25-35, stated that *they prefer to go alone*, so that they are looking for the best offer and not the best brand. Specifically, it was reported "I go alone for shopping and I usually prefer to shop from stores with merchandise of Chinese origin, but I do not refer it to my social circles.", "I go shopping with friends when I'm going for window shopping or to get a gift, which will necessarily be something branded", as well as "I buy specific products from discount supermarkets that the whole family likes, but they do not know their origin because I put them in noname boxes, purely for the bias that exists." Regarding the expenses in the supermarket, 6 out of 8 participants in each group stated that they increased their visits to the supermarket from what they did in 2008 and before. They even agreed that it used to be a form of weekly family walk, with the older ones recalling nice family moments and the younger ones remembering their parents buying them almost what they asked for. This pattern has changed (1) with the household purchaser going several times a week to look for better deals and prices, (2) by expanding the product categories available in the grocery stores/ supermarket and purchased, (3) by avoiding the family walk to restrict purchases to only commodities and (4) by visiting more than one supermarket. As mentioned, "I used to buy shoes from shoe stores, but now due to the crisis I find these stores expensive, so I buy them from the supermarket too. Thus, the frequency of my visit may have finally increased, with a smaller amount of expense each time but the supermarket gets a bigger share of my income than before. That is, the expenses that I had in other types of stores and now I buy them from there".

In contrast in 2020, visits and expenses in supermarkets increased considerably. Some participants stated that they increased their visits to the supermarket, as they were not able to visit another type of store. Supermarkets are considered as a place to go out and walk. However, one participant from the group 1, aged up to 30, stated that "I observe people around me in the supermarket and I see them in two conditions: (1) those who are over-dressed than requires a visit to the supermarket and (2) those who are informal and even messy, as they have been swept away by quarantine and this is evident in their appearance". The majority of participants of group 1 and 2, aged up to 35, agreed with this view, whereas, the group 4 and 5, aged 40+, mentioned that they preferred to visit less frequent and to buy variety of branded products. Moreover, public servants and retirees have admitted to spending more money in the supermarket buying more premium products, as their expenses (such as entertainment) has reduced. In contrast, private-sector employees who were affected by the lockdown have seen housekeeping costs increasing suddenly (for example electricity and heating bills), thus limiting their spending capacity at the supermarket.

As for the participants' attachment with their main supermarket, it was reported that *they changed or reduced the percentage of their purchases from the supermarket they visited*

before the crisis. One from the participants who reduced the percentage of purchases from the main supermarket said, "I used to go to one brand that had bio and fresh products, but it is said that the private label products are produced from one supplier and they are all the same... so I go to other brand when I find offers."

A participants from Covid-19 group stated that "I do not go to other supermarkets because I like my main one. I know it has good quality, service and it gives value to customer.". However, the group 4 and 5, aged 40+ declared that they *have changed their main supermarket*, preferring a less crowded branch and/or brand. Also, it is referred from the younger consumers that "I am visiting only one brand and store. I do not go to others as if an employee from the store I visit has tested positive for the Covid19, then I will either be careful with the surroundings or I will do the test. With this choice I feel that I am not so exposed to the virus." The majority of participants has agreed with this perspective.

4.1 Collage Results

The creation of the collage was not intended only to in-depth explanation of how they perceive the crises, but allowed the group to eliminate stress. The collage creation enables respondents to comment on some images they collect on their own and to start a dialogue with each other, revealing new aspects of their retail shopping habits during the crises.

Figure 1: Collage Results (per group per crisis)



An image, which was depicting a girl counting money with a ruler, was observed in all groups of the economic crisis, whereas all groups of the healthcare crisis included images if people counting interpersonal distances (Figure 1). However, the collage revealed in both circumstances very similar feelings and behaviors. At both cases, unpleasant feelings of uncertainty and stress in relation to employment, livelihood and what may lurk in the future were present. These feelings were externalized indirectly or subconsciously through the use of images that projected sadness and/or agony. However, groups of younger people were more optimistic about the future, while groups of older people who were facing difficulties with their disposable income, were more frustrated. The group with the retirees used images with question marks but also pictures that represent their need for the family warmth again. Several in these groups split the page into two parts, one with what they would like in a materialistic

sense (goods and gifts) and one with what they were aspiring to in terms of values, such as warmth and love. Moreover, the recession groups focused on their daily chase of product offerings, their reduced loyalty to branded goods and their anxiety for tomorrow. On the contrary, the healthcare crisis collage revealed images of empty shelves, full supermarket trolleys packed with a large variety of branded products, and occasionally, expensive items.

5. Discussion

This paper aims to shed some light to further understanding consumer behavior in difficult times by juxtaposing consumer views of retail shopping (a) during a prolonged economic crisis and (b) during a severe healthcare crisis. From the perspective of the recession, it has been established that consumer habits have changed significantly in recent years. Buyers have reduced their spending on durable goods and they are trying to subtract the greatest possible value from the money spend on goods and services. This means that the pivotal criterion of choosing becomes the cost of products, to the expense of other costs such as opportunity and personal (time and convenience) costs.

During the economic crisis, consumers have reduced their shopping trips in retail stores while they continued visiting supermarkets, assigning to grocery retailing the nature of one-stop-shops, by expanding the product categories purchased from them. Therefore, as supermarkets became the only outlets consumers continued to visit and enjoy shopping experiences, they also became the best environment for studying consumer behavior in times of crises. Consumers in their quest to maintain the quality of life they used to have before recession, refuted their favorite supermarket brand hastily and started visiting more, hunting bargains and product offers. This renunciation of their main supermarket and perhaps of some of their preferred brands was followed by feelings of demystification and, thus consumers were led to an indiscriminate choice based solely on price. The supermarket's positioning was diluted in the minds of the consumers. So, consumers reported that they were detached from their main supermarket and some of their favorite brands. This result revealed that the fun and intimacy of household shopping has turned into an involuntary emotional burden and what we used to call "shopping therapy" has been transformed to "shopping remorse".

In that respect, it can be claimed that in times of severe economic recession, the consumers may experience sudden and unintentional detachment from a brand, due mainly to income loss. Thus, in such times, the quality of the bond and the relationship with the retail brand may not be sufficient predictors of consumer choices and behavior, whereas the under-research concept of brand detachment could explain better the emerging purchasing patterns. In addition, in times of emotional distress, consumers may seek emotional havens in their purchasing habits and, thus, distant themselves from retail brands they can no longer afford. In particular, the case of grocery retail patronage rises as an important decision which affects a considerable proportion of the disposable income, and as anecdotal evidence suggests, in a crisis, consumers swift to (a) smaller per trip purchasing baskets, (b) discount S/M and (c) private label products.

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the imposed lockdown and social distancing, have disrupted consumers' purchasing habits and they were forced to improvise and learn new habits. These results are supported by reactance theory, which postulates that consumers in order to restore their sense of freedom, will seek variety of choice in other unrelated decisions. Reactance works as a motivator factor to restore consumers' freedom. In addition, seeking increased variety and branded products is closely related to restoring one's freedom and feelings of control (Levav & Zhu, 2009). Being forced to stay safe or in home, turns the supermarket shopping trip into an excuse for walking around, an opportunity for "breathing

some fresh air” or a quick visit, targeted to stockpiling necessities. In that sense, consumers in the Covid-19 pandemic were abruptly detached from their shopping habits, they were left with no choice and thus had to re-conceptualize their shopping opportunities as the only available social meetings.

The majority of participants both from economic crisis and Covid19 crisis stated that there is great insecurity, uncertainty and pessimistic feelings about the future. Both crises have the same effect, encapsulated into the phase “I do not know if tomorrow they give me 800 or 500 euros...”. These are the feelings that prevailed and explained the retail consumer’s changed behavior and consumers’ detachment.

It is important for retail and consumer services to understand the underlying processes and reasons that led to these unusual behaviors. Greece, due to Covid-19, has re-entered into an economic crisis period, so retailers should be able to better react to these situations in the future. The question arises as to which from the two behaviors, finally, consumers will adopt. The contribution of this study is to provide an initial look into an optimal transition to the new status quo of consumer and retail services that is expected to emerge once the Covid-19 pandemic is curbed.

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