Empirical Paper

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Conscious shopping of middle-class consumers during the pandemic: Exploratory study in Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, and Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This study aims to identify middle-class consumers' habits in four countries during the pandemic of 2020, with special attention to analogous consumers' reactions to extraordinary circumstances during the recession of 2008. Furthermore, this study tried to detect the impact of the pandemic on conscious shopping. Although the consequences of the ongoing pandemic were unforeseeable, the paper opened new avenues for further research on factors responsible for conscious consumption during the unprecedented externality and its significance on the middle-class consumers in culturally diverse markets. To achieve the aforementioned goals, between June and December 2020, computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) based on pilot stage research were conducted to answer the following questions: How did the pandemic influence the buyers' shopping habits in terms of conscious consumption? What were the reasons for the changes in shopping habits? What kind of consumer behaviors would middle-class buyers recommend to others? One general conclusion, inter alia, should be stressed remarkably: during the pandemic, irrespective of the cultural differences, the middle-class consumers' behaviors did not vary significantly with regards to most of the investigated variables.

Keywords: Consumers, Mexico, Nigeria, pandemic, Poland, Sri Lanka
JEL Classification: D9, D12, I12

1 Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2020 was an unprecedented global phenomenon with many unforeseeable consequences. It affected states, economies, and individuals. However, similar to other global events, such as the recession of 2008, its impact was rapid with astounding repercussions. The current pandemic has affected numerous countries, and the macroeconomic effects have ramifications on different strands of the respective economies [Hampson and McGoldrick, 2013]. The focus of this study was on middle-class consumers in Mexico, Sri Lanka, Poland, and Nigeria. We refer to prior analyses comprising relevant aspects

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Table 1. The COVID-19 cases in the four countries (in December 2020)

	Mexico	Nigeria	Poland	Sri Lanka
Numbers of people infected/population	1,413,935/ 128,932,753	86.576/ 206,139,589	1,281,414/ 37,846,611	42,702/ 21,413,249
Percentage of the population	1.10%	0.04%	3.39%	0.20%
Numbers of deaths	124 897	1 278	2 8019	199

Source: Worldometer [2021], *Population: World*. https://www.worldometers.info/population/world. Accessed February 3, 2021.

of the 2008 recession. Each of the four countries was affected by the pandemic differently. In the spring of 2020, Poland was the least affected among the four countries surveyed, but the number of cases increased significantly in the autumn. Sri Lanka initially reached the incidence peaks in the spring of 2020 but the cases subsequently got worse in the second wave in the autumn. The situation in Mexico and Nigeria was more difficult to determine as large number of cases recorded in the spring of 2020. The Nigerian cases stabilized in August 2020. Mexico recorded the highest number of cases in the entire period of the study. The statistical data are presented in Table 1 [Worldometer, 2021].

Mexico had the highest number of cases and was the only country of the four that left its air space open throughout the pandemic. The other countries put restrictions on arrivals and departures based on the number of cases. The protection policy of all the surveyed countries had direct economic consequences. In areas of high number of confirmed cases, non-essential shops and services were closed. Most stores that were open operated with many restrictions, which included disinfection of hands, temperature measurement, maximum number of customers, and designated traffic directions on entrances and exits. Cities and towns had different travel and mobility restrictions. Unlike the recession of 2008, where only Mexico was severely affected by that crisis, the pandemic of 2020 in all four countries quickly transformed the health catastrophe into a social and economic downturn resulting in numerous adverse social and economic effects.

The selection of the four countries was based on an approach presented by Kotze and Garcia [2017] and Euromonitor [2011], in which various social and cultural diversities were the main criteria. Concurrently, these countries are deeply rooted in traditions with conservative mindsets. Although Poland is a part of the European Union, the country suffered for almost 50 years due to a communist regime and has experienced a free market economy for a relatively short period of time. Furthermore, until a few years ago, the economy of Poland flourished with and belonged to new emerging markets – this status was changed to "developed" in 2017. All these four countries have a growing middle-class of aspiring consumers [Pieris, 2011; Inglot et al., 2012; Cypher, 2013; Findlay, 2013; Ost, 2015; Chandrasekara and Wijetunga, 2016; Rodas et al., 2019] while reinforcing the role of women in decision-making [Abeyasekera, 2016; Adebiyi et al., 2017; Anczyk and Malita-Król, 2017; Herrera and Agoff, 2019]. This trend was relevant for our study, as women could be perceived as key influencers of shopping habits worldwide [Brennan, 2011]. Furthermore, according to Cavusgil et al. [2018, p. 95], the middle-class is the fastest growing group in emerging markets whereas the reverse is the case in the more advanced economies with the additional claim that "the middle-class phenomenon is surprisingly new to international marketing literature". Hence, this segment deserves specific investigation in an international level. Malter et al. [2020] emphasized the significance of future studies on the influence of the pandemic on buyer behavior and, simultaneously, on values including sustainability among the major future questions as regards consumer behavior. This paper attempts to meet such expectations and in doing so contributes to previous research in three ways, namely, exploring consumer behavior in unprecedented global circumstances with a special attention to consumer consciousness, comparing buyer habits in four diverse economies and filling the gaps in current studies on the middle-class as a market segment. In this context, our study focused on behaviors differentiating consumers in the aforementioned countries.

To achieve the aforementioned goals of this exploratory study, computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) were conducted on a total sample of 213, which included Mexican, Polish, Nigerian, and Sri Lankan

buyers between June and December 2020, and investigated based on the three research questions with respect to the pandemic:

RQ 1: How did the pandemic influence the buyers' shopping habits in terms of conscious consumption?
RQ 2: What were the reasons for changes in shopping habits?
RQ 3: What kind of consumer behaviors would middle-class buyers recommend to others?

2 Literature review

2.1 Consumers during the recession

The economic and social consequences of the ongoing pandemic may be compared with those of the 2008 recession. However, the current ongoing crisis also has its idiosyncratic features. This is truly exogenous and not the result of the past financial imbalances that triggered recent recessions. Moreover, the wide range of possibilities depends on unpredictable non-economic factors. Finally, this crisis is truly global. The recession of 2008 did not affect as many countries, especially those in Asia [Bank for International Settlements, 2020].

In this study, some of the circumstances reflected in consumer behavior were considered. Noticeably, even after the recession was over, many consumers felt insecure, and their recession shopping habits remained as such [Govender and Govender, 2013; Weisser, 2014]. Many consumers were worried about losing their jobs, suffered from "post-recession panic", reduced their spending, deferred traveling, and even gave up charity donations [Weisser, 2014]. They also embarked upon bargain hunting and preferred shopping in discount shops while postponing the purchase of non-essential items. These changes in the consumer purchasing strategies also led to changes in the supply of goods [Govender and Govender, 2013]. As consumers became price conscious and more sensitive to price changes, there was an increase in footfall and purchases from discount retailers with few luxury items; shoppers searched for better values for their money over the same period [Hampson et al., 2018]. A reduction in impulse buying was also recognized (signifying a positive correlation between money available to consumers and non-essential impulse buying) as well as a decrease in retailer loyalty (replaced by a search for better values for their money) [Hampson and McGoldrick, 2013].

Regarding ethical purchasing, in general such products are more expensive thus less attractive due to consumers' price sensitivity during economic downturns. While ethical considerations are important for some shoppers, many consumers focus solely on the value. Another major ethical consideration is convenience: this is because as consumers become more price conscious, retailers started to focus on fast selling products, hence less prime space is reserved for ethical products. This leads to fewer ethical products being available or convenient to buy [Hampson and McGoldrick, 2013]. On the other hand, Bondy and Talwar [2011] noticed that dedicated buyers of "fair trade products" continued to buy them due to strong ethical beliefs. These authors recommend future research on this group of consumers to shed light on international differences that may exist, thus inspiring us to conduct the current study.

2.2 Sustainable consumption and consumer consciousness

Consumers are more conscious of sustainable products due to the high-profile attention now given to ethical consumption [Marzouk and Mahrous, 2020]. This topic is now top on the agenda both in public and academic circles. While a lot of research has been undertaken on this issue in developed markets, it has attracted less attention in emerging and post-communist economies. The essence of the debate is to substitute or reduce the dependency of natural or toxic resources that will produce emissions or are detrimental to the environment, adversely affecting future generations [Miczyńska-Kowalska, 2020]. The new millennium has seen a rapid growth in interest for sustainable consumption [Veiga Neto et al., 2020].

Sustainable consumption is about prioritizing our present needs and changing current lifestyles for the benefit of the future generations. This allows for long-term thinking so as not to curtail the aspirations of generations to follow [Biswas and Roy, 2015]. Previous studies on conscious consumption have shown a differential between intentions and the actual behaviors of consumers. This is because consumer decisions are affected by other considerations such as price, location, availability of the products, convenience, habits, peer pressure, emotional appeal amongst other factors [Sajn, 2020].

Noteworthy terms such as sustainable consumption, ecologically conscious consumer, green consumer, green consumption, ecologically concerned or pro-environmental behavior are used to describe the same construct [Carfagna et al., 2014; Banovic et al., 2019; Marzouk and Mahrous, 2020; Veiga Neto et al., 2020]. Given the example of incorporating environmental awareness and sustainability rules, in a configuration called ethical or "conscious consumption" [Carfagna et al., 2014], in this study the term *consumer consciousness* was applied. Thus, a conscious consumer is defined as a rational, reasonable, and responsible individual.

In light of the reasoning in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, regarding each of the four countries, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H: During the pandemic of 2020, the consumers in the four countries did more conscious shopping than before.

2.3 Middle-class

The middle-class builds the fundamentals of socio-economic development and consists of creative professionals, who motivate others and become a reference group for them [OECD, 2019]. Therefore, during the pandemic or economic downturns, they have powerful and influential consumption patterns. In this context, Mohan [2019] noticed a remarkable phenomenon: although the term middle-class was ambiguous, more people prefer being classified as middle-class.

Rodas et al. [2019] claimed that although the middle-class is defined differently in the literature, some facets were comparable such as lifestyle, education, and patterns of consumption. Thus, income distribution should not become a dominant criterion. This group is predominantly concentrated in urban areas [Kardes, 2016]. The research attested to the growing middle-class in developing countries, and in the case of Nigeria, formed around 23% of the population. Shimeles and Ncube [2015] with data from 37 African countries, showed an improvement in the percentage of people moving into the middle-class in the decade spanning 2000–2010.

From a global perspective, a radical transformation is being spurred by a rise of middle-class in emerging markets [Marsh and Li, 2016; Cavusgil et al., 2018], where it usually indicates a preferred status. In this study, we followed Rodas et al., [2019] who underlined the "functional role of the middle-class, its occupational structure or specific system of values" [p. 295] and [Cavusgil et al., 2018], who depicted middle-class in emerging markets as active buyers in both the economic and the social sense. Consumers in this group can afford discretionary expenses, which allow them, for instance, to purchase aspirational brands [Kardes, 2016].

Thus, regarding each of the four countries, the present paper seeks to answer the additional research question:

RQ 4: Did the representatives of the middle-class buyers encourage other consumers to shop consciously during the pandemic of 2020?

3 Research methods

We found that CAWI is the best method to conduct an exploratory survey [Govender and Govender, 2013] during the challenging pandemic times. The judgmental sampling with the snowballing technique, similarly, justified with the pandemic obstacles, was applied to select middle-class consumers who participated in

this study [Atkinson and Flint, 2004]. In each of the four countries, after the online pilot survey, a trained native researcher was responsible for conducting the enquiries and selecting actual buyers. An online questionnaire, which consisted of 17 questions, was distributed among consumers who fulfilled strict criteria: influential representatives of the middle-class, aged 30–60. A total of 213 responses were collected and used for further analysis (Mexico – 44, Nigeria – 50, Poland – 86, and Sri Lanka – 33). The sample size is acceptable [Sudman, 1976] due to the specific profile of the respondents and the exploratory, inductive character of the study [Bernard, 2006] in extremely tough circumstances. In doing so, we also referred to the international pilot study carried out by Bush et al., [2020]. Respondents were asked to rate items on a seven-point Likert scale (how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements comparing previous behaviors and current behaviors during the pandemic) with an additional option: "not applicable". To the investigated items, inserted in the questions, belonged:

- four statements on current shopping online and four statements on current shopping offline during the pandemic: *I was searching for bargains/sales promotions more intensely; I bought generally less but better quality; I prepared an exact shopping list; I did not make impulse purchases*,
- four statements on future shopping online and four statements on future shopping offline: *I will search for bargains/sales promotions more intensely; I will buy generally less but better quality; I will prepare an exact shopping list; I will not make impulse purchases*,
- five conscious and rational behaviors recommended to other buyers: *compare the offer on the internet; look for other reliable users' opinions; try to reuse some of your used goods or their parts to do something creative; read all the info on the packaging; use your own basket/shopping bag.*

Furthermore, the respondents were asked to select three of ten reasons for changing consumer habits during the pandemic: *financial austerity; being against waste; natural environment protection; being responsible for family; fear from being infected; fun of do-it-yourself tasks* (for example: preparing meals, mending furniture); *personal satisfaction with being a rational consumer; saving money for the time after the lock-down; finding out, how many goods were wasted at home before; other people do this, so it makes sense*. The order in which the aforementioned item variables appeared in the questionnaire was counterbalanced to guard against the potential order effect.

The online questionnaire design was based on the preliminary quasi-qualitative telephone and web interviews (because of the pandemic restrictions direct contacts were not possible). As those circumstances were extraordinary (a global pandemic has never happened before) we used one of the precursory reports [Dizono, 2020], adjusting the tool to the requirements of respondents from the four countries. It enabled us to unify the questionnaire design. Moreover, we applied some elements of the procedure proposed by Bondy and Talwar [2011] and Euromonitor's multinational study [2011], realized during the recession of 2008, when – similarly – economic concerns influenced purchases.

4 Results and discussion

Regarding the three aforementioned research questions: how did the pandemic influence the buyers' shopping habits in terms of conscious consumption?; what were the reasons for changing shopping habits?; what kind of consumer behaviors would middle-class buyers recommend to others and did the representatives of the middle-class buyers encourage other consumers to do conscious shopping during the pandemic of 2020?; statistically significant differences among the buyers from the four countries only concerned some statements ($p < 0.05$, Kruskal-Wallis H test – so-called "one-way ANOVA on ranks"). These statements are given in detail in the text below with the dominant answers presented. In Tables 2–4, which show all the findings, the statements for which one can observe statistically significant differences across the four countries are put in boldface. Additionally, it should be stressed that at first glance the frequencies (in percentage terms) seem to be low, but the respondents had an option "not applicable" and in some cases this answer was chosen by the majority of them. Moreover, in light of the considerations given below, the

Table 2. Statistically significant differences in shopping habits during the pandemic across the researched countries (boldface)

Items	H Kruskal–Wallis	*df*	*p*
Current online			
Search for bargains more intensely	1.355	3	0.716
Purchase generally less but better quality	0.274	3	0.965
An exact shopping list prepared	3.641	3	0.303
Impulse purchases reduced	4.171	3	0.244
Future online			
Search for bargains more intensely	26.012	3	**0.000***
Purchase generally less but better quality	4.979	3	0.173
An exact shopping list prepared	5.482	3	0.140
Impulse purchases reduced	0.102	3	0.992
Current stationary			
Search for bargains more intensely	17.152	3	**0.001***
Purchase generally less but better quality	3.010	3	0.390
An exact shopping list prepared	2.381	3	0.497
Impulse purchases reduced	4.428	3	0.219
Future stationary			
Search for bargains more intensely	24.754	3	**0.000***
Purchase generally less but better quality	14.899	3	**0.002***
An exact shopping list prepared	1.865	3	0.601
Impulse purchases reduced	3.961	3	0.266

*Significance value $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Statistically significant differences in reasons for changing consumer habits across the researched countries (boldface)

Items	H Kruskal–Wallis	*df*	*p*
Financial austerity	13.734	3	**0.003***
Being against waste	4.305	3	0.230
Natural environment protection	7.302	3	0.063
Being responsible for family	9.578	3	**0.023***
Fear from being infected	1.538	3	0.674
Fun of do-it-yourself tasks	4.051	3	0.256
Personal satisfaction with being a rational consumer	13.531	3	**0.004***
Saving money for the time after the lock-down	43.436	3	**0.000***
Finding out, how many goods were wasted at home before	0.213	3	0.975
Other people do this, so it makes sense	2.893	3	0.408

*Significance value $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4. Statistically significant differences in recommending behaviors to others across the researched countries (boldface)

Items	H Kruskal–Wallis	*df*	*p*
Compare the offer in the internet	2.471	3	0.481
Look for other reliable users' opinions	0.725	3	0.867
Try to reuse some of your used goods or their parts to do something creative	1.949	3	0.583
Read all the info on the packaging	8.049	3	**0.045***
Use your own shopping bag	10.379	3	**0.016***

*Significance value $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own elaboration.

hypothesis formulated before can be accepted: during the pandemic, middle-class consumers did more conscious shopping than before the pandemic.

4.1 Shopping habits

Quite unexpectedly, analysis of the data on *actual online shopping habits* (presented in Table 2) did not find statistically significant differences across the investigated states. In other words, none of the four statements (search for bargains more intensely; purchase generally less but better quality; an exact shopping list prepared; impulse purchases reduced): can be taken for consideration in this study.

In turn, in the case of the *future online shopping habits (i.e., after the pandemic)* the statement "I will search for online bargains/sales promotions more intensely", which is in line with the recession habits [Hampson and McGoldrick, 2013], was confirmed by the buyers in Mexico (15.9% strongly agree, 22.7% agree, and 15.9% rather agree), in Nigeria (20.0% strongly agree, 20.0% agree, and 14.0% rather agree), and in Sri Lanka (only 3% strongly agree, but 24.2% agree, and 12.1% rather agree). Likewise, in the recession of 2008, bargain hunting emerged as the most important trend and globally, 59.0% of respondents preferred bargains [Euromonitor, 2011]. However, in Poland the attitudes toward future promotions were neutral (27.9% neither agree nor not agree) and negative (10.5% strongly disagree, 14.0% disagree, and 12.8% rather disagree). This vanishing enthusiasm for promotional campaigns among Poles during the pandemic was also annotated in other studies. Poles were cautious about using the promotion mainly due to the uncertain economic situation and tried not to exceed their previously assumed budget [Santander Consumer Bank, 2021].

Regarding *actual stationary shopping habits,* the statement "searching for bargains/sales promotions in traditional shops more intensely" was denied in Nigeria (20.0% strongly disagree, 10% disagree, and 8% rather disagree), Poland (22.1% strongly disagree, 22.1% disagree, and 18.6% rather disagree), and Sri Lanka (although none "strongly disagree" nor "rather disagree", the dominant answer was: "disagree" chosen by 27.3%). Compared to other buyers, Sri Lankans declared much less stationary shopping during the pandemic. It may be explained twofold: they were used to buying from the street vendors and on the "pola" – farmers' markets [Ratnayake, 2015], and/or felt more secure while purchasing in the open-air markets. Contrary to the consumers from the aforementioned three countries, this statement was accepted (20.5% strongly agree, 11.4% agree, 18.2% rather agree) in Mexico. It can be explained by the fact that Mexicans appreciate bargains, their level of fear of infection is low (in this study only 8.9% indicated it was a major factor of changing shopping habits, while in Poland 21.6%) and are ranked as the most brand or company loyal in the world [Santander Trade, 2021].

Considering *future stationary shopping habits,* we noticed that in Mexico (25.0% strongly agree, 27.3% agree, and 18.2 rather agree) and Nigeria (12% strongly agree, 20.0% agree, and 10% rather agree) the buyers planned to "search for bargains/sales promotions in traditional shops more intensely". This contradicts the actual stationary shopping habits declared by Nigerians. Such a phenomenon may be explained by the results of another pandemic survey. Its findings indicated that many Nigerian consumers were expecting a reduction in their incomes, hence, planned to reduce their non-essential consumption and to change their future habits as they became more frugal with their spending [McKinsey & Company, 2020].

Whereas in Poland and Sri Lanka the answers were very diverse (for example: 17.4% of Poles agree while the same percent rather disagree; 24.2% of Sri Lankans agree but 27.3% disagree). Referring to the prospective purchases and replacing the quantity with quality, Mexican buyers felt strongest about that (although none strongly agree, 15.9% agree, and 36.4% rather agree). Sri Lankan consumers' attitude was not so expressive, however, most of them accepted this statement (none strongly agree, but 21.2% agree, and 24.2% rather agree). Nigerian buyers seemed to prefer such a behavior as well, but less explicitly (2.0% strongly agree, 12.0% agree, and 32.0% rather agree). Similar to the previous statement, here also the Polish buyers' answers were remarkably inconsistent.

4.2 Reasons for changing shopping habits

Among all the *reasons for changing shopping habits*, statistically significant differences across the researched countries were found in four of them, shown in Table 3. As it was highlighted in the research methods description, the respondents could select three of ten reasons.

The first reason was *the desire to save money* (41.3% of all respondents). The largest percentage of respondents who expressed such a desire was in Poland (15.0%), and in Nigeria and Mexico (11.7% in each country). In Sri Lanka, only 2.8% of respondents wanted to save. Further, 24.4% of all respondents declared their willingness *to save money on time after the end of restrictions* and the detail are as follows: in Nigeria 11.7%, Sri Lanka 7.0%, Poland 5.2%, and only 0.5% in Mexico. Referring to the basic principles of economics, especially to the principle that people respond to stimuli and the principles of business cycles, this behavior should be considered fully economically rational [Mankiw and Taylor, 2015]. In the face of the crisis, when consumers are concerned about the stability of their income, it is rational to reduce current consumption in favor of savings that postpone consumption over time. Another reason for changing shopping habits was *responsibility for family* (39.0% of all respondents). A greater percentage of respondents indicating this response were among Poles and Mexicans (11.7% each). In Nigeria and Sri Lanka, this reason was given by 8.9% and 6.6%, respectively. However, Poland and Mexico are rooted in catholic, conservative traditions in the same manner, where family belongs to the highest values [World Value Survey, 2021]. In the case of Nigeria, the difficult economic condition may have led to people focusing less on family and more on individuals [Financial Times, 2020]. In Sri Lanka, the pandemic led to a significant loss of jobs and a contraction in the economy [World Bank, 2021].

Regarding *personal satisfaction of being a rational consumer (*19.2% of all respondents), the highest number of responses in this case were from Nigeria (8.0%), while from Poland (5.6%) and, to a small extent, Sri Lanka (2.3%) and Mexico (1.9%). There are various reasons for this depending on governmental financial support for citizens during the pandemic.

4.3 Recommended behavior

In all the four countries, the influential middle-class buyers [OECD, 2019] – as we assumed a priori – would recommend to others conscious and rational behaviors. The Mexicans' and Poles' answers were very close. The consumers were in agreement, while suggesting *"using actual buyers' opinion before purchase"*, *"compare offers on the internet"*.

However, from this study's perspective, the behaviors that differentiate consumers in the four countries are in focus (Table 4). Therefore, >50.0% of them would advise "*reading all the info/labels on the packaging"*. By and large, researchers appeared to agree that a level of buyers' awareness of such info was low worldwide [Hornibrook et al., 2015]. Thus this attitude may be very appealing in the conscious consumption context. Nevertheless, Sri Lankans were not so determined (extremely likely 24.2%, likely 21.2%, and rather likely 18.2%), while both Poles (extremely likely 27.9%, likely 38.4%, and rather likely 12.8%) and Mexicans (extremely likely 22.7%, likely 31.8%, and rather likely 27.3%) felt very strongly about that. Most buyers would recommend "*using your own basket/shopping bag"*. However, in Nigeria, 58.0% of consumers declared such a recommendation, while 30.0% did not, which markedly exceeded the denials in other states (for instance only 4.7% of Poles and 9.1% of Mexicans would not recommend it). This may be due to the lack of charge for shopping bags. In the UK for example, shoppers increased the use of their own bags from 29.0% to 58.0% after charges were introduced for shopping bags in 2015 [Poortinga et al., 2016].

5 Major conclusions, limitations, and further research

In terms of theoretical implications, this study contributes to previous research by indicating that during the pandemic, irrespective of the cultural differences, the middle-class consumers' behaviors did not vary significantly. However, the Mexican and Polish buyers' habits were similar, presumably due to

strong catholic beliefs, although this cohesion needs further investigation. On the subject of idiosyncratic behaviors, the Mexican middle-class seemed to be active stationary shoppers, regardless of restrictions, but still family-centered, which sheds light on their hedonistic and laid-back attitudes. Poles, kin-focused as well, seemed to be more savvy shoppers than other buyers, which can be explained by advances in consumer consciousness but also by their tendency to gain recognition in the eyes of others. In those extraordinary circumstances, Nigerians focused on buying essential items for survival. Unlike those buyers, Sri Lankans, whose behaviors were the most diverse in general, did their shopping outside of the typical outlets, i.e., in bazaars and from street vendors. The investigated behaviors were sometimes discursive in the face of the ongoing disaster, resulting in the lack of sufficient correlations between current and declared habits. This inconsistency might arise in the face of an unknown adversary. However, to conclude, during the pandemic, middle-class consumers did more conscious shopping than prior to this disaster and recommended the same to others.

With regards to practical implications, it is observed that everyone should be and was stressed comprehensively. This study reveals that to reinforce conscious behavior of consumers, more attention should be paid to environmental protection, which was not the main focus of the buyers during the pandemic (although the Poles dominated in this context). A straightforward memo from the policymakers should be addressed worldwide, following the UN chief Guterres [2020], who claimed that via the SARS-CoV-2 "nature is sending us a clear message. We are harming the natural world, to our own detriment". Moreover, according to our research results, representatives of the middle-class constitute a strong reference group for other consumer segments. Therefore, the particularities of this influence should be taken into account in marketing communications, especially in informal activities.

The paper has certain limitations that provide opportunities for further research. As intended, this is an exploratory study, and so the findings should be interpreted with caution and not regarded as highly generalizable. It seems that during the tough pandemic times, respondents were reluctant to participate in the survey due to online work and other activities which demand long hours in front of the computer. Furthermore, it is worth investigating distinct types of consciousness, i.e., price and environmental consciousness, which were not separated in this article. These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that the paper opens new avenues for further research on factors responsible for conscious consumption during the unprecedented external conditions and on the significance of the middle-class in post-communist and emerging markets.

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