ASEAN Entrepreneurship Journal (AEJ)

The Pandemic and Consumer Cultural Theory: A Conceptual Model with a Fifth Interest Cluster

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Abstract
Consumer research is cardinal to all types of businesses. Understanding consumer behaviours give organizations competitive advantages in many ways, especially in getting consumers to willingly pay for the products and services continuously. This is the core of all entrepreneurial activities. Traditionally, marketing tends to treat consumers as a group of individuals with homogenous characteristics. While consumers share similarities, consumers do show heterogenous features which make them unique from others. Over the past forty years, there are a mountain of literature that discover consumer behavioural differences due to socio-cultural influence. The Consumer Cultural Theory (CCT) was coined in 2005, organizing past research works in a meaningful fashion to enable a good understanding of consumer behaviours in the respective cultural context. However, the unexpected arrival of the pandemic has created massive disruptions to consumer behaviours, undermining the adequacy of CCT in addressing this new phenomenon. To address this scientific gap, a theoretical conceptual model with Phenomenological Influencer (PI) as the fifth interest cluster is proposed with the intent to give academicians and practitioners useful insights into consumer research and consumer behaviours. Even though some countries have evolved into the endemic stage, the impact of PI is still happening in society, changing consumer behaviours in an unorderly fashion. This model offers academicians and practitioners useful insights to make further scientific investigations to enrich CCT theoretical knowledge.

ARTICLE INFORMATION
Received: 17 Apr 2022
Revised: 02 Jun 2022
Accepted: 08 Jun 2022
Published: 31 July 2022

Keywords: Consumer Cultural Theory, Consumer behaviour, Consumer research, and the Pandemic

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Consumer behaviour emerged as a separate field of academic study in the 1960s (Pachauri, 2001). Over the years, the definition and scope of consumer behaviour are continuously evolving (Yin et al., 2021). The consumer behaviour field had expanded tremendously over the past fifty years due to the strong interest shown by social science researchers (MacInnis et al., 2010). Solomon (1995) defines a consumer as the study of individuals or groups on their interactions with products, services, experiences, or ideas for needs and desires satisfaction. Woods (1981) refers to consumer behaviours as a series of actions individuals act to obtain what they require, such as buying goods and services. While Engel et al. (1986) shared a similar view, they included the decision-making process in the definition. Consumer behaviour involves a decision-making process from a behavioural viewpoint (Lu, 2017). The whole process of consumer behaviour includes searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and processing goods or services (Schiffman et al., 1987). In marketing, pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviours are taken into consideration together with the act of purchase when it comes to consumers (Pachauri, 2001).

Throughout the process of evolution of consumer behaviour, multi-disciplines literature was drawn (Solomon, 1995). Scholars have moved beyond simple observations into sophisticated concepts and investigation methodology in order to better understand, predict, and even attempt to control consumer behaviour (Pachauri, 2001). Due to the constant changes in society, economics, and technology influencing consumer behaviours, there is a diverse and extensive collection of literature on consumer behaviour (Peighambari et al., 2016). Systematic analysis of the literature development in consumer behaviour field can support the continuous growth of the field (Williams et al., 2007). A good study on consumer behaviour must consider factors affecting consumer psychology and behaviour in a heterogenous fashion (Yin et al., 2021). A study on consumer behaviour cannot be done in isolation from the context where it is happening and greater consideration should be accorded

to changes in the social landscape (Jin, 2021). Yin et al. (2021) state that consumer behaviour constantly accepts new things in the information age. Factors like individual perception and environment can affect consumer behaviours (Chen, 2006). People mostly live in families and societies and thus, they experience the expectations and needs of others as well as interact with daily opportunities and challenges (Khan, 2020). All these can also influence consumer behaviours. The economics community tends to treat consumers as rational when making a decision, and they buy goods and services relying on the principle of maximizing benefits (Zhou et al., 2004). Some scholars found out that this may not be true as sometimes there are irrational purchasing behaviours, influenced by other factors including personal emotions and personal thinking (Yin et al., 2021). A study on consumer behaviour is aimed at improving marketing practice and thus, it is a form of applied social science (Pachauri, 2001). The consumer is an integral part of entrepreneurial activities and understanding consumer behaviours can offer firms a competitiveness advantage in capturing consumer markets (Barbe et al., 2017). As millennial consumers are progressively becoming the main players in the consumer markets (Khan et al., 2020), entrepreneurs and managers should pay more attention to understanding the behaviours of their targeted consumers.

The Consumer Cultural Theory (CCT) was formulated in the spirit of giving heterogenous treatment to individuals. Since the introduction of CCT, academicians and marketers started to pay attention to the cultural influence on consumers, giving them opportunities to better understand their consumers. In 2020, mankind was shocked by the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had caused a huge impact on the lives of many, especially altering consumer consumption patterns in unimaginable ways (Yin et al., 2021). Yin et al. (2021) believe that this has introduced new elements to fuel the expansion of consumer behaviour theory. As a result, a conceptual model is proposed to refine the existing CCT so as to provide useful insights to academicians and practitioners.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, marketing and consumer research view consumers as homogeneous individuals with a range of similar characteristics (Sloth et al., 2018). While similarities can be found in consumers across the world, nonetheless, there are significant differences supported by forty years of literature on understanding consumer behaviours caused by cultural and social relations impact. Arnould et al. (2005) organized past literature in a meaningful way to form a distinct research brand called the CCT. CCT is not a single theory nor a grand theory (Sloth et al., 2018), making it hard to identify its origin (Askegaard, 2015). Instead, CCT is an umbrella of research offering views on consumption patterns as a social and cultural practice in the modern world (Askegaard, 2015). CCT consists of a set of theoretical viewpoints that look at the complex interactions between consumer behaviors, the marketplace, and cultural meanings (Arnould et al., 2005). Grouping these phenomena under one roof facilitates a better understanding of previous works done and fertilizes the development of future theory, critique, and practical implementation (Arnould et al., 2019).

Culture is defined as how humans interact with the natural world and how they create objects, languages, and customs (Levy, 2015). Arnould et al. (2005) define consumer culture as a social structure in which markets mediate the interaction between symbolic and material resources and meaningful ways of life as well as social resources and lived culture. While customers' intentions, purchasing, and post-purchase satisfaction are the focus of traditional consumer behavior (Levy, 2015), CCT purports that understanding consumption phenomena is only possible by applying a contextual interpretation with consideration of the full consumption cycle of acquisition, ownership, consumption, and disposition (Askegaard, 2015). Consumption is at the core of consumer culture and it includes images, symbols, lifestyles, and services (Arnould et al., 2005). CCT pioneers emphasized the need of understanding consumer behavior as it is influenced by complex symbolic, material, experiential, and emotional worlds and is anchored in cultural and social relationships (Rokka, 2021). CCT investigates how consumers constantly redefine and modify symbolic meanings planted in retail locations, tangible goods, brands, and advertisements to manifest their own personal and societal conditions and advance their identity and lifestyle aspirations (Arnould et al., 2005). CCT advocates the notion of heterogeneous treatment of individuals and a plethora of intersecting cultural groupings existing within the larger socio-historical framework of globalization and market capitalism (Arnould et al., 2019). Not only is CCT

a subdiscipline of consumer research (Bode et al., 2017), it has empowered discoveries to fuel further development of consumer research (Arnould et al., 2019). Scholars are constantly expanding and enriching CCT in many ways as society evolves (Kravets et al., 2018). Globalization processes have significantly influenced consumer culture, which used to be exclusively local, in the last decades (Arnould et al., 2005; Steenkamp, 2019).

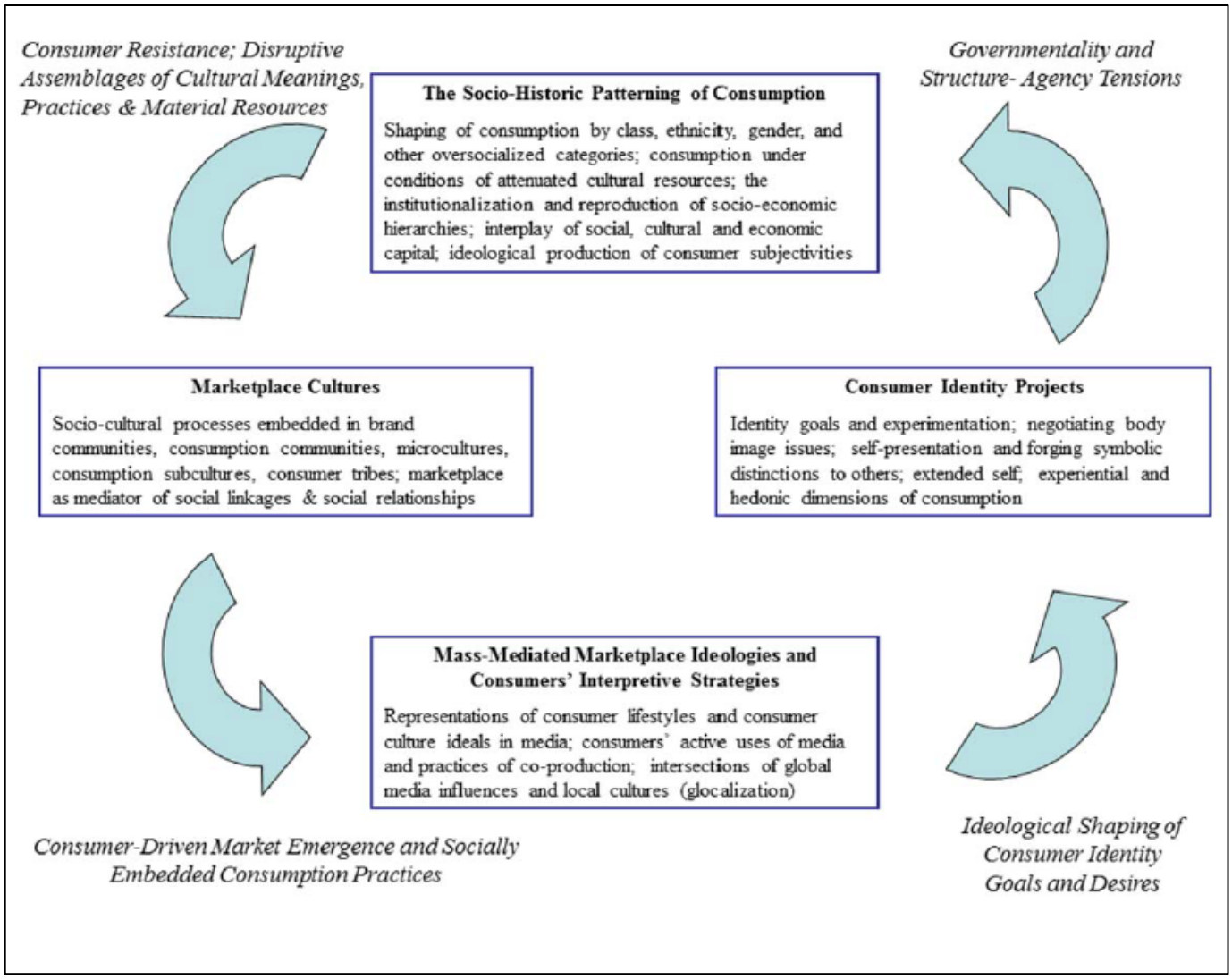
CCT offers a valuable framework for comprehending the social, cultural, experiential, and symbolic dimensions of consumption (Catulli et al., 2017). CCT can provide valuable insights into areas related to pricing, markets, customer loyalty, and distribution channel (Arnould et al., 2019). Practitioners may incline toward a homogeneous approach, claiming that people are more alike than different, for efficiency and simplicity reasons. While similarities can draw us closer, ignoring differences actually pushes us apart. Moisander et al. (2009) believe that managers can gain alternative perceptive by viewing the market and consumers through the lens of CCT. CCT offers managers the opportunity to see from the eyes of their consumers so that there can be greater alignment in terms of product offerings and communication (Cayla et al., 2013).

3.0 3.0 DISCUSSION

3.1 The Four Interest Clusters

The CCT framework consists of four theoretical and practical interest clusters (Arnould et al., 2019). First, consumer identity projects examine how consumers use

Figure 1: CCT: Four (Heuristic) Domains of Theoretical Interest



Source: Arnould et al. (2018, p. 51)

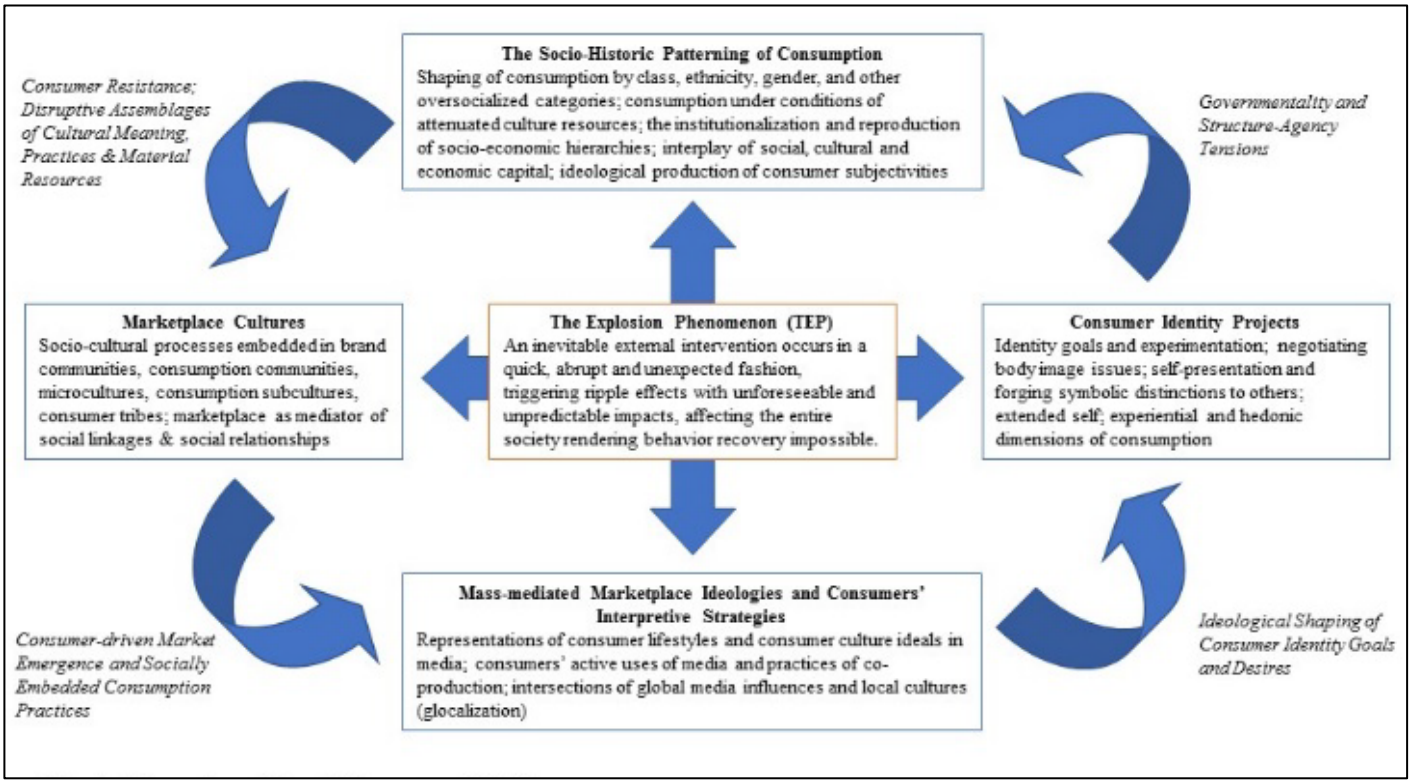
marketplace resources to perform specific identity stances and integrate their diverse identity practices into a cohesive narrative of identity (Arnould et al., 2018). It helps us understand the interactions of consumers with commercially distributed products and services in the formation and changes of their identities (Arnould et al., 2019). Second, marketplace culture focuses on the influential effect of the social-cultural that consumers belong to and the material environments in that consumption occur (Rokka, 2021). Consumers interact with each other as well as with products and services, form different emotional bonds, and share experiences, collectively forming a network of marketplace cultures (Arnould et al., 2019). The popularity of the internet and social media have further mediated interactions and communication through games, campaigns, events, and activities between people worldwide (Cova et al., 2018). Third, socio-historic patterning of consumption examines the influences on consumption patterns and consumer identity caused by different historical and structural factors (Rokka, 2021). Researchers study the forming and existence of different sociological categories and lifestyles associated with social class (Arnould et al., 2019). Fourth, ideological turn examines the norms, beliefs, symbols, values, customs, and meanings of consumers (Arnould et al., 2019). While consumers may seem to be individual and autonomous agents with their own narratives about consumption, they are also under the influence of the cultural narratives and consumption ideologies purported in media representations of identity and lifestyle ideals (Rokka, 2021).

3.2 Weaknesses of CCT

CCT has been subjected to constant critics and the legitimacy of CCT as an independent research field remains debatable (Hungara et al., 2021). CCT has been chastised for perpetuating the neoliberal viewpoint that free-market competition is the best approach to maximize social well-being and human freedom (Fitchett et al., 2014). The creative deployment of polysemic marketplace resources by consumers is not an indication of an ideological commitment to neoliberal beliefs when it is considered in its conceptual and historical context (Arnould et al., 2018). Some scholars argue that since it is not referring to a specific theory, it should not be called a theory (Vera et al., 2019). Simonson et al. (2001) state that CCT offers little contribution to theory development in consumer research. This argument is unfounded as CCT resembles a collection of theoretical innovations in consumer behaviors and market research which are grounded in empirical material (Sloth et al., 2018). Theoretical pluralism is what CCT offers (Arnould et al., 2019). CCT is defined by the substantive phenomena it intends to address, not by its theories or methods (Belk et al., 2019). CCT broadens marketers' perspective in understanding consumers in a social, experiential, and cultural context where their consumption takes place (Arnould et al., 2005). The four aspects of CCT provide a framework for researchers to continuously enrich and refine CCT (Hungara et al., 2021). Theoretical pluralism is what CCT offers (Arnould et al., 2019), and CCT is defined by the substantive phenomena it intends to address, not by its theories or methods (Belk et al., 2019).

Some critics argue that the difference between CCT and consumer research is methodological, which is not entirely true. Consumer research mainly relies on qualitative data, but CCT embraces methodological pluralism which includes qualitative measures, quantitative measures, and other analytic techniques which serve the research agenda (Arnould et al., 2019). CCT provides a wider avenue to investigate consumption phenomena and offers multi-dimensional insights for marketers. CCT broadens marketers' perspective in understanding consumers in a social, experiential, and cultural context where their consumption takes place (Arnould et al., 2005). Some authors claim that CCT is not predictive in nature. Arnould et al. (2019) rebut this notion by stressing the essence of CCT is to offer a good understanding of consumption phenomena in a social and cultural context. CCT is not about the causal action of consumers (Arnould et al., 2005). Through the lens of CCT, executives derive valuable consumer insights for the development of strategic plans. Treating consumer behaviors in a hyper-individualizing manner connotes that previous research results done in a different cultural context may not be reflective of another cluster of consumers (Thompson et al., 2013). Furthermore, society is ever-changing and consumers are constantly evolving, thus, diminishing the relevance and value of referencing previous research works. This statement is questionable when Wang et al. (2015) found that citations on CCT articles in the Journal of Consumer Research have been at the top of the list in the past forty years. CCT articles also

Figure 2: CCT Conceptual Model: The Fifth Explosion Phenomenon



captured great interest in other top journals (Malter et al., 2020).

Askegaard et al. (2011) argue that many CCT researches only focus on consumer psychological aspects, leaving out external and internal contexts, which the trio intertwines to offer contextual understanding (Dilley, 1999). Thus, CCT neglects the forces with phenomenological influence on consumer behaviors (Askegaard et al., 2011). As such, Askegaard et al. (2011) call for expansion of the existing CCT analytical framework. When human civilization was swapped by the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, consumer behaviours were forced to change in an upheaval fashion rendering the current CCT insufficient to account for these new phenomena. This gives rise to the need to formulate a conceptual model with the fifth cluster known as Phenomenological Influencer (PI). CCT was developed with a constant awareness of its limitation and the need to be improved as its core characteristic (Thompson et al., 2013). CCT is also based on lived experiences of consumers (Vera et al., 2019). This pandemic had radically changed the lives of the consumer, being forcing them into abandoning old behaviours and forced to adapt to the new normal. CCT is highly contextually sensitive (Rokka, 2021) with a "blend theorization with the grounded study" (Miller, 2007, p.25). Innovation opportunity lies in challenging some of the ontological and axiomatic assumptions of CCT (Chatzidakis et al., 2022). With the introduction of the fifth cluster, CCT can innovate further. Askegaard mentions that CCT should go beyond micro-sociological to address macro issues (Cronin et al., 2022). Patsiaouras (2022) acknowledges that social movements can be a force that changes consumer behaviour trajectory.

3.3 The Conceptual Model

PI carries four characteristics. First, PI happens in a quick, abrupt and unexpected fashion, making it an inevitable external intervention. Second, PI triggers other events with a ripple effect which will exponent the overall impact on consumer behaviors. Third, the overall impact is unforeseeable and unpredictable, most likely novel to human civilization. Forth, the overall impact has a wide and long-lasting effect which made recovery to the prior stage impossible. In summary, PI is an abrupt and unexpected event that can trigger a series of events and collectively they change consumer behaviors in an unforeseeable and unpredictable fashion, rendering

recovery not possible. PI is like a nuclear bomb explosion, landing on consumer behaviors. It happens so quickly and abruptly, with almost no chance of escaping from its highly unpredictable impact and the effect will prolong for some time (Glasstone, 1964). While PI may resemble some features of a black swan event (Taleb, 2007), its implications on consumer behaviors are far more reaching and long-lasting.

The COVID-19 pandemic (Shastitko, 2020) meets the four characteristics of PI. It was discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and within months, it had spread over the world, hitting people in a quick, abrupt and unexpected fashion, with no exception (Harper et al., 2020). The Chinese government mandated a full lockdown on a modern city with more than 10 million population, an unseen measure in modern human civilization, as a measure to contain the virus outbreak (Lau et al., 2020). Soon, the lockdown measure was mimicked throughout the world in different variations to flatten the outbreak curve (Chauhan et al., 2020; Joffe, 2021). Intending to curb the outbreak, governments ordered "painful" counter-measures (Herby, 2021), causing a great impact on politics, economy, society, and technology (Ramane et al., 2020). The pandemic triggered a series of chain reactions that resulted in consumer behaviors being severely affected in numerous ways (Patil et al., 2020), forcing them to change in a very short time (Varade et al., 2020), altering the life of many globally (Grashuis et al., 2020), and many believe that life will never be the same as before (Agarwal et al., 2021). Most people were clueless about the pandemic and the various sanctions by governments, resulting in unforeseeable and unpredictable change patterns (Herby, 2021). Even though the pandemic has evolved to be endemic in some parts of the world, never expect the influence and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are over.

In the past 3 years, there has been countless literature on consumer behaviors studying the impact of the pandemic, particularly on lockdown. While behavioural changes caused by lockdown were temporary, nonetheless, some of these behavioural changes will be permanent (Chauhan et al., 2020). Grunert et al. (2021) found that cultural differences can cause different changes in direction in consumer behaviours as what we see during lockdowns. Behaviours are influenced by risk perceptions and people from different cultures respond to risk perceptions in a different fashion (Fukuyama, 1995; Hofstede, 1980, 2001). More broadly, existing research has discovered that culture influences the willingness of individuals to accept risks, including financial, economic, and personal risks (Rieger et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2018). Individuals from individualistic cultures are more likely to consider risks when their own freedom is endangered by external circumstances; whereas individuals from collectivistic cultures are less concerned with their own accomplishments and more risk-averse to things that may jeopardize the well-being of the society as a whole (Pantano et al., 2021). During the lockdown, Greece people generally exhibited a negative mood towards the pandemic (Kyrousi et al., 2021), but the Indians displayed a high level of optimism (Chauhan et al., 2020). Glaeser et al. (2021) discovered that Republican supporters in the US showed less concern about the virus compared to others.

The uncertain lockdown situation had resulted in a pattern change in consumer buying behaviour (Ramane et al., 2020). There was a shift in consumption activities gearing towards "essential" items (Goolsbee et al., 2021). This pandemic lockdown had also triggered a global panic-buying phenomenon due to psychological stress and fear of scarcity (Islam et al., 2021). Consumers in the US, China, and India were hoarding items like masks, toiletries, and sanitizers in panic buying, but Pakistanis hoarded items like flour, cooking oil, and rice (Islam et al., 2021). Impulsive buying is found in people in the US, China, and Pakistan, but not the Indians (Islam et al., 2021). In general, Korea (Jo et al., 2021) and the United Kingdom consumers (Chronopoulos et al., 2020) responded to the pandemic by reducing spending. Cox et al. (2020) discovered that higher household income individuals in the US cut more spending than lower household income individuals, and with slower recoveries. Different spending reduction patterns were also discovered in Denmark during the lockdown (Andersen et al., 2020). In a study on buying sustainable brands, Romanian buyers showed a stronger intention than Spanish buyers (Alexa et al., 2021). Verma et al. (2021) found that Indian consumers' intention of buying Indian-made products had gone up. In a study of the top-of-mind expectation by consumers during the lockdown, UK consumers prefer having a good meal, Italians prefer traveling, and Spanish want to drink alcoholic beverages

(Pantano et al., 2021). Pantano et al. (2021) concluded that there are obvious cultural differences shown by consumers.

Online shopping was elevated as a trend for people to buy grocery and goods without leaving their house (Fadhillah et al., 2021). The e-commerce business is one of those industries which benefited from this pandemic (Veeragandham et al., 2020). During the lockdown, consumers generally buy online through websites or Apps (Chaudhary, 2020; Ramane et al., 2020), but Chinese consumers prefer to buy through the WeChat group (Wang et al., 2020). It was discovered that a majority of respondents in China (Wang et al., 2020) and the United Emirates of Arab (Ismail et al., 2020) prefer to shop offline instead. Alhaimer (2022) discovered that product risk did not influence Kuwait consumers' online shopping behaviours, which contradicts findings on New Zealanders (Doolin et al., 2005) and Taiwanese's (Li et al., 2009).

The pandemic has spurred consumers in many ways, bringing out their creativity and innovativeness (Vijayan, 2021), and redirected consumers to focus on life and living (Mehta et al., 2020). While consumers are forced to do home cooking during the lockdown, studies have shown that consumers from different cultural backgrounds exhibited different changes in eating habits. Murphy et al. (2021) did a study across the Island of Ireland, Great Britain, the US, and New Zealand and concluded that consumers in these four countries do not share the same behavioural changes in terms of food consumption and food waste, as well as bulk buying. Italians increased their purchase of healthy food with lesser food waste during lockdown (Scacchi et al., 2021), but the Chinese had more food waste and a lesser increase in food with sustainable attributes (Li et al., 2022). Qatar consumers prefer consuming locally purchased food over imported goods (Hassen et al., 2020) whereas Italians purchased more flour, eggs, fresh vegetables, and fruits (Scacchi et al., 2021). In a study, it was found that consumers in Denmark and Germany opted for food with longer shelf life, but not in the case of Slovenia consumers (Janssen et al., 2021). Wine drinkers in France, Portugal, Spain, and Italy showed different change patterns in wine consumption frequency during the lockdown (Dubois et al., 2021). Ngoc et al. (2020) through research on Google trends found that there are vast differences in the interest of consumers worldwide. These papers pick up on the change in consumer behavior under the socio-cultural influence and thus, support the call to refine the existing CCT framework. From the literature, we can reasonably conclude that this pandemic, a PI event, had significantly changed the behaviours of consumers in many ways and cultural influence on behavioural change is observed. While some habits may return to the pre-pandemic stage, some habits will be replaced by new habits (Sheth, 2020).

4.0 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The unexpected hit of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has severely altered the consumer behaviour landscape. Consumers globally have experienced an unintentional change in behaviours in order to cope with the ongoing pandemic. While consumers share some similarities, studies have shown that consumers are similarly different, heavily influenced by the socio-cultural context they belong to. CCT is established consumer behaviour and research theory that empower entrepreneurs and marketers to understand their consumers. Although the existing four interest clusters are relevant, with the upheaval disruption caused by the pandemic, a conceptual model with the fifth aspect can be useful to provide useful insights to academicians and practitioners. The incorporation of PI in CCT offers scholarly insights in understanding the impact on consumer behaviours caused by the pandemic. PI has substantially altered consumer behaviours in an unorderly fashion. As we have not moved beyond this pandemic, consumer behaviours are likely to evolve under the strong influence of the pandemic and the conceptual model provides the necessary theoretical groundings for future scientific works.

With the introduction of a fifth interest cluster in CCT, I call for scholars to conduct further investigations using the conceptual model to draw new insights into consumer behaviours, especially when the pandemic is not over yet and still affecting consumer behaviour even at this moment. For example, Shanghai experienced two full-scale lockdowns in 2020 (Wu et al., 2021) and 2022 (McDonell, 2022). Even though both lockdowns triggered panic buying, Shanghai consumers responded to both lockdowns differently. The conceptual model accounts for such a new phenomenon which is lacking in CCT. The conceptual model offers a good framework for the ongoing investigation of consumer behaviours.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Vincent Wee Eng Kim for the encouragement and guidance of writing this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results

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