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# Consumers anticipating futures beyond the pandemic: A qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

Consumers have needed to reorganise their daily lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has become a focal question whether or not the changes will be permanent, short-lived or perhaps contribute to a transition towards new forms of consumption. Alongside changes caused directly by the pandemic, consumers have ideas, plans and hopes concerning their futures. In this article, we investigate consumers' behaviour change and futures thinking during the pandemic. A three-month qualitative online data collection was carried out to allow consumers to reflect on their current situation and views on the future. Consumers' future expectations and changes in consumer lifestyles during the pandemic are identified in the analysis. The results are interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of anticipation and imaginaries. In their thinking, consumers move fluently between the past, present and future, and they anticipate simplified, flexible and ecologically conscious lifestyles in the future. We conclude that primary qualitative data consisting of consumers' futures thinking can be a valuable data source in foresight research supporting traditional expert-driven methods.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed consumption all over the world at the beginning of 2020 and onwards. Restrictions, lockdowns and other attempts to prevent the spread of the virus have forced people to decrease the number of social contacts by staying at home, commuting less and avoiding public places. As a result, many everyday activities and routines have been reorganised. As consumption is a part of people's daily activities, the crisis has led consumers to adjust, change and re-evaluate their behaviour. The duration of the pandemic has been uncertain, making long-term planning difficult.

A central question during the pandemic has been whether the changes in consumers' ways of living will be permanent, temporary or a transition towards something new. According to survey studies (e.g. [Charm et al., 2020](#); [Koslow et al., 2020](#)), consumers have expressed that they do not want to go entirely back to their former lifestyles. The pandemic has altered consumers' product needs, shopping behaviours, purchasing behaviours and post-purchase satisfaction levels ([Mason et al., 2020](#)). The crisis has also accelerated former behaviours, such as the use of online delivery, telemedicine and digital entertainment ([Kirk & Rifkin, 2020](#); [Kohli et al., 2020](#); [Wilska et al., 2020](#)). According to the [European Commission \(2021\)](#), the pandemic has left a mark on consumers, and they have postponed major purchases and been environmentally mindful. There has been a downturn in economic activity in former crises, but consumers have eventually adapted and become resilient to a new sense of normality ([Fortin & Uncles, 2011](#)).

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Finland, the location of this study's data collection, has managed the crisis relatively well compared to many other countries (Milne, 2021). Finland had one of the lowest infection rates in Europe in 2020. The pandemic's negative impact on GDP was also one of the lowest in the area. The shutdowns and re-openings were conducted rapidly. The consumer confidence index in Finland was exceptionally low at the beginning of the pandemic but has since returned to the long-term average level (Official Statistics of Finland, 2021). The data collection was conducted during three months in the autumn of 2020 when the second wave of the virus was spreading. During the study's data collection period, introduced policies included nation-wide recommendations to use face masks and work remotely. Public spaces were also partially closed, and restaurants' opening hours were limited.

Besides contextual changes caused by the pandemic, consumers have ideas, plans and hopes about their futures. They anticipate and aspire to futures in their thinking and behaviour. The future influences the present (Beckert, 2013), which allows anticipatory thinking (Poli, 2014) and conducting daily life projectively (Adam, 2009). The future is about the present, and people engage it as a means to make better choices today by being aware of the multiplicity of options and consequences of choosing one future over others (Selkirk et al., 2018). The consumers' voice reflecting changes and future expectations during the pandemic has been largely missing from the research literature, even if researchers have addressed consumption during the pandemic from many perspectives (e.g. Campbell et al., 2020; Galoni et al., 2020; Kouvavas et al., 2020; Trentmann, 2020). The goal of this study was to qualitatively understand changes in consumer lifestyles and their future trajectories. By looking at the common, frequent and multidimensional practice of consumption, the study aims to enrich understanding of anticipation in everyday life. The study is positioned at the intersection of futures studies and consumer research, and seeks to increase their theoretical and methodological interconnections.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. Anticipation

The increasingly popular discussion on anticipation studies human interaction with the future. Anticipation occurs when the future is used in action (Poli, 2019), and highly diverse conceptualisations and formalisations have been proposed for understanding anticipation (Poli, 2010). According to Seligman et al. (2013), a wide range of research areas suggests that navigation into the future is a core principle organising human behaviour. Daily lives are conducted projectively, and they are surrounded by the open and fluid horizon of the past and the future, and people move in this temporal domain with agility (Adam, 2009; Mandich, 2019). Futures are constituted at the level of the individual, family, social groups, companies, and nations (Adam, 2009). Life is anticipatory because the brain works in an anticipatory way, the mind is anticipatory, and society and some of its structures are anticipatory (Poli, 2014).

The presence of the future influences human decision-making as does the presence of the past, and the concept of anticipation provides an approach for seeing the future as a source in understanding the decisions made today (Iparraguirre, 2018). Forethought is a feature of agency (Bandura, 2001), and a system behaving in an anticipatory way takes its decisions in the present according to anticipations about something that may eventually happen in the future (Poli, 2014). The past works in tension with the future which provides it with coming energy (Iparraguirre, 2018). Long-term futures are connected to short-term futures and present choices and actions, and people differ in their tendency to think about time (Ahvenharju et al., 2021). The reflexive side of anticipation becomes visible as the difference between looking into the future and taking account of the consequences of that looking (Poli, 2019). As described by the former authors, the dialogue between futures thinking and current behaviour was a guiding interest in our research design, paying attention to contextual changes, changes in consumer behaviour, and consumers' future expectations. We study explicit anticipations (Poli, 2010): predictions and expectations people are aware of and can talk about in a qualitative research setting.

According to Beckert (2013) and Iparraguirre (2018), present imaginaries of future situations provide orientation in decision-making despite the uncertainty inherent in the situation. Beckert (2013) refers to these imaginaries as "fictions", which do not have to be true but they must be convincing. Therefore, they are open to the influence of collective beliefs and powerful actors (Beckert, 2013). Social processes are the tension between socio-imaginary forces, experience and vision (Iparraguirre 2018). The presence of economic and health threats—besides a lack of information, misinformation and conflicting information related to the virus—has created shifts in consumers' marketplace and socio-cultural behaviour (Campbell et al., 2020), possibly influencing the collective beliefs and imaginaries as well. People's futures literacy, defined by Miller (2017) as the capacity to explore the potential of the present to give rise to the future, has potentially been influenced by the significant changes in everyday life. When conditions for change emerge, the role of "what-if" imagining becomes central to individual and collective choices (Miller, 2017).

### 2.2. Consumer behaviour in change

A critical situation pushes human behaviour in different directions, with certain aspects of behaviour being irreversible (Mehta et al., 2020). According to the European Central Bank (Kouvavas et al., 2020), the pandemic has triggered unusually large changes in household spending patterns. Consumers' concerns related to lockdowns, social distancing, restrictions and uncertainty about the pandemic's extent change along with their lifestyle, and consumers have changed their habits and motivations (Laguna et al., 2020). Consumers have tried new kinds of shopping behaviours and have expressed a strong willingness to continue these behaviours in the future (Charm et al., 2020). Consumers have expressed that the changes in lifestyles may be permanent (Koslow et al., 2021), implying that the contextual changes caused by the pandemic have also altered their expectations of the future. According to the empirical research of Korkman et al. (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are open to change, understand that they have a personal responsibility to drive collective change, and expect similar engagement from brands, companies and society – creating a possibility for systemic change.

The pillar of consumer culture hardest hit by lockdowns and distancing is the city, the epitome of proximity and mobility (Trentmann, 2020). Cities' shops, restaurants and cultural spaces are crucial arteries for the circulation of goods and experience (Trentmann, 2020). When ordinary city life with its experiences has not been possible, it has been debated whether the coronavirus will cause an exodus from big cities (Nathan & Overman, 2020). The crisis has disrupted typical urban activities in Finland as well, and it has made people prioritise new things in city life, like actively exploring the near surroundings and nature (Korkman et al., 2020).

Home has been a central location in consumer lifestyles during the pandemic. Consumers have started to nest, develop new skills and take better care of their house (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). For example, consumers may have pursued baking, exercising, doing puzzles and reading (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Homes have transitioned into offices, classrooms, broadcast studios, gyms, doctors' offices and places of worship (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Instead of passive cocooning, the crisis has made people adopt an active approach to their homes (Korkman et al., 2020).

Feeling fear and disgust because of a contagious disease motivates consumers to re-establish a sense of control by seeking familiar and helpful products, sometimes increasing their purchases overall (Galoni et al., 2020). Disruption to norms, beliefs, routines and

**Table 1**

The participants of the study.

Gender	Age	Place of residence <sup>a</sup>	House type	Household	Education	Employment
Male	66	Small city/municipality	Apartment	Living alone	Master (applied sciences)	Retired
Male	66	Metropolitan area	Apartment	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Bachelor (applied sciences)	Retired
Female	63	Mid-sized city or municipality	Apartment	Living with a partner	Vocational qualification	Retired
Female	63	Metropolitan area	Row/semi-detached	Living with a partner	Vocational qualification	Retired
Male	60	Mid-sized city/municipality	Single-family	Living with a partner	Bachelor (university)	Working full-time
Female	59	Small city/municipality	Apartment	Living alone	Bachelor (applied sciences)	Working full-time
Female	58	Metropolitan area	Apartment	Living alone	Vocational qualification	Working full-time
Male	57	Mid-sized city/municipality	Single-family	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Doctor/licentiate	Unemployed
Female	50	Mid-sized city/municipality	Row/semi-detached	Living with a partner	Vocational qualification	Working part-time
Male	50	Large city	Apartment	Living alone	Vocational qualification	Working part-time, retired
Female	46	Mid-sized city/municipality	Apartment	Living with kid(s)	Master (university)	Working part-time
Female	45	Large city	Single-family	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Master's degree	Unemployed
Male	45	Mid-sized city/municipality	Single-family	Living with a partner	Bachelor (applied sciences)	Working full-time
Female	43	Mid-sized city/municipality	Row/semi-detached	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Master (university)	Working full-time
Male	41	Mid-sized city/municipality	Apartment	Living with kid(s)	Master (university)	On parental leave
Male	41	Mid-sized city/municipality	Row/semi-detached	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Master (university)	Student
Female	38	Mid-sized city/municipality	Apartment	Living alone	Master (university)	Working full-time
Female	32	Large city	Apartment	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Vocational qualification	Working part-time
Male	32	Metropolitan area	Single-family	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Master (university)	Working full-time
Male	31	Large city	Row/semi-detached	Living with a partner	Bachelor (applied sciences)	Working full-time, student
Male	31	Large city	Apartment	Living with a partner	Bachelor (applied sciences)	Working full-time
Female	30	Small city/municipality	Single-family	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Vocational qualification	Student, on parental leave
Male	29	Large city	Apartment	Living with a partner and child (ren)	Vocational qualification	Student
Female	26	Mid-sized city/municipality	Apartment	Living alone	Bachelor (applied sciences)	Working part-time
Female	23	Mid-sized city/municipality	Single-family	Living with parents	Bachelor (university)	Working part-time, student
Male	21	Large city	Apartment	Living with roommates	A-level	Student
Female	20	Small city/municipality	Single-family	Living with roommates	A-level	Student
Male	18	Metropolitan area	Single-family	Living with parents	Elementary	Working part-time, student

<sup>a</sup> The categories used in the classification: Helsinki metropolitan area. Large city (over 100 000 inhabitants). Mid-sized city or municipality (20 000 – 100 000 inhabitants). Small city or municipality (less than 20 000 inhabitants).

practices affects ontological security (Campbell et al., 2020). According to Beck et al. (2020), consumers experiencing low personal control are more likely to prefer leading brands as a way of reasserting agency. Connection to highly agentic entities can restore feelings of control by symbolically providing a sense of personal agency (Beck et al., 2020). According to market statistics, consumer behaviour during the pandemic has favoured large consumer brands (Evans, 2020).

In a global survey conducted in 45 countries, consumers have reported shifting their spending to essentials and cutting back on discretionary product categories (Charm et al., 2020). The pandemic and lockdown measures have led to a large spending increase in product categories such as food and communication services (Kouvavas et al., 2020). Spending on food items and recreation services in particular show persistent deviations from pre-pandemic trends (Kouvavas et al., 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic in Finland, consumers visited physical stores significantly less, but the increase in using online stores was relatively small (Wilska et al., 2020). The pandemic has not impacted different socioeconomic groups in the same way. According to a survey study of Wilska et al. (2020), many Finnish unemployed people had to rely on donations and food aid, while many middle-class consumers could invest in stocks when the prices were low. Consumers with a high income level were more willing to continue consuming as before when the pandemic ends (Wilska et al., 2020).

The outbreak of the virus has also caused panic buying, a herd mentality and altered patterns of discretionary spending (Loxton et al., 2020). The intention to self-isolate has been identified as a strong predictor of unusual purchases, even though in hindsight, the panic buying phenomenon was brief (Laato, Islam, Farooq, & Dhir, 2020). To some extent, panic buying has also been a side-effect of government measures (Prentice et al., 2020). Consumers stockpile essential items that may help them sustain themselves through periods of crisis and supply shortages (Yoon et al., 2018). Even if the pandemic is unique in the scope of historical crises, the reactions as mentioned earlier align with behaviours exhibited during shocks and crises of the past (Loxton et al., 2020).

A vast amount of research related to consumption during the pandemic already exists. The data sources, approaches and outcomes of the research are heterogeneous, which can be attributed to the short period of the crisis. However, only a few articles and reports are based on qualitative primary data and examine consumers' future expectations in addition to the identified changes in consumption (Güngördü Belbağ, 2021; Korkman et al., 2020). Consumers' own reflection of the situation and analysis based on this empirical evidence is broadly missing.

### 3. Data

The study data was collected in Finland during three months in 2020, from 17 September to 17 December. The rationale behind the period's length was to react to different phases in the COVID-19 situation and allow the participants to be reflective and introspective about their lives from many viewpoints without the need to finish their answers in one sitting. The long period also allowed us to review our approach and make adjustments if necessary.

We recruited 28 participants to take part in the study, the final target sample being 25, with an estimation of three dropouts. The group size was set to be manageable in group discussions. We also estimated that the amount of data generated by a group of this size would be sufficient and manageable in analysis. The sample was a qualitatively balanced representation of the Finnish population in the age group of 18–66 years. The participants' demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds were versatile, including students, employees, unemployed people and pensioners. The participants lived in different locations and different forms of housing. The sample included an equal number of men and women. A subcontractor specialised in qualitative samples was used for recruiting participants for the study. Information about the participants is given in Table 1.

Altogether 27 people finished the data collection phase, and one participant discontinued in the middle of the three-month period. The data of the discontinued respondent was included in the analysis. The participants were incentivised with gift cards worth 150 euros for taking part in the whole process.

**Table 2**

The thematic structure and timetable of the study.

Date (2020)	Theme	Number of new COVID-19 cases weekly in Finland <sup>a</sup>
17.9	Introduction and housing	468
24.9	Transportation	717
24.9	Group discussion 1	
1.10	Travel	1128
8.10	Food	1624
15.10	Hobbies	1276
22.10	Work and education	1243
22.10	Group discussion 2	
29.10	Social relations	1454
5.11	Communications, media and technology	1417
12.11	Health and wellbeing	1649
19.11	Values and attitudes	2597
26.11	Consumption, part 1	3136
26.11	Group discussion 3	
3.12	Consumption, part 2	3011
10.12	Future	2904

<sup>a</sup> Finnish institute for health and welfare (2021).

#### 4. Methodology

In the age of social distancing, qualitative researchers face new kinds of opportunities and challenges (Lobe et al., 2020). Traditional field research in face-to-face settings has become difficult or impossible. As Teti et al. (2020) have noted, qualitative methods can play a pivotal role in understanding epidemics like COVID-19 and the people involved in them. Using available technologies, we can document this phenomenon and other situations that hamper face-to-face data collection efforts and explore the lived experience of individuals facing the challenging times (Lobe et al., 2020).

We used an online collaboration platform called Howspace, developed by a Finnish company Humap Software, for data collection. Every week, the participants responded to questions in the online diary section of the platform. In this section, the participants could not see each other's replies. In practice, the diaries were open-ended questions to which the participants could reply when they preferred, even though we encouraged them to respond during the one-week period between the different research themes introduced weekly.

We presented the respondents with an average of 3–5 questions with sub-questions weekly. The weekly pattern of questions concerned a particular theme, as presented in Table 2. The final amount of text in the diary data was ca. 97,000 words. If the responses were concise (1–2 sentences), the participants were occasionally encouraged to explain their answers in more detail. The number of COVID-19 infections in Finland rose throughout the data collection period, as presented in the third column of the table.

In most of the themes, the diary questions followed a threefold structure: (1) the participant's thoughts about the theme in general, (2) theme-specific changes in the way of living during COVID-19 and (3) theme-specific thoughts about the future. Consumption was a cross-thematic viewpoint throughout the study, but it was also handled separately in two parts to focus on general consumption practices without a link to a particular theme. The idea of using the same structure for the questions weekly was to allow the respondents concentrate on thinking and answering instead of familiarising themselves with a re-organised question pattern every week. The theme 'consumption, part 2' included a section focusing on future textile services, which was excluded from this analysis because the data was collected with another project in mind.

The participants could write as many replies to the questions as they wanted. They were also able to add video and picture content, which some of them did in a limited manner. The participants had different kinds of rhythms in answering the questions. At the end of the data-collection period, we encouraged them to go through all their answers, which led a couple of respondents to expand on their former answers.

Every month, a synchronous text-based group discussion was facilitated for the participants. Besides safety concerns, there are many benefits with online focus groups. They are relatively inexpensive, provide access to a broad range of participants in different geographical locations, and can take less time to collect data (Fielding et al., 2008). In chat-based focus groups, the respondents can reply to the moderator's questions simultaneously, and the data is complete when the discussion ends without a need for transcription. One reason to prefer a text-based chat over a video-mediated discussion was to guarantee the participants' anonymity. The chat discussions lasted about one hour on average. The discussions consisted of timely and topical issues related to the COVID-19 situation in Finland and additional questions related to the former weeks' diary themes. The amount of textual data collected in the three discussions was ca. 30,000 words.

We designed a coding scheme (Table 3) to identify changes, stabilities and future expectations in the respondents' consumption and lifestyle. We applied the coding to the data by using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo. We experimented with the coding scheme by using it on the first 100 entries in the online diary data. During this phase, we also carried out open coding to identify other critical themes in the data, which led to adding a few new codes to the scheme. Because the data was extensive, our purpose was to keep the number of codes moderate to avoid unnecessary complexity in the coding and analysis phases. For example, we did not include theme-specific codes (e.g. travel, work, food), but instead analysed the themes within the more generic codes. During the analysis, we classified the findings thematically into "contextual changes", "changes in consumer behaviour" and "future expectations". The prominent themes identified during this phase are shown in Table 4 in the results.

**Table 3**  
Codes explained.

Code	Explanation
Change in attitude	A change in consumption-related attitudes
Consumer identity	The respondent describes what kind of consumer he/she is
Increase in consumption	Increase in particular product or service category
Decrease in consumption	Decreased consumption in a particular product or service category
Change in consumption	A qualitative change in consumption habits, practices, routines
Stability in consumption	A consumption pattern that has remained the same during the pandemic
Change in behaviour	A change in the way of living
Stability in behaviour	Stability in the way of living
Change in emotions	An emotional change caused by the pandemic
Change in plans	A change in plans caused by the pandemic
Change in circumstances	A change in the living context
Future expectation	An expectation to do something in the future
Future view	A view or understanding about the future
Future ideal	An ideal about the future
Benefit of change	A positive outcome of change in consumption or way of living
Harm of change	A negative outcome of change in consumption or way of living

## 5. Results

The participants of the study reported caution and consideration in consumption. They had observed changes in consumption routines, preferences and contexts; but the big picture of personal and household consumption had remained mostly, if not completely, stable. As [Loxton et al. \(2020\)](#) have noted, consumers re-evaluate behaviours during periods of economic downturn to complement their economic environment, and there is an increase in non-durable essential goods. Risk-averse consumption behaviour has been observed after dramatic, large-scale events such as terrorism, tsunamis, earthquakes and pandemics such as SARS ([Fortin & Uncles, 2011](#)).

After the initial shock, the participants were already in the process of adapting to the new situation by becoming less reactive and more resilient, as [Kirk and Rifkin \(2020\)](#) have outlined the progression of consumer behaviour during crises. According to the model, consumers first react by attempting to defend against perceived threats and regain control of lost freedoms. As the situation progresses, consumers cope by exerting control in other domains and adopting new behaviours. Eventually, consumers adapt by becoming less reactive and more resilient. However, the long-term observation of the pandemic may support the model's most stages, but regaining control of lost freedoms did not notably appear during the time period of this study. Some of the respondents considered living 'a new normal' after six months of the pandemic. A 66-year-old man from a large city describes his household's attitude on consumption during the pandemic:

*'The way we use money has become more careful during the pandemic. Both of us have questioned even quite small purchases, also groceries. I believe the situation will stay the same also after the pandemic.'*

The back-to-basics type of consumption attitude was typical for the participants in this study. One participant described this as 'living in a smaller way'. The more rational and simplified way of consuming was also a future intention for many of the participants, pointing out an opportunity to drive the adoption of a more sustainable lifestyle, as noticed by [Korkman et al. \(2020\)](#). The change in behaviour had influenced the respondents' ideas of what's possible in the future, opening up new imaginaries of everyday life in the future.

Several participants identified themselves as sensible and even frugal consumers, which may have influenced the emphasis on more rational consumption during the pandemic. The participants told about simplifying their shopping habits and mentioned a notable decrease in purchases related to transportation, travel, live entertainment, restaurants and clothing. The decrease in some areas of consumption had mostly not led to an increase in other areas. The respondents' risk-awareness and wariness related to the pandemic varied a lot, but the shifts in consumption were quite similar. On the brand level, the respondents did not recognise any significant changes, and they appeared to be indifferent to brands. In this sense, our findings do not align with other studies that pointed out a preference for large and familiar brands during crises ([Beck et al., 2020](#)), even though the respondents may have been using well-known brands already.

In [Table 4](#), we have summarised the contextual changes in the respondents' lifestyles, which had led to changes in consumption practices. All contextual changes were caused by the need to avoid social contacts due to official restrictions and recommendations or

**Table 4**  
Framework of contextual change, change in consumption and future expectations.

Contextual change	Change in consumption	Future expectations
More time at home	Cooking more New renovation projects More cleaning and organising More digital entertainment Less effort on appearance (clothes and make-up) Appreciation of spacious and distant living	Flexibility, simplicity and family-centricity in life Adjusting living to the personal situation and life stage Maintaining and developing new cooking habits
Less commuting	Driving less reduces the need for gasoline Avoiding public transport	Preference for walking and cycling Preference for public transport in dense urban areas Minimising the role of the private car A preference for electric power sources and other options considered to be ecological
Restricted travelling	Travelling to foreign countries mostly ceased Preferring domestic options Using a private car instead of public transport Accommodation away from other people Nature-related travel instead of crowded destinations Travelling in a minimised group of people	Strong wish to see travelling returning to 'normal' Travelling abroad but more interest in domestic options Air travel to farther destinations Concern with air travel's environmental impact and acceptance of its possible consequences (e.g. higher prices for flight tickets)
Avoiding public spaces	Visiting stores less frequently Using more online stores Preferring small convenience stores Doing more purchases at once Planning store visits more carefully Preferring products with a long shelf life Reducing restaurant visits Going to movies, theatres, museums, concerts stopped or much reduced Hobbies stopped, moved online or organised outdoors Using online health services	Using restaurants again, especially at work and school Using restaurant pick-up and delivery services Using online stores more Returning to former hobbies, but also continuing new ones, especially outdoor activities Visiting movies, theatres, museums, concerts in physical locations Preferring health services face-to-face (especially with a doctor)

because of personal awareness of health risks. As these changes may be lasting or temporary or lead to something new, we also paid attention to the respondents' future expectations related to the particular context. The future expectations consist of plans, views and wishes related to the future. In some of the researched themes, e.g. home, the contextual change and changes in consumption were interwoven with future expectations. On the other hand, in some themes, e.g. commuting, the link and continuum were not clear or straight-forward. The finding points out that the relationship between forethought and behaviour is complex, and future expectations do not always directly steer current behaviour. The sudden change in consumption and lifestyle uncovered new options for the future, but their desirability varied.

As the participants had spent more time at home, their grocery expenses had grown. Food was clearly the most-mentioned product category of increased spending. A part of the participants' former restaurant expenses had probably moved to grocery costs, especially when replacing work and school lunches with meals at home. The respondents had indeed cooked more at home. Some told about trying new recipes and investing in quality ingredients. According to [Zwanka and Buff \(2020\)](#), the consumers' need to stay at home for prolonged periods, coupled with the closure of restaurants, could lead to a more intense practice of preparing and cooking meals at home, which is characterised by increased health awareness. The participants of this study enjoyed the practice of cooking more at home but also considered it time-consuming. The practicality, affordability and versatility of work and school meals were missed. In the future, people especially wanted to develop healthier eating habits, improve their diet and keep up the new cooking habits. In this sense, the changes in behaviour had inspired new future trajectories and personal development goals.

A few participants talked about investing in house renovation as a result of spending more time at home. The increase in remote work had not led to improvements in the working arrangements at home, such as buying office furniture. This is notable because many respondents wanted to continue working at home in the future but were simultaneously satisfied with relatively stripped-down home office arrangements. The positive experience of remote work was creating a shift towards a more flexibly arranged everyday life in the future, increasing freedom in daily arrangements. Concerns related to remote working were more about ergonomics, being able to concentrate and keep a steady daily rhythm. The respondents used their houses flexibly and had often multiple working spots. A 32-year-old man from the capital area had renovated the house but continued working by the kitchen table:

"I have spent much more time at home because of the pandemic. I have improved the house by doing painting, wallpapering and gardening. I'm really happy that we have a spacious house, and my wife and I can take time and space for ourselves. I value the outdoor activity possibilities of our neighbourhood more than before. I will work more at home in the future."

The virus is harmful to the economy because of its synchronised effect on activities that mutually depend on mobility and proximity ([Trentmann, 2020](#)). This reflects changes in consumer lifestyles during the pandemic. For many, there had been no need to move from home to work or school daily, which had reduced the need for gasoline and public transport tickets. Remote working had not required the same kind of emphasis on personal appearance as work at the office, and the participants talked about spending less or not at all on clothes and makeup. Going to concerts, theatre and sports events had been unpleasant, difficult or impossible due to restrictions.

Commuting to different activities did not seem to create any value, and the respondents were especially critical towards work-related transportation and travel in the future. In addition, their transportation-related future expectations were ecologically mindful, emphasising walking, cycling, public transport and electric power sources. However, a private car was critical for many of the respondents, and the transition towards the ideal future state was difficult to carry out in practice. Limitations in substitutive services and resources, such as public transport and shared vehicles, did not allow reaching the collective imaginary of more sustainable future transport. The answer of a 29-year old man living in a village close to a large city exemplifies this attitude:

"The ideal would be to commute by cycling or walking. However, I don't believe it's completely possible here. I hope transport would be cheaper and more ecological in five years. All unnecessary commuting should be left out. The saved time could be used for something else."

A reduced number of store visits was one of the most notable changes in consumption patterns. The respondents planned more purchases to be done at once, and many preferred visiting the stores outside crowded hours. Many preferred small stores over supermarkets. The changes had even impacted the need to store food, as a 45-year-old woman living in a village near a large city describes it:

"Also our grocery store visits changed, we made them more clever by going to the store less frequently, and we also installed another fridge for the large amount of purchases. Our children did not visit stores at all from March to July [in 2020]. After the summer, the visits have increased, but we have avoided rush hours. We live close to the store, and if the parking lot seems crowded, we go there another time."

A couple of respondents mentioned hoarding in the beginning of the pandemic, and many preferred products with a long shelf life, such as canned food. The new shopping patterns had a two-fold impact on impulse purchases. Some participants considered online stores more tempting for spontaneous shopping ideas, and others thought that time spent in brick-and-mortar stores leads to unplanned purchases. In general, the idea of wandering in shopping malls and retail stores did not appear to be enjoyable anymore, and many respondents felt a need to use online stores more than before. As [Sheth \(2020\)](#) has pointed out, when the consumers cannot go to the store, the store comes home, and this reverses the flow of consumption. In addition, changing shopping behaviour is not simply about replacing one practice with another. Shopping online is a fragmented process that is not conducted in a linear sequence, and it is not necessarily about saving time, but reorganising it ([de Kervenoael et al., 2014](#)). A 59-year-old woman from a small city describes her thoughts about using different kinds of stores:

“Going to physical stores has become much less frequent, which has ended hanging around in the malls and impulse buying. That’s good. On the other hand, there have been more impulse purchases in online stores, which I’m not satisfied about. Unfortunately, this contradicts my attempts at a minimalist lifestyle.”

The role of the physical store nevertheless appeared to be robust for most participants. Grocery stores even offered a welcome break to the dull daily routines during restrictions. One participant mentioned that the grocery store visits can be the ‘highlight of the week’, as there are no other activities. In this sense, the future growth of e-commerce may not lead to the disappearance of the physical store because people still visit traditional retail locations even in risky circumstances. Grocery home deliveries were also used by several participants, especially if the household had been in quarantine. In this kind of situation, the official restrictions had triggered new consumption habits. For people not accustomed to buying groceries online, the threshold to use this kind of service appeared to be high, but critical constraints had led to planning and using them. In future expectations, consumption appeared increasingly digitally mediated. However, long-term daily routines in consumption seemed to be slowing down the adoption of new e-commerce options.

Most participants had reduced their restaurant visits significantly. To avoid crowded indoor restaurant spaces, terraces were preferred, especially in the summertime. People had noticed new safety measures and arrangements in the restaurants but were not completely convinced that the experience would be safe enough. Also, some respondents were concerned about other people’s behaviour and their ability to keep a distance indoors. Many respondents had also picked up and ordered food from restaurants instead of staying at the physical location, but they also pointed out that the experience is different and less social. From the perspective of consumer needs, food deliveries and restaurant pick-ups did not appear to be substitutes for eating at a physical restaurant. The sudden shock and change caused by the virus did not seem to influence future expectations, as most participants were willing to visit restaurants in the future. In this sense, future imaginaries aligned with positive experiences in the past. A 46-year-old woman from a mid-sized city tells:

“Restaurant visits have decreased, but when the pandemic is over, we will go back to our earlier habits. I’ve heard many people use grocery online stores and pick-up points. I could consider using these services, but not because of fear but for saving time. I believe this trend will last. In the future, I wish I could eat healthier and cleaner food than now.”

In hobbies and other leisure activities, the shift to online and remote contacts has not been as satisfying as at work. Many hobbies had been stopped completely or partially, and the respondents had especially started new outdoor activities. Gyms, swimming halls and fitness studios had been temporarily closed, which had led to trying online yoga and fitness classes. On most occasions, the respondents felt that there is something missing in the digital experience. Many of the paid leisure services had been replaced by free, self-organised activities, but the respondents were willing to continue their former hobbies in the future. The new kind of personal agency in leisure activities appeared to be temporary in this sense, and the rebound effect seemed as univocal and inevitable as it was for travel. A 23-year-old woman from a mid-sized city describes her experience:

“Corona closed my gym in the beginning of this year. I didn’t want to give up exercising, so I started jogging more and got my dad’s old dumbbells out of storage and started practising at home. At some point, my gym offered online classes, but they couldn’t quite replace the classes that I used to take. When I was taking classes at the gym, there were all sorts of different tools that we used, and naturally it was really difficult to replicate that at home.”

For consumption-related values, the respondents often identified an ideal target state, such as reducing flying or reducing the use of a private car. Nevertheless, this ideal had a limited influence on their behaviour. The respondents were aware of air travel’s environmental impact, but they considered their personal environmental impact to be relatively small, or they simply preferred the pleasure of travelling with a slight cognitive dissonance toward the ecological burden. As to travel, the consumers had a strong future wish for things to return to the pre-pandemic state, even if the changes during the pandemic had been significant. The crisis had also led to supporting small and local producers despite their above-average prices. Some of the respondents said they preferred the money spent to be left in Finland, which also required effort and research related to product and company information.

In many situations, the lifestyle change had been unnoticeable or something that required reflection. In their answers, the respondents often started by stating that not much has changed; but as the text unfolded, more and more changes were identified. In the end, the changes appeared even significant. The adaptivity of consumer behaviour is not consistently recognised in everyday life but requires further thinking and observing oneself from the outside. Future expectations, such as imaginaries of more sustainable and simple life, were amplified by the on-going changes in everyday life. Therefore, the time of the pandemic may be a turning point or at least a catalyst in how people organise their lives.

## 6. Discussion & conclusions

To cite [Beckert \(2013\)](#): “it is the future that shapes the present—or, to be more specific: it is the images of the future that shape present decisions”. Actors in the economy are motivated by present imaginaries of future situations, and organise their activities based on these mental representations ([Beckert, 2013](#)). The pandemic has ignited a widespread and active engagement with the future and how it will look like after the threat of the virus has subsided ([Boons, 2020](#)). The two distinct components of anticipation ([Poli, 2019](#)), a forward-looking attitude and the use of it for action, have been necessary for individuals trying to make sense of the uncertain future. The individual and collective imaginaries have been in flux.

Anticipation was present in the respondents’ thinking and behaviour, as they had versatile plans, dreams and hopes steering their futures in the midst of a global health crisis. Consumption itself appeared to be mundane, routinised and adaptive, but it was also

linked to broader trajectories in life. As Miller (2007) has noted, everyday futures thinking is mostly about the short term, from a few days to months, and includes a wide range of expectations of varying probability. However, this did not mean that the respondents could not think about the long term, if necessary. When addressing their future consumption and lifestyle, the participants considered the pandemic's impact, but they also imagined a post-crisis situation in which life has become relatively normal again, even if a clear future horizon was lacking due to the uncertainty of the pandemic conditions. Aligning with Poli (2014), prospection appeared as a ubiquitous feature of the human mind.

According to Korkman et al. (2020), the changing dynamics in everyday life driven by the COVID-19 crisis can be seen as a seeding ground for more lasting change, but they are not a prediction of the future. The partial asymmetry between the respondents' future expectations and changes in behaviour exemplified this claim. As a result of the crisis, people are redefining what it means to live a good life (Korkman et al., 2020). In our data and especially in questions related to health and values, the respondents noticed that the exceptional situation had led to observing and re-evaluating former thinking and behaviours. For many, the situation appeared as a 'wake-up call' for developing healthier habits in the future.

Because of sudden lifestyle adjustments and health risks, former daily routines and ways of reasoning had become 'visible' to the respondents and led to thinking about personal futures from a new angle. People began creating new habits and routines they may not have thought of before, such as walking in the forest or baking; and this created a new kind of personal future expectation. The respondents identified a continuum for the new practices and habits that seemed enjoyable. The time of the pandemic has also been an experiment in simplified living, and for many, the experience was positive. The need and willingness to use more online services appeared to be opening up a pathway to a more digitally organised daily life. The adoption and increased use of digital communication technologies during the pandemic was fluent for the participants, and many of the participants expected to pursue a more digital lifestyle in the future.

Early evidence in survey studies has shown that many consumers believe that the pandemic has permanently changed their lifestyle, and not necessarily for the worse (Charm et al., 2020; Koslow et al., 2021). Consumers who have experienced the change positively have paid more attention to health and cherished opportunities to spend time with family, and they have also become more thoughtful when spending money (Koslow et al., 2021). The positive sentiment in our study was also strongly linked to more time with family, new health-related habits and simplification in lifestyle and consumption. In general, the new habits, which had clearly improved the quality of life, seemed likely to stick. On the other hand, people living alone experienced loneliness and isolation, which had caused anxiety, frustration and other kinds of psychological burden. In our sample, the type of household affected the respondents' experience and satisfaction in restricted circumstances.

According to Campbell et al. (2020), consumers' lives consist of countless, often taken-for-granted norms, beliefs and routines, and threats can disrupt many normal or expected courses of action. Consumers learn to improvise when there are constraints (Sheth, 2020). We noticed a significant shift towards flexibility and self-organising in consumers' lifestyles. The daily rhythms had changed because of sleeping longer and having fewer time-bound obligations. People especially expected to continue remote working and studying at least partially in the future, which affects the daily rhythm of commuting and reduces the need for private and public transportation. Even people with negative remote working experiences wished for more flexibility and freedom in the future. As Korkman et al. (2020) have noted, the crisis has the potential to be a watershed moment in working life, generating a series of profound changes. In leisure activities, the willingness to return to former hobbies was strong, but the respondents had also increased the amount of outdoor activities and wanted to continue them in the future. The respondents in our study also reorganised grocery store visits by making more purchases at once, preferring smaller stores over supermarkets, and visiting the stores outside crowded hours.

In different areas of life, the respondents could move between the past and the future in their thinking and adjust their plans and behaviour based on the contextual changes caused by the pandemic, which resembles the temporal agility in thinking that Adam (2009) has vividly described. As Beckert (2013) has written, imaginaries and courses of actions emerge in a reciprocal process in which goals and means inform each other, and cultural repertoires enter the process by shaping the imaginaries through cognitive frames. The respondents referred to technological development, digitalisation and climate change in their long-term thinking and reflected on the megatrends' impact on their everyday life. In this sense, personal futures, community futures, state-level futures and global futures are intertwined, as noted by Ahvenharju et al. (2021). The participants were especially concerned about the environment. As the research of Lewandowsky, Facer, and Ecker (2021) has pointed out, people had a desire for sustainable and equitable futures after the pandemic, but also expressed certain scepticism about progressive futures. The respondents considered increased health awareness, societal resilience and valuation of everyday things as a lasting change after the pandemic. Despite the global health crisis, they looked at their personal futures with cautious optimism.

Typically, the role of the consumer has been limited in futures and foresight studies, and the consumer has been treated as an outcome of systemic changes rather than the central component of it (Osman & Nelson, 2019; Schweitzer et al., 2019). Particularly in times of uncertainty, inviting customers to take part in foresight research increases the validity of projecting future consumer lifestyles (Schweitzer et al., 2019). Currently, the intersection of consumer research and foresight is seen in lead user and early adopter studies (Eller et al., 2020), but the concept of anticipation may help identifying future-oriented consumer behaviour more broadly, and among all kinds of consumer profiles. By understanding anticipation in consumers' behaviour and thinking, foresight research can become more empirically grounded and closer to people's everyday realities. This direction requires strengthening the methodological and theoretical dialogue of consumer research and foresight studies.

The study is not without limitations. Even if the qualitative data of 28 respondents was socio-demographically balanced, a larger sample would have allowed a more detailed examination of various sub-groups in the population, making a quantitative validation of the findings a potential future research trajectory. The study also did not utilise established foresight methods, such as horizon scanning or scenario planning. In this sense, a relevant research avenue in the future could be a comparison of empirical consumer data

and horizon scanning conducted as a desk study, and how these data sources possibly differ from each other. Based on this study, our hypothesis is that empirical understanding of anticipatory elements in consumers' thinking and behaviour could enrich and expand the findings of traditional horizon scanning. As Poli (2019) has noted, the multi-disciplinary concept of anticipation comes in many different guises and the understanding of anticipation is still cursory. Therefore, we acknowledge that the concept includes different theoretical elements, which do not always share the same epistemology or ontology. However, we also believe that meaningful connections can be found in the diversity of the emerging field.

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## Declarations of interest

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