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## Research Article

### **The Impact of Digital Media on Consumer Culture**

**Zehra Cansu Rendeci<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

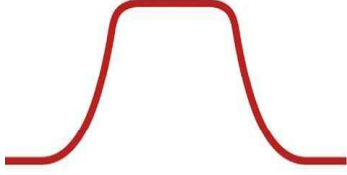
Changes after the coronavirus pandemic did not only change the way individuals protect their well-being, but also their lifestyles and consumption activities. The relationship between consumption and lifestyle changed; the perspective towards sustainability changed to the detriment of global production changed and the need for mediated communication changed the way in which media is consumed. This, in turn, changed brand narratives too, for individuals favored do-it-yourself activities such as baking, cooking and knitting among many more. In this regard, studying consumer culture alongside varying lifestyles of consumers is important, because it is the only way to fully understand the effects of the changing world and how consumers attach meanings to it. From this perspective, consumer culture must be understood well from the framework of consumer behavior. Despite the growing discussions concerning social media consumption in consumer culture research, there are not many attempts to discover the relationship between consumer culture and social media use. This study aims to identify the role digital media plays in shaping the post-coronavirus consumer culture by reviewing consumer practices, reflecting consumer culture, during the 2020 lockdown in Turkey. A content analysis is carried out with hashtags to illustrate those with the highest engagement rates on Instagram. A critical consumer culture concept is at the center to highlight the elements of a post-coronavirus consumer culture. The study is hoped to contribute to the existing literature by attempting to track the traces of a novel type of consumer culture.

**Keywords:** Consumer Culture, Instagram, Digital Media Analysis

**JEL Codes:** L82, E21, M00

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## Araştırma Makalesi

### Dijital Medyanın Tüketim Kültürü Üzerindeki Etkisi

Zehra Cansu Rendeci <sup>1</sup>

#### Öz

Korona virüs pandemisinin ardından gelen değişiklikler yalnızca bireylerin sağlıklarını koruma biçimlerini değil, aynı zamanda yaşam tarzlarını ve tüketim faaliyetlerini de dönüştürmüştür. Tüketim ve yaşam tarzı arasındaki ilişki değişmiş, sürdürülebilirliğe bakış açısı küresel üretimin aleyhine dönmüş ve aracılılandırılmış iletişime olan ihtiyaç medyanın tüketilme şeklini değiştirmiştir.

Pek çok farklı aktivitenin yanı sıra bireyler evde kapalı kaldıkları sürede kendileri yapabilecekleri yemek ve hamur işi yapma ya da örgü örme gibi faaliyetlere ilgi gösterdikleri için bu durum karşısında markaların kendilerini anlatma biçimleri de değişime uğramıştır. Bu anlamda, tüketicilerin maruz kaldığı tüketim kültürü ile birlikte tüketicilerin yaşam tarzlarının nasıl değiştiğinin incelenmesi önem taşımaktadır, zira değişen dünyanın etkilerini tam olarak anlayabilmenin tek yolu tüketicilerin bu dünyayı nasıl anlamlandırdıklarından geçmektedir. Bu nedenle tüketici davranışları çerçevesinde tüketim kültürü anlaşılmalıdır. Sosyal medya tüketimi tüketim kültürüne ilişkin çalışmalarda gittikçe artan bir yere sahip olsa da tüketim kültürü ve sosyal medya kullanımı arasındaki ilişkiyi irdeleyen çalışmalara pek rastlanmamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma da tüketim kültürünü Türkiye'nin 2020 yılında deneyimlediği kapanma dönemi süresince yansıtan tüketici pratiklerini incelemek suretiyle korona virüs sonrası dönemde tüketim kültürünün şekillenmesinde dijital medyanın oynadığı rolü belirleme niyetiyle hazırlanmıştır. Belirlenen zaman aralığında en yüksek etkileşim düzeyine sahip Instagram gönderilerinin etiketleri içerik analizi yöntemi ile incelenmiştir. Ayrıca virüs sonrası dönemdeki tüketim kültürünün bileşenlerini vurgulamak için eleştirel tüketim kültürü kavramı merkezde tutulmuştur. Çalışmanın yeni tip bir tüketim kültürünün izlerini sürmek suretiyle mevcut literatüre katkı sağlaması umulmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tüketim Kültürü, Instagram, Dijital Medya Analizi

**JEL Kodlar:** L82, E21, M00

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## **1. Introduction**

Theories in the field of communication and media studies that attempt to explain the relationship between media and society in terms of how consumer culture spreads throughout societies and eventually the globe. However, they often focus on the impact of capitalism, taking their starting point as the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, they deem media as an intermediary to disseminate messages of consumption to consumer societies. Discussions in this field before Covid-19 were grounded on the constant hunt of individuals to find the objects of their desires as they see them on various media to the extent of debating whether social human beings live to consume or consume to live (Bauman, 2010:83). However, the current media texts must be investigated in parallel with the prevailing concepts of consumer culture with the 'new normal'. This term is not used herein to refer only to the virtualization of everyday life, but also to refer to the prediction of a new and more equitable form of capitalism, where health is more important than possession, money is more carefully spent and in line with actual needs, individual production surpasses consumption and relationships become more important than objects, be it with the environment or other individuals within the society (Kotler, 2020). From this perspective, mediatization theories to shed light on the links between consumer culture and consumer practices must be investigated in light of the new normal. Furthermore, much of the existing work in this field, rely on the examinations of traditional media. To that end, the link between Covid-19, capitalism and consumer culture, must be investigated (Sobande, 2020). Despite the growing discussions concerning social media consumption in consumer culture research, there are not many attempts to neither discover the relationship between such concepts nor focus on rhetoric versus reality or traditional versus digital consumer culture (Kviat, 2021). Drawing off on this review, this study attempts to answer the following research question: "What role does digital media play in shaping the post-covid-19 consumer culture?"

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Social Changes in Consumer Behavior After Covid-19**

Much like various crises preceding it, Covid-19 drastically changed the way individuals live, produce and consume. There have been outbreaks, political conflicts and economic recessions across the world too, but Covid-19 pandemic is on its way to entirely transforming individuals' lifestyles in the 21st century. Across the world, lockdowns or stay-at-home restrictions drove consumers to delve deeper into online channels for delivery of services and communication (Briedis et al., 2020 as cited in Paik & Lee, 2021). Changes in consumption habits in a number of areas were hence observed. One of the widespread effects of the pandemic has been the provocation of emotions by a globally contagious disease, particularly influencing consumer choices (Galoni, Sarpenter & Rao, 2020). During the time of the pandemic, consumers forged new habits in various fields, including their use of technology and how they consume news, the spread of which prompted perceived fear and risk (Naeem, 2021). These new habits can be seen in various fields. For example, the attempt to avoid human contact has resulted in the popularization of do-it-yourself endeavors. The do-it-yourself habits reflect lifestyle changes, a different symbolization by consumers and a post-materialistic mentality, pointing to a shift in culture in symbolic, individual and cultural terms (Üstündağlı Erten & Güzeoğlu, 2021). Payment methods also changed in this time; alternative methods that help consumers avoid physical contact became more popular and the effects of this adoption of a new technology persists as regular now (Flavian, Guinaliu & Yu, 2020). Similarly, the pandemic encouraged the use of e-wallets in Indonesia and Malaysia, which is both an economic conclusion and evidently a lifestyle change (Aji, Berakon & Maizaitulaidawati, 2020). Another reflection of this global crisis, with respect to lifestyles, was observed in

religious consumption habits under the influence of public policies and society, revealing prayer practices in relation with adaptive behavior (Rostiani, Toyib & Khoiriyah, 2021). Spiritual engagement with brands in the market and such attachments are also observed, which are not directly linked with economic rationalism (Karpen & Conduit, 2020).

From this perspective, the existing studies in the consumption transformation during this time of global crisis point to one that is also related to cultures and societies. Social effects of Covid-19 such as restrictions to stay home, social distancing and other measures to keep individuals' health in check on a public level, were also observed in market dynamics due to the interrelation between them (Mehta, Saxena & Purohit, 2020). Thus, social change on a greater level than that on merely individualistic consumption patterns is in question. The disease itself can wind up infecting all human beings, whereas the social effects are not equally distributed, affecting certain ethnic groups and social classes more than others (Fuchs, 2020). Moreover, a recent study, conducted across Europe to examine the lives of low income households during Covid-19 pandemic, focuses on the effect this disruption had on everyday lives and specifically reflections on social justice (O'Connell & Brannen, 2021). The intention to help others, who are perceived to be less fortunate than oneself, known as prosocial behavior in social sciences, displayed changes during Covid-19 as well. A recent study concludes that psychological ownership brings along greater chances to engage in such behavior, when individuals are presented with a relevant opportunity (Jami, Kouchaki & Gino, 2021) and in the case of the pandemic, the opportunities became abundant. Additionally, other concepts that have gained more importance during the time of this global crisis, such as environmentalism and sustainability, are foreseen to continue as such (Dermody et al., 2021). In this sense, globalization itself is predicted to be affected by the pandemic due to the growing sentiments against it and consumer movements away from global production chains (Saari et al., 2020:22). These concepts can also be observed in the increasing interest towards minimalism, the sharing economy, rental services and the overthrowing of ownership and materialism with such concepts (Morewedge et al., 2019; Zervas, Proserpio & Byers, 2017 as cited in Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Thus, it is possible to claim that the sharing economy has now spread throughout the consumer culture across the globe, but what happens to sharing and renting as the risk of Covid-19 contraction is still very much alive, is a matter for research too (Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020).

On the other hand, the lack of consumer experience due to restrictions and lockdowns not only affects consumers' lives, but the value of product itself too. In a study conducted on the experience of watching football, authors conclude that detachment, disenchantment and protest prevail in the field, when there are no viewers in the stadium during footballs games due to Covid-19 restrictions (Bull & Whittam, 2021). The sensation of disenchantment, generated by the consumer culture and along with the lack of enchanting cathedrals of consumption such as the stadiums (Ritzer, 2005), has changed with the new world order of the pandemic.

## **2.2. Consumer Culture and The Role of Media**

In order to have a better understanding of how marketers produce experiences, carefully craft symbolic meanings and engage with both the consumers and innovations in the market, consumer culture must be examined (Rokka, 2021). Consumer culture carries the connotation that consumption, as an activity, has a cultural aspect with meanings attributed by consumers. Within the scope of critical media studies, meanings are relayed to individuals via various media. At this point, ideological orientations of media channels also influence individuals' lifestyles and practices of making sense of the world around them. Thus, the role of media gained even more importance during the time of this global crisis, for individuals across the world were limited to mediated communication.



Social practices naturally changed along with the requirements to isolate or abide by government mandated restrictions, putting emphasis on a lifestyle that carries out said practices almost entirely in virtual ways, highlighting the mediatization of everyday life and rendering digital media more visible than ever (Kannengießer & McCurdy, 2020). This was also visible in the delivery of virus-related news, for such information shapes consumption activities as well, even to the simple extent to which individuals choose online deliveries. False news about the virus and their rapid spread, the collective fear of imminent death that followed due to such news, largely affected everyday lives of consumers. This news had to do with both the origin of coronavirus and the manners of contracting the disease (Fuchs, 2020). From the perspective of media studies, such news is disseminated by certain governments to spread and reinforce nationalism and hatred via traditional and social media, highlighting the significance of studying the role of media in the shaping of consumer culture.

Dating back to even before Covid-19, the virtualization of everyday life is manifested in social media, the use of which during this global crisis, significantly expanded (Saari et al., 2020:11; Yel & Ünlü Dalaylı, 2021). Consumers' needs in not only purchasing and shopping methods, but also those related with recreation and creativity, shifted towards do-it-yourself and customized features, which mainly emerged consequent to the dissemination of such trends on various social media, in addition to changes in incomes and readjusted expenses (Lang et al., 2021).

Having mentioned that media shapes the way in which individuals make sense of the world, consumers' views on other countries were affected during this time as well. In a study, examining the impact of country of origin, revealed that such cues influenced consumers' willingness to purchase a product and evaluate prices in e-commerce settings from such a framework (Moriuchi, 2021). Similarly, consumers' perceptions regarding brand origins and country of manufacturing, which ultimately affect their willingness to pay price premiums or simply make preferences in various categories, were already under the influence of geopolitical and economic conflicts, which became further strained with Covid-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2021). These perceptions are related to the narratives of brands, to which consumers were exposed to on social media. From this perspective, focusing on the narrative navigations of brands and how storytelling strategies shape consumers' engagement with them can help shed light on the role digital narratives on social media play (Feiereisen et al., 2020). On a larger scale, prosumption on social media with concepts such as baking, cooking, virtual dinner parties and displays of volunteering, highlight the social and gendered hierarchy in the global consumer society media shapes (Swan, 2020; Karpen & Conduit, 2020).

After such drastic changes in social and everyday life settings, consumers today tend to engage with brands in different ways than they used to and with varying expectations from varying perspectives, shaping their frameworks of making sense and attributing meaning (Charm et al., 2020 as cited in Karpen & Conduit, 2020). From a theoretical perspective, understanding consumer culture can help shed light on both the consumers' motives and consumption patterns and the future practices of marketers regarding the shaping of products, prices, communication and distribution strategies during times of economic challenges among others (Ozdamar Ertekin, Oflac & Serbetcioglu, 2020). Studying consumer culture must be conducted simultaneously with varying lifestyles of consumers, for it is the only way to fully understand the effects of the changing world and how consumers attach meanings to it (Atik et al., 2020). In order to examine the various transformative impacts of media with regards to societies, cultures, economies and the environment, the socio-ecological effects of mediatization must be recognized (Kannengießer & McCurdy, 2020). In this vein, media practices and the accompanying sociocultural change are often examined with mediatization

research and comparative methods are preferred to explore the cultural characteristics involved in this process to (Salazar, 2020).

### **2.3. Critical Communication Theories On Consumer Culture**

A multi-disciplinary approach can be observed in the early analyses of consumer culture, focusing not only on quantitative methods of research, but also on process, content and experience to have a better understanding of the qualitative nature of the phenomenon too (Evans, 2020). In this sense, this study aims to bring consumer behavior and critical media studies together to scrutinize the role media plays in consumption during such a globally transforming period of time, as life as we know it switched from offline to online. To that end, critical communication theories placing emphasis on consumer culture, must be mentioned.

Accordingly, in modern consumer cultures and consumer societies, images, rather than products are consumed and the entirety of images came together in this sense comprise the 'media spectacles' (Debord, 1992). The spectacle is the social relation amongst people in a society, rather than a mere gathering of images to be displayed. This way, the existing system, i.e. the consumer society, is justified via the images. Although this concept was originally introduced as early as the 1960s, it still successfully depicts the current circumstances of social media. The media spectacle, consisting of images, becomes life itself. In this sense, what individuals see is what they consume and technology is the main means of communication for it. Almost in support of this argument, the latest report on global social media use states that there are now 4.66 billion internet users across the world with 316 million users having joined some time in the last 12 months, while 99% of total social media users are connected via mobile means (Chaffey, 2021). Revealing mobility and connectivity together, this finding also illustrates the indispensable position social media made for itself in everyday lives.

The spectacles of media and consumer culture shape and mediate consumer experiences and everyday lives (Kellner, 2003:2). Furthermore, cultural associations and illusions are conveyed to individuals or consumers via media messages, before being received by consumers and meanings are attached (Featherstone, 2007:14). Baudrillard (2013) argues that consumption shapes contemporary societies via media messages and becomes the main instrument in shaping worldviews, while drawing attention to the symbolic dimension of consumption alongside the symbolic motives of consumers, mentioning semiology as a method to investigate this field. In this sense, the images or in other words, the elements of the 'media spectacle', then, are to be scrutinized to understand the links between consumption and societies. Ritzer (2005), on the other hand, states that consumption has penetrated the most private areas of individuals via technological advances such as the internet, telephone and computers. While there was no global crisis in mind at the time of this proposition, such penetration appears to have been a blessing during the pandemic due to limited means of interaction. Jameson (1984), much like many other postmodern theorists in media studies, suggests the mediation of popular culture to have a better understanding on the mediatization of cultures. Accordingly, media and popular culture are in a cyclic relationship, where mass media promotes products of popular culture and products of popular culture are covered widely in mass media due to the interest of large masses. Still, this view existed before the emergence of social media, even though it attempts to explain the relationship between mediatization and social life. Finally, Bourdieu (1984) posits the means of distribution of symbolic products such as media and advertisements, which he calls new cultural intermediaries. Accordingly, consumer culture is disseminated and taught to individuals in a society via television personalities and public figures individuals often see in media.

### **3. Method**

This study examines the role digital media play in shaping the post-Covid-19 consumer culture. To that end, a content analysis is conducted on Instagram to observe consumption trends on social media during the mandatory lockdown in Turkey. Instagram posts with 5 different hashtags are subjected to a content analysis. The hashtags in question are *hayatevesiğar* (*life fits home*), *evdehayatvar* (*there is life at home*), *koronagünleri* (*corona days*), *karantinagünlükleri* (*quarantine diaries*) and *evdekal* (*stay home*). These hashtags were selected for they are thought to be related to individuals' time spent at home during the time of lockdown in Turkey, which was enforced by the Turkish government by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Turkey on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Hashtags are selected in the Turkish language, for the study aims to examine consumption habits of Turkish Instagram users. Instagram is the choice of platform, for it is not studied as frequently as Twitter with respect to content analyses and it offers both visual and textual content.

### **3.1. Sample of The Study**

The sample size for the study is determined to be 385. The population for the research study was accepted to be 38 million, for the social media user numbers of Turkey in 2019 revealed 38 million Instagram users across the country at the time (Türkiye'nin sosyal medya karnesi belli oldu, 2020). A sample size calculator was used (Raosoft, 2020) and sample size was determined to be 385 with 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. The hashtags were investigated between May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. For the sake of the analysis, post captions were scrutinized. In the event of a lack of caption text, visual content of the posts was examined. Accordingly, 5 hashtags were identified: *hayatevesiğar* (*life fits home*), *evdehayatvar* (*there is life at home*), *koronagünleri* (*corona days*), *karantinagünlükleri* (*quarantine diaries*) and *evdekal* (*stay home*). Hashtags are selected in Turkish, for the study is attempted to observe Turkish consumption circumstances during the lockdown. In order to serve to the same purpose, posts that include direct sales, advertisements and corporation accounts are excluded. Content from the same account is not included to ensure diversity. Finally, only personal accounts that can be seen publicly are investigated to eliminate corporate campaigns. Since Instagram does not offer a preference, where posts between particular dates can be examined, the posts on the selected day of the research study are examined according to their popularity, for the option in question shows the posts that reach highest engagements. This also means that the investigated posts are seen by a larger number of people than others posted on the same dates. The coding was conducted separately with two independent researchers for cross-checking and reliability purposes.

### **3.2. Limitations of The Study**

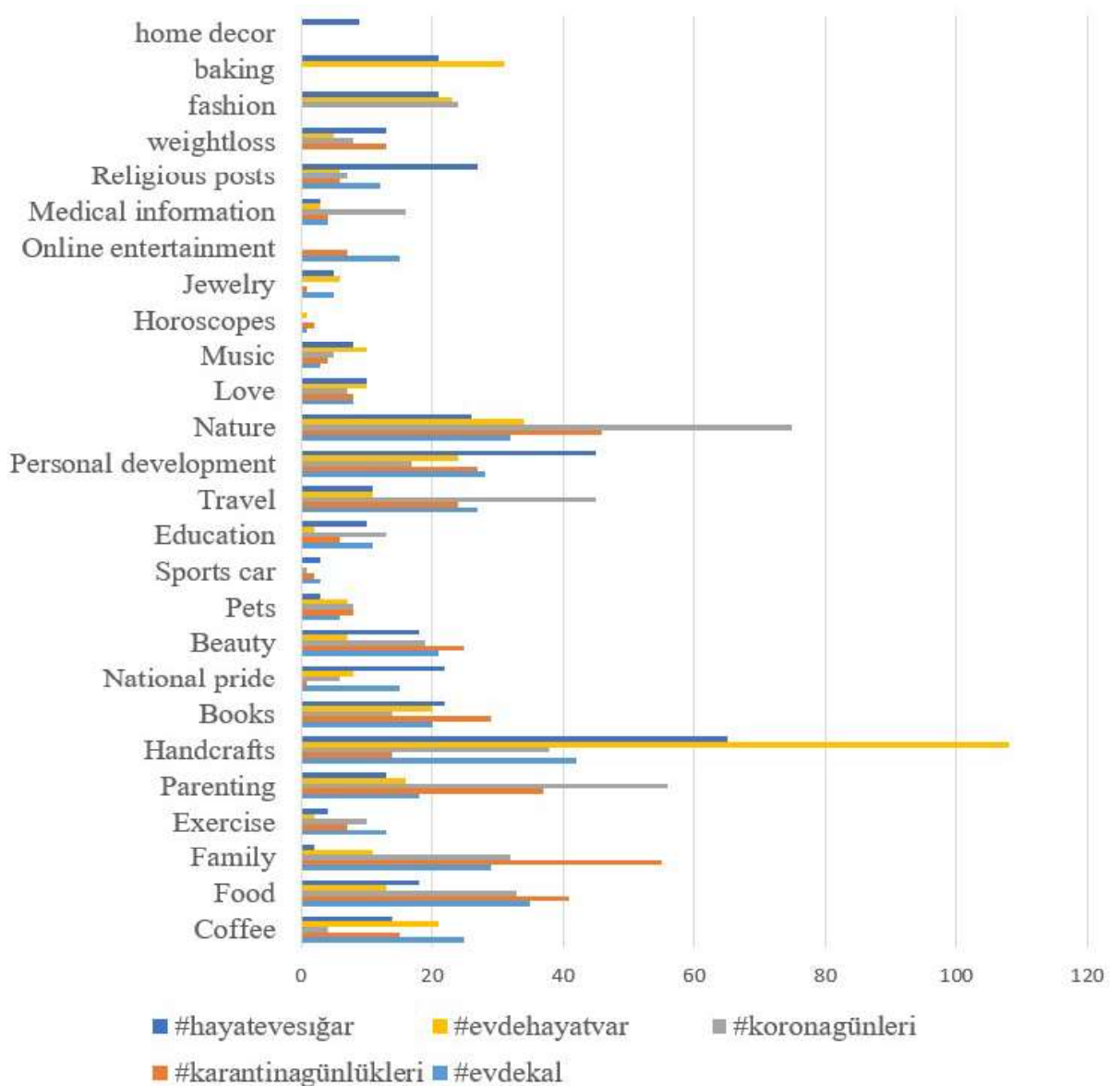
The study is limited to Turkish Instagram users. To that end, posts from only Turkish account holders were examined. Posts with highest engagement numbers were selected for the designated hashtags. This method ensures that posts with the highest engagement rates according to Instagram's algorithm were examined. At the same time, Instagram does not provide the option to examine specific hashtags from prior dates. Another limitation of the study relates to the privacy settings of the accounts; only public accounts were examined within the scope of the study, since private accounts are not listed in hashtag search endeavors. Moreover, investigated captions and posts are limited to times of the corona virus outbreak and the accompanying lockdown.

### **3.3. Results**

The investigation of hashtags, related to spending time at home, are investigated to trace patterns of consumption under the lockdown conditions. Accordingly, the content analysis revealed multiple categories in terms of themes, which were observed in 385 posts in each of

the five hashtags. For the first hashtag, #evdekal, the most common themes are handcraft (42), food (35) and nature (32); for #karantinagünlükleri, family (55), nature (46), food (41) and fashion (38); for #koronagünleri, nature (75), parenting (55), traveling (45) and hand crafts (37); for #evdehayatvar, hand crafts (100), nature (34), personal development (24) and fashion (23); and finally for #hayatevesiğar, the most commonly observed themes are hand crafts (61), personal development (45), religion (27), baking (21) and fashion (21), the distribution of which can be viewed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Content Distribution of Examined Hashtags**



While there are multiple categories under different hashtags, the most common ones accordingly are observed to be hand crafts, food, fashion, nature, parenting, traveling, personal development, religion and baking. Hand crafts, as they were observed in various Instagram posts, include accessories and items that are hand made by account holders, but are not practical. Specifically, during the time of the corona virus outbreak, bakeries and take-out services in restaurants remained open in Turkey, as was the case in many other countries with state-sanctioned lockdown measures (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2020). However, baking at home and displaying one's cooking and baking skills appear to be common; followed by displays concerning fashion, clothing and nature. This may bring to mind Veblen's indicators to



distinguish conspicuous consumption; displaying the amount, type and levels of consumer goods, religious acts without productivity, purchasing items based on their aesthetic values instead of practicality, rustic details, love for nature, exercising without a viable need other than to be fit or compete, social mobility, small dogs and similar pets that have no other purpose than to appear pretty and virtually all novelties (Veblen, 1995:103 – 112). Food and baking are also listed items in Veblen's descriptions of the leisure class, for they are meant to be for sustenance, but are consumed and displayed as luxury commodities by the leisure class, which are also observed in the analyses. Nature is yet another common denominator of the identified categories as a result of the content analysis. Much like the basis of critical studies on consumer culture, modern individuals in industrial societies become obsessed with nature so much that they cut down trees in their original locations and bring them to city centers to build parks. Pets, home décor and women's efforts to look good at home, even when a quarantine is in question, are also encountered in the analysis with respect to the deeply embedded roots of consumer culture. Relatively more abstract themes in the analysis, on the other hand, were personal development and religion, both of which indicate a changing roadmap for consumer culture. Rather than consumer goods and services, which are often examined within the scope of consumer behavior, appear to be replaced by intangible assets regarding the individual's investments to their selves. While this observation indicates a change in the course of modern consumption habits, the fact that consumers display their purchases or consumption choices to others, regardless of whether or not they personally know them, remains intact. Conducted to predict consumer trends and insights after the pandemic, PwC's The Future of Consumer World Report (2021) lists digital stores, socially responsible brands, digital supply chains, healthy food products and cyber-security as the top priorities for consumers after the pandemic. In parallel with the report, findings of the study show that fashion and textile products continued to be sold on digital platforms – on Instagram, in this case, while healthy food trends are observed in individuals' enthusiasm in homemade food products. Thus, the study concludes that Instagram as a digital medium does not only play a prominent role in consumer culture, it also acts as a mediator for the sake of the consumption spectacle, possibly to the extent of influencing consumer decisions. Further studies must focus on other digital media to expand the scope of this study's findings. While studies that approach consumer culture during the early times of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they were covered in the literature review, shed light on consumer behavior from various perspectives such as the tendencies to select online services and communication means (Briedis et al., 2020 as cited in Paik & Lee, 2021); the use of technology (Galoni, Sarpenter & Rao, 2020; Naeem, 2021); do-it-yourself activities (Üstündağlı Erten & Güzeloğlu, 2021); payment methods (Flavian, Guinaliu & Yu, 2020) and lifestyle changes (Aji, Berakon & Khoiriyah, 2021). This study is hoped to contribute to the literature by way of addressing the intersection between media and consumer behavior, which is yet to be investigated.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Throughout history, there have been a number of factors that have changed consumption patterns and covid-19 pandemic was not an exception. The pandemic has been investigated from different perspectives in different fields. In this framework, this study examines the role Instagram played during the mandatory lockdown in Turkey in 2020 to have a better grasp on the role social media play in shaping the post-coronavirus consumer culture. To that end, a literature review was conducted to identify recent studies on consumer behavior and how the pandemic changed consumer patterns.

Existing studies have been attempted to be understood from the framework of communication studies, because consumer culture is a notion that has been covered in both disciplines – consumer behavior and critical communication theories. A content analysis was

carried out to investigate the items consumers display during their time in the lockdown with the assumption that the reflection of existing trends during the lockdown may persist after the pandemic too. The study concludes that digital media use is still prominent, even when consumers are excluded from their habitual consumption patterns due to the lockdown, which reinforces the spectacle aspect of consumer activities, as they are mentioned in critical communication studies. It is herein recommended that further studies investigate the link between consumer displays on social media and digital word-of-mouth, since the spread of consumer culture may just as well move onto an entirely digital platform, leaving behind the traditional sense of the term.

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