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HOW LONELINESS INFLUENCES CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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HOW LONELINESS INFLUENCES CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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RESUMEN

La pandemia de coronavirus tuvo importantes consecuencias en varios campos de estudio. En el área de la psicología, la aparición y acentuación de sentimientos de soledad parece ser una respuesta lógica a las restricciones de la cuarentena. Pero este tema no sólo atrae la atención de los especialistas en ciencias sociales, ya que los expertos en marketing también se interesan por la forma en que estos consumidores particulares afrontan estos sentimientos a través de compras y actividades de consumo.

Esta tesis realiza un estudio para conocer las preferencias de los consumidores solitarios en cuanto a productos, categorías y actividades relacionadas con el consumo en las que participan cuando tienen estos sentimientos poco agradables. Para ello, se realizó una encuesta principalmente entre argentinos, pero también participaron personas de otros países sudamericanos y europeos. La soledad se midió mediante pruebas estándares, así como las estrategias de afrontamiento activo, pasivo y de búsqueda de apoyo social. Se enumeraron y agruparon diferentes categorías de productos, productos y actividades, que luego fueron calificadas por los participantes. Por último, también se preguntó por la percepción en el estado de soledad de las personas y su preferencia de canal de compra.

Los resultados muestran algunas asociaciones interesantes entre las variables estudiadas. En particular, surgieron algunas actividades, categorías y productos que estaban más presentes o ausentes en los consumidores solitarios, aunque este efecto fue leve. Sin embargo, el considerable número de variables: soledad, percepción de la soledad e impacto de la cuarentena, demografía, mecanismos de afrontamiento, preferencia de canal de compra, actividades relacionadas con el consumo, categorías de productos y productos

puede requerir futuras investigaciones para profundizar y ampliar los resultados mostrados en el presente estudio.

PALABRAS CLAVES: soledad, comportamiento del consumidor, actividades de consumo, mecanismos de afrontamiento.

ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus pandemic had significant consequences in several fields of study. In the psychological realm, the emergence and accentuation of loneliness' feelings seems to be a logical response to the lockdown restrictions. But this topic does not only attract the attention of social specialists, as marketers are also interested in how these particular consumers cope with these feelings through purchases and consumption activities.

This thesis conducts a study to find out the particular preferences of lonely consumers in terms of regarding products, categories and consumption-related activities they engage in when they have these unpleasant feelings. For this purpose, a survey was conducted mainly among Argentinians, but people from other South American and European countries also participated. Loneliness was measured using standard tests, as well as active and passive coping and social support seeking. Different categories of products, products and activities were listed and grouped, which were then rated by the participants. Finally, the perceived influence on people's state of loneliness and their preference in purchasing channel were also asked.

The results show some interesting associations between the variables studied. In particular, there were some activities, categories and products that were more present or absent in lonely consumers, although this effect was slight. However, the considerable number of variables: loneliness, perception of loneliness and impact of lockdown, demographics, coping mechanisms, shopping channel preference, consumption-related activities, product categories and products may require future research to deepen and extend the results shown in the present study.



KEY WORDS: loneliness, consumer behavior, consumption-related activities, coping mechanisms.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Loneliness, its effects and consequences on people's health are topics that call the attention of health's professionals for research. This might be the case because between 10% and 30% of the population in different countries is reported lonely (e.g. European Commission, 2018; Rokach & Brock, 1998). Furthermore, the current situation with Coronavirus and lockdown in the world, could have exposed a lot of people to these undesired feelings. In this context, research on the topic becomes more interesting. Additionally, reducing this problem is of major importance because it can cause several illnesses and lead even to premature deaths (e.g. Dill & Anderson, 1999; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Salvo G. & Castro S., 2013).

When an individual's social network is smaller or less pleasing than the person's expectations, loneliness' feelings emerge (Peplau & Perlman, 1979, p. 101). Naturally, this issue can happen in any life stage (Goossens et al., 2014, p. 5) and people can use different approaches to face these unpleasant feelings (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Rokach (1990) mentions that one of the most powerful ways to cope with this problem implies restoring one's social grid (pp. 43–45). But this is not always easily achieved, as it also depends on whether people have a more active or passive approach (Gentina et al., 2016). Asking for social support is another common strategy to cope with loneliness (Vasileiou et al., 2019).

The research on loneliness is not only restricted to health professionals, but also to marketers, who are interested in observing how it influences consumer behavior. Specifically, research linking loneliness with ethnocentrism (Tan & Hair, 2020), Internet usage and addiction (Hasmujaj, 2016; Kim et al.,

2009), experimental and material purchases (Yang et al., 2020), purchase attachments (Mittal & Silvera, 2017), materialism (Gentina et al., 2016; Pieters, 2013), brand communities (Snyder & Newman, 2019), product choices (Wan et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012), retail therapy (Atalay & Meloy, 2011), conspicuous consumption (Liu et al., 2020), mall shopping motivation and spending (Kim et al., 2005), impulsive behavior (Sinha & Wang, 2013), nostalgic products consumption and charitable giving (Kim, 2017), dining out, traveling and alcohol consumption (Kim & Jang, 2017), are examples of previous studies in the field. Literature not only employs loneliness but also social exclusion as an equivalent (e.g. Wan et al., 2014).

Kim (2017) proposes that in order to alleviate loneliness' feelings people might take part in different activities (p. 1). As it is suggested by the studies from above, loneliness has a significant impact on consumer behavior at different levels. This research had several goals. First, the intention was to assess loneliness, coping strategies, consumption-related activities and choices for categories and products. The included coping strategies were active, passive and social support seeking. Second, the idea was to evaluate if loneliness drives buying in the store rather than online and to more alcohol consumption. Third, another objective was to relate loneliness and coping strategies with both, activities and products, that might help with social connection or social avoidance. Factors and controls that were considered were age, gender, education, housing arrangement, income, need to belong and self-esteem. The study was conducted mainly in the province of Córdoba in Argentina, but individuals from other South American and European countries participated as well.

The thesis is organized as follows: the second section contains a definition of loneliness, consequences on people's health, coping strategies for

loneliness, consumption-related activities and product choices, results and conclusions about research in the field; the third section mentions the methodology of the research and the measures and controls that were included in the survey; the fourth section contains the results of the survey as well as comments regarding the validation or rejection of the hypotheses; the final section provides the conclusions of the work, together with managerial implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

Results show that loneliness has a correlation with coping strategies and more passive style was present in lonely individuals, which is similar to the findings of previous research (e.g. Garver, 1999; Gentina et al., 2016). It was also found that when having feelings of loneliness people preferred activities that could be easily performed at home and did not imply money spending. Unhealthy activities, such as smoking and drinking alcohol were the least favorite. No significant differences between these activities, interest for some categories or purchase likelihood of some products were present between lonely and non-lonely individuals, except for specific cases. Examples of these exceptions are alcohol consumption, foods and drinks as category, video games and group board games. Regarding the purchase channel, there was no preference for lonely individuals to buy in the store as a means to mitigate loneliness' feelings.

Additionally, grouping consumption activities and product choices as helping social connection or avoidance, did not provide a direct relationship with loneliness, but with some coping strategies, demographic variables and other controls. Particularly, seeking social support, which could be interpreted as a response not only to loneliness but life's stressors in general, was related both, to consumption activities and certain products purchase.

To sum up, in the lockdown context there was not a strong influence of loneliness in consumer behavior. This could be associated with the fact that other stressors such as depression and anxiety could have also emerged. However, interesting relationships between variables were found as well as activities and products that could be attractive for further future research.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Loneliness, actuality and its effects on health

The growing interest in the study of loneliness in psychology is relatively recent as it has started around forty years ago (Garver, 1999, p. 4). Loneliness is a severe problem as almost one quarter of the people in an US study said that they have no one to talk about important issues (McPherson et al., 2006). Similarly, Rokach and Brock (1998) found that 30% of the participants in their study were lonely while participating in their questionnaire. In Europe, almost 8% and approximately 20% were reported as frequent lonely and social isolated individuals, respectively (European Commission, 2018). In Argentina, this tendency is similar as one out of five elderly was found to have no one to rely on (Amadasi & Tinoboras, 2016).

The Coronavirus situation around the world, which obliged people in several countries to stay at home to reduce the spreading of the virus, implies a social isolation which might have contributed to increased loneliness in certain individuals. In that context, Hamermesh (2020) found that singles' happiness and well-being was reduced during lockdown. It seems reasonable to assume that one of the causes of this effect might be linked to the appearance of loneliness' feelings.

Peplau and Perlman (1979) consider loneliness a social deficiency and provide the following definition: "loneliness exists to the extent that a person's network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than the person desires" (p. 101). Additionally, Hughes et al. (2004) mention that loneliness implies feeling isolated, disconnected and not belonging (p. 657). Moreover, it is a displeasing and upsetting experience (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 32) that refers not merely to being alone (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010, p. 218) but can

be understood as a subjective experience, suggesting that a person cannot feel lonely alone and instead have those feelings surrounded by a crowd (Kim & Jang, 2017, p. 107).

Loneliness is normal and intrinsic to human nature and can be present in any life stage (Goossens et al., 2014, p. 5; Rokach & Brock, 1998, p. 107). In fact, there are studies including adolescents (e.g. Gentina et al., 2016) to older adults (e.g. Kim et al., 2005). Even though older people are expected to be more socially isolated, they do not report higher loneliness' rates, but rather are more frequent for those individuals with weaker health, living alone or with disadvantageous economic circumstances (European Commission, 2018).

Researchers are not only interested in loneliness, but also employ social isolation and social exclusion, which are associated but not the similar issues as loneliness (Kim, 2017, p. 12; Masi et al., 2010, p. 259). Even when there is no direct connection between the topics, many characteristics are correlated with both social isolation and loneliness (de Jong Gierveld, 1998, p. 74), while social exclusion is described as a precursor of loneliness (Kim, 2017, p. 20).

Alleviating loneliness is of major importance as it was found that individuals experiencing loneliness are less positive, optimistic, comfortable and secure, while at the same time more negative, angry and anxious than non-lonely individuals (Cacioppo et al., 2000, pp. 151–152). Besides that, Rokach (1990) mentions that “acute loneliness is a terrorizing pain, an agonizing and frightening experience that leaves a person vulnerable, shaken, and often wounded” (p. 41). In addition, loneliness has been associated with depression (e.g. Dill & Anderson, 1999; Weeks et al., 1980), chronic alcoholism (e.g. Nerviano & Gross, 1976) and suicide (e.g. Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Salvo G. & Castro S., 2013). Finally, loneliness can be considered a risk factor both for

physical inactivity (Hawkley et al., 2009) and that predicts mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

2.2. Coping strategies for loneliness

Coping is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Regarding loneliness, Peplau and Perlman (1979), assert that people can use different strategies in order to cope with it. Particularly, they mention three strategies, which are focused in changing the ideal level of social contact a person wants, the actual level of social contact the person has, or the importance the person gives to the difference between these two measures (p. 107). For its part, Rokach (1990) describes three heuristic stages, including accepting the situation, reorganizing internal resources and constructing social bridges (p. 41). In that direction, Vasileiou et al. (2019) found out while interviewing university students, that the most common strategies to cope with loneliness were related to seeking support, socially isolating themselves, solving the problem, being self-sufficient and adapting to the situation.

Gentina et al. (2016) comment that people can cope with this stressor using either an active or passive strategy. In the first approach, actions are aimed at solving the problem, while the second approach is more linked to elude it (p. 106). Carver et al. (1989) define active coping as “the process of taking active steps to try to remove or circumvent the stressor or to ameliorate its effects” (p. 268). Passive coping might be better associated with activities of behavioral and mental disengagement as described by the latter authors. Furthermore, they mention that the first strategy implies diminishing efforts to handle the stressor even up to quitting the desire to obtain a goal, while the

second approach suggests engaging in activities that help the stressed person to avoid thinking about the problem and get distracted (p. 269). Concerning the consequences, Gentina et al. (2016) found that using more active coping strategies drove adolescents to adopt fewer unethical behaviors, while more of those activities were observed for the adolescents stronger in passive coping strategies.

Lastly, Masi et al. (2010) concluded that the best approach to reduce loneliness is focused in adjusting defective social cognition. In that direction, Rokach (1990) remarked that confronting and assuming loneliness is one of the most efficient responses to this experience. Besides that, she mentions that restoring one's social grid and setting up close relationships are among the most powerful ways to cope with this problem (pp. 43–45).

2.3. Loneliness and consumer behavior

Marketers are also interested in the effects of loneliness on consumer behavior, but in order to comprehend the impact of loneliness on consumer behavior Long et al. (2015) mention that it is crucial to recognize how this problem impacts on people's thinking. The authors also comment that loneliness impacts on mood and sometimes leads to rumination, which is an idle and constant thinking about one's social deficiencies (p. 96). As a consequence, lonely consumers might be perceived as evasive, passive, indirect and averse to commit to brands in an active manner (Qin, 2017, p. 50).

Kim (2017) proposed that capable consumers in successfully managing negative stressors could be expected not to spend money to manage those emotional distress, but those with lower internal resources could use this strategy (p. 5). Therefore, in alleviating loneliness and averting the affliction derived

from it, people might take part in different consumption activities (Kim, 2017, p. 1). Pettigrew (2007) found, for example, that most interviewees used shopping as a channel to lessen loneliness. Additionally, the author mentions some rituals in that participants take part to maintain themselves socially active, which include eating and drinking practices. In the same way, Kim et al. (2005) found that older lonely consumers were particularly attracted to shopping pursuing recreation, aesthetics, eating and services. Likewise, Kim and Jang (2017) encountered that dining out and traveling are activities that could potentially reduce loneliness' feelings. Lastly, Rokach (1990) reported that participants often took part in superficial social functions such as parties, bars and drinks and going to malls to speak to people (p. 46).

Loneliness can also be a driver for a stronger alcohol consumption as suggested by the findings of Kim and Jang (2017), for example, but they mention that it was not the preferred avocation. Steptoe et al. (1998) mention that individuals who use drinking alcohol as a coping strategy tend to drink more as life-stressors increase (p. 60). In that direction, Britton (2004) found that individuals with avoidance and denial approaches tend to be more associated with the repercussions of alcohol consumption.

The previous different studies are in the direction of the study of Yang et al. (2020), who found that excluded individuals preferred experimental over material purchases when dealing with feelings of loneliness. However, Mittal and Silvera (2017) detected differences due to gender in this preference, as men were more attached to experimental purchases and women rather to material purchases.

As for material purchases, Atalay and Meloy (2011) found that loneliness did not influence the acquisition of products as retail therapy. The authors mentioned that this could be associated with the fact that loneliness is

assumed as a chronic condition, as other smooth and momentary negative states did have an impact in the acquisition of self-treats. Liu et al. (2020) found that loneliness influences people's conspicuous consumption behavior, especially for those who were single.

More in a general way, Pieters (2013) encountered two cycles regarding loneliness and materialism. In the first cycle, a vicious one, both materialism for success and for happiness were linked to increases of loneliness, while in the second cycle, a virtuous one, materialism as centrality implied a reduction in the level of those unpleasant feelings.

2.4. Loneliness and product choices

Excluded individuals select particular products that help them in alleviating the adverse results of this issue (Yang et al., 2020). In the context of loneliness, a similar effect is expected. Wang et al. (2012) found, for example, that lonely people rather choose products that are not selected from the majority, while their selection was preserved privately. Tan and Hair (2020), for their part, discovered that loneliness was associated with ethnocentrism, leading consumers to preferably choose products of their home country. Finally, Kim (2017) encountered that lonely individuals evaluated more positively nostalgic products than non-lonely individuals.

2.5. Hypotheses development

Loneliness is comparable to physical suffering and drives individuals to relieve that social affliction by pursuing social connections in order to feel safe, secure and satisfied with life (Masi et al., 2010, p. 259). In the same way, Mead et al. (2011) found that spending behavior for excluded individuals was

orientated in the creation of social connections, even if it represented making sacrifices personally and financially. Consequently, it is expected that loneliness influences consumer behavior in different aspects, including the consumption-related activities in which people suffering from this distress engage. The channels in which these activities take place and more specifically, the choices in categories and products might be affected by this variable as well.

Regarding activities related to consumption, Caprariello and Reis (2013) encountered that people preferred spending money on experiences that could be shared with others more than experiences carried out alone or material properties. Moreover, in the eagerness of connecting with others, lonely consumers are more likely to join brand communities with a social orientation (Snyder & Newman, 2019). A further explanation towards the choices in consumption activities might be related to the coping strategies people use. For instance, the usage of more avoidance-oriented style was related to more alcohol drinking (Aldridge-Gerry et al., 2011). As active coping is associated with solving the problem, while passive coping with avoiding it (Gentina et al., 2016), it is proposed that certain activities would be related to these strategies. Also, social support seeking is included. Specifically, it is proposed a relationship between loneliness, active and social support coping strategies with social connection activities, while loneliness with passive coping strategies would be related to social avoidance activities. Therefore:

H1: The engagement in consumption related coping activities that help people to connect with others will be positively related with loneliness and active and support seeking coping strategies.

H2: The engagement in consumption related coping activities associated with escaping or avoidance with people will be positively related with loneliness and passive coping strategies.

Concerning the way people could carry out certain consumption activities, online behavior receives special interest as it might be opposite to social connections, especially for lonely individuals. In the lockdown context, Nakazaki Gomes Corrêa and Alberto (2020) reported increasing sales and the growing in digital payments through apps. Besides, Sorce et al. (2005) found that 91.5% of all participants in their study had used the Internet for online buying and that no significant differences according to age were to be found, but when loneliness is included as variable, literature provides mixed findings. On one hand, Kim et al. (2009) encountered that undergraduate students feeling loneliness could develop an Internet addiction behavior. In this context it is predictable that they would prefer to shop online. On the other hand, Das et al. (2003) concluded that Internet surfing did not increase the likelihood for lonely consumers to purchase through the Internet. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2005) found that older consumers could be motivated to shop in malls to alleviate their loneliness. Under these circumstances a strong online purchase behavior is not expected. Thus, it is suggested that people choosing to buy in the shop might show higher loneliness rates as they use that experience as a means to counterattack those feelings. Specifically:

H3: Individuals who prefer shopping in the store will show higher loneliness rates than those choosing to buy online.

Beforehand, another consumption activity that attracted marketers' interest was alcohol consumption (e.g. Steptoe et al., 1998). In the context of lockdown and presuming that feelings of loneliness might be associated with social restrictions, the interest in this consumption activity remains of utmost importance. Similar to the findings of Kim and Jang (2017) and Aldridge-Gerry et al. (2011), in this study it is proposed that loneliness and passive coping strategies drive to more alcohol consumption. Particularly:

H4: Lonely individuals will have more passive coping strategies and a higher alcohol consumption than non-lonely individuals.

Apart from alcohol consumption, lockdown denoted other changes in consumer behavior as it is observed in the report of Nakazaki Gomes Corrêa and Alberto (2020). The authors report modifications both, in categories and products searches and choices. For those feeling lonely, it might be expected to engage in products' categories that help them to cope with this distressing experience. Particularly, categories such as books, foods, drinks and technology gadgets, which were directly associated with coping strategies (Pettigrew, 2007; Vasileiou et al., 2019) would have more probabilities of being purchased by lonely individuals. Therefore:

H5: Products' categories associated with coping with loneliness will have a higher purchase likelihood from lonely individuals than non-lonely individuals.

Maner et al. (2007) found through six studies that social exclusion led people to find the ways to reconnect with others. In addition, Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) mention that "perceptions of social isolation, or loneliness, increase vigilance for threat and heighten feelings of vulnerability while also raising the desire to reconnect" (p. 218). As regards to product choices, people might seek to connect with people or to avoid social contact depending on their coping strategies; those with higher active and social support coping will tend to alleviate their loneliness through products related to social connection, while those with passive strategies would avoid the problem, and consequently select products that prevent them from social contact. Specifically:

H6: The likelihood of choosing products that help to reconnect with people will be positively related to loneliness, active and social support seeking coping strategies.

H7: The likelihood of choosing products that help to avoid social contact will be positively related to loneliness and passive coping strategies.

Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the relations that want to be tested in hypotheses H1, H2, H6 and H7.

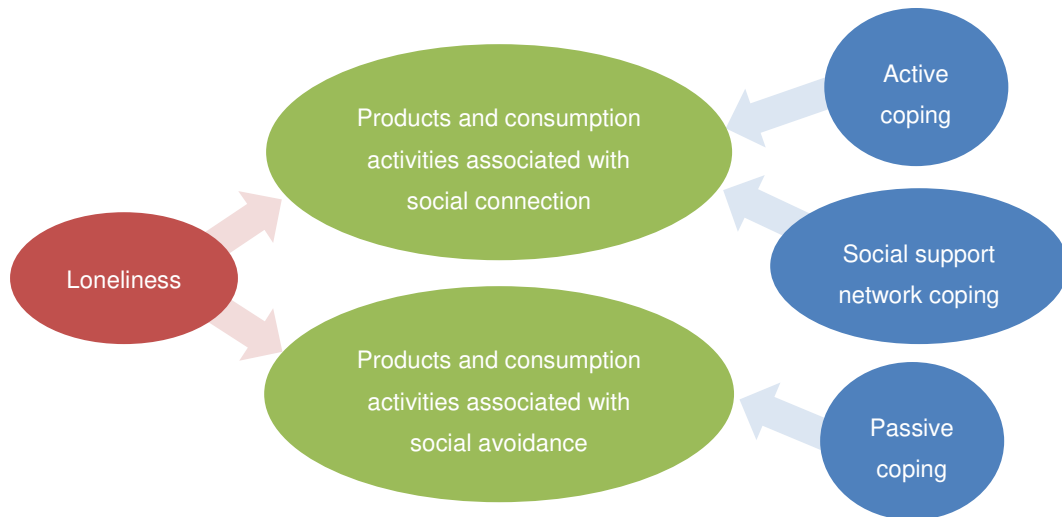


Figure 1: Visual summary for H1, H2, H6 and H7

III. METHODOLOGY

The selected method to test the different hypotheses was a survey, which was uploaded in Google forms. As the survey was carried out among Argentinians and Europeans, the form was developed both in Spanish and in English. For that purpose, the original survey in English was translated using DeepL and checked after for consistency. The aim of choosing the Internet to carry out the survey was that it is lower in costs and it is an easier and faster way to reach more individuals; it also reports higher automatization and external validity (Reips, 2002, p. 244). Finally, the Google form was shared using social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp. The expected time to complete it was less than ten minutes.

3.1. Measures

The survey contained 17 questions divided in four sections. The first section evaluated loneliness and coping strategies; the second section included the consumption activities, the categories and product options; the third section measured the control variables; the last section included the demographic questions. In the following subsections the selected questions and measures are presented and explained.

3.2.1. Demographics

The demographics questions were included at the end of the survey and referred to age, gender, marital status, housing arrangement, education and income level. In the English survey, the country of origin was requested, as it was conducted mainly among European students. In the Spanish survey, the

participants were asked to complete with the region they came from in Argentina, or the country where they proceeded in case they were from another Spanish-speaking country. As there could be significant differences in the income level between both samples which are not easily convertible with an exchange rate, six ranges were included in each survey with their correspondent local currency and later grouped as income level independently of the currency.

Gender was included as it was found that people vary in their coping strategies preference according to this demographic variable (Carver et al., 1989; Rokach, 1999). Marital status, housing arrangement, income and education were added as they were related to loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2010; European Commission, 2018; Pettigrew, 2007) and to coping strategies (Rokach & Brock, 1998).

3.2.2. Loneliness

The selected measure to assess loneliness was the 3-version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale provided by Russell (1996). The UCLA loneliness measure was found present in 8 out of 12 studies (Masi et al., 2010, p. 252) and showed high reliability and validity (Garver, 1999; Russell, 1996). The original scale contains 20 items, but 10 were selected following similar research (e.g. Gentina et al., 2016; Pieters, 2013). The chosen items as well as the possible responses are attached in Table 1. Additionally, it was requested to participants their current loneliness status by asking whether they felt left out, lonely or not supported at the moment following the procedure of Gentina et

al. (2016) and finally if they thought that lockdown due to Coronavirus affected their loneliness condition.

Table 1: Loneliness and coping strategies measures

Measures	Responses
<p><i>Loneliness</i> (Russell, 1996)</p> <p>How often do you feel that you are “in tune” with the people around you? (reversed)</p> <p>How often do you feel that you lack companionship?</p> <p>How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?</p> <p>How often do you feel alone?</p> <p>How often do you feel outgoing and friendly? (reversed)</p> <p>How often do you feel left out?</p> <p>How often do you feel isolated from others?</p> <p>How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it? (reversed)</p> <p>How often do you feel shy?</p> <p>How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?</p>	<p>1 = never</p> <p>2 = rarely</p> <p>3 = sometimes</p> <p>4 = often</p> <p>5 = always</p>
<p><i>Coping strategies</i> (Carver et al., 1989; Rokach & Brock, 1998)</p> <p>I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it.</p> <p>I text to friends/family more frequently.</p> <p>I learn to live with it.</p> <p>I go to more parties and social functions.</p> <p>I do what has to be done, one step at a time.</p> <p>I give up the attempt to get what I want.</p> <p>I spend time at places where I know there would be a lot of people.</p> <p>I take direct action to get around the problem.</p> <p>I admit to myself that I can't deal with it, and quit trying.</p> <p>I turn to my friends for companionship and support.</p>	<p>1 = never</p> <p>2 = rarely</p> <p>3 = sometimes</p> <p>4 = often</p> <p>5 = always</p>

3.2.3. Active, passive and social support network seeking coping strategies

For the purpose of identifying and measuring coping styles of the individuals, and comparable to the procedures of Garver (1999) and Gentina et al. (2016), a measure was included to assess specifically active and passive coping strategies. On that matter, participants were asked what they feel and how they behave when they have stressful situations in their lives. This procedure follows and includes items of the study of Carver et al. (1989). The first category includes only elements from the specific active strategy, while the second borrows items from acceptance and behavioral disengagement. Some consumption coping activities are related with social contact and Vasileiou et al. (2019) found that seeking social support was one of the preferred strategies. Hence, items from this category from the study of Rokach and Brock (1998) were also included. The selected items and responses are included in Table 1.

3.2.4. Consumption-related coping activities

The findings of Carver (1997), Hawkley et al. (2009), Kim and Jang (2017), Pettigrew (2007), Rokach (1990), Sorce et al. (2005) and Vazsonyi et al. (2001) provide the consumption activities that were selected to test among participants. Table 2 shows the final selection and the possible responses after asking them how often they engage in such activities when they have loneliness' feelings. In order to test H1 and H2, the hand-picked activities could be grouped by the possibility to connect with others or avoid social contact.

3.2.5. Category and product selection

In this subsection it was asked how interesting participants find certain categories to buy either in the shop or online. The consumer research study from Nakazaki Gomes Corrêa and Alberto (2020) for Mercado Libre, the biggest company in Argentina for buying and selling products through the Internet, provided the categories that were considered to evaluate. The criteria also included groups of products that could be associated with coping activities, in order to observe distinctions in the purchase interest between lonely and non-lonely consumers.

Similarly, some products of the previous categories were selected in order to distinguish the differences within each category. Additionally, the purpose was to choose products that could help to connect or to avoid social contact, in order to test H6 and H7.

In Table 2 all the chosen items are shown. At the end of that subsection, a question regarding preference towards purchasing in the store or through the Internet was added, so as to test H3.

Table 2: Consumption coping strategies, categories and product options

Measures		Responses
<i>Consumption coping strategies</i>		1 = never
I go to shopping malls	I shop online	2 = rarely
I look for bargains	I dine out	3 = sometimes
I read	I travel	4 = often
I smoke	I go to bars/clubs	5 = always
I drink alcohol	I exercise	
I listen to music	I watch movies or series	
<i>Interest in product categories</i>		1 = not at all
Technology products/gadgets	Decoration/tools	2 = slightly
Fashion/clothes	Books	3 = moderately
Foods/drinks	Games	4 = very
		5 = extremely
<i>Product options</i>		1 = very unlikely
Book	Kit to make pizza	2 = unlikely
Video games	Dumbbell	3 = neutral
Wine	Tennis racket	4 = likely
Group board games	Headphones	5 = very likely
Clothes	Coffee	
Beer	Puzzle	
Vodka	Snacks and candies	

3.2.6. Controls

In the present research need to belong and self-esteem were included as controls. On one hand and similar to the findings of Maner et al. (2007), who found that need to belong fosters social reconnection, it might be expected that it also influences the likelihood for adopting certain coping strategies, consumption-related activities and preference for certain categories and products. For that purpose, the 10-item scale developed by Leary et al. (2013) was included using only five of those statements. On the other hand, Woodward and Frank (1988) found in their study a negative relationship between loneliness and self-esteem, that indicates that individuals with more self-esteem showed less loneliness. Moreover, active coping was related to optimism, self-esteem and hardiness (Carver et al., 1989). Therefore, self-esteem was likewise included as control, employing the 10-item scale of Rosenberg (1965), but only using five of those items, similar to other research (e.g. Snyder & Newman, 2019). Table 3 provides the selected items within each variable and the possible responses.

Table 3: Controls

Measures	Responses
<p><i>Need to belong</i> (Leary et al., 2013)</p> <p>If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me (reversed).</p> <p>I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me.</p> <p>I want other people to accept me.</p> <p>I have a strong "need to belong."</p> <p>My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me.</p>	<p>1 = not at all</p> <p>2 = slightly</p> <p>3 = moderately</p> <p>4 = very</p> <p>5 = extremely</p>
<p><i>Self-esteem</i> (Rosenberg, 1965)</p> <p>On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.</p> <p>I feel that I have a number of good qualities.</p> <p>I am able to do things as well as most other people.</p> <p>I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.</p> <p>I take a positive attitude toward myself.</p>	<p>1 = strongly disagree</p> <p>2 = disagree</p> <p>3 = neither agree nor disagree</p> <p>4 = agree</p> <p>5 = strongly agree</p>

IV. RESULTS

The participation of 153 individuals in the survey was registered, from which 151 answers were considered for processing using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS. Different analyses were performed, including t-test, Kruskal-Wallis test, Mann–Whitney U test, one-way ANOVA and Chi-square independence test, all at the 5% of significance. Additionally, Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated as well as linear regressions and stepwise regression performed. Its parameters were tested with the same significance level.

4.1. Demographics, loneliness and controls

The contestants were mainly from Argentina (80.79%, 61.48% from Córdoba) while the rest were from different countries in South America and Europe. In addition, participants' average age was 32.32 years (SD = 12.39, range 19–66 years), corresponding 62.25% to females (37.25% males). As for marital status and housing arrangement, 70.86% were singles (24.5% married/common-law and 4.64% divorced/separated/widowed) and 43.71% were living with their family (30.46% with their partner/friends and 25.83% alone). Finally, 52.32% of the participants held a bachelor's degree (24.5% just finished high school, 21.19% held a master's degree and 1.32% had a PhD or higher degree). Concerning their income level, the average was 3.06 (SD = 1.65, range 1-6), which implies a net income between € 1500 and € 2500.

Loneliness was measured as the mean of the 10 items of the test. The average of the sample was 2.37 (SD = 0.58, range 1.3–3.9) and the selected elements showed high reliability ($\alpha = .833$). Regarding their current status, 5.3% of the participants claimed they were feeling lonely, not supported or

isolated at the moment (10.6% mentioned it was possible). Concerning recent events, 33.11% affirmed that lockdown due to Coronavirus affected their loneliness status (with 17.22% suggesting that it was a possibility). The rest of the participants denied feeling lonely or having been affected by lockdown.

As regards loneliness and demographic variables, no gender differences were significant ($p = .11$). Singles showed higher loneliness rates than married and common-law people ($p < .001$) as well as people living alone in comparison with those living with their family ($p = .037$). There was also dependence between loneliness (grouped into higher and lower rates) and education, $\chi^2(75, N = 150) = 120.45, p = .001$, and with income level, $\chi^2(120, N = 129) = 162.95, p = .006$.

The rest of the controls showed good reliability (need to belong, $\alpha = .741$; self-esteem $\alpha = .853$). Need to belong was positively correlated with loneliness, $r(149) = 0.3, p < .001$, while self-esteem was negatively correlated, $r(149) = -0.42, p < .001$. Higher in loneliness participants reported more need to belong ($M = 2.95, SD = 0.81$) and less self-esteem ($M = 3.7, SD = 0.6$), while lower in loneliness individuals less need to belong ($M = 2.61, SD = 0.85$) and more self-esteem ($4.16, SD = 0.6$), $t(149) = 2.53, p = .012$ and $t(149) = -4.68, p < .001$, respectively.

4.2. Coping strategies

Active, passive and social support coping were measured as the mean of the items that corresponded to each strategy and were detailed in Table 1 (active: 1-5-8; passive: 3-6-9; social support: 2-4-7-10). The first two strategies showed a moderate reliability ($\alpha = .608$ and $\alpha = .418$, respectively), while the last one exhibited a good reliability ($\alpha = .694$). The preferred coping strategy

was active ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.79$), followed by support seeking ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.78$) and passive ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.63$).

Loneliness was negatively associated both with active and social support coping, $r(149) = -0.27$, $p = .001$ and $r(149) = -0.26$, $p = .001$. Additionally, active strategies were positively correlated with passive and social support approaches, $r(149) = 0.18$, $p = .027$ and $r(149) = 0.41$, $p < .001$, respectively. Finally, passive strategies were also linked with social support, $r(149) = 0.21$, $p = .008$.

When individuals were divided into two groups according to the loneliness' mean, statistical differences in coping strategies were present. The second group showed more passive coping style ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 0.6$) than the first group ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(149) = 2.15$, $p = .033$. At the same time, the first group showed more active coping style ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.84$) than the second ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.7$), $t(149) = -2.47$, $p = .015$. These results agree with the suggestions of Garver (1999), who mentioned that lonely individuals are more prone to use less-effective coping approaches than non-lonely individuals (p. 21), and provide partial evidence to support H4.

4.3. Consumption coping activities

The preferred consumption coping activities were watching movies or TV series ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.91$), followed by listening to music ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.18$) and doing exercise ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.2$). It seems logical to assume that these activities can be carried out from their houses and do not directly imply a spending behavior. On the contrary, and except for shopping ($M = 1.9$, $SD = 1$), unhealthy-related activities such as smoking ($M = 1.6$, $SD = 1.19$) and alcohol drinking ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.2$) were the least preferred. Figure 2 shows

a visual summary for all activities. It also provides information on how often lonely and non-lonely individuals (according to the mean) engage in these activities, in order to appreciate potential differences.

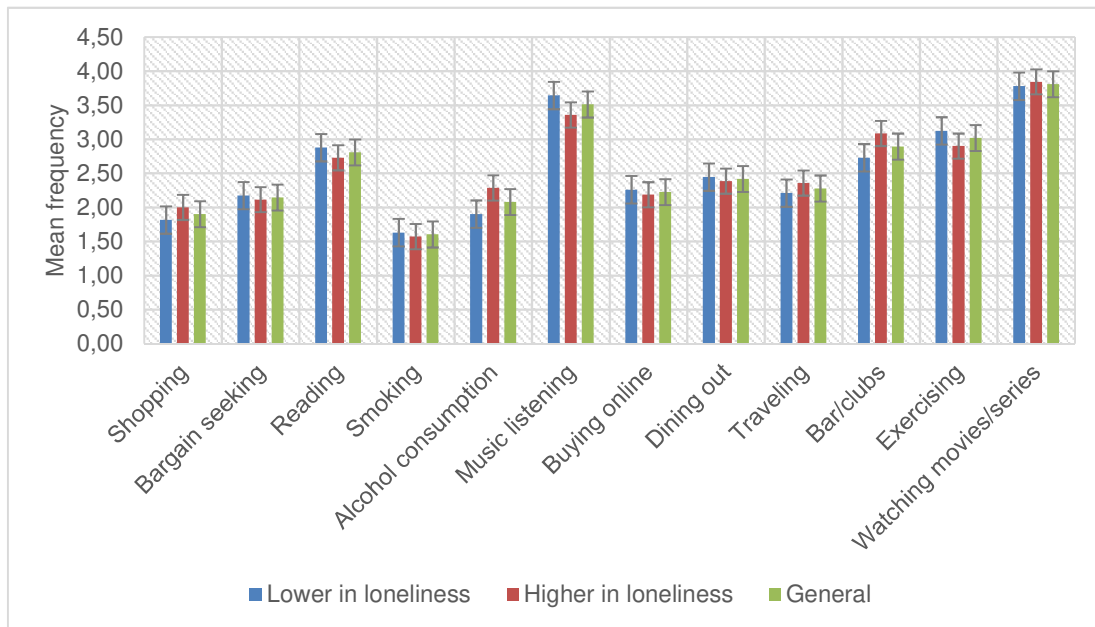


Figure 2: Consumption coping activities summary

Independence between each activity (considering the five possible frequencies) and loneliness (grouped into two groups) was calculated with Chi-square test. None of them was dependent on loneliness (all $p > 0.05$). Nonetheless, a Kruskal-Wallis test for each activity showed that alcohol consumption varies between the two loneliness groups, $H(1) = 4.47$, $p = .035$. Finally, a Mann-Whitney U test, a non-parametric analysis, confirms this finding for alcohol consumption, $U = 3365$, $p = .035$.

For the purpose of testing H1 and H2, the selected coping activities were divided into two groups: the first included activities that might be associated with social connections (shopping, dining out, traveling and going to bars and clubs), while the second incorporated activities that might be linked to

avoid social contact (looking for bargains, reading, smoking, alcohol consumption, listening to music, buying online, doing exercises and watching movies or TV series). After that, the correlation between these variables was calculated and several linear regressions were performed.

Firstly, regarding activities that might help with social contact, results showed that neither a correlation was present between the frequency of those grouped activities and loneliness, nor with active coping strategies, $r(149) = -0.05$, $p = .258$ and $r(149) = 0.12$, $p = .08$, respectively. However, social support seeking strategies were weakly positively correlated with the selected activities, $r(149) = 0.5$, $p < .001$. A regression on these three variables does not provide a satisfactory model ($R^2 = .264$) and only social support has a significant coefficient, $B = 0.61$, $t = 7.07$, $p < .001$. When demographics factors and the rest of controls were included, a better degree of adjustment was obtained ($R^2 = .378$). Still, social support coping strategies provided a moderate relationship with the mentioned variable, $B = 0.61$, $t = 5.98$, $p < .001$, as well as income, but with a much weaker relationship, $B = 0.11$, $t = 2.29$, $p = .024$.

Secondly, concerning activities that might help to avoid social contact, results suggested that a correlation was present with passive coping strategies, $r(149) = 0.16$, $p = .026$ but not with loneliness, $r(149) = -0.11$, $p = .083$. In the same way to the previous analysis, a regression on these two variables provided a poor model ($R^2 = .044$), with a weak coefficient for passive style, $B = 0.15$, $t = 2.19$, $p = .03$. After including the rest of the variables, a better adjustment was obtained ($R^2 = .272$). Nonetheless, in this model only social support reported a weak relation with the objective variable, $B = 0.28$, $t = 3.88$, $p < .001$.

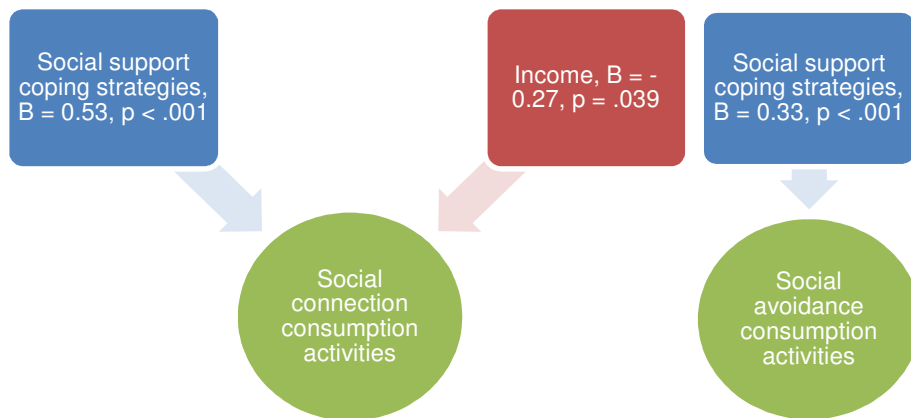


Figure 3: Stepwise regression for social connection and avoidance consumption activities

Finally, a forward stepwise regression for both variables of interest was performed using the same predictors. No significant changes were to appreciate. The results are shown in Figure 3, and together with the preceding analyses, provide evidence that does not support H1 and H2.

4.4. Online shopping and alcohol consumption

Concerning shopping online, 77.48% of the participants mentioned that when having both options they prefer to carry out purchases in the shop rather than through the Internet. But to test H3, whether differences in the loneliness scores between the participants of each selection were present, a t-test was conducted to compare loneliness' means. Results showed no significant difference between individuals in the first group ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.57$) compared to the second one ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(149) = 0.2$, $p = .839$. Neither distinctions in coping styles, need to belong or self-esteem were considerable (all $p > .05$). Additionally, a one-way ANOVA reinforced these results; specifically for loneliness, $F(1, 149) = 0.04$, $p = .839$. Lastly, a Mann–Whitney U test for all

variables, including demographics and the rest of the controls, confirmed the findings ($p > .05$ for all combinations). To sum up, there is no evidence to support H3.

Regarding alcohol consumption, the Chi-square test from the previous subsection showed independence within the two loneliness groups, $\chi^2(4, N = 151) = 7.22, p = .125$. However, there was a dependence between personal perception of loneliness due to lockdown and alcohol consumption, $\chi^2(8, N = 151) = 17.84, p = .022$. In spite of that, the result for the Mann–Whitney U test for alcohol consumption presented in the previous subsection showed that lonely individuals drink more ($M = 2.29, SD = 1.22$) than non-lonely individuals ($M = 1.9, SD = 1.16$). Additionally, the first group also has more passive coping styles than the second group. Both results imply that there is enough evidence to support H4.

4.5. Categories and product choices

The category that candidates were more interested in was fashion and clothes ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.25$), while the category that individuals were less interested in was games ($M = 2.08, SD = 1.25$). Figure 4 provides a summary of the mean for each category and also differences due to loneliness. In order to appreciate distinctions in the interest for all categories among lonely and non-lonely individuals, a Chi-square test of independence was performed. Results showed that the mean purchase interest of all categories was independent between groups, $\chi^2(19, N = 151) = 21.53, p = .308$. This implies that no differences in overall buying interest were present between groups. Moreover, there was no dependence for each category when compared with the loneliness groups ($p > .05$ for all combinations). Including a Kruskal-Wallis, it turns out that there were differences in the attraction for the foods and drinks

category, $H(1) = 4.63$, $p = .031$. This result is similar when using a Mann-Whitney U test, $U = 2276$, $p = .031$. This confirms that this category is significantly less interesting for lonely individuals ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.2$) than for non-lonely ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.04$).

After that, there was a comparison between categories that might be related to coping strategies, such as technology/gadgets, foods/drinks, books and games, with those that might be unrelated (fashion/clothes and decoration/tools) by performing a Kruskal-Wallis test for both categories of loneliness. Results confirmed that no differences between groups were significant, $H(1) = 0.01$, $p = .915$ and $H(1) = 0.024$, $p = .877$. Neither a correlation between these variables and loneliness was present ($p > .05$). Therefore, there is no evidence to support H5.

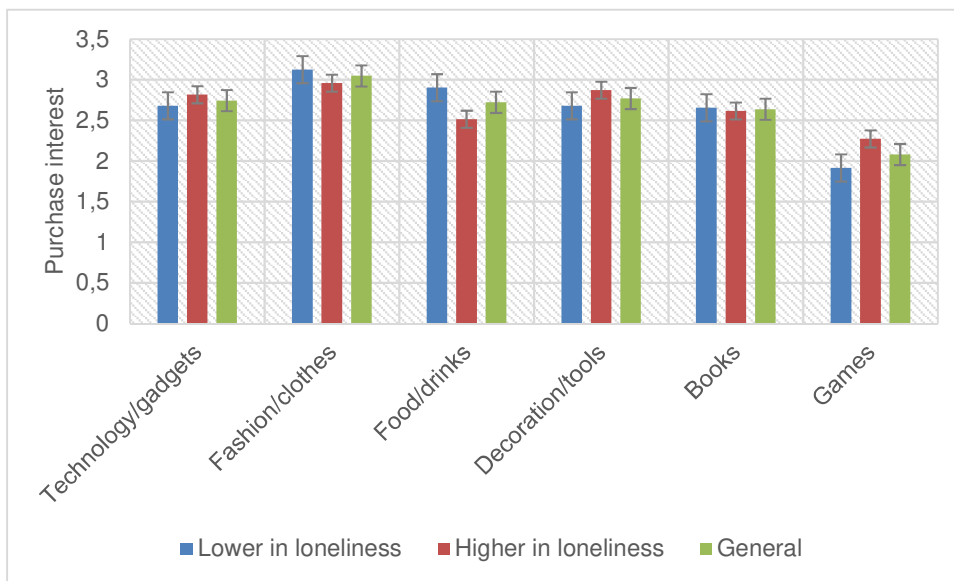


Figure 4: Categories choices summary

Regarding product choices, the ones that showed the highest purchase likelihood were clothes ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.1$), a book ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.36$) and coffee ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.41$), while the ones with the lowest purchase

possibility were a tennis racket ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.97$), vodka ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.26$) and a dumbbell ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.22$). Figure 5 presents a summary of the mean for each product as well as differences according to loneliness. The purchase chances for video games and group board games were related with loneliness according to higher and lower scores, $\chi^2(4, N = 151) = 10.11$, $p = .039$ and $\chi^2(4, N = 151) = 12.2$ $p = .016$, respectively. A Mann–Whitney U test provides similar outcomes, $U = 3507$, $p = .006$ and $U = 3546.5$, $p = .006$, respectively. Finally, a Kruskal-Wallis test, showed the same results, for video games, $H(1) = 7.61$, $p = .006$, and also for group board games $H(1) = 7.49$, $p = .006$.

As far as alcoholic products, the mean purchase likelihood of those items showed no significant relationship with loneliness or active coping strategies when calculating the Pearson’s correlation coefficient ($p > .05$ for both). However, need to belong and social support seeking were weakly positively correlated with the purchase intention of these products, $r(149) = 0.21$, $p = .006$ and $r(149) = 0.19$, $p = .011$, respectively. Curiously, passive coping style was negatively weakly linked, $r(149) = -0.16$, $p = .028$.

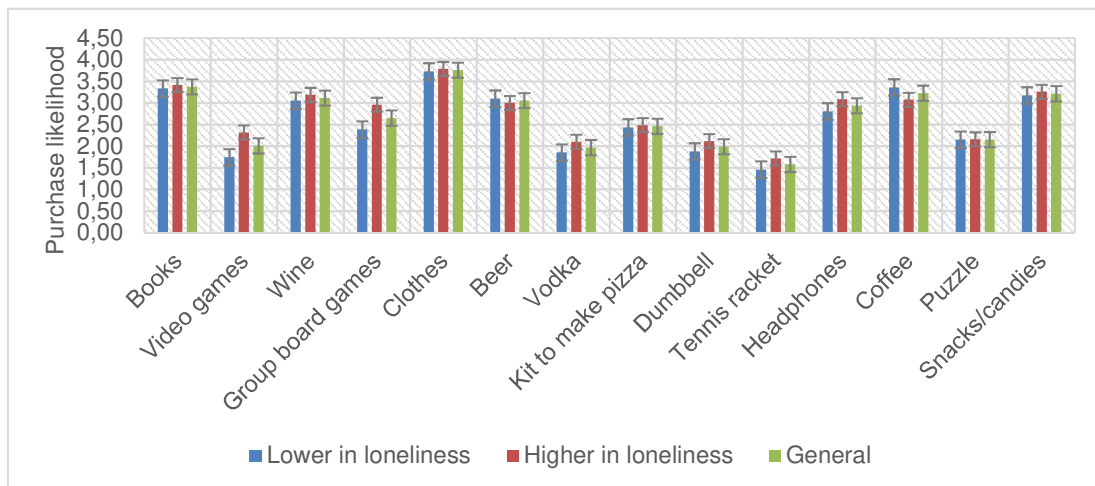


Figure 5: Product choices summary

In order to test H6 and H7, the list of products was divided into two categories: the first included products that might be associated with social connection (clothes, group board games, a kit to make a pizza, a tennis racket, coffee and snacks and candies), while the second incorporated products that might be linked to social avoidance (beer, vodka, wine, headphones, video games and a dumbbell). After that, and similar to the analysis for consumption-related activities, the correlations between the included variables were estimated and several linear regressions performed.

Firstly, in relation to products that might help with social contact, results show that neither a correlation was present between the mean purchase likelihood and loneliness, nor with active coping strategies, $r(149) = 0.07$, $p = .197$ and $r(149) = 0.09$, $p = .148$. However, social support seeking strategies were weakly positively correlated with the intention to buy those items, $r(149) = 0.29$, $p < .001$. Regressing the objective variable on these three as predictors provides a low adjustment ($R^2 = .105$), with social support weakly related, $B = 0.28$, $t = 3.81$, $p < .001$. When demographic factors and the rest of controls are included, a better degree of adjustment is obtained ($R^2 = .292$). In this version, not only social support coping strategies suggest a relationship with the mentioned variable, $B = 0.33$, $t = 3.94$, $p < .001$, but also perceptions of loneliness due to lockdown, $B = -0.21$, $t = -3.1$, $p = .002$.

Secondly, regarding products that might help to avoid social contact, results suggest that no correlation was present with loneliness, $r(149) = 0.11$, $p = .097$, but opposed to expectations, a weak negative correlation was to observe with passive coping styles, $r(149) = -0.15$, $p = .038$. Regressing the objective function on these two variables shows that passive strategies are weakly negatively related, $B = -0.18$, $t = -2$, $p = .047$, with a poorly adjusted model ($R^2 = .037$). Similar to products that help to socially connect, when the

rest of the variables are included, a higher adjustment's degree is obtained ($R^2 = .292$). In this model both passive and social support seeking style suggest a weak relation with the purchase likelihood of the selected items, $B = -0.21$, $t = -2.04$, $p = .044$ and $B = 0.3$, $t = 3.42$, $p = .001$. Furthermore, gender provided also a moderate relation, $B = -0.41$, $t = 3.27$, $p = .001$, as well as loneliness associated with lockdown, $B = -0.21$, $t = -2.95$, $p = .004$.

Lastly, with a forward stepwise regression for both variables of interest the previous findings are supported. The results are shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7 and, together with the preceding analyses, provide evidence that do not support H6 and H7.

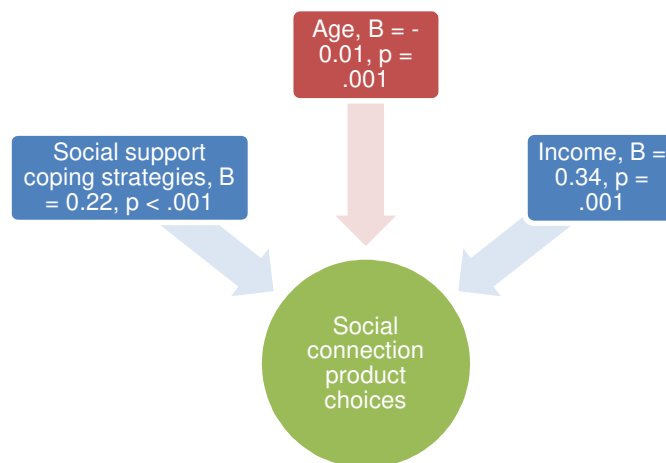


Figure 6: Social connection product choices stepwise regression

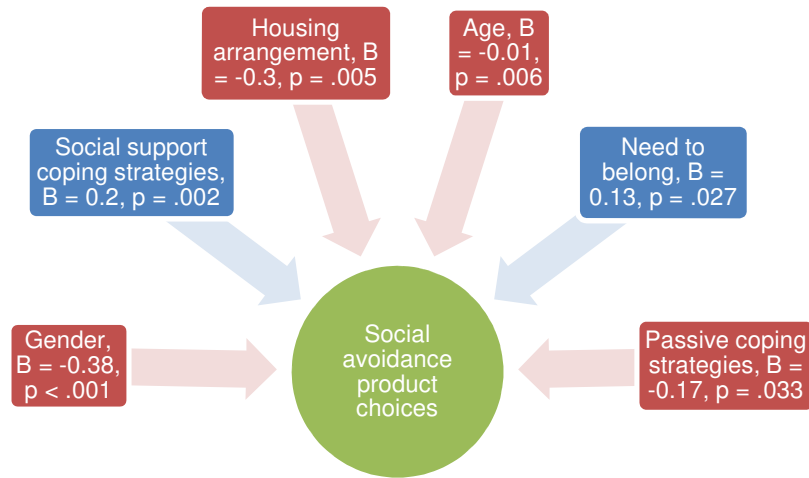


Figure 7: Social avoidance product choices stepwise regression

V. CONCLUSIONS

The world is constantly facing challenges, with Coronavirus being the most recent one. Before this situation, a topic that required attention was loneliness, as it affects a considerable amount of population (European Commission, 2018; McPherson et al., 2006). During lockdown, loneliness' feelings might have arisen for individuals within the groups of risk. In fact, the results of this survey showed that 50.33% of the participants either considered or affirmed that their loneliness status was affected during this period.

Marketing can contribute in alleviating this problem by considering how to reach these consumers and suggest them specific products and consumption activities that could help to re-establish their personal social network. In that direction, this research provides an interesting overview not only in the way loneliness could influence consumer behavior, but also in certain consumption-related activities, the interest in some products' categories and purchase likelihood of particular products. Furthermore, the implications of other variables such as coping strategies, demographics, need to belong and self-esteem were considered.

Several interesting findings were obtained. First, it was encountered that the favorite activities to cope with loneliness were the ones which could easily be performed at home and did not imply money spending, such as watching TV series or movies, doing exercise and listening to music. Second, unhealthy activities such as smoking and alcohol drinking were among the last options to cope with loneliness. Nonetheless, it was possible to observe that lonely individuals drink more alcohol than those who are not lonely, similar to the findings of previous research (e.g. Kim and Jang, 2017). Third, it was found

that lonely consumers did not prefer shopping in the store as a means to face this problem. Fourth, it was observed that lonely individuals did not have a stronger preference for products' categories associated with coping. Fifth, it was noticed that foods and drinks as a category did not attract lonely individuals' interest as it was expected. Instead, products such as video games and group board games have more possibilities of being purchased by these individuals.

Regarding the possibility of social connection or avoidance through consumption-related activities and products, it was found that loneliness did not provide a strong relationship with these objective variables, but some coping strategies and controls were related to these social functions. Specifically, social support seeking was related with both, activities and products, that could help people to connect or to avoid contact with others.

5.1. Managerial implications

As already mentioned, this research can help marketers to consider the special group of consumers with loneliness' feelings. As Qin (2017) says, it is better to recognize lonely consumers' singular choices regarding demands and products, as it is significant to improve not only consumers' satisfaction but also their health (p. 49). Additionally, Long et al. (2015) mentioned that their research had significance for marketers when designing communication campaigns for lonely consumers (p. 103). This research's findings could provide small hints as regards to categories and products in which marketers should focus when designing campaigns for lonely consumers. Foods and drinks, for example, might require particular stimuli in advertising to attract more consumers with this condition. In a similar way, promoting video games and group board games for lonely individuals could produce interesting outcomes.

5.2. Limitations and future research

The findings of the present research are not exempt of limitations. Likewise, the results provide suggestions for future research. Firstly, as most of the participants were from Argentina and specifically from the province of Córdoba, it is expected that the conclusions refer to a greater extent to those regions and cannot be generalized. Similar studies carried out in different countries could help in reducing this gap. Secondly, the situation with Coronavirus and lockdown might have a greater impact on people's mind and consequent consumer behavior than expected, especially for Argentina where lockdown restrictions still remain (Reuters, 2020). This implies that not only loneliness could be the variable of interest. Conducting similar research after the Coronavirus situation is over, might help to contrast results as well as to include other control variables such as depression and stress in general. Thirdly, the selection of categories and products might be very sensitive for the analysis. Other categories and products could show different tendencies among participants. Fourthly, in the consumption-related activities measure it was asked to participants how often they engage in such activities when they feel lonely. It could be the case that a considerable number of participants did not score high on the loneliness test, but still take part in such activities when having temporary loneliness' feelings. Following Kim (2017) comments regarding temporary and more chronic loneliness (p. 14), future research exploring further this difference could produce positive outcomes. Finally, video games and group board games were related with loneliness, but not with the category, additional research on this specific type of products could provide interesting findings.

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