

CUSHIONING THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 CONSUMER EXPERIENCES FOR OPTIMUM ECONOMIC SURVIVAL IN THE 'NEW NORMAL' IN ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

The challenging impact of covid-19 pandemic on global businesses triggered the need for survivalist strategies in the new normal. The understanding of the prevailing customer needs and the innovative capacity towards their satisfaction occupied the heart of competition at this period. Invariably, discourses pursued the deployment of mitigating hooks and stabilizers that could service symbiotic commercial relationships. This study therefore explores the various dimensions to this phenomenon with the aim of ascertaining the cushioning and coping strategies from companies to individuals and individuals to themselves for optimum economic survival. Data were elicited from 147 respondents from Enugu State through online mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research. Zoom multimedia application, moderated by the researchers was used to gather responses from two different online focus groups who determined the relevant item statements based on the objectives of the study. The outcome of the focus groups interactions helped in structuring the questionnaire administered to the consumers using survey monkey application with corresponding open spaces to justify their choice of responses. Simple percentage was used, where applicable, for the analysis and vividly illustrated with bar charts. Findings show significant congruence on the studied factors upon which conclusion was drawn. The study recommends, among other things, that advocacy be channelled more towards Return on Empathy (ROE) with less emphasis on Return on Investment (ROI).

Keywords: Cushion, consumer experiences, Covid-19 pandemic, empathy, adaptability new normal.

Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic has brought about emergency behavioural adaptation and significant changes to our corporate existence. The complex experiences garnered during this crisis has compelled consumer-world citizens and business organizational interests from diverse sectors to devise survivalist strategies aimed at mitigating the hardship occasioned by this scourge. The negative impacts of the pandemic include sudden cancellation of flights and reservations by airline operators in compliance with government safety regulations, or by safety-conscious passengers who just discovered that their close relatives have tested positive to the virus. This situation is further aggravated by the reality of overstretched health care systems which suddenly became ill-positioned and ill-equipped to manage the growing emergencies.

The continued emergence of strict lockdown rules and public restrictions, loss of loved ones, jobs and businesses, physical and emotional vulnerability/dependency, reprioritizing of essentials resulting to changes in shopping preferences and taste, upsurge in the prices of goods and services, worries about running out of money, distrust in brands that are still profit-conscious rather than people-conscious, pessimism towards government capability to solve the pandemic, and substitution of cherished physical socialization with virtual ones causing nostalgia for normal living (Institute for Global Environment 2020; Leon 2020; Morgan 2020; Thompson, 2020). There is also the perceived insincerity of the Nigerian government in the recorded cases, heightened scepticism around online and offline fake news, embezzlement of the nation's relief funds by cronies of the government to further widen existing socio-economic inequalities in the class structure, and the bogus disbursement of pandemic palliatives to imaginary beneficiaries in the most unaccountable way.

In the midst of these impacts which are mainly negative is the expectation placed on companies not to lose focus on the position of consumers as the most valuable asset in its existence. With the priority shifting from luxury, non-essential products to basic essential ones in the food and health commodities sub-category, and supply-chain safety over cost and convenience, companies has tended to be proactive in engaging and positively connecting with consumers to ensure supportive interactions (Mongalo 2020; Vader, Lin and Martin, 2020). It has become imperative for companies to refocus their mission and vision statements, activities, and procedures to the next new normal as consumers tend to trust businesses more

than the government (Morgan, 2020). These efforts give confidence to consumers that the companies' deliveries will truly add more value to their lives and make them feel supported and safer than ever before. This vital factor was captured in Salesforce's State of Service Report (2019), where 80% of consumers preferred the experiences they get from companies to offerings and deliveries they got from the same sources.

Arguably, it is believed that employing pragmatic tools will offer a smooth cushion and positive experiences to panicked customers. Cushion, in this context, has to do with lessening/softening/ameliorating/mitigating or alleviating the negative impacts of covid-19 on consumers' optimal experiences in the new normal. World Economic Forum (2020) described the 'new normal' as a state to which an economy, society, and others, settles following a crisis, when this differs from the situation that prevailed prior to the start of the crisis. The new normal era is laden with challenges and instabilities necessitating agility, curiosity, risk mitigation, and a refocus with proactive spirit (Buheji & Buheji, 2020). As noted by Morgan (2020), 'when we return to normal, it won't really be normal'. Usually, it requires methodic and rapid responses by companies in the display of empathy towards their customers to enhance trust from people, as well as consumers' self-adaptability instincts toward contingent realities as efficient solutions aimed at achieving smooth transitions. Although empathy and adaptability have been in existence in literature long before now, their relevance and application are more fitted as a response to exigencies as provided during the covid-19 period.

Empathy has been noted as one of the temperamental mindsets that even transcends the pandemic crisis. Empathy entails choosing the appropriate responses to meet the customers' circumstances (Chidozie and Abioye, 2019). The authors noted that empathy and integrity topped the list of their 6-pillar framework of customer experiences resulting from 10 years of primary research across 3,000 brands in 25 countries. Empathy in the context of this study can be well understood when one creates an imagination of what it would feel like to be in another person's shoes as a result of the covid-19 crisis. It is little wonder that some researchers have maintained that empathy is non-negotiable as one of the consumers' support strategies amid covid-19, therefore justifying its primal incorporation into companies' activities (Thompson, 2020; Mongalo 2020). Thus, there is a vital need to integrate this cardinal element into a responsive user-friendly Empathetic Customer Support Software (ECSS) (Apaynski, 2020).

Through interviews, focus groups discussions, and surveys, companies can factor in the needs of consumers in the concept development stage of production to suit different consumers' demographics, tastes and preferences. This implies an integration of the target audiences into the product and service trajectory of companies to elicit satisfaction, loyalty and retention. Moreso, empathetically handling consumers' first calls, queries and feedback helps to address concerns in the overall 'service journey' to ensure 'resting-heart-beat' of consumer satisfaction (Aitchison, 2020). For instance, if it took two or more calls to resolve customers' issues, satisfaction is drastically reduced and becomes worse if the issues are not resolved at all. Thompson (2020), also cited an example of this with the LEGO group, a Danish Toy production company that allows consumers to submit proposed customized designs, whereby a consumer can request for environmentally friendly materials for sustainable consumption at affordable prices. These eco-friendly toys and games can provide eco-security during play for toddlers of nursing mothers without care-givers, so that these mothers can be efficient in their virtual workplaces. Companies also need to learn to respond to the consumers' new shift towards adopting either a frugal and/or simple lifestyle by encouraging the purchase of what consumers really need (responsible buying) instead of unnecessary buying (Mehta, Saxena & Purhit, 2020).

In the new normal, the consumer has to learn how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. This scenario best describes the principle of adaptability. The ability of consumers to quickly adjust to a change in abnormal circumstances will help them to navigate the storms posed by a novel pandemic era. Adaptability is the capacity of an individual to rapidly respond to changing trends, innovation, destabilization, industrial shifts among others. There is need for the consumers to quickly change their thought processes by embracing the realities occasioned by the pandemic. Owing to the present situation, several authors have highlighted realistic ways by which an individual can cushion the pandemic effects and also cope subsequently: being optimistic about economic recovery, finding creative ways to kill boredom such as learning new skills or online education, adopting mindful purchases (Standish, 2020). Consumers can also find upcoming opportunities to explore as other streams of income, strictly tailor their expenses to more essential needs, access covid-19 loans and grants to help them bounce back to their disrupted businesses for better purchases, collaborate with other consumers for easy bulk and cheaper purchases and prepare alternative solutions for future uncertainties as they continuously seek answers to divergent questions of 'but whys' (Willkomm, 2020; Orumor, 2020).

Furthermore, in adapting for survival in this crisis, consumers are implored to reappraise their values, not to take serious issues for granted (Morgan, 2020); learn to improvise when there are constraints, discovery and utilizing of new talents and to help close social gaps amidst the social distancing rules by utilizing social/multimedia platforms (Sheth, 2020). To meet with the unending demand of one of the most essential needs –food, Mehta, Saxena and Purohit (2020) strongly advised that consumers should embark on farming at least on a subsistent level and most importantly, revive the spirit of leaving within their means and capacities.

Methodology

For easy and broad accessibility of respondents while adhering to covid-19 rules, the study adopted online mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research method. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2013), online research design is used in collecting primary data through internet surveys, online focus groups, emails, blogs, web-based and links, and tracking consumers' online behaviours by following consumers' click streams as they navigate from one website to another. Zoom application was used to gather responses from two online focus groups. The first was organized with 12 selected company executives who supplied information on the pragmatic ways required of businesses to demonstrate empathy to consumers. The second focus group comprised of 10 groups of marketing experts/consultants randomly selected to suggest adaptability means for consumers to cushion the effect of the covid-19 crises so as to cope in the new normal. The results of the focus groups helped in constructing the questionnaires (segmenting it into structured/closed-end and unstructured/open-end) and validation respectively. The instrument was administered to 147 consumers with corresponding open spaces to justify their choice of responses if any. The unstructured part also helped in gaining deeper insights which would be used to extend/replicate the current study subsequently. While simple percentage was used for the analysis and converted to bar charts for clarity.

Presentation and Analyses of Results

Table 1: Simple percentage of the responses of Consumers on the empathetic ways required of companies to cushion the effects of consumers' covid-19 pandemic experiences

S/no	Item statements	% Yes
% No		

1. Prioritize personalization and customization in delivering of products and service	80	20
2. Understand when consumers request for stoppage of automatic payments due to loss of job	100	0
3. Partial or total elimination of subscription fees for easy access to materials and services	97	3
4. Cancel booking and reservation fees without extra charges	100	0
5. Create tele-health system for with virtual doctors and therapy appointments	100	0
6. Connect people that lost their jobs through covid-19 to ad-hoc jobs created by the pandemic	79	21
7. Track consumers' googling with cookies to understand what they actually like	81	34
8. Minimize customer efforts in accessing information from the company	100	0
9. Provide immediate feedback for questions and queries raised by customers	100	0
10. Create online social media networks for instant digital feedback	100	0
Total Percentage		93.7
07.8		

Table 1 above showed that Item numbers 2, 4 and 5 received 100% responses while items 7, 1 and 6 got the lowest responses of 81, 80 and 79 respectively. Generally, more than 80% of the consumers accepted that all the 7 items addressing empathy from companies to cushion the effects of consumers' covid-19 pandemic experiences were accepted.

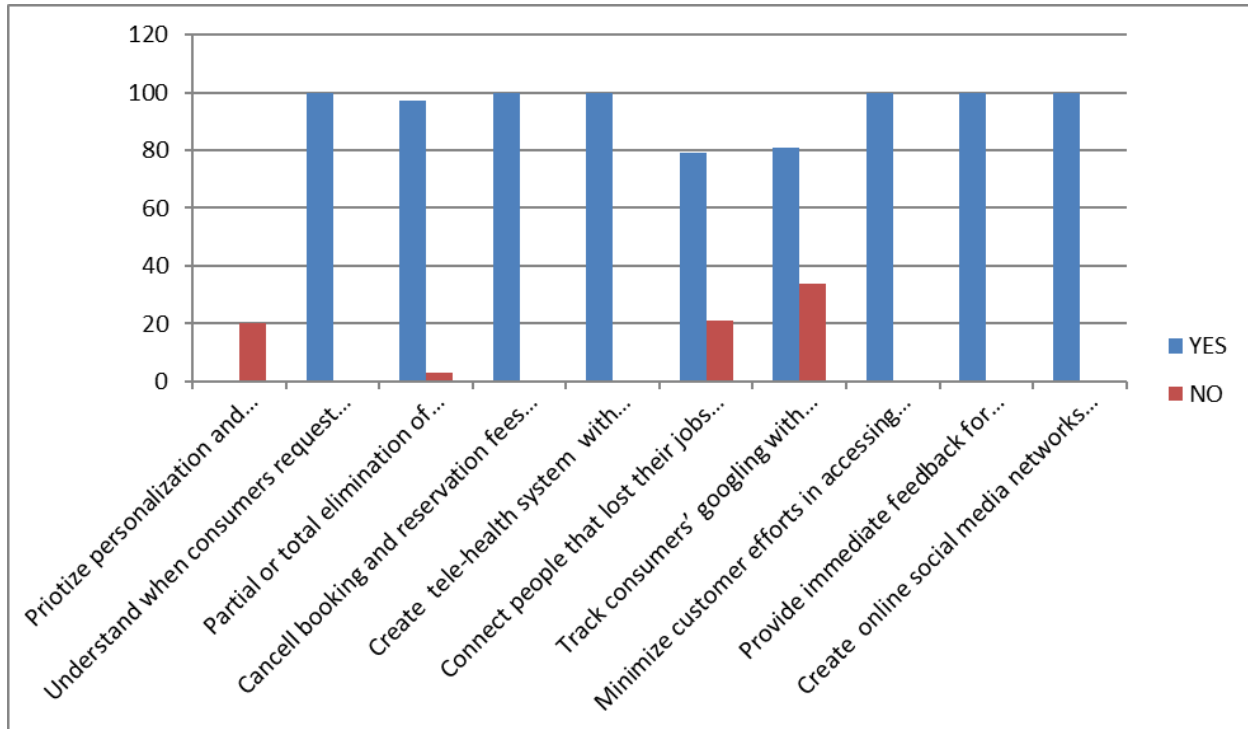


Figure 1: Empathy strategies needed from companies by consumers to cushion the effects of COVID-19 consumer pandemic experiences

Source: Researchers' findings from consumer survey analysis

Table2: Simple Percentage of the Responses of Consumers on the Adaptability Ways Necessary for them to Cushion the effects of consumers' covid-19 pandemic experiences

S/no	Item statements	% Yes	
		% No	% Yes
1.	Change thought process by accepting the sudden change caused by the pandemic	23	77
2.	Be optimistic about economic recovery	0	100
3.	Find creative ways to kill boredom like learning of new skills, online education	0	100
4.	Revive the spirit of living within your means and capacity	10	90
5.	Adopt conscious and mindful purchases	5	95

6. Collaborate with other consumers for bulk and cheap purchases	98	2
7. Embrace digital technologies to close up social gaps with families and loved ones	84	16
8. Engage in subsistent farming, at least, to cater for one of the basic needs (food)	100	0
9. Access COVID-19 government loans and grants to help bounce back to business	82	18
10. Explore the opportunity of this pandemic for other streams of income	100	0
Total Percentage	07.4	92.6

The data presented in table 2 showed that all the 10 items on adaptability strategies had their percentages ranging from 77-100 which are above the real limit of 50% indicating that all the respondents agreed with the items as adaptability strategies for cushioning their covid-19 experiences.

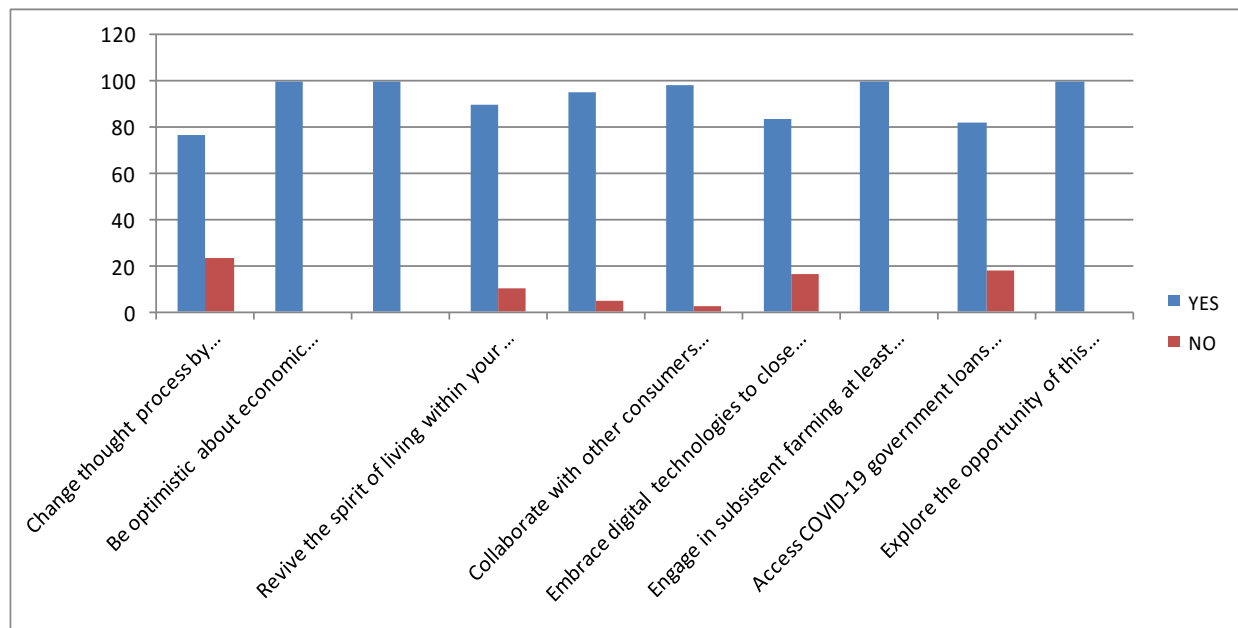


Figure 2: *Adaptability strategies necessary for consumers to cushion the effects of their covid-19 pandemic experiences for optimum survival in the new normal*

Source: *Researchers' result from consumer survey analysis*

Discussion of Findings

Empathy strategies needed from companies by consumers to cushion the effects of COVID-19 consumer pandemic experiences

Result in Table 1 revealed that all the items listed on empathy were accepted by the consumers as practical ways for companies to cushion the effects of COVID-19 consumer experiences. Item number 1 on Prioritizing personalization and customization in delivering of products and service tallied with the assertions of Thompson (2020) that individual differences go along with varying preferences which makes them feel a sense of belonging. For instance, allowing consumers to submit proposed designs for new products/services like making nose masks from the pieces of clothes to match the consumers outfit and also adding their preferred fragrance into hand-washes and sanitizers.

Findings on item number 2: to Understand when consumers request for stoppage of automatic payments due to loss of job, agrees with Kindzierski (2020) who maintained that consumers ask for stoppages of automatic product payments like standing orders are based on genuine reasons of loss of jobs and non-payment of salaries as in the case of recent Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)'s strike, should not be disputed. The findings of the study on Partial or total elimination of subscription fees for internet data, television channels (DSTV, GOTV, MYTV among others) to enable easy access to materials and services, corroborates with Mongalo (2020) who stated that many consumers find it difficult to renew their subscriptions because of the economic hardship occasioned by the pandemic. 98% of the subscribers whose subscriptions have elapsed observed that they have been enjoying free access to usually encrypted channels which was attributed to system upgrade and wished such could linger for a relatively long period. About 60% of them suggested for a conveniently prepaid Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) billing system, as adopted by the GSM and Electricity Service providers for flexible consumption, in contrast to the subsisting rigid

prepaid format. They also implored EEDC, whose tariff was recently hiked to consider the economic plights of the consumers.

The submission on short-term removal or drastic reduction of tariffs and fees are apt as most consumers have joined the digitalization bandwagon which serve as an entertainment source to cushion the effect of the pandemic. The move was seen as a way for the company to innovate with digital strategies to capture new marketplace opportunities for the growing digital customer segment (Chidozie & Abioye, 2019; Accenture, 2020). This factor was affirmed in the findings by Vader (2020) who remarked that healthcare providers' delivery charges for orders they place should be reduced in order to motivate them for being at the forefront of the pandemic fight.

The result found on Cancellation of booking and reservation fees without extra charges agreed with the assertion by Kindzierski (2020) acknowledging the waving of re-booking fees for issued flight tickets with the advent of the pandemic. The findings on Creating tele-health system with virtual doctors and therapy appointments was in consonance with the views of Morgan (2020), who stated that it will help consumers to obtain quality, easy, and quick access to health care systems. They are disposed to meet with doctor's appointment without disobeying the social distance rules. Findings on connecting people that lost their jobs through covid-19 to ad-hoc jobs created by the pandemic, yielded a result with corroborates the views in the work by Chidozie and Abioye (2019). The authors proposed that customers who lost their jobs should be incorporated in the new opportunities created by the pandemic such as production of safety equipments, sensitization of the public, fumigation of public areas to curb further spread, door-step delivery of essential needs like foodstuffs, among others. In consonance with the assertions of Kindzierski (2020) on tracking consumers' browsing with accepted cookies to understand what they actually like, it also tallies with Morgan (2020)'s view.

The findings on minimizing customers' efforts in accessing information from the company, agreed with Chidozie and Abioye (2020)'s assertions. The results on the provision of immediate feedback for questions and queries raised by customers as well as creation of online social media networks for instant digital feedback, all concurred with the submissions of kotler and Armstrong (2013) who had proposed the utilization of more engaging and interactive online content for quickest feedback. It is also in tandem with Kindzierski (2020) who advocated for the use of video in customer service to deepen relationships, build trust and human feelings. Additionally, Aitchison (2020) maintained that when customers' issues

are well resolved at first contacts and calls, the companies will soon win their loyalty and continuous patronage with referrals even beyond the pandemic era.

Adaptability strategies necessary for consumers to cushion the effects of their covid-19 pandemic experiences for optimum survival in the new normal

Table 2 shows that the findings on Change thought process by accepting the sudden change caused by the pandemic tallies with Willkomm (2019) who suggested that the moment of change should be turned into profitable opportunities. It also aligned with the views of David (2019) who advised that consumers should always prepare alternative sources of solution to easily adjust in such unfortunate mishappenings. And to also learn to improvise when there are constraints (Sheth, 2020). Instead of complaint, Economic Forum (2020), maintained that the pandemic discomfort should be utilized to forge a new paradigm shift. Contrarily, 23% of the subject with negative responses expressed that the crisis had already affected their mental status which hinders them from absorbing the rude shock. This implies psychological therapy is pertinent. The findings on being optimistic about economic recovery and finding creative ways to kill boredom like learning of new skills, online education are in line with Standish (2020). The study also corroborates with Mehta, Saxena, and Purohit, (2020), who posited the re-awakening the spirit of living within one's means or capacity that will help in conscious and mindful purchases. This pattern will help to initiate collaborative bulk and cheap buying (Orumor, 2020).

In congruence with the views of Orumor (2020), embracing digital technologies to close up social gaps with families and loved ones, was upheld. On the flip side, 16% of the respondents complained of lack of android phone with internet which creates more social gaps. Their reasons were attributed to low income. The findings also supported the recommendations of Mehta, Saxena, and Purohit, (2020), which supported that consumers should engage in at least subsistent level so as to cater for their basic need food. Orumor (2020)'s findings was affirmed when this study found out that access to COVID-19 loans and grants can help consumers to bounce back to business. The accessed loans and grants will also help them finance more opportunities discovered from this period for multiple streams of income for optimum economic survival.

Conclusion

At this pandemic period, consumers sincerely need smart companies that delight them promising what they can deliver but end up delivering more than promised.

Therefore, the empathetic treatment and assurances received by consumers from companies in this Covid-19 period will help them cushion the effects of a protracted downturn in fortunes and ever remain indelible in their minds. It is the surest way of retaining the loyalty of customers perpetually as well as attracting new ones even beyond the crisis period. Most importantly, consumers themselves need to wake up to the realities of the pandemic by accepting that life may no longer be the same again in the new normal hence the need for them to adapt swiftly so that the effects of the pandemic will be ameliorated maximally.

Recommendation

Companies should learn valuable lessons that will help them strategize for suitable customer experiences in the new normal, now and subsequently. Optimizing consumer Covid-19 experiences requires the development of mind-sets on 'test practices' rather than on 'best practices'. Advocacy should be channelled more towards a Return on Empathy (ROE) with less emphasis on a Return on Investment (ROI) where technical and logistic workers with empathy and compassion, will expertly handle consumers' issues consumer/company and societal optimum survival. This paradigm shift will definitely ensure smooth and positive transitioning experiences for panicked consumers.

Therefore, an innovative focus on a pragmatic dimension of training is imperative for employees to enable them create and deliver positive and memorable consumer experiences to cushion the effects of the pandemic. These trainings should be aligned with the new normal demands which are believed to help set high standards for employees' expectations that will definitely boost staff performance and consumer satisfactions.

Also, since the pandemic has abruptly pushed consumers out of their normal routines thereby unfolding three major observable trends – a refocus to health consciousness, a rise in sustainable consumption, and a growing love for local foods - they need to quickly adapt to the new habits and behaviours within their limits and capabilities for sustainable consumption. Consequently, envisaging more scenarios that may emerge/erupt subsequently such as citizens' protests, from the current pandemic, which could lead to an 'abnormal new normal' need not be overemphasized. And intrinsically developing self absorptive/coping/thriving measures by the consumers remains the ultimate means optimum survival.

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