

# **An exploration of the substitutions of British pub consumers during the COVID-19 crisis**

**Sianne Gordon-Wilson, University of Portsmouth**

## **Abstract**

This research draws on substitution theory to understand how British pub consumers describe their substitutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. A two-stage research method design is adopted, with an exploratory netnography stage followed by 13 semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper insight. Five themes emerge that are either direct substitutions for the physical closing of the pub venues (online social drinking and pub-dating alternatives), or they were indirect effects of the substituting venues (in-the-home drinking, different drinks in the home and no work-related substitutions). The findings show that drinking in pubs is a functional as well as a symbolic act. Key stakeholders are recommended to remain in contact with customers through blended online and offline activities to help keep the pubs relevant to them. This will benefit the pub sector long after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

## **Keywords**

Covid-19, crisis, pub consumer, pub sector, substitution theory

## 1. Introduction

The UK went into a full and national lockdown on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020. The public were advised to stay at home and minimise their contact with others to reduce the transmission rate of coronavirus (COVID-19). People were allowed to leave their houses for three main reasons: essential consumption, essential travel, and daily exercise, which ruled out the possibility of going to most of the British hospitality sector. Dining-in restaurants, pubs/bars, nightclubs, coffee shops, and gyms were all closed, thus suffering an immediate fall in revenue for different reasons whilst being committed to paying fixed costs, such as for their premises. Exceptions included some restaurants which were able to offer take-away or delivery services and a small number of hotels which remained open for front-line medical staff and for rough sleepers to prevent the spread of the virus. The UK Government reduced the social distance recommendation from two to one metre from July 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, and this enabled hotels, restaurants, and pubs to reopen. Not all establishments were able to do so, but 61.7% of pubs had opened by the end of July, and this had increased to 76.3% by the end of August (Bentley, 2020).

The pubs sector has been in a constant state of flux since it was allowed to open in July due to constant changes in government regulations aimed at mitigating the rate of infection. The frequency and short notice of changes has caused stock wastage (e.g. tapped real ale), financial losses, and pub employees being put on payment retention schemes. Not all pubs were allowed to open in areas with higher infection rates, such as Leicester, in July 2020. Nearly one quarter (27,000) of pubs, bars, and licensed premises still remained closed at the

beginning of September, and they may not ever be able to reopen (Bentley, 2020). The government imposed a 10 p.m. mandatory closing time for pubs in September (extended to 11 p.m. in December) and limited socialising groups to no more than six people. More pubs then needed to close due to local lockdown restrictions in areas where the virus continued to rise (e.g. in Liverpool in October 2020), and then all pubs had to close once again for four weeks during England's second lockdown from November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and then again for a third lockdown between January 5<sup>th</sup> and May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021<sup>1</sup>. Some pub and brewery businesses announced job cuts and pub closures during this period due to losses in sales and profits compared to the previous year (e.g. Mitchells & Butlers cut 1,300 jobs, Marston's 2,150 jobs) (Walsh, 2020).

This research aims to answer the following question: "How do British pub consumers describe their substitutions during the pandemic crisis?" By doing so, it makes the following three contributions. Firstly, it responds to Andrews and Turner's (2017) call for further empirical research into the pub retailing sector due to the limited research that currently exists. Pub retailing has the third highest workforce in numbers behind hospitality services and restaurants in the UK hospitality and tourism industry (Andrew & Turner, 2017). Secondly, it contributes to the growing amount of research into pandemics within the hospitality industry (e.g. Foroudi, Tabaghdehi, & Marvi, 2021; Li, Yao, & Chen, 2021; Tuzovic, Kabadayi, & Paluch, 2021) due to its focus on the COVID-19 context. No research has emerged to date on the impact of any pandemic crises on the pub sector. This is surprising given the significant financial contribution it makes to the UK economy (just under £25 billion in revenue in 2018; Mintel, 2019). Thirdly, the virus continues to challenge the pub sector, which has to undergo several changes. It is imperative for the sector to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Pubs with an outdoor area were allowed to open on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021 and provide outdoor table service only for groups of up to 6 individuals. Tables are restricted to groups of up to 6 people when pubs open indoors from May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

the impact of the first peak and national lockdown because the UK population did not have any similar experiences for comparison. This knowledge will “help apply the lessons learned towards recovery and normalcy” (Rivera, 2020), and thereby benefit the UK economy. Finally, this research extends substitution theory to a new field of hospitality management by exploring how British pub consumers were affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, it will help to provide an understanding of the substitutions they made when the pubs were closed during the lockdown.

This article consists of a literature review on crises, the pub sector, and substitution theory. It then discusses the two-stage research method design, which consists of netnography followed by semi-structured interviews. The results show the five themes that emerged, and a discussion concludes the article.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Crises Within Hospitality and Tourism Research*

A crisis has been explained as an unexpected event that creates uncertainty, threatens routines, and affects the accomplishment of tasks (Kutak, 1938). The impact of different crises has been studied within empirical research, but it generally seems more common within the tourism research area, whereas the coverage within the hospitality remit is more limited by comparison. The impact of economic and financial crises seems to be the most widely covered within hospitality research (Alonso-Almeida & Bremser, 2013; Eugenio-Martin & Campos-Soria, 2014; Henderson, 1999; Lee, Beamish, Lee, & Park, 2009; Okumus & Karamustafa, 2005). Different types of strategies have been suggested to help businesses retain customers in order to survive these types of crises, such as increasing marketing efforts and investing in new product development (e.g. Ang, Leong, & Kotler, 2000; Laitinen, 2000; Lee et al., 2009; Pearce & Michael, 1997).

Research into pandemics, by comparison, is definitely gaining traction, which is salient due to the ongoing global COVID-19 crisis that has currently infected over 159 million individuals in 222 countries (Worldometer, 2020). This is likely to continue until some form of prevention has been found or the vaccination becomes more widely accessible, and so consequently research on the COVID-19 crisis continues to increase. Examples of consumer-focused research within hospitality include Baum and Than Hai (2021) addressing how the pandemic has denied individuals the right to travel due to domestic and international travel restrictions caused by borders closing and a lack of international flights. Foroudi, Tabaghdehi, and Marvi (2021) found that the lockdown and social distancing restrictions had the most dominant effect on anticipated emotion, future desire, and consequently on consumers' demand for hospitality-related services and products. Additional research into social distancing has found that perceived isolation (e.g. from there being fewer tables and thus fewer guests in the restaurant) signal that things are not as before to consumers and decreases their well-being perceptions (Tuzovic, Kabadayi, & Paluch, 2021). Finally, consumers consider scarce hospitality businesses to be less safe and have lower consumer purchase intentions and preferences towards them. This effect is reduced when consumers are presented with more diagnostic external information (e.g. customer reviews) or when the consumption context lowers safety concerns (e.g. order food online and consume at home) (Li, Yao, & Chen, 2021).

## *2.2. The Pub Sector Prior to the COVID Crisis*

The UK pub sector was estimated to be worth just under £25 billion in terms of revenue in 2018, following an 11% increase between 2013 and 2018. This was driven by an increase in average prices and had occurred despite a fall in the number of pubs nationwide. The projected increase for 2023 was lower at 8%, with an estimated revenue of £27 billion for

that year, partly due to the ageing population (Mintel, 2019); however, this forecast was made before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Pubs are considered to be the centre of social and community life, places where people meet for a range of activities, such as to relax, to socialise, to share their daily experiences, and/or to watch televised sporting fixtures with fellow patrons (Jones & Comfort, 2020). Drinking alcohol away from the home is embedded in British leisure culture (Sandiford & Seymour, 2013), and this is assumed to be the key attribute of pubs (Sandiford & Divers, 2011). Pubs continue to be current in Britain, where individuals can go to have a civilised drink with other people from their community. (Watson & Watson, 2012). Regulars<sup>2</sup> view them as an extension of their home, and they have been found to form a strong attachment to particular spaces in the pub, such as a bar, table, or stool (Sandiford & Divers, 2019). Some pubs are even considered to be family-friendly places when they provide a welcoming, personalised, and hospitable service in an environment that reflects the community (Lugosi et al., 2020). Hence, pubs remain popular in the UK, with 9 out of 10 adults visiting them (Mintel, 2019), but this consists more of non-regular customers rather than the diminishing regulars (Sandiford & Divers, 2019).

However, the British pub retailing sector has undergone a long and sustained period of change. There have been numerous challenges to the pub industry, and a few examples will illustrate this. Many pubs struggled to survive in the economic climate (Cabras & Mount, 2017) prior to the pandemic. They have also had to adapt to challenges, such as higher duties, declining alcohol consumption, and increased competition (Martin, Jerrard, & Wright, 2019). This is in addition to numerous government regulations such as the Licensing Act (2003) extending pub opening hours, the Health Act (2006) banning smoking in pubs in 2008, the Supply of Beer (Tied Estate) Order (1989), and lastly The Supply of Beer (Loan Ties,

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<sup>2</sup> They are not referred to as 'regular consumers' because their relationship with the places extends beyond that of customers (Sandiford & Divers, 2019)

Licensed Premises and Wholesale Prices) Order 1989, which forced breweries to reduce their power and anti-competitive practices by disposing of most of their pubs (Sandiford & Divers, 2014). The management of pubs need be aware of the current issues and embrace any changes in the sector if they are going to survive. They could also adopt different strategies, such as the following: avoiding increasing prices by reviewing the costs of utilities, food- and drink-related ingredients, and employees; maximising profit potential by attracting new customers through the adoption and promotion of 'green' initiatives; evaluating the drinks offerings to include those making a positive contribution and those that are more popular; and improving customer service so as to exceed consumers' expectations, as this will help to build the customer base (Andrews & Turner, 2012).

### 2.3. *Substitution Theory*

The closing of pubs during the national lockdown would have had an impact on the high number of pub consumers in the UK who have been found to frequent them for various reasons. The lockdown was so extreme that any substitutes for pubs, such as bars, hotel bars, members clubs, social clubs, or even shisha bars, were also closed, so there were very limited alternatives available. Businesses need to know the substitutions consumers make when they are unable to have their initial choice. Furthermore, it is important for businesses to know whether customers will remain loyal in the long term to their substituted replacement or whether they will return to their initial preference when the crises are over (Arens & Hamilton, 2018). Consumers often choose a substitute product or service when a service they had planned to use is either sold out, too expensive, or becomes unavailable (Hamilton et al., 2014). A successful substitution strategy comprises two stages: substitute selection followed by substitute effectiveness. In the substitute selection stage, consumers choose an alternative product or service as a replacement for the one they initially preferred, while in the substitute

effectiveness stage, they need to perceive their selected product or service as being an effective substitute (Arens & Hamilton, 2018).

When consumers are not able to purchase their preferred good or service, they are more likely to choose something similar, which has attributes in common with the unavailable item (e.g. Arens & Hamilton, 2018; Huh, Vosgerau, & Morewedge, 2016; Urban, Johnson, & Hauser, 1984). It can therefore be said that services used for the same purpose generate greater competition due to their close similarity (Srivastava, Leone, & Shocker, 1981). Substitution effectiveness indicates the level of success of the replacement when purchased as an alternative. It consists of satisfaction with the replacement along with a reduced desire for the initially preferred alternative. Specifically, the replacement will be more effective if it meets the consumer's needs and reduces their desire for the initially preferred alternative. Thus, different replacements have been found to be more effective substitutes than others which are similar (Arens & Hamilton, 2016; Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989, 1990; Mizik & Jacobson, 2008), with Huh, Vosgerau, and Morewedge (2016) finding that cross-category substitutes perform better than lower-quality within-category alternatives. This has received additional support by Arens and Hamilton (2018), who found that alternative replacements need to draw attention to their distinct attributes rather than attributes that are common to both options. Emphasising common attributes does not reduce the desire for the initially preferred option. Marketing communications can be used to encourage consumers to select different alternatives as substitutions, as this will be less likely to happen in their absence (Arens & Hamilton, 2018).

The examples of substitutions made within hospitality research tends to fall in the accommodation remit. O'Connor and Frew (2004) recommend that hotels attract consumers directly rather than through online intermediaries so as to develop close customer relationships and insure long-term profitability. More recent uses include substituting Airbnb



with different hotel price categories (Guttentag & Smith, 2017), substituting information (volume of reviews and number of listings on sales history) on peer-to-peer short-term rental platforms (Xie, Mao, & Wu, 2019), the threat of peer-to-peer accommodation as a substitute for traditional hotels (Prayag & Ozanne, 2018), seasonal, weekend, and holiday threats to Airbnb (Sainaghi & Baggio, 2020), and substitutes in menu item pricing and menu placement decisions (Noone & Cachia, 2020).

In summary, research into pandemics is gaining traction due to the ongoing global COVID-19 crisis. There appears to be no research to date on the impact on the pub sector, which has survived numerous challenges over the years. Pubs continue to be relevant social and community hubs in the UK. The closing of pubs during the first national lockdown would have had an impact on the high number of pub consumers in the UK. Consumers often choose a substitute when their initial preference becomes unavailable (Hamilton et al., 2014). In line with substitution theory, a dissimilar replacement (c.f. substitution selection) will be more effective if it reduces the desire for the initially preferred alternative (c.f. substitution effectiveness).

### 3. Method

The data discussed in this article were collected as part of a larger project which explored consumption practices during the pandemic crisis in the UK. This research sought to understand how British pub consumers described their substitutions during the pandemic crisis by using their narratives within the COVID-19 context. Netnography adapts ethnographic research techniques to use information that is publicly available on online forums to identify and understand the needs and influences on decisions of relevant online consumer groups. It is less obtrusive, time-consuming, and elaborate than other research methods, and it has the advantage of revealing naturally occurring behaviours (Kozinets,

2002). This was the first study of this nature at the point of data collection, so netnography was used as an exploratory stage to identify consumption-related themes that were used to create the interview guide. These were later explored in greater depth through dialogue at the semi-structured interview stage, thereby producing richer and thicker data. Online platforms raise issues of trustworthiness in terms of any statements made and the identity of the statement maker, therefore Kozinets (2020) recommends using interviews to help overcome these weaknesses.

I have been a member of the two forums on Facebook that were used shortly after they had started, so I was naturally interacting and engaging on them, which gave me an emic appreciation (Kozinets, 2020). Additionally, they met the *entrée* requirements for online cultures and communities (i.e. relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich) (Kozinets, 2010). The ‘Portsmouth Coronavirus Support Group’ was created on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 as a public and visible group providing an informal network of volunteers to help support anyone self-isolating or at risk. It has 9,660 members. ‘SW19 Mums Network’ is a private and visible group with 15,812 members that was created in April 2012 for people to share ideas on places to go, to give recommendations, and to ask questions.

I observed that online communications relating to consumption organically unfolded when COVID-19 was reaching the UK and that that could be used as data. I took a non-participatory (passive) position (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017) by not commenting on any threads or posing any questions relating to this topic so as not to influence the dialogue. This stance is common for hospitality netnography studies (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Wahlen, 2018) so as not to impact on the quality of the data collected (Kozinets, 2010). I had a total of 294 viewing occasions on both forums, which were captured by taking of the relevant threads and their content. They were recorded with notes to create an immersion journal. Thematic analysis was used to unify the ideas, which were coded manually to

identify the topics used to create the interview guide. Since I did not have permission from the moderators to use any of the pandemic-crisis-related conversations, these themes were gathered for exploratory purposes and led into a qualitative inquiry in the second stage. The netnography did not require ethical approval, as I was not engaging in “interaction data-collection operations” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 251).

### *3.1. Data Collection and Analysis*

Ethical approval was granted by the university where I worked. The netnography stage revealed themes that were related to consumption during the pandemic crisis. The data from questions relating to expenditures, social activities (including going to the pub), food, diet and alcohol consumption were used to form the basis of this research for the period throughout March and April 2020 in the lead-up to lockdown and during the four weeks of the coronavirus peak when all pubs were closed. These themes formed the questions that were explored in the semi-structured interviews and consisted of open-ended questions so as to allow the participants the time and flexibility to explore their thoughts and views (Thompson, 1997) (see Appendix 1). Participants were recruited through a recruitment advertisement on my different social media channels (Facebook and Twitter). They all came from my virtual social network, and I ensured that they were not virtually acquainted by checking their lists of friends and profiles. The interviews were conducted between May 3<sup>rd</sup> and May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, just days after the UK peak on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (Cuthbertson, 2020). The sample size of the participants was determined by their availability. The interviews were conducted online, with the participants and the researcher remaining in their own homes due to different households not being allowed to mix during the lockdown and were audio recorded. The interviews lasted 11 hours and 2 minutes in total, and ranged from 22 minutes to 1 hour and 34 minutes (47 minutes on average), with the longer interviews being from participants who were more fearful of catching the virus and those whose consumption had

experienced the most change. The sample had an average age of 44 years and consisted of six men and seven women. Their socio-economic profiles indicate that the participants in this research can be described as middle-class. Individuals with a higher socio-economic status have been found to drink more alcohol than those from a lower class (Collins, 2016). Aliases have been given to preserve their anonymity (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participants' Profiles

Name	Age	Gender	Profession	Region in the U.K.
Mark	49	male	IT Manager	Greater London
Charles	43	male	Economic Researcher	South East
Bob	66	male	Retired (Former Project Manager)	West Midlands
Evie	42	female	Senior Governance Officer	South East
Nigel	44	male	Financial Sales Manager	Greater London
Andrew	32	male	Construction Project Manager	West Midlands
Claudette	42	female	Finance and Premises Assistant	Greater London
Debbie	46	female	IT Consultant	Greater London
Lauren	45	female	Stay-at-Home Mum	South East
Javine	42	female	Senior Probation Officer	North West
Anita	37	female	Freelance Graphic Designer	Greater London
Audrey	41	female	Stay-at-Home Mum	Greater London
Darren	43	male	Sales Director	East Midlands

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to move from description to interpretation (Clarke & Braun, 2013). A continual iterative analysis process was used to analyse the data (Spiggle, 1994). Coding was manual to ensure the researcher remained immersed in the data. It started with the author reading the transcripts several times line by line to identify the key themes, which were then organised into higher-order concepts by categorising and selecting recurring themes in the codes. The theoretical review then involved moving continuously between existing theories and the data, which uncovered that research on substitution theory fitted well with the data. Following further coding, five themes were refined and developed according to the original theory. Thick descriptions of the themes (Geertz, 1975) were produced to illustrate the substitutions made by UK consumers when the pubs were closed. Finally, the researcher contacted the participants again to confirm that the interpretations matched their proposed experiences, thoughts, and emotions related to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

#### 4. Findings

The findings draw on substitution theory and represent the narratives of the participants when the pubs were closed during the lockdown, just after the first COVID-19 peak. Consumers were found to replace drinking in pubs with either social drinking online or with completely different activities that did not involve drinking at all. These were direct substitutions for the physical closing of the pub venues. The themes were online social drinking and pub-dating alternatives. Consumers were also found to change their pub-related drinking behaviours along with their attitudes towards those with whom they drank during the pandemic crisis. These changes occurred as a result of the pubs being closed and they were indirect effects of the substituting venues. The themes were increased in-the-home drinking, different drinks in the home, and no work-related substitutions. In the following sections, examples and relevant

quotes are presented under each theme. Table 2 provides additional data to illustrate the discussions that appear further in the main text.

Table 2. Additional Data to Support Empirical Observations

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotations
<p>Pub Closures Increasing</p> <p>Drinking in the Home to Relieve Boredom</p>	<p>Occasional pub customers not changing their drinking consumption</p> <p>More regular pub users drinking more to relieve stress and boredom</p>	<p>“Lauren: “Probably only once every other week [going to the pub]... I think, on the whole, it's about the same [alcohol intake].”</p> <p>Claudette: “In terms of once a fortnight as a pub lunch with the family and with friends or husband.... I'm not drinking anymore.”</p> <p>Javine: “We're buying a lot more alcohol in order to cope with the situation... Because I'm a bit more stressed and probably because I'm at home and the weather's been nicer. For example, yesterday which was a Wednesday, I</p>

		would never normally have a drink on a Wednesday. I'd had quite a stressful couple of days.”
Different drinks in the home		Evie: “Well funnily enough my husband bought lots of different types of alcohol, like cider and things, so I’ve been consuming some of the stuff that he’s bought. I haven’t done it for about a year, but I drank cider the other day. I get through some of the stuff that he’s buying...gin and tonic, white wine, and now I’m drinking more red wine because he buys red wine.”

#### 4.1. *Seeking Alternatives to Pub-Based Dating*

Nigel is a single guy who had tended to take his dates to pubs; however, this was not possible during the lockdown as no pubs were open. Nigel expressed that he did not think he should stop dating just because we were in a pandemic crisis and that he enjoyed the social aspect of dating. Therefore, he had substituted meeting his dates in pubs with conversing over the phone, and if he felt there was potential, it would lead to him inviting them out for walks or

bicycle rides around London. Nigel shared that he thought the absence of alcohol had added a different dimension to his dates. Also, he considered the dates to be more meaningful as he was getting to know the 'real person' more as there were fewer distractions and disruptions from the pub environment (e.g. other people around them, the music) or even from alcohol having an impact on their behaviour. He said that he considered these new forms of dates to be more transparent, and so he found that it was more apparent whether they had a connection and were well-suited. He shared that he felt comfortable doing this as he did not have any issues conversing with others and thought he had lots to talk about. He did not feel that he needed alcohol to help boost his confidence or conversational skills. Nigel would never have considered these types of dates previously, simply because it had never occurred to him. Taking his date to the pub had become his dating norm before the pandemic, but this had to change during the pandemic as it was no longer viable. Nigel thought that the new type of dating activity was the kind that his grandparents went on, and he hoped that elements of this would continue after the pandemic. He did, however, miss the drinking aspect as he thought it was more fun and relaxing. He also recognised that the new type was only possible when the weather was dry, which obviously would not usually have been a consideration for him, as pubs are suitable in all weather. Some of Nigel's views are shared in the following quote:

Nigel: "It's actually quite nice...I think there's a lot of people that struggle in that, because they've probably got s\*\*t [poor] chat unless they've had a few drinks down them...Hopefully, some good habits will stick out of this."

#### *4.2. Adopting Online Drinking as a New Social Activity*

Both Mark and Nigel had mainly been outside-of-the home social drinkers before lockdown. Mark expressed that he did not feel the need to drink inside the home before the pandemic as he had done a sufficient amount of drinking outside of it. Drinking was more of a social



activity for him, and he confessed that Thursdays after work tended to be a big drinking night. Mark tended to drink one or two times a week on average, mostly in pubs after work with his colleagues or to catch up with his mates. Nigel went out three or four times a week, including to pubs before the pandemic. This was normal for him and formed a major part of his life. He also shared that he did not feel the need to drink in the home as he had an active drinking life outside of it. He went to pubs after work to socialise with his colleagues or meet up with his friends, to take his dates to, or to catch up with his non-work friends over the weekend. Nigel's social life is described in the following quote:

Nigel: "Well, certainly all the weekend, and then maybe a day or two in the week, so maybe four... That's ranging from catching up with a friend to going and having some wild night."

Mark and Nigel were not allowed to meet up with anybody from outside their household during the lockdown. Both of them sought and adopted alternatives as a result of this, which evolved to them both arranging social drinks over videoconferencing platforms, such as House Party and Zoom. This was something that neither had previously done, in terms of either online drinking or drinking in the home. They found it to be a great way to still interact and catch up with their mates in a relaxed environment: in their home and with a drink. Alcohol consumption is usually a group and public activity rather than a solitary or individual one (Sandiford & Seymour, 2013). Nigel and Mark both expressed how they considered it to be a suitable alternative due to the restrictions in place. Both admitted that this would be temporary because it was not as good as actually physically meeting their mates and drinking outside of the home, which concurs with the findings of Pakdaman and Clapp (2021), who found that videoconferencing calls were perceived as poor substitutes for in-person drinking interactions. They were still drinking considerably less in terms of quantity, as their drinking

frequencies had decreased; Mark was not “binging” on a Thursday after work, for example.

The following quotes illustrate this:

Mark: “...We have Zoom calls. Zoom calls with our friends last night...Well, I'd probably say that I'm drinking slightly less just because I'm not going out, say like work or meeting people locally and having slightly more than I would do because it's at home.”

Nigel: “Yes, you'd have House Party drinks and this kind of stuff. Like I said, I'm not one of these people who would unwind in front of the TV over a bottle of wine. That's not me, or relax with a beer in front of a TV, but I've become more like that middle-class English stereotype because of the lockdown and because you just have a Zoom call with friends or whatever.”

#### *4.3 Pub Closures Increasing Drinking in the Home to Relieve Boredom*

The crisis seemed to have less impact on the drinking behaviours of the participants who were more occasional pub consumers (see Table 2). This was different for the participants who frequented pubs more regularly. The closure of the pubs and the pandemic seemed to give some of the participants an excuse to drink more alcohol in the home than they usually would. Grossman, Benjamin-Neelon, and Sonnenschein (2020) and Gordon-Wilson (2021) found that individuals consumed more drinks and increased their number of drinking days during the pandemic crisis to relieve stress and boredom. Sandiford and Divers (2014) showed how some people visit pubs to escape their home and to enjoy company. Charles drank regularly in pubs with his mates and work colleagues before the pandemic. This happened around two or three times a week on average. He would have the odd glass of wine at home also, but he made a conscious effort not to drink every day. Charles confessed that he actually increased his drinking frequency to every day during the lockdown. This was mostly

due to boredom, as drinking would help him to occupy his time because he had nowhere to go and because he missed the social aspect of pubs, which the following quote shows:

Charles: “I’m drinking every single day, whereas before I would try and have a day or two off a week...boredom and despair.”

Audrey would usually drink on Friday and Saturday nights with her husband before the pandemic to celebrate having more free time over the weekend. This took place both inside and outside of the home in pubs. She would meet up with their friends, meet up with other families, and have date nights in the pub. She confessed that her number of non-drinking days had reduced during the pandemic, and she had started to drink on a couple of weekdays in her home during the lockdown. She expressed that this had never happened before. It seemed that her threshold was lowered during the crisis as a result of the pandemic and the nature of lockdown in terms of what she deemed acceptable. She shared that it was something relaxing and fun to do to help pass the time due to being bored and not being able to visit places, such as pubs, to help add variety to her daily activities. She also missed the social aspect of drinking outside of her home. Drinking acted as a distraction and helped her to forget and therefore temporarily escape the negative aspects associated with the crisis, which she shared in the following quote:

Audrey: “Stress, I suppose. The whole situation. This situation is quite, of course, it's unprecedented. It's completely abnormal...You still can't go out. I feel like I'm drinking to—I don't know—just to relax I suppose.”

#### *4.4. Different Drinks in the Home*

When exploring the meanings associated with alcohol use, Brierly-Jones et al. (2014) found that home-drinking habitus particularly used wine as a source of cultural capital, whereas those in the traditional habitus consumed lager, beer, and spirits to have fun in social settings.

Mark revealed that he was drinking different types of drinks during lockdown, now that he could only drink inside the home. These were different drinks to what he would have drunk in pubs before the pandemic. He had tended to drink more beer in pubs, but this had now changed to wine in the home, which was mainly because his partner really only drank wine. So, he had changed to drinking wine to accommodate his partner so they could drink together in the home when a bottle had been opened, which the following quote shows (see Table 2 for additional quotes to illustrate this):

Mark: “Five pints of beer...I would do a bit more wine because [his partner] may open a bottle, and then she'll offer me a glass, so I'll have some.”

Charles was also drinking different types of alcohol in the home than he had done in pubs. He had tended to drink draught beer in pubs two or three times a week on average, but this was not possible to access in the home or from a supermarket. He had therefore switched to drinking red wine at home, which he did not drink in pubs because he thought the price premium was too high, making it too expensive. He had opened various wine delivery accounts as a result of not being able to drink in the pub and due to drinking more wine at home. This was to ensure that he had sufficient wine in stock due to encountering many supply issues and longer delivery times. His decision had been driven by price; he had initially joined up with a money-off coupon to reduce the cost of the case. The companies would offer him a selection in the case due to their limited supply. This had the advantage of introducing him to different types that he would never previously have considered. This worked well if he liked them as he would then be inclined to add them to his repertoire with his future purchases. However, their cross-selling efforts would backfire if he did not like some of the bottles, although at least he would then know what to avoid buying. This is illustrated by the following quote:

Charles: “Yeah but it’s a bit risky because some of them are not too good...I look at it more like, this is what they think, you know? This is their case that they think is going to blow your socks off, to show they are a good company, whereas if they send you a few dodgy ones, you think...”

Darren had saved money as a result of not being able to drink in pubs at weekends, which he had done before the pandemic crisis. The savings he made from this, among other things (e.g. reduced transport and entertainment expenses), meant that he could now afford to treat himself by buying more expensive alcohol. This included more expensive bottles of red wine and brandy. He expressed that they added an element of positivity during the rather bleak COVID-19 time. The following quote explains this:

Darren: “Yes, I suppose I’m treating myself, actually, because there are all the things that I can’t treat myself to, so I’m thinking, ‘Do you know what, I’m actually going to get a bottle of XO Brandy’.”

#### *4.5. No Work-Related Substitutions*

Charles, Mark, and Nigel all shared how they had tended to socialise with their colleagues during the week, directly after their working day, in pubs near their offices before the pandemic crisis. This helped them to develop networks in their workplace. It is also considered critical for success in business (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). Sandiford and Divers (2014) describe pubs as being third places because they provide a sociable alternative to home or the workplace, which help to create and reinforce relationships (Sandiford, 2019). Thus, they provide an informal meeting place on neutral ground for social interactions. Charles, Mark, and Nigel all considered this to be enjoyable and necessary in helping them to forge working relationships by identifying commonalities and shared interests. Additionally, it contributed towards an enjoyable working experience. This did not continue during the

pandemic crisis because they were all working from home, and the pubs were closed. The workplace, as a common ground and a place to gather, had now been removed. There was nowhere they could socialise and unwind together now that all the pubs were shut. They were not able to take public transport and meet up with any colleagues or friends, as this was not deemed to be essential travel. They all disclosed that they were not interested in meeting their colleagues outside of work as this was not the sort of relationships they had. Socialising with them had been more an enjoyable extension of their working day. They saw their colleagues in online meetings and all of the participants shared that they were looking forward to their work drinks culture resuming after the pandemic crisis. The following quote also shows how Charles had more disposable income during the lockdown as a result of not having any social-activity-related expenses because his usual establishments were not open:

Charles: "I've been saving money in terms of entertaining expenses... Well yeah, going to the pub, basically, or anything else you might do, going out, obviously you can't do any of that anymore, so I think probably like most people, I'm saving money on outgoings."

Nigel shared his concern that the closure of the pubs had impacted negatively on his external working relationships. His job involved him "getting in front of clients, finding out what they need, trying to extract more revenue from them." He was no longer able to physically meet his clients as different households were not able to mix at the start of lockdown. Additionally, there was no longer anywhere for him to establish and build relationships, generate business, network, and persuade his clients to increase the amount of revenue they put into the business he worked for. He had usually conducted this element of his job in pubs. He expressed that he found the pub environment more relaxing and an easier place in which to conduct his work, as it was more enjoyable and less rigid, especially when a few drinks were involved. He thought that the addition of alcohol helped to lighten the mood. He did not consider it to be

appropriate to try this in a virtual environment as it was less direct. It was difficult to schmooze them, and it was less enjoyable. He focused on keeping in contact with his existing clients during the lockdown to keep these relationships ticking over rather than on gaining new clients or persuading clients to increase their investments in the organisation he worked for. He expressed how vulnerable he felt in not being able to fully fulfil his role, which the following quote illustrates:

Nigel: “That has made me a bit concerned because you’re just, like, “Well, if you’re a sales guy and your job is to be in front of people and you can’t be in front of people, why do you need a sales guy?””

## 5. Discussion

### *5.1 Theoretical Contributions*

The findings show that drinking in pubs is a functional as well as a symbolic act. The drinking element is functional, and it can be substituted in the home or socially online. The symbolic element represents the pub experience; the social and physical aspects that are very specific to pub environments and are difficult to replicate or find a substitution for. Substitution theory consistently finds that different replacements are more effective substitutes than other similar ones (e.g. Arens & Hamilton, 2016; Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989, 1990; Mizik & Jacobson, 2008). Although consumers are relatively ambivalent about finding a substitution, they are relatively able to do so. The pandemic crisis is a very forced and extreme condition in which consumers have behaved differently because replacement alternatives were not readily available due to the nature of the lockdown. Both the pandemic and the pub sector elements show how these two new research areas contribute to substitution theory.

The narratives reveal how the different substitutions did not pose a threat to the participants’ initial preference of going to the pubs. The action of the participant who went for walks or

bicycle rides represented a very different substitute for dating, which had no connection or similarity to his initial preferences. The participant had a long history of taking his dates to pubs. He could have tried to recreate a similar alternative by bringing drinks along to his dates, for example. However, he chose completely unrelated replacements. Even though this was enjoyed by the participant in question, he expressed that he still missed the pub. Not only does this show how individuals do not behave as expected during a pandemic crisis, but it shows the degree of attachment and strength of their initial behaviour. It illustrates that because this individual was so attached and committed to something (dating in pubs), then they were less likely to accept a replacement for this. This was also true for the participants who frequented pubs for business or work-related activities. They chose to temporarily pause until they were able to resume the action rather than finding a substitute. They could have tried to create the third space online (c.f. Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) to connect with their work colleagues or external contacts in a less formal way, for example. This gives a sense that they had invested time in going to pubs and that it had formed part of their long-term behaviour. However, the pandemic had forcefully detached them from being able to do so. The fact that they looked forward to returning to this further illustrates their degree of attachment and commitment to pubs for work-related activities. Both of these examples show how the strength of the initial preference mediates any substitutes, as individuals are less likely to accept any replacement when they have a strong level of attachment. The less regular pub users also support this. They had less time invested in going to pubs, so they had less attachment, which meant they were satisfied with their substitutions.

Drinking in the home is already a normalised activity of many drinkers' consumption routines (Holloway et al., 2008). However, the narratives show how drinking in the home or socially online were not able to compete with the individuals' initial preference of wanting to drink in a pubs, and so they were not effective substitutes. These participants seemed to miss



something in addition to the functional side of pubs serving alcohol, as this was substituted, but they were still bored or wanting to drink more. This suggests that there was something different that was not as obvious or easy to substitute. A pubscape is a service offering that excites customer interest by positioning pubs as destinations that fit their current customer expectations and aspirations (Martin, Jerrard, & Wright, 2019). This contributes to a pub being a welcoming, relaxing, and enjoyable environment. This is very specific to each pub and difficult to replicate in the home environment. Alcohol was chosen as an easier, more manageable, and nuanced substitution, but it appeared to be a poor one that seemed to result in some of the participants drinking to anaesthetise themselves to compensate for the lack of stimuli and distractions provided by the pubscape. Certain pub-related characteristics are difficult to replace, such as friendly and engaging bar staff, general conversations including those with neighbouring tables and other pub consumers, and the different physical setting. These help to provide variety, entertainment, and a distraction in pub venues, which result in some of the participants drinking less than they were doing at home. Drinking alcohol at home seemed to provide the participants with maximum pleasure from the most marginal utility. This implies that individuals maximise their pleasure from poor substitutions that have a perceived ease of access.

## *5.2 Managerial Implications*

There are different initiatives that the pub sector could adopt to support the functional (alcohol) and symbolic (pubscape) elements when the pubs are closed during a pandemic crisis. The key priority should be for all stakeholders to remain in contact through blended online and offline activities to help keep pubs relevant to customers, which will be beneficial when they reopen. Pub managers could work exclusively with breweries and local suppliers to serve drinks that cannot be bought from other types of establishments, such as draught or local beer options, along with running promotions such as “beer of the month”. This would

help to differentiate them from the offerings of grocery stores or off-licences, which would help to remove their competition. Pubs could give away free tasters to introduce their customers to their new products and offer incentive promotions to encourage repeat purchases. Drinks could be sold in different packaging options to suit different occasions: dating, online drinking, birthdays, anniversaries, or even relaxing. They could even be sent as gifts to external business clients ahead of online business meetings to reinforce that they have not been forgotten. Organisations could also send the drinks to their employees to try and foster the after-work drinking culture through online social catch-ups. Drinks could be delivered by the pubs via linking with existing and established food delivery companies (e.g. Deliveroo, Just Eat).

Pub employees and managers could also run virtual entertainment to help maintain their community ties, which will help to alleviate the boredom and monotonous home environment of their customers. This could include pubs running different online activities, such as quizzes, slot machines, home-brewing classes, music events (e.g. DJs, live music, jukebox), competitions (e.g., virtual bingo, karaoke, charades, darts), comedy nights, and broadcasting sports events. This could be done through video conferencing programmes (e.g. Facebook live) or through virtual reality viewing platforms. It is important for these to be facilitated from inside the pub or for this to be replicated virtually, as the pubscape is accepted and enjoyed by customers.

### *5.3 Limitations and Future Research*

This research is, of course, subject to limitations. A benefit of adopting a qualitative methodology in this research is that it enabled key areas to be explored. However, this needs to be considered with a degree of caution due to it being the participants' social reality and within a specific pandemic context. A larger sample with broader demographics could help reveal whether any differences exist across social classes, generational cohorts, geography

(e.g. across the UK), or pub format (e.g. urban vs rural, chains vs independents). This research could also form a longitudinal study, gathering data on any changes that occur in subsequent lockdowns throughout the pandemic. Finally, the data suggest that the interesting attachment and ease of access conditions of substitution theory can be expanded and tested in other contexts.

## *6.0 Conclusion*

This research has shown how British pub consumers describe their substitutions within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The study contributes to the growing amount of pandemic research concerning the hospitality sector by looking at pubs, on which there is currently no research (to the author's knowledge). The participants showed how pubs are an integral part of their social and work life. The narratives illustrate how pubs consist of a functional and symbolic element, the latter being unique and difficult to replicate or substitute. We currently do not know how long this pandemic crisis will last due to its unprecedented nature. Pubs have remained resilient and relevant throughout various challenges over the years, and they must continue to do so. It is important for the pub sector to remain adaptable, learn from previous lockdowns, and to be inclusive with respect to all its stakeholders, which can now be achieved with the help of the virtual environment. Pubs need to continue providing both tangible (product) and intangible (pubscape, entertainment, employees, and drinking occasions) elements to remain relevant and enjoyable for their customers. This can be through a blended approach, which will benefit them long after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

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## Appendix 1: Interview questions relating to this research

1. To what extent has your life has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic in terms of

- work (location, time and pay),
- expenditures/financial circumstances (income and outgoings),
- social activities (outings to restaurants, the cinema, pubs, bars, sporting events),
- food and diet,
- holidays and travel?

2. How have your shopping habits changed during coronavirus pandemic in terms of:

- visiting supermarkets,
- online grocery delivery,
- online non-grocery delivery,
- take-away delivery services,
- total food spend including eating out?

3. How has your consumption changed since the coronavirus lockdown took effect in terms of:

- alcohol intake,
- smoking/vaping?