

# **CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN TIMES OF CORONAVIRUS: THE CASE OF COLOMBIA**

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper looks at the material and non-material ways the citizens of Colombia had to adapt to the COVID19 pandemic. In the process, the culture of the country was impacted, with consequences that we are just beginning to discern.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On January 12 of 2020, the World Health Organization, or OMS for its initials in Spanish, confirmed that a novel coronavirus was the cause of an illness affecting the lungs in a group of people in China (Weiss, 2020). More than 15,000 kilometers away, for Colombians, it was an interesting piece of international news but nothing else. Little did they know how their lives and those of the rest of the world would be affected. On March 6, 2020, a 19-year old female patient who recently traveled to Milan, Italy, became the first confirmed case in Colombia (Reuters, 2020). Later, the taxi driver who picked her up at the airport also got infected. On March 15, there were already 45 confirmed cases, and President Ivan Duque announced the suspension of classes for all public and private schools and universities in the country (COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, n.d.). On March 16, with positive tests totaling 57, he declared a state of emergency and all sea and land borders closed. By March 20, an obligatory lockdown was in place (Cobb, 2020), initially until April 21 but re-instated several times as the pandemic progressed. By May 14 of 2021, there were more than 3 million confirmed cases and 79,261 deaths (World Health Organization, 2021), and unfortunately, still counting.

Countries across the world declared mandatory stay-at-home measures, closing schools, businesses, and public places. Some governments were faster in reacting to the pandemic than others. Colombia has been praised for confronting the threat early on, compared to Brazil to the south and the USA to the north. Dozens of pharmaceutical companies and researchers began working on tests, treatments, and vaccines. Faced with millions of deaths, the push for the human race to survive the pandemic became the primary concern in the world.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways this history-altering event has forced the entire Colombian culture to reorganize its social arrangement and behaviors. It will focus on the material and non-material ways the culture adapts to the new norm of ever-present detrimental viruses. Due to the globalization of commerce, international traveling, and higher levels of human interaction, a virus can reach a population faster than before.

## **CULTURAL ADAPTATION**

National culture, the typical behavior of the inhabitants of a nation, which distinguishes them from other countries, can be analyzed based on non-material and material components. Although national culture is dynamic, the changes are usually gradual, except when an event of great magnitude affects the entire country, like a significant innovation, a war, a discovery, or a natural disaster. For Colombia, a major cultural adaptation occurred when the first Spaniards arrived on the country's Caribbean shores in the 15th century. Its surviving inhabitants at the time were forced to mold their behavior to the new reality of colonization. As a result, a new religion was

adopted, and so were the language and the way of doing business. New traditions emerged in the amalgamation that ensued. Not since the 1980s, when the country was immersed in a drug trafficking war, has the fabric of the society been impacted as it is today, as we witness a unique pandemic whose consequences we are beginning to discern.

## Material culture



Figure 1 Colombian woman with mask

Material culture includes all the society's physical objects, such as its tools, technology, and means of transportation (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition, 2016). Another name for material culture is artifacts, including physical things like the architecture of houses, the clothing we wear, the food we eat, and the music we listen to. Perhaps the most representative artifact of this era is the face mask, not only of the standard NK95 that meets the CDC requirements for a respirator but also the masks people started making at home and selling to show their individuality and identity (see Figure 1).

According to research (Milling, 2020)) the

Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends wearing masks in a public setting such as grocery stores and pharmacies where social distancing measures are challenging to maintain.



Figure 2-CoronApp Colombia

In addition to masks, and from a technology point of view, we see the proliferation of mobile applications to manage, prevent, detect and trace Covid-19 (see figure 2). The Colombian government, thru its website

[coronaviruscolombia.gov.co](http://coronaviruscolombia.gov.co) offers its citizens the resources to self-diagnose and receive

recommendations about the virus and mapping, monitoring, and data collection by the Center of Emergency Operations of the National Institute of Health (INS). Such an application named CoronApp featured similar functionality to those in South Korea and Singapore (Presidencia de la Republica, 2020). The app has four functions: to provide information, to allow the reporting of symptoms, to provide mobility passports, and to activate contact-tracing efforts (Walsh, 2020).

Along the same line, the second-largest city in the country, Medellin, also implemented a mobility passport and a city-run website and campaign -- Medellin Me Cuida (Medellin Takes Care of Me). It relies on QR codes that allow people to travel to work, doctor's appointments, schools, and shopping malls. The data can be cross-referenced to generate heat maps to implement quarantines. By June of 2020, 90 percent of Medellin's metro area had entered their information into the app, having been downloaded 9 million times (Walsh, 2020)).

The strategy kept the virus under control and was hailed as a medical marvel. Even though the country was going thru its third wave, the city's overall cases were still low compared to other cities in the region.

Other examples of widespread technology tools during the pandemic were mobile applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype for video calls, Slack and Discord for gamers, and Houseparty for social meetings and online parties. However, the most useful applications of the outbreak due to its costs, simplicity, and speed were Zoom, Meet, and Teams, used by businesses and schools to share presentations and conduct meetings and classes remotely. Although the face-to-face meeting is essential in building relationships and trust, the pandemic showed that there is always an opportunity that an alternative approach would work. Businesses soon realized that when all the participants know each other, videoconferencing could replace face-to-face meetings and save money while providing flexibility, the same level of interaction with new features. Many of these tools already existed before the pandemic, but the outbreak accelerated its adoption, made us improve them with new features, and show that we could do it. Most online education platforms like Coursera and EDX began offering free courses for Colombians, waiving fees on nutrition, art, music, law, philosophy, economics, and math courses (Semana, 2021)). In addition to more than 100 courses, thru Crehana and iNNpalsa. (Semana, 2020). Thru the ministries of technology and information, work, commerce, industry, and tourism, the government opened 3,800 courses and 400 specializations for free to 50,000 Colombians who lost their jobs due to the pandemics (Morales, 2020)

Even workspaces affected by the outbreak; thanks again to cloud services technologies and collaboration tools, companies no longer need to house workers in a central location to perform essential tasks. The pandemics showed this to be true, especially for knowledge workers, to the point that hybrid and remote work could become part of the new normal. Enhanced project management tools, office productivity apps, and enterprise software give managers more insights into employee productivity. According to Detwiler (2021), in a survey conducted in February of the same year, more than 65% of remote workers would prefer to split their time between



Figure 3 - Signage at a hospital

working from home and going into an office. Other studies have shown that 7 in 10 Americans would like to work remotely at least 1-2 days per week. Research released by Salesforce found that 59% of respondents believed that hybrid work would improve their psychological wellbeing, and 54% thought it would improve their physical wellbeing. Yet another survey from LiveCareer found that nearly one-third (29%) of employees would quit if they were no longer allowed to work remotely. Although these studies were conducted in the US, we can extrapolate that similar sentiments apply to Colombians. One clear consequence of the pandemic, here to stay, is that companies are embracing a flexible, hybrid model, with workers contributing from any place in the world.

The country has witnessed the emergence of other physical changes. 2020 was the year of reorganizing homes to create an area dedicated to online work; the fitting of restaurants to offer dining al fresco; the reconfiguring of shops to maintain 2 meters distance; the placing of sneeze guards in retail stores and offices; to the restricted space in parks and public spaces. The market is now demanding more hygienic, touchless interactions

thru the use of technology. For example, before the pandemic, going through airports security checks implied personnel physically holding travelers' passports and checking the information against databases. In contrast, now travelers are directed to scan their passports or identification documents themselves, avoiding the handling of documents by others. Stores likewise had increased self-checkout stands and tap-and-go smartphone payments, bolstering the contactless systems they put in place when the pandemic began.

Other tangible, visual, and recognizable objects to vividly remind Colombians that they were indeed experiencing a new normal was the proliferation of posters, floor demarcation, and signage found at the entrances of buildings or shops admonishing clients and consumers to wear a mask, keep



Figure 4- COVID 19 Signage in Cartagena, Colombia

social distances, and stay at home as much as possible (see figure 4)

### **Non-material culture**

The non-material components of national culture are symbols, norms, rituals, values, and beliefs. When it comes to symbols, the most important is language and how it is used to express ourselves. While there have been new addition of words to help us stay safe and informed, others have existed for decades and are again in usage with an additional meaning, giving us a look into how language changes in the face of unprecedented social and economic disruption.

The Royal Spanish Academy officially added the word COVID-19 to the dictionary, and it stands for the English term "coronavirus disease", which was first detected in 2019. There are even debates about whether it is a feminine "la COVID" or masculine term "el COVID" since the word virus is masculine, but the word disease is feminine. The academy, headquartered in Madrid, in charge of safeguarding the correct use of the Spanish language, considers it masculine (Cela, 2020).

Here are some neologisms added in 2020 of the more than fifty COVID - related words now widely spoken (Anonymous, 2021):

- Covididiota (noun): Stupid person ignores protocols such as social distancing, helping spread the COVID-19 virus. Usage: Are you going to visit your grandmother? Don't be a covididiota.
- Covidarticulo/Covidprecio (nouns): which are items offered during quarantine at special prices.
- Descofinar (verb): To lift lockdown measures
- Cuerentenaar (verb): the act of spending a period of time quarantining
- Confinamiento (noun): Temporal isolation imposed upon a population, person, or group for health and security reasons. Usage: The government decreed a "confinamiento" for one month.
- Infodemia (noun): Misinformation about the pandemic
- Teletrabajo (noun): Work from home
- Coronnials (noun): Those who have been through the coronavirus pandemic have come out stronger than before the world crisis.
- Covidcidio (noun): Extermination of people caused by the COVID-19 pandemic
- Covidauto (noun): Testing for the Coronavirus from your car
- Coronaplausos (noun): Referring to the synchronized applause to essential workers during the pandemic
- Coronabebe (noun): Those babies born during the Coronavirus
- Precovid (adjective): To denote anything preceding the pandemic
- Covidiano (noun): Someone who follows COVID-related safety measures and does not question the existence of the disease. The opposite of covididiota.

Just as new words emerged with the pandemic, new emojis and combinations were also introduced in 2020 (see Figure 5). The microbe emoji, depicted as a squiggly, single-cell microorganism with prominent cilia, already existed but gained prominence and was primarily used about COVID-19. And so were emojis related to obtaining a vaccination like a syringe and adhesive bandage and suggested behavior to minimize the spread of the disease. (Coronavirus, n.d.)

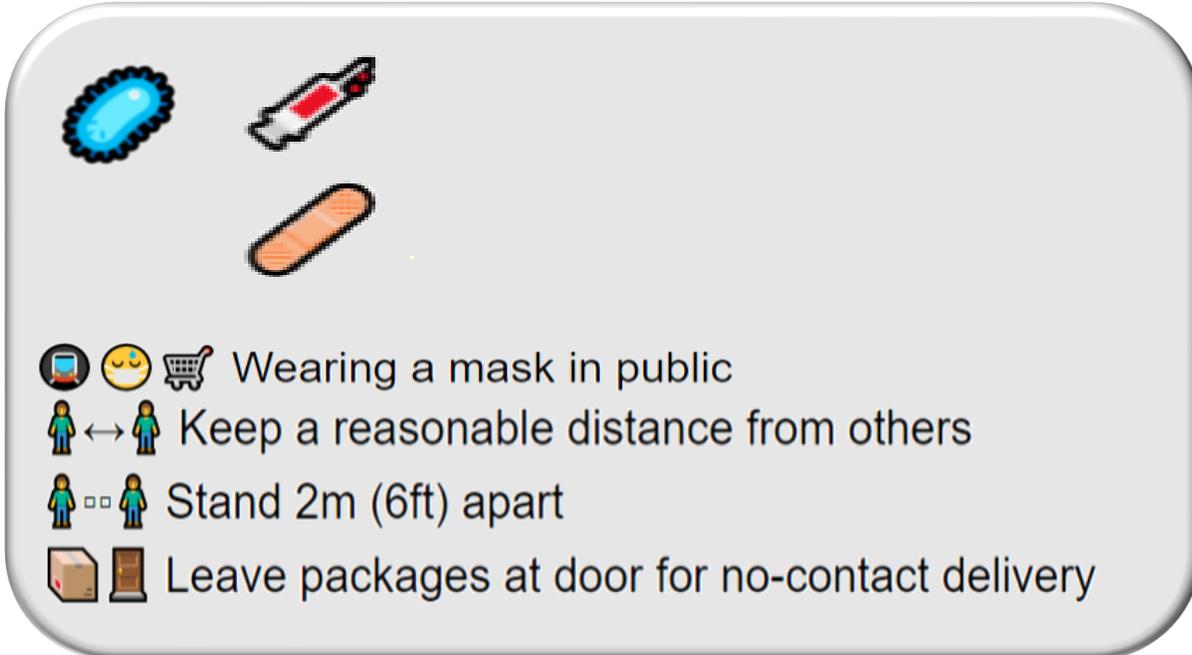


Figure 5 - Coronavirus emojis

## Norms

Norms, as another non-material component of national culture, are standards and expectations for behaving. It is further divided into formal norms like mores and laws and informal norms like customs (University of Minnesota Publishing edition, 2016). An example of mores greatly affected by the pandemic are physical and nonverbal gestures used in greetings and saying goodbyes, which involve touch and close contact, like hugging, kissing, and handshakes. As the virus can spread through airborne respiratory droplets through sneezing or coughing, surfaces can become contaminated with microorganisms and potential pathogens. Touching our mouths, hands, and cheeks carries the potential of such contamination.

Health officials urge people to maintain a distance of at least six feet from one another, and cultures worldwide have put a moratorium on haptic gestures, some going as far as calling an end to handshakes due to its detrimental effect from an infectious standpoint (Vople, 2020). However, this is quite a sacrifice for Latin societies used to more unrestrained emotional expressions compared to the Chinese and Japanese, where social touching is more refrained (Anonymous, 2020)

The implications of adjusting to touchless greetings affect how messages are interpreted, as we often use touching to express status, power, affection, and intimacy. For Colombians, a highly collectivistic and emotional culture accustomed to greetings involving handshakes, hugs, and kissing has been quite a sacrifice to abide by the new guidelines. It is common for parents to tell a child to greet an adult relative with a hug or a kiss as a way to teach social etiquette. Therefore, it is almost ingrained in Colombians from childhood to greet others in a very expressive way.

Would the parents of the future lessen the pressure put on kids to greet in a particular manner? Will the coronabebes be the first generation of kids with personal autonomy to decide how they would like to welcome people? Many have gotten used to newer, more creative ways of greeting each other, whether it is a friendly wave, air-kissing, or an elbow pump. We will have to adapt and perhaps adopt new ways of expressing "I miss you" that do not involve a tight squeeze. Can we think of a way to convey sportsmanship or a peace offering without shaking hands? Are Colombians ready for a bow instead?

In terms of laws, all countries have passed rules and resolutions to enforce business lockdowns, shelter-in-place quarantines, border closings, travel bans, and gradual re-opening of the economy. This area has been controversial because opening the economy too soon increases infections, and not soon enough, increases the chances of bankruptcy, economic instability, and food insecurity.

According to Cardenas and Martinez (2020), relative to other countries, Colombia exhibited a slower but constant contagion pace. Almost 100 after the onset of the pandemic, the nation had 0.1 daily deaths per 1 million inhabitants. It took about 20 days for countries like Spain, Italy, and the US to reach this number of daily cases. The country's rate of daily PCR testing has increased consistently and in line with what per-capita income would project.

The Colombian government reacted quickly by implementing a strict lockdown that began the last week of March. The lockdown was effective and timely as other countries started later, and the pandemic gained speed. The first line of defense was a success, buying time to strengthen the health system and increase ICU capacity, yet, the virus is still expanding, and the country is not out of the woods yet. However, it was not sustainable because the country's economy relies heavily on sole breadwinners in informal jobs like street vendors, construction workers, delivery drivers, and small businesses. The shadow economy is highly vulnerable to lockdowns and challenging to control than the official economy made up of legally established organizations with physical offices and many employees. In 2019, the percentage of informal employment in Colombia stood at 62.1 percent of the total employed population (Pasquali, 2021).

On the fiscal side, the national government increased the amount of cash low-income households were receiving thru programs like Familia en Accion, Jovenes en Accion, and Familia Mayor. On top of the existing programs, it introduced the Ingreso Solitario program to reach 2.9 million poor households, each person receiving COP 160K (US\$44). thru digital wallets and other mobile phone payment services, citizens opened 1 million bank accounts. Many think that this program will become part of Colombia's permanent social safety net.

Moreover, to prevent formal employment destruction, the government has implemented the Programa de Apoyo al Empleo Formal. This program helps legal firms with the condition that no payroll cuts can occur. Through this program, the government paid 40 percent of the minimum wage to each worker of any firm that experienced a 20 percent reduction in sales compared to the previous year. This program has benefited 100,000 firms and protected 2.4 million formal jobs (Cardenas and Martinez, 2020).

The government decided to gradually reopen the economy by allowing some nonessential sectors to go back to work, starting on April 28 with construction and manufacturing, and then wholesale Retail on May 11. The president has insisted that Colombians should gradually regain their productive life but not their social life. The effects of this gradual re-opening can be observed in leading indicators.

In summary, the government has unveiled around USD 3.7 billion (1.5% of GDP) to counter the effects of the coronavirus outbreak. These include additional cash transfers for the most vulnerable, VAT rebates for the poorest, tax deferrals for companies, and financing support for SMEs. The Colombian president announced a package of economic measures to mitigate the effects on the tourism and aviation sectors. Examples of ordinances, decrees, and resolutions include state compensation schemes, employment protection, a moratorium on debt repayments, issuances of visas and passports, bankruptcy regulations, lease agreements, and customs (KPMG, 2020). Table 1 summarizes the first 13 decrees announced the first six days after the pandemic was officially declared (OCEinfo, n.d).

<b>COVID-19 related Norms</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Decree 417 Office of the President</b>	March 17, 2020	Declaration of national state of emergency for 30 days
<b>Decrees 418, 420 Ministry of Internal Affairs</b>	March 18, 2020	Management of public order, banning of alcohol sale, and meeting of more than 50 people. Curfew until May 30th, 2020
<b>Decrees 434, 436, 438 Ministries of the Treasury, Commerce, and Justice</b>	March 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Customs and tax related measure, No tariff on imported medical equipment.
<b>Decrees 439, 440, 441 Ministries of Justice, and Transport.</b>	March 20th	Banning of foreign travelers. Utility services cannot be suspended.
<b>Decree 444 Ministry of Finance</b>	March 21st	Creation of a fund to mitigate health and ensure continuance of the economy.
<b>Decrees 460, 462, 464, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Commerce</b>	March 22	Ban on the exportation of disinfectants, alcohol, soaps, gloves, etc. Additional funds available for the programs Familias en Accion, Colombia Mayor and Jovenes en Accion.

Table 1 - Decrees announced on the first 6 days of COVID-19 outbreak in Colombia



Figure 6 - Norms enforced in the city of Cúcuta, Colombia

To manage and decrease the number of citizens out in the streets, the Colombian government implemented a system based on the last two digits of the national identification card or "cedula" to handle coronavirus challenges in medium and small size cities. Whereas if the identification number ends in 1 or 2, the cardholder was allowed to go out on Mondays; 3 or 4 on Tuesdays, and so on, as shown in Figure 6.

The government imposed heavy penalties on those found breaching the legal decree. Another scheme based on gender was implemented in the capital. Women were allowed to perform essential tasks like grocery shopping, going to the bank, and going to medical appointments—on even-numbered days, while men were permitted to do so on odd-numbered days. Similar measures were implemented in Panama and Peru (Sandoval, 2020).

In many cities, during the worst times of the three waves the country has experienced so far, curfews and dry laws were implemented on weekends (see figure 7).

In terms of customs, considered another form of norms, Colombians became habituated to wearing masks, washing their hands, and keeping physical distancing of at least 2 meters. Even



Figure 7 - Curfew announcement in the city of Montería, Colombia

52.9%, health by 38.2%, and technology by 26.9%. The sectors of tourism, airlines, B2B, and transport were the most negatively affected.

The conversion rate from March 2019 compared to March 2020 in figure 8 shows consumers' increasing interest to buy online products related to groceries and drug stores.

with the vaccine, the recommendation is to continue wearing masks when going out of the house into crowded areas or rural areas where not everyone has been vaccinated.

Digitally oriented businesses generally thrived during the pandemic, but physically based businesses, from restaurants to manufacturing to entertainment to most brick and mortar retail, have been struck hard.

According a document published by the Colombian Chamber of Electronic Commerce (Camara Colombiana de Comercio Electronico, n.d.), electronic commerce from February 29 to April 4 of 2020 was a key tool to supply Colombians with basic needs. The categories, which increased their online activities, were sports by 86.5%, Retail by

## Conversion rate between March 2019 - March 2020

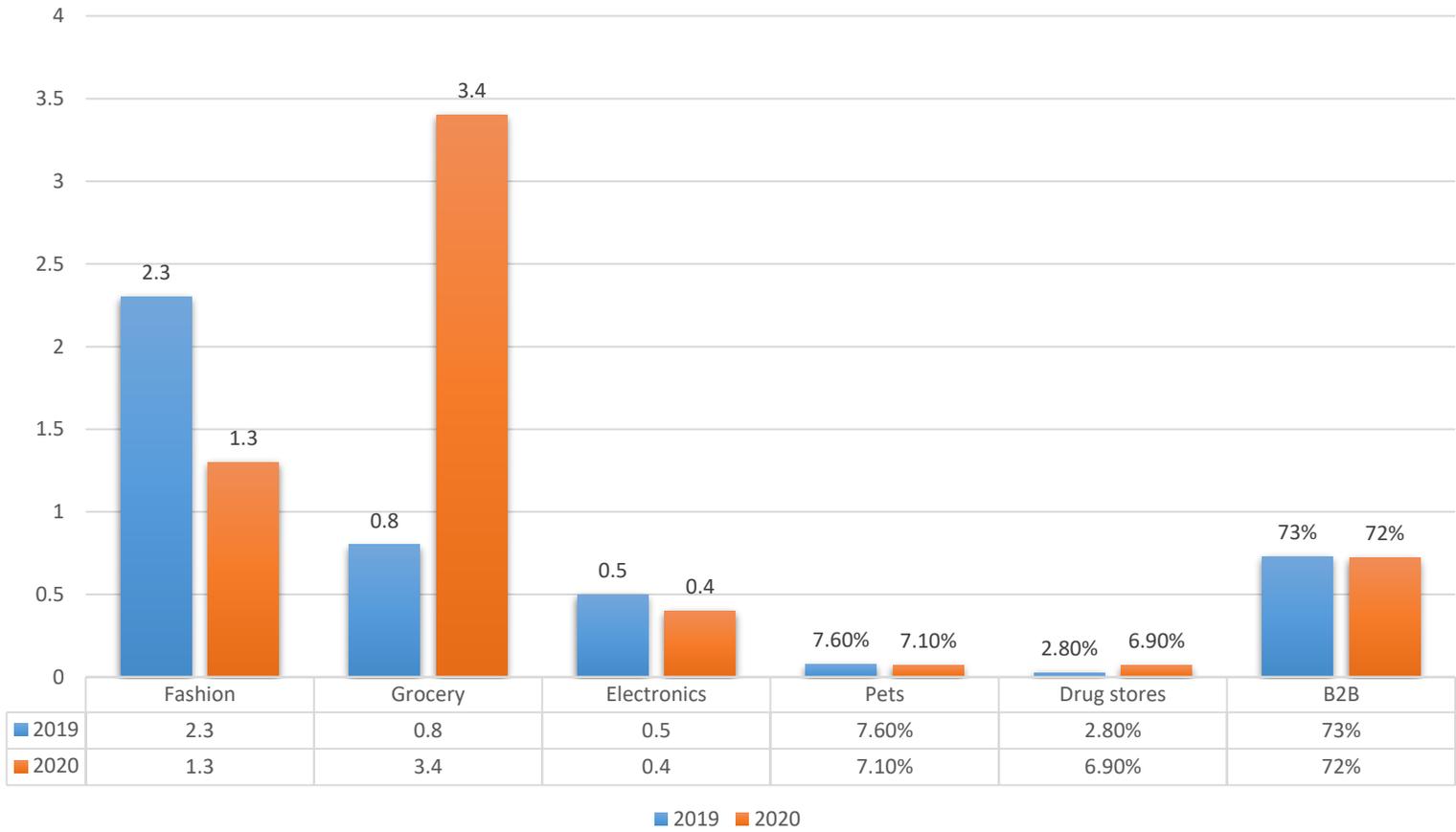


Figure 8 - Conversion rate between March 2019 – March 2020

### Rituals

Rituals are established procedures and ceremonies that mark important events in the life of a person or a country. Although the pandemic has not fully encroached into the essence of ritualistic activities yet, those will also change with time. We have witnessed how attendance at weddings, graduations, and funerals was limited during the first months of COVID-19.

Governments are placing certain limitations on how many people can gather for concerts, sporting events, family ceremonies, and even religious activities.

The pandemic has also shaped the ways ceremonies are conducted with the use of apps like zoom and social media where family members from any place can participate in video conferencing and virtually partake of the event. As an example, as the author was working on this article, she watched online a relative's wedding and other friends from three countries, as shown in Figure 9.

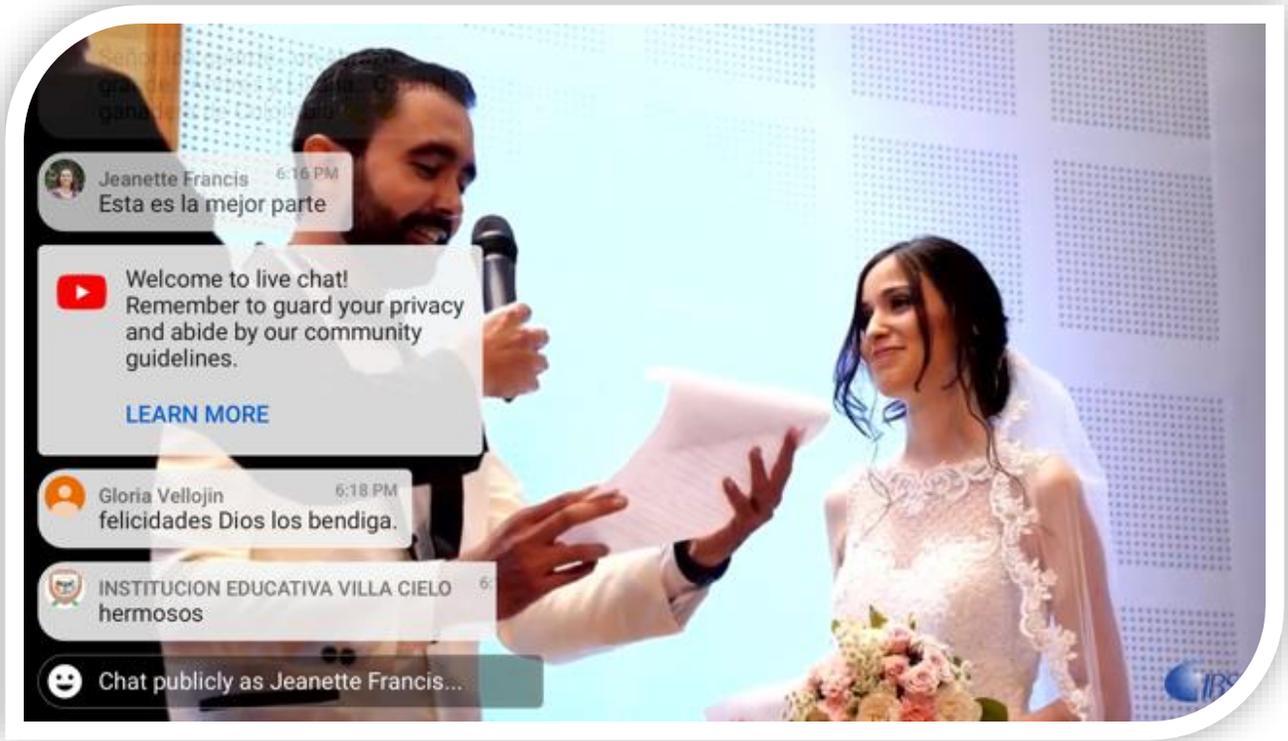


Figure 9 - Virtual Participation in a Wedding Ceremony



Figure 10 - Wedding at a courthouse

The first few months of the pandemic saw massive cancellation of weddings or more uncomplicated weddings at courthouses forgoing fancy ceremonies or parties (see Figure 10).

The religious community modified its traditions to prevent the propagation of the virus. Many churches began offering services online or thru local television channels (Cable News Network, 2020). When someone died, only three to five cars

were allowed to follow the funeral car to the cemetery, with one to three family members physically present in the actual interment of the deceased. In many cities, there were daily masses where friends and family who wanted to pay their respects to those taken by the virus could log online at a set time and interact with one another thru YouTube channels, Facebook and Zoom. In place of flowers people started sending their digital sympathy cards and homemade videos expressing their condolences.

## **Values**

Values involve notions or things that we deem important to have, do or be. Obviously, with the presence of viruses that come in waves, may mutate, or come from unsuspecting places, the infliction in our bodies and life is great. Therefore, in times of pandemic, we find one thing foremost in our minds: health. We value safety and hygiene because they both lead to health. Health has been the main driver of thousands of Colombians flying to the US to get vaccinated (Maseri, 2021). Like Florida, New York, and Texas, several states have implicitly allowed foreign travelers to seek free vaccines to increase tourism and help the economy thru dollars those tourists spend in hotels, restaurants, and shops.

Just a few months ago, people might have awarded the highest status to those with the most money or those driving expensive luxury cars, such as celebrities (Applin, 2020). Today, the post-pandemic status markers are staying healthy along with technological competencies. Mastery of internet connecting technologies like videoconferencing has become paramount in keeping our jobs or continuing our education. We are awarding prominence to inventors, scientists, doctors, nurses, delivery drivers, sanitation workers, and those who keep infrastructures functioning because the highest status is our good health.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Coronavirus, an invisible pathogen, has brought Colombia and the whole world to its knees. The pandemic has significantly impacted life, from international travel, medicine, education, business interactions to global trade. At the same time, it has been the catalyst for the acceleration of electronic shopping, flexible workspace, remote education, touchless payments, etc. The planet's inhabitants have no other choice but to adapt to the new normal.

The pandemic's impact is reflected in external activities like the way we communicate and work and inner values like our health and safety. Ten years from now, we could look back and see all the positive changes made because of this pandemic for the betterment of humankind. After all, a healthy dose of tension is how cultures and civilizations can grow and evolve. For example, it has forced the full adoption of new technologies to happen five to ten years sooner than it would have otherwise, with heavy investment in digital health, remote access to specialists, telemedicine, telework, and touchless shopping. It is now our job to internalize this new normal to make the best out of it and grow and prepare for whatever comes our way next.

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Figure 9. Francis, J. (2020, October 10). Virtual participation in a wedding ceremony in Colombia [Photograph]. Provided by author.

Figure 10. Francis, J. (2020b, October 14). Wedding at a courthouse [Photograph]. *Provided by author.*

