Bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding: practice memories and household consumption during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Melbourne

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the COVID-19 pandemic as an external “shock” that changed household-consumption practices in Melbourne, Australia. We assess national consumption data and retail data for the state of Victoria to show how dramatically consumption patterns shifted during 2020. We then discuss three specific examples of changed consumption practices during the pandemic drawn from an analysis of media reports: bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding. These activities illustrate how the pandemic and resultant lockdowns enabled innovation in domestic consumption, enhanced food security and resilience, and created space for the experience of a slower way of life. We argue that the pandemic provided impetus to experiment and innovate in ways that are relevant to sustainability but not necessarily motivated by it. Further, there is limited evidence that sustainable consumption practices will live on at an integrated mass scale, given a lack of wider institutional effects, such as changes in policy, business strategy, or mass social movements to support them. Instead, we hypothesize that these new consumption experiences “discovered” during the lockdown will live on as practice memories that might be mobilized when the next shock comes.

Introduction
For several decades, scientists and other researchers have recognized that to live within planetary boundaries we need to engage in more sustainable modes of production and consumption and to foster a sustainable consumption transition, particularly in industrialized countries (RSL and USNAS 1997). The theoretical work on how to achieve this objective is well developed. A compelling recent example is the concept of “consumption corridors” proposed by Fuchs and colleagues which outlines a model for achieving a good life for humanity if we can live within the limits of both minimum and maximum consumption standards (Fuchs et al. 2021).

As Geels (2002) has noted, disasters have a tendency to catalyze processes of social change by disrupting regimes and making room for novel ways of doing things. There is emerging research about the opportunity for the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate a sustainability transition by changing consumption practices (Bodenheimer and Leidenberger 2020; Cohen 2020; Sarkis et al. 2020; Wells et al. 2020). As Cohen wrote early in the pandemic in March 2020, “COVID-19 is simultaneously a public health emergency and a real-time experiment in downsizing the consumer economy” (Cohen 2020, 1). Indeed, the pandemic appears to have triggered social changes in consumption practices around the world.

In affluent countries, in response to the pandemic, consumers changed their practices by “stocking up,” “hoarding,” or “panic buying” specific items such as bottled water, canned goods, and disinfectant and other cleaning supplies (Degli Esposti, Mortara, and Roberti 2021) as well as hygiene products, toilet paper, and baking supplies (Boons and Mylan 2020). Consumers have also shown themselves to be creative and innovative, transforming previous consumption habits to home-based activities such as cooking, baking, working out, and pursuing home improvements (Cohen 2020; Degli Esposti, Mortara, and Roberti 2021). In reaction to pandemic restrictions and lockdowns, people purchased and consumed food differently (Hughes 2021; Hoolohan et al. 2022). In the UK, Europe, and Vietnam consumers returned to weekly supermarket shopping instead of smaller and more regular shopping trips as had been common prior to the pandemic (Hoolohan et al. 2022). People
experimented with new ways of accessing food such as arranging to have farm produce delivered to their homes (Forno, Laamanen, and Wahlen 2022). Generally speaking, food-consumption practices changed in tandem with COVID-19 restrictions and there is evidence of increased experimentation with food including more cooking from scratch and trying new recipes, more shared meals within households, and shared meals online with family and friends (Hughes 2021; Hoolohan et al. 2022).

Some more recent studies have started to look into the relation between changing consumption practices and sustainability. For instance, for some consumers the pandemic prompted greater attention to the ecological impact of consumption, and conscious engagement with sustainable consumption (Degli Esposti, Mortara, and Roberti 2021; Forno, Laamanen, and Wahlen 2022). Studies of university students found increasing intention to engage in more conscious and sustainable consumption, by reducing clothing purchases and foregoing specific products such as body and beauty care that were “perceived as frivolous and unnecessary” (Sahakian et al. 2022; Degli Esposti, Mortara, and Roberti 2021). Around the world, lockdowns disrupted everyday life and changed practices in key areas of hygiene; food provisioning; mobility; shopping; alternative economies and thrift; water use and gardening; and household work, coordination, and care (Hoolohan et al. 2022; Sahakian et al. 2022; Boons and Mylan 2020). Several of these changes in consumption practices are arguably beneficial from a sustainability perspective, but there is limited understanding about these new practices; how they occur; where, why, and by whom; and, perhaps most importantly, if and how they are going to persist.

To start to address such questions, we conducted exploratory case research into the 2020 lockdown in Melbourne, Australia. This lockdown was one of the most severe and prolonged coronavirus confinements in the world with residents ordered home for over 110 days (with exceptions for essential workers) (Parliament of Australia 2020). Only “essential” shopping was allowed at supermarkets, food stores, and pharmacies, while cafes and restaurants were only allowed to serve take-away food. Everyday life changed dramatically as working, schooling, and studying all became activities conducted “from home” and online. These circumstances prompted widespread change and innovation in everyday work, care, leisure, and consumption practices. While not necessarily motivated by sustainability concerns, many of these innovations in response to changed circumstances are indicative of the potential for more sustainable modes of consumption. We discuss three specific practices of interest – bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding – that highlight opportunities for change in the household-consumption domains in which they sit, namely food provisioning, leisure, and mobility.

Our analysis is informed by social practice theory as formulated by Shove and colleagues (see Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Strengers and Maller 2014; Blue et al. 2016). From this perspective, consumption practices may be individually performed but the focus is on how practices are socially constructed and regulated. Social practices have three key “elements” that interact when a practice is performed. First, materials are things, technologies, and other tangible physical entities. Second, competences encompass skills, know-how, and techniques for carrying out the activity. Finally, meanings are ideas, aspirations, and symbolic meanings (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). In the examples reported below, we separate out the practice entities for analytic purposes, but in everyday life the elements intersect. By distinguishing and analyzing the practice entities, we recognize that changing practices are not just a matter of individual preference but are embedded in the broader social system. For new practices to become established, the three practice entities usually interact. Practices rely on the recruitment of practitioners and their sustained performance over time – but if practices decline, they may become dormant (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) or they may live on as practice memories that can be mobilized again in the future (Maller and Strengers 2013, 2014) which is the primary idea developed in this article.

News media play a role in reflecting and shaping social perceptions and practices, and its consumption can be understood as a realm of social practice in its own right (Couldry 2012). For the purposes of this article, we analyze media stories as a representation of changing social practices in domestic consumption during the pandemic. We acknowledge that the media engage in “agenda setting” and mainstreaming whereby topics may be magnified and homogenized in a commercial system driven by clicks (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 2014; Ng, Chow, and Yang 2021). As the pandemic developed, media researchers found that media narratives about COVID-19 began to diverge geographically. For example, in Australia and New Zealand there were more media stories of hope and uncertainty than other countries such as the United States which focused on economic reopening and tackling discrimination (Ng, Chow, and Yang 2021). Despite the possibility of distortion, we suggest that newspaper reports provide useful perspectives on changing practices particularly during the pandemic, a time of rapid social change where other observational methods were constrained.
The next section describes the methods used in this research. We then present in the third section the findings, starting with a presentation of consumption data on the national and state levels and followed by the results of qualitative studies of bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding. The fourth section discusses the results in light of existing literature and future lines of research. We conclude this article with the fifth section which draws out policy implications of consumption changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This article draws together three data sources to provide a picture of changing household-consumption practices. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) provides quarterly estimates of key economic flows for the country, including gross domestic product (GDP), consumption, investment, income, and saving. We discuss data from the fourth quarter (beginning of October through the end of December) of 2020 reference period which provides national insights into household consumption (ABS 2021).

The second data source on which we rely is a study by the Australian Consumer and Retail Studies (ACRS) unit in the Department of Marketing at Monash University. This research investigated attitudes and behavior toward retail in the context of COVID-19 through a retail review at the end of 2020. Although the study was not informed by practice theory, the findings do provide insights on changes in prevalence and some further details on meanings and motivations. A total of 4,647 Australian shoppers (18 years of age and older) participated in the study, of which 1,277 were from the state of Victoria. The sample is proportional to ABS population data on state of residence, gender, and age. ACRS used Qualtrics to program the survey and participants were recruited via Dynata, the panel-partner company. Data were collected over a three-month period, with monthly questionnaires in September, October, and November 2020. To participate in the study, respondents needed to meet the following criteria: to have made a non-grocery retail purchase in the last six months and to have purchased goods through one or more of the following channels – retail websites, physical stores, online marketplaces, and social media.

The third data source entailed a search of news articles using the Factiva news-publications database which provides qualitative data on changing consumption practices. We selected three examples of changed household-consumption practices to discuss – bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding – for several reasons. First, they reflect key domains of household consumption that changed during the pandemic – food provisioning, leisure, and mobility (Hughes 2021). Second, these practices featured prominently in the news articles returned by Factiva in our initial searches. Finally, they provided examples of changed consumption practices that are based on new meanings, materials, and competences (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). We suggest that media stories uncovered significant emerging practices during the pandemic and these accounts may also have reinforced emerging practices by sharing “how to” information and demonstrating that others were taking up novel ways of doing things, potentially normalizing new meanings.

For the bread-baking example, we used as search terms “bread baking” with at least one word “Melbourne” or “Victoria” during the reference period starting on March 16, 2020 (the date when the first state of emergency was called) to the end of the working year for most Australians or December 24, 2020. The search yielded 182 articles. For the food-growing example, the search terms were “vegetable garden” with at least one word “Melbourne” or “Victoria” during the same reference period, yielding 92 articles. In addition, a search for “gardening” and the exact phrase “growing food” was also conducted, yielding eleven articles. For the bicycle-riding example, our search terms were “bike riding” with at least one word “Melbourne” or “Victoria” for the same reference period, yielding 165 articles. All of the newspaper articles were purposefully coded under three broad categories: (1) evidence of changed consumption, (2) type of change, and (3) motivation for change. We use the term “motivation” here as shorthand for the expressed reason for taking up the new practice which is related to meanings in practices. Following Welch’s (2017) discussion of teleoaffective structures (Schatzki 2002) in practice theory, we recognize the “complex entwining of emotional commitment and motivational orientation toward goals” (Welch 2017) when practices are undertaken.

We are not able to determine the exact correspondence between media stories and everyday life but we argue that news accounts provide a useful window on changing consumption practices. Collating numerous articles, particularly those with first-hand reports from a variety of geographic locations and media outlets, increases our confidence that changed practices reported in the news have also occurred in the community. Triangulating the media stories with national data from ABS and retail sources outlined above strengthens our analysis.

Results

The impact of the pandemic on consumption: national data

We begin by outlining the dramatic changes in Australian household-consumption patterns in 2020.
in comparison to previous years (ABS 2021). Australians reduced their spending on consumption of goods and services in the first quarter of 2020 by 1.4% and more dramatically in the second quarter of the year by 12.3% (Figure 1). The downward pattern reversed during the third quarter of 2020 with consumption spending increasing during this three-month period (July 1–September 30) by 7.9% and in the fourth quarter by 4.3%. Over the entire year of 2020, households slightly reduced their spending on consumption for all goods by 2.7% (ABS 2021).

The types of household consumption also changed dramatically over the pandemic year as people’s activities and behaviors shifted during the lockdowns. Australians spent less on discretionary services such as transport; accommodation; sports, recreation, and entertainment; catering; and other services. It is likely that this reduction in spending was influenced by COVID-19 travel restrictions as well as capacity limits for hospitality venues, public events, and office attendance. By contrast, consumption of food and goods for the home rose during the pandemic. As illustrated in Figure 2, Australians spent more on food, alcohol, furnishings and household equipment, and goods for recreation and culture (including bicycles) than the previous year. There was a steep decline in the purchase of vehicles for the first three quarters of the year, but this trend reversed in the last quarter as lockdowns eased (ABS 2021).

In comparison to the year prior to the pandemic, Australians increased their spending on eating at home (1.1%) and drinking alcohol at home (0.4%) and reduced their expenditures on eating out at cafes and restaurants (−1.4%). They also increased their spending on furnishings and household equipment (+0.7%) (ABS 2021). The other notable change was in modes of consumption, whereby the use of online shopping accelerated nationwide. According to the ABS (2021) survey, “one in three (33%) Australians reported they prefer to do more shopping online than before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.” It should be noted that prior to the pandemic a larger proportion of the Victorian population preferred to shop online in comparison to counterparts in the rest of Australia (ABS 2021).

**The impact of the pandemic on consumption: Victorian data**

In response to extremely stringent lockdown measures during 2020, residents of the state of Victoria reduced their spending on consumption by 7.2% which was a larger increment than any other state in the country (Figure 3).

The ACRS retail surveys provide more nuanced data on retail consumption in Victoria. During the pandemic, there was a transition to online shopping for non-grocery items where 65.3% of the population in the state used online shopping or click-and-collect services at least once (prior to the pandemic 28.6% used these shopping methods). In comparison to the previous year, a total of 39.4% reported more intensive use of retail websites, 30.9% indicated more intensive use of online marketplaces (e.g., eBay and Gumtree), and 18.9% reported more intensive use of social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook) as a shopping channel.

Victorian shoppers indicated purchasing more than usual or stocking up on grocery items in response to the pandemic. Of all stocked-up products, the most popular were canned goods and
soups (14.9%); toilet paper, paper towels, and tissues (13.8%); pasta, noodles, grains, and sides (13.5%); cleaning supplies (e.g., laundry detergent, dishwashing liquid) (11.2%); and frozen foods (11.7%).

Consumers from the state of Victoria also made “out of the ordinary purchases” or different purchases to what they would normally buy in response to the pandemic in the following categories:

- Clothing, footwear, and accessories (22.2%) including casual/loungewear (5.2%) and sports clothing and shoes (7.9%).
- Personal care goods (22.3%) including face and body products (7%) and haircare products (5.1%).
- Household goods (22.6%) including cooking, baking, and drinking appliances and products (e.g., rice cookers, coffeemakers, bread-making machines) (3.4%, 1.8%, and 3%, respectively).
- Consumer electronics (19.3%) including laptops and tablets (6.7%) and smartphones (6.7%).
- Media and entertainment (17.6%), including subscriptions to online movie and television platforms (e.g., Netflix, Disney+, Stan) (8.8%).
- Sporting goods and equipment (14.6%), including small and portable gym equipment (e.g., weights, exercise balls) (6%) and general sports equipment (e.g., balls, bats, clubs) (4.4%).

Motivations and the meanings associated with changing shopping practices – stocking up or making out-of-the-ordinary purchases varied according to retail category. Building up inventory was notable for grocery items and the leading motivations for
this purchasing strategy were to ensure one’s family/household was taken care of (15.7% of the Victorian sample), anticipating disruptions in supply (15.0%), and expecting to spend more time at home (13.3%).

For non-routine purchases, motivations varied across the different consumer items. The top three motivations for each consumer item are highlighted in Figure 4. Ensuring the household or family was taken care of and concern about supply disruptions were important for grocery and personal care products. A desire for security – food security in particular – in response to changed conditions drove stocking up. Supporting connections with others was one reason people bought consumer electronics. Other retail purchases were reported to be for emotional reasons such as purchasing items to “feel good,” which was an especially prevalent motivation for out-of-the-ordinary items for comfort, leisure, and entertainment at home.

There were some gender differences in retail-consumption patterns. Women were more likely than men to transition to online shopping. Reflecting the gendered division of domestic labor in households (Dempsey and Lindsay 2014), more women reported stocking up on groceries than men (Figure 5). There were small variations with non-food purchasing where men were more likely than women to make out-of-the-ordinary purchases of consumer electronics, media and entertainment, and sporting goods (Figure 6).

There were notable age differences in non-food retail purchases with those aged under 45 making more out-of-the-ordinary purchases than older cohorts (Figure 7).

The relationship between income and retail expenditure during the pandemic was not linear. Middle income groups (A$80,000–90,000 (US$56,665–63,748) annual income bracket) were more likely to stock up on groceries (Figure 8). The lower income group (under A$39,000 (US$27,624) was less likely than other cohorts to make out-of-the-ordinary purchases, particularly for media and entertainment and sporting goods (Figure 9).

Data on intentions about future retail consumption provide some evidence that the pandemic encouraged people to consider pro-environmental consumption. A large proportion of the sample reported that in the future they were likely to “shop more for environmentally friendly/sustainable product(s)” (46%). However, other intended changes were seen as more probable (Table 1). Participants were asked “Thinking of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your retail experience, please indicate how likely you are to do the following in...”
the future" – with a series of options provided. Over half of the respondents reported that they were likely to seek out specials and be more conservative with their spending. The likelihood of engaging in potentially pro-environmental consumption was affirmed by over half of the sample intending to buy better quality products (52.3%), almost half indicating they would shop more for environmentally friendly/sustainable products in the future (46%), and 60% maintaining that they would shop for more locally produced products.

The quantitative data we have reported suggest that the environmental shock provided by the pandemic created opportunity for a rare natural experiment where Australians revised their consumption decisions and changed their overall provisioning patterns. Evidence is now emerging of profound changes in consumption and everyday life in
response to the pandemic in other parts of the world (Moynat, Volden, and Sahakian 2022; Forno, Laamanen, and Wahlen 2022; Hoolohan et al. 2022; Greene et al. 2022). We explore changing consumption practices in more detail in the following section.

The pandemic as a driver of changed consumption practices

During the lockdown, several arguably more sustainable consumption practices emerged, particularly around food. Restricted to the home, many households experimented with “slower” ways of living (Parkins 2004). Instances of such experiments included turning to backyard gardening for growing food, baking bread at home, and an increased focus on cooking healthy meals from scratch. In response to changing purchasing practices, supermarkets, concerned with ensuring a continuous supply of high-demand food ingredients, placed limits on staples such as flour and canned beans and tomatoes. These limits prompted anxiety about insecure food supplies and may have encouraged people to think about producing and cooking alternatives themselves. We note that a turn to household production has also been entwined in changed food-consumption practices such as seeking out healthy food and cooking from scratch (see Forno, Laamanen, and Wahlen 2022). Newspaper reports provide a window on changed domestic consumption practices and offer some useful perspectives from retailers and householders around meanings driving these changes.

Bread baking

The Herald Sun reported in September 2020, after several months of lockdowns, that bread baking had become a “national pastime as demand for key ingredients and appliances soars even as lockdowns lift.” Coles, a supermarket chain, noted that in Victoria “flour and baking mix sales were up almost 70%” and Woolworths reported “double digit growth in sales of dried yeast, cake mix and bread mix” across Australia. Purchases of bread-making appliances also rose with the retailer Appliances Online stating they had “experienced over 1,500% sales growth on average for breadmakers,” while Harvey Norman, a furniture and homewares store, reported continuing high demand for breadmakers (Aidone 2020). A survey by the market-research firm, Canstar, suggested that 1.5 million Australians “have or had someone in their household bake bread at home during the COVID-19 pandemic,” with the taking up of a hobby or saving money as key motivations (Aidone 2020).

Earlier in the year (in April), it was reported that flour mills were “working around the clock” to meet demand for flour from house-bound Australians taking up baking” (Wilson 2020).
Craig Neale and the team at Wholegrain Milling in Gunnedah, NSW [New South Wales], have seen wholesale demand increase four times. The artisan mill, which specialises in organic and sustainable flours, had “three weeks to react, basically.” “I don’t have an answer to why it’s happened,” says Mr Neale, who is overseeing 21 production hours a day. “I’ve been in the industry for 45 years and I’ve never seen anything like this. People must be learning to cook again because they’re not just buying enough flour to bake a cake; they’re buying five and 12 kg [kilogram] bags of flour.” (Wilson 2020)

The Age also reported on the surge in bread baking at the beginning of the pandemic in Melbourne. Millennials are making it, couples are kneading it and hatted chefs are obsessed with perfecting it. Home-baked sourdough is the hottest thing since sliced bread. Google searches for sourdough have skyrocketed by 400 per cent in Australia since social distancing rules were announced in March, while Instagram is rife with images of beautifully burnished loaves. (Boys 2020)

The pandemic disrupted usual work, care, and leisure practices as people were confined to home. Occupying time was a motivation to try the time-consuming process of bread baking. A respondent named Elina Brunning reported,

Prior to the pandemic baking sourdough bread was something I always wanted to try but never had the time… There was a lot of uncertainty at the time and I thought I might end up without a job or reduced hours, so I wanted to do something that would occupy my time. (Aidone 2020)

According to John Lethlean (2020), writing for the Weekend Australian Magazine, sourdough bread requires “time and routine to get a starter up, maintained (for it is a living thing) and employed as the foundation of real baking at home without added yeast.” He explained that it takes a lot of time “for a loaf to be shaped and then to ‘prove’ sufficiently for baking with a natural leaven. The up-side is flavour.” Nutritionist Kate Levins also began baking sourdough because of time available at home and told the reporter that “with the amount of kneading, resting and folding involved, however, sourdough is a serious labour of love. It can be a four-day process, if not a week-long process if you need to make your own starter” (Boys 2020).

In newspaper reports and lifestyle pages, bread baking was seen as a way of coping with anxiety, offering comfort, occupying time, and providing a new hobby (Aidone 2020).

Chef Xinyi Lim began mailing sourdough starters to people across the country and explained that “It’s about returning to an old-fashioned way of cooking and being in touch with the food we eat” (Boys 2020). Lockdown provided the opportunity to “unearth forgotten skills, experiment with new tastes – or just take it easy” (Epicure 2020). These articles suggest that the pandemic provided the opportunity to try new practices or rediscover practices remembered, recorded, and shared by others.

In a time of economic uncertainty, bread baking was recognized in the articles as an inexpensive or money-saving mode of consumption as well as a pastime. As the founder of Phillipa’s Bakery in Melbourne stated, “when there’s uncertainty about people’s incomes, bread is an affordable product to bake” (Boys 2020).

In sum, the newspaper articles illustrate that specific elements of bread-baking practice were attended to by both new and experienced practitioners. For those new to bread baking, materials such as flour were acquired; competencies in maintaining a starter, kneading, and baking were learned; and new meanings were taken up so that bread baking was now seen as enjoyable, achievable, and relaxing – building on Shove, Pantzar, and Watson’s (2012) elements of practices. Confinement to the home and the availability of time for domestic activities during the pandemic lockdowns were critical enablers of bread-baking practice according to newspaper reports. These accounts may also have contributed to normalizing bread baking during this period.

Food growing

During the lockdowns, Victorians with access to backyards or similar property established vegetable gardens or increased production in existing plots. While seemingly not as popular as bread baking, during the first Melbourne lockdown nurseries reported a boom in trade, with a rush for vegetable and herb seeds and seedlings. One garden manager, Alastair Cooper, reported he had never been so busy with orders. “It’s all absolutely pumping… We are delivering plants if we can across the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, and also garden supplies” (Schauder and Turbet 2020). Another purveyor, Aimee Craig, stated “My local garden centre has virtually nothing, from herbs to flowers. I’m on a four-week wait list for rosemary as we speak. I’ve resorted to getting cuttings from my neighbours to see if I can harvest from there” (Schauder and Turbet 2020). Sharing cuttings with neighbors is an example of community trade and support that might have been strengthened during the pandemic.

Gardeners were described as “perfect lockdown subjects” because of the skills and mindset required. According to John Lewis in The Shepparton News, “Nothing is ever finished. They are in for the long haul and they keep their eyes on the horizon, not
the shiny immediate rewards at the supermarket” (Lewis 2020).

The disruption to usual time schedules was a key enabler of food growing (see Greene et al. 2022). For example, one Melbournite, Kerry Frankland, stated that “The veggie garden was definitely put in because of the possibility of coronavirus being a long-term issue. In the first lockdown we grabbed whatever we could get hold of.” Her garden has made her almost self-sufficient with respect to food (Schauder and Turbet 2020). Restoring “the lost skills of growing food” requires time as noted by another local grower, Amorelle Dempster, “One thing the coronavirus has done for the whole community is given us time. It’s such a precious commodity, and when you’ve got time you can spend time growing things” (Farquhar 2020).

Motivations for food growing appeared to include food security, improving health and well-being, and saving money (Schauder and Turbet 2020) as well as the psychological benefits and social connectedness that arise through sharing food across households and with neighbors (Gaynor 2020). For writer Victoria Hanana, gardening was a way of reducing anxiety about the coronavirus and learning to take pleasure from producing food (On 2020). One resident, Kathryn Bordonaro, returned from France to the Victorian town of Warragul as the pandemic worsened and found that working in the vegetable garden reduced her anxiety. “It’s calming, it’s soothing. Hands in the earth. There’s something about that that I strongly believe centers your soul” (Dexter and McManus 2020). Gardening Australia television host Millie Ross hoped that people who began gardening during lockdown would continue afterwards. She emphasized the benefits to well-being that gardening can bring:

Plants and gardening are about all the things that make you feel good in life: good food, physical activity, being outside, understanding and connecting with your natural environment, connecting with other people,” she says. “You can have a chat to someone when you don’t even speak the same language when you’re talking about your plants over the front fence. (Christopher 2020)

Environmental historians Rachel Goldlust and Andrea Gaynor and wrote articles about food growing for The Conversation which were republished by various outlets. Goldlust (2020) noted that historically gardening was a way of responding to food shortages “and as an emotional salve that lends elements of feeling productive and in control” (Goldlust 2020). People turned to food growing during World War I and the Great Depression and later as part of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Gaynor (2020), a long tradition of home-food production is drawn on during times of crisis: “Vegetable gardening and poultry-keeping often surge in popularity during times of social or economic insecurity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Reaching out and sharing with neighbors and community members was a notable suggestion for building gardening competency across media publications. Online communities and websites were described as rich and well-used resources during the pandemic.

There are mountains of Facebook groups, blogs, websites and community organisations providing resources for basic vegetable gardening. Find one in your area that is suitable for the weather, soils and conditions, and learn from others’ experience. Local networks will be able to tell you what’s best for planting, how to make a garden if you’re renting, or even share seeds with you! (Goldlust 2020)

Andrea Gaynor (2020) reported that Google searches for “how to grow vegetables” hit an all-time worldwide high in April. She further wrote that “Hobart-based Good Life Permaculture’s video on ‘Crisis Gardening – Fresh Food Fast’ racked up over 80,000 views in a month” (Gaynor 2020).

Yet, as Gaynor (2020) notes, resources such as available land, tools, and skills are required to grow food effectively and they are not available or easily mobilized by low-income or unemployed people. Under these circumstances, community gardens and charity organizations stepped in to provide materials and education. In the Victorian city of Ballarat, for example, the Food is Free community initiative provided inputs and instruction on self-sufficiency:

We also urge anyone keen to start their gardens to visit the Food Is Free Laneway to grab the free pots, seeds from our toolbox, seedlings (if available), gardening book from our street library and get cracking. Other great resources will appear on our Facebook page. Gardenate is a free online resource. Grow some for you and your neighbours. The fallout of the economy and wages is going to be a strain. Nature heals. It is time to get green. (Ridsdale 2020)

Taking a social practice perspective (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), marked changes in everyday life that were required to adopt or intensify food growing as a practice. Infrastructure and resources such as tools, seeds or seedlings, and space in a backyard or pots were required. New or recovered skills and competences included planting and tending to the garden. Reported meanings about food growing, in the press, were that it was seen as providing connection to the Earth and relaxation and health benefits while also conferring food security in the uncertain time of the pandemic lockdowns.
Bicycle riding

According to an article in News.com.au, bicycle sales spiked early in the first lockdown in March 2020 and bicycles became “the new toilet paper”: a consumer item in high demand due to lockdown-prompted purchases. For example, Teresa Rendo, commercial general manager for Big W, a chain of discount department stores, said “We could never have predicted the surge in demand in some of these categories, and in March alone we saw an 88% increase in bike sales, when compared to last year,” and other retailers such as Kmart and Giant also reported a surge in bicycle sales (Staff Reporter 2020).

Bicycle Network, an organization for cyclists, reported that bicycle use in Melbourne rose by up by 79%. The group’s survey found that 30% of people aimed to increase their bicycle riding during lockdowns (Staff Reporter 2020). Two months later, in May, it was noted the “popularity of cycling has exploded in Melbourne during lockdown, with bike traffic in the city tripling” (Rooney 2020) and there had been a large increase in people using popular cycling trails across the city (McKinnon 2020).

Bicycle Network counted a one-day total of 8,827 people on thirteen trails in Melbourne, an increase in the total number of bicycle riders of 268% in comparison to the year before (Delibasic 2020). These news reports are supported by industry data showing that bicycle imports for the country overall were higher in 2020 at 1.447 million in comparison to 1.179 million the year before (Bourke 2022).

Motivations and meanings associated with increased bicycle riding were that this mode of mobility provided a safe alternative for exercise during the lockdown, served as a family activity while schools were closed, and conferred health and well-being benefits (McKinnon 2020). According to Craig Richards, CEO of Bicycle Network, “Coronavirus restrictions have shown that we need to start thinking differently about daily life. Instead of driving to the gym or taking the kids to basketball, suddenly thousands of people have pulled the bikes out of the shed and are exercising near home,” as they were legally required to during lockdowns (Staff Reporter 2020). Retailers reported that bicycles were being purchased initially by families. According to one account, “Most bikes being bought are entry-level models for families looking to ride together, particularly with home-schooling under way” (Staff Reporter 2020).

Enjoyment, fun, and sustainability were also mentioned as motivations for bicycle riding during the pandemic. According to an informant named Anna Bonomini, “Cycling is fun family time for us, as well as exercise.” And it provided a break from remote learning for her son Giorgio. She observed that “riding gives him a chance to get away from all that and be outside… Plus, it’s good for the planet” (Jensen 2020). Another respondent named Craig Richards said “Melburnians rediscovered the joy, freedom and stress relief of bicycle riding during the first lockdown… If you’re ever feeling stressed or anxious about the world then heading out for a ride can be very helpful” (McKinnon 2020).

Bicycle riding was for many people a continued or intensified social practice. Drawing on a social practice perspective (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), it required materials such as the acquisition of bicycles and helmets, and put pressure on the existing infrastructure of bicycle paths as families took advantage of allowed exercise time outside the house. This form of recreation took on new meanings as a socially distanced and safe mobility option in comparison to public transport and became an enjoyable leisure and sporting activity when customary facilities were closed during the lockdown. As Melburnians took to bicycle riding, there were increased demands for infrastructure (bicycle paths and dedicated lanes on roads with barriers between cyclists and drivers) to accommodate this newly popular practice (Rooney 2020). By November 2020, the Municipal Association of Victoria was lobbying the state government “to provide councils with $60 million for walking and bike riding infrastructure” (Ilanbey 2020). There was little discussion of bicycle-riding skills in the news articles yet basic competence in riding and negotiating with traffic was required. Bicycle safety emerged as a concern with children and inexperienced riders taking to the streets (Delibasic 2020). However, claims for hospitalization following bicycle accidents as well as cycling-related deaths appeared to stay stable over the 2020 pandemic year (Elg 2020).

To sum up, the three examples of changed consumption reported in the newspapers required the acquisition of materials, new or recovered competences, and meanings (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Each practice entailed access to physical materials or financial resources and infrastructure – this included ingredients and tools for baking, seeds for sowing, garden beds, and bicycles for people to ride (if they did not have bicycles already). Each practice required new competences and skills (or recovered skills). Those new to the tasks were encouraged and supported by information in the newspapers that we reviewed and the many online communities and websites reported in the relevant articles. Each practice was presented in these accounts as a meaningful and beneficial activity to undertake during the pandemic. Bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding were reported to
provide benefits for health, enjoyment, and a welcome distraction from anxiety. In the cases of cycling and gardening, the practices provided independence and food security, and in the case of bicycle riding an enjoyable family activity, independent transport, and socially distanced exercise. Learning new skills or recovering skills often involved sharing with online communities and, in the case of gardening, sharing with neighbors. Key themes in the newspaper articles were that the new availability of time and constraints on the domestic setting imposed by the lockdowns were critical enablers of these practices. Media discussion of these practices may have contributed to a process of normalization and reinforced renewed meanings attached to these activities during the pandemic.

Discussion: implications for sustainability transitions

As demonstrated by the quantitative consumption data and the qualitative case examples based on a media analysis, the COVID-19 outbreak and its associated lockdowns were a massive disruption to everyday life in Melbourne. To some extent, the pandemic can also be seen as a potential enabler of a transition to more sustainable, more localized, and healthier modes of consumption. Similar to last century’s major wars and the Great Depression, people found (and continue to find) ways to live more locally (Sarkis et al. 2020). Restriction on movement encouraged home-based production and consumption and large numbers of people experienced “slower” modes of living. Yet the connections between the pandemic and sustainability appear to be quite loose. There is limited evidence in the media articles that the pandemic promoted new commitments to sustainability in people who were previously uninterested. We suggest, along with other recent research featured in this special issue (Moynat, Volden, and Sahakian 2022; Forno, Laamanen, and Wahlen 2022; Hoolohan et al. 2022; Greene et al. 2022), that the COVID-19 outbreak has opened up a window of opportunity for experiments – or perhaps even radical changes – in household consumption and practices that otherwise remain dynamically stable (i.e., at most, changing incrementally). The pandemic drove changes in everyday consumption practices through necessity and choice – and the changes in food, leisure, and mobility practices discussed in this article are generally consistent with wider agendas for more sustainable consumption.

But it is unclear to what extent these new or recovered practices will remain when restrictions are lifted, borders are opened, and the economy returns to full production. New consumption practices may well “rebound” or “snap back” to previous patterns when circumstances allow. For instance, the millennium drought that occurred in Australia between 1997 and 2009 is a case where reductions in household-water consumption partly rebounded once the crisis was over (Lindsay, Dean, and Supski 2017). In the case of energy efficiency, behavioral research has found that reduced resource use can rebound unless pro-environmental values have been adopted (Seebauer 2018). The rebound dynamic is a common challenge for promoting sustainable consumption where there is not broader systemic change (Fuchs et al. 2021).

It is too soon to tell whether the disruption of the pandemic will have lasting positive effects on sustainability transitions. What is clear is that COVID-19 did prompt household innovation for some time, enabling people to discover (or rediscover) home production and consumption skills from a previous era, some of which are likely to be beneficial to a transition to a more sustainable way of living. Melburnians “rediscovered” their local areas through flocking to local parks and using bicycle paths for exercise. At the same time, the pandemic accelerated digital channels of shopping as demonstrated by the retail data on online purchasing, and prompted new modes of organizing and community connection via social media.

In response to the pandemic, retail-consumption data showed that almost half of all surveyed consumers intended to shop for more environmentally friendly or sustainable products in the future but in the newspaper articles there was little evidence of more fundamental change toward sustainable attitudes and practices across the community. References to sustainability were muted; there were only five mentions of sustainability, environmental gains, or being good for the planet in the sample. Household innovation and increased resilience was demonstrated but the primary diver may have been fear and anxiety about the longevity of the pandemic, or its consequences for the economy, rather than a desire for more sustainable ways of life. In this sense, food growing and bicycle riding may be examples of “quiet sustainability” where participants undertake sustainable practices but are motivated by reasons other than sustainability to do so (Smith and Jehlicka 2013). An intention to be more parsimonious in future spending was illustrated by the ACRS data. However, as has been found in consumption research, frugality does not always mesh with more sustainable modes of consumption. Without a commitment to sustainable practices, people can reduce spending in one area only to increase consumption in another; spending less does
not necessarily mean consuming fewer resources (Evans 2011).

To what extent will these changed practices become embedded or permanent? If we consider the three dimensions or elements within practices (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), there is mixed evidence of durable change. In terms of “meanings,” sustainable consumption has not become substantially more prominent in wider corporate or political discourses, indicating little commitment to public or institutional change. More positively, in the case of baking and gardening, these themes remain staples of weekend-news articles and popular television shows. Have new materials and infrastructures entered the mainstream? When it comes to bicycle riding, local and city councils in Melbourne are investing in pop-up and permanent bicycle infrastructure, which holds potential to drive future growth in cycling (VicRoads 2021). Yet overall, investments in active transport (walking and cycling) receive approximately 2% of Australian transport budgets (ABC 2017). Material changes in backyard-food growing and bread baking remain limited to personal purchases of kitchen appliances and perhaps a change of land use within the boundaries of the house block, with no indication of wider changes beyond individual residences. Are new competencies turning into stabilized organizational structures? There are some indications that online and in-person community networks are emerging around these activities for sharing information, expertise, and resources as illustrated in the newspaper articles. But overall, the evidence that the window of opportunity has created more enduring changes to household consumption and practice beneficial for sustainability transitions remains to be seen.

Yet it is possible that the experiences of bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding may live on as embodied practice memories. Based on their research with migrants about water consumption and responses to weather, Maller and Strengers (2014; see also Strengers and Maller 2017) contend that sustainable practices can travel across time and space and be taken up when needed. They argue that practice memories are socially and culturally shared and write,

In crises or periods of restriction, such as drought, natural disasters or energy shortages, past experiences from other times and places, or practice memories, can re-emerge as a logical and sensible response to the restriction or unavailability of the elements of current practices. (Maller and Strengers 2014, 153)

The practices discussed here – bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding – have been, as noted in the newspaper articles, practiced over generations. While it is unclear whether these practices will become regular or enduring after the pandemic, we suggest that the experiential learning involved in performing them may have been embodied and available for resurrection in other times of restriction or crisis (Maller and Strengers 2014). An emerging theme from our analysis of the news stories was the connection between motivation and emotion in how people talked about and made sense of taking up practices during the pandemic. Drawing on discussions of emotions and teleaffective structures in practice theory (Welch 2017; Sahakian and Bertho 2018; Sahakian et al. 2022), we noted the emotional aspects of the consumption practices that we studied. Baking, gardening, and cycling were all understood as useful ways of managing stress and anxiety and people adopted them to feel good or provide joy. We argue that the concept of practice memory can be usefully extended by incorporating “emotional” memory alongside “muscle memory” as suggested by Maller and Strengers (2014). The emotional motivations for undertaking practices might provide a deeper explanation for why certain practice memories last while others fade out. This adds the idea of nostalgia, or collective emotional attachment to practices of the past, to the concept of practice memories.

Links between changing temporalities and more sustainable modes of consumption were a key theme in the newspaper reports (see also Greene et al. 2022 in this special issue). For many people, the pandemic slowed down time and provided opportunities to experiment and adopt activities such as bread baking, food growing, and bicycle riding. Yet enforced slowing down through lockdowns appears to be distinct from an overt commitment to the slow living movement even though the adopted practices may be similar. We did not uncover any reports of people purposely adopting “slowness” or intentionally reconfiguring work, leisure, and sociality to live more attentively or meaningfully (Parkins 2004). Yet we can assume that having time or reorganizing time to engage in key practices associated with slow living – cooking from scratch instead of buying fast food, food growing instead of purchasing from the supermarket, and cycling instead of driving (Parkins 2004) – will live on as a practice memories.

**Conclusion**

The pandemic provided a natural experiment in new ways of living and an opportunity to revive or develop practice memories. New or rediscovered meanings, skills, and infrastructures resulted in habits being formed that may be carried forward. Some
consumption practices may well have been changed more or less permanently. Public response to the COVID outbreak demonstrated that consuming less was possible, household production could be enjoyable, and local community amenities were important. The examples of more sustainable consumption practices were not all about hardship and sacrifice but (re)discovering joys and pleasures of household provisioning and finding more relaxing and less stressful ways of living as people were able to reassign time use (Southerton 2020). Indeed, the emotional meanings connected to consumption practices (reducing anxiety, finding purpose, and experiencing delight) prompted us to recognize that practice memories have an important affective element. Emotional attachment to practices and collective nostalgia may explain why some practice memories are reenacted in times of crisis while others fade.

It is important to note that the burdens and negative impacts of the pandemic have not been evenly distributed across regions or populations (Hughes 2021; Moen, Pedtke, and Flood 2020; Saikia et al. 2021; Friel and Demaio 2020), including by gender (Churchill 2021; Dang and Nguyen 2021), age (Churchill 2021), and income level (Almeida et al. 2021). Within wealthy countries, such as Australia, already vulnerable groups faced increased food insecurity (Kent et al. 2020) and food banks provided emergency relief (McKay, Bastian, and Lindberg 2021). We also note that not everyone was confined to home during the lockdowns or had the time or inclination to experiment with sustainable consumption practices (see Greene et al. 2022). Frontline workers in healthcare and aged care and essential workers in supply chains were required to work harder and longer during the pandemic and parents of young children added home schooling to their usual occupations. One of the limitations of this article is that our data does not fully capture the social differentiation of the effects of the pandemic. For instance, the retail data illustrate important gender differences in that women in general played a larger role in the provisioning of food than men during the pandemic.

For people already living in poverty, the pandemic made everyday life more challenging. Our data highlight that lower income groups were less likely to stock up on groceries or make exceptional purchases, but the data are not nuanced enough to report on the dynamics of inequality during the pandemic. We suggest that governments and policy makers should develop and support such programs at the local level. For example, in the city of Melbourne we are aware that organizations such as Cultivating Community (see Cultivating Community 2021) which provide and support community gardens in public housing estates pivoted to providing fresh food packs to residents during the pandemic (Christensen and Buckley 2020). Similarly, programs such as the bicycle shed at CERES, a community-environment park in Melbourne (The Bike Shed 2021), offered affordable recycled bicycles and prior to the COVID-induced lockdowns provided opportunities for people to learn skills in fixing and maintaining bicycles which has the potential to reduce consumption (Batterbury and Dant 2019). As identified in practice theory, access to materials and infrastructure is critical for the take up and continuation of social practices (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). The provision of local infrastructure such as community gardens and bicycle repair and recycling shops, along with bikeways, is necessary to support the continuation of sustainable consumption practices that people have tried during the pandemic and would provide practical and community-engaged forms of resilience during our post-pandemic future.

We acknowledge that our data have limitations – the quantitative retail data designed to capture individual behavior and attitudes provide limited information about the links between changing consumption patterns and social meanings. Likewise, media reports may present a distorted or partial view on changing practices during the pandemic. Further research is required to confirm and further interrogate the dynamics of social practices that we identified. It would be useful to explore whether value shifts away from materialism and toward the collective good accompanied consumption changes during the pandemic.

It is still too early to say how durable more sustainable consumption practices will be beyond the pandemic. We note that mainstream conversations, political debate, and institutional processes to support more sustainable consumption and notions of living well within limits as we emerge from the pandemic are essential but have not yet been initiated in Australia (Fuchs et al. 2021; Sarkis et al. 2020). We began this article with the premise that Australia was coming back from the pandemic but at the time of writing, new strains of the COVID-19 virus and poorly organized public vaccination programs have necessitated ongoing lockdowns, self-isolation, and working from home in Melbourne and other parts of the world. We might expect that repeated periods of quarantine and working from home might strengthen the formation of new consumption habits and associated institutional effects triggered by initial responses to the pandemic in 2020. At the very least, the sustainable consumption practices that people experimented with during the pandemic provided a useful trial and will live on as
a “muscle” or practice memory while waiting for the next opportunity or external shock (Maller and Strengers 2013). We suggest that supporting the continued performance of sustainable modes of consumption from the past is a potential resource for policy makers. Enabling and strengthening community-level knowledge exchange and shared infrastructures such as community gardens and bicycle paths could extend and broaden the adoption of sustainable consumption that was kickstarted by the pandemic.

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