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What is Socially Responsible During a Pandemic? Exploring the Role of Values, Trust and Adherence to Covid-19 Preventive Measures With a Mixed-Methods Study on Italian and Greek Young People

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a huge impact on people's lives. Especially at the first stages, adherence to preventive measures was key to decreasing the number of cases, and institutions have been recommending citizens to act in a socially responsible way. Still, during the pandemic people might experience dilemmas on what it means to do so. We employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate similarities and differences in what is perceived as socially responsible among young people in Greece and Italy (Study 1), and to explore the relationships between these different meanings and their antecedents (trust, human values) and consequences (adherence to COVID-19 preventive guidelines) (Study 2). In Study 1 we found that different conceptualizations of social responsibility (SR) are driven by different ideas on what it means to be considerate of others, and these included ways to protect others' physical and/or mental health; in Italy, acting responsibly mostly assumed a connotation of "respecting the rules", while Greek participants stressed the importance of the role of "critical thinking". Coherently, Study 2 provided further evidence that compatibility between what is considered socially responsible and compliance to COVID-19 preventive guidelines is higher in Italy than in Greece; the same pattern was observed for self-reported adherence and trust in institutions. We also found that the meanings of SR are shaped, at least to a certain extent, by human values and level of trust in various societal agents, which may account in part for country differences in behavioral responses to governmental recommendations and measures against spreading of the disease. Our findings raise implications for institutions and scientists on the importance of implementing strategies to effectively foster trust and to frame guidelines in line with the prevalent value systems.

What is Socially Responsible During a Pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a huge impact on people's lives. Before reaching herd immunity and with the presence of new COVID-19 variants, adherence to preventive measures is key to decreasing the number of cases (Flaxman et al., 2020). For this reason, many studies have tried to identify the factors contributing to higher adherence (Noone et al., 2021). Coherently, during the pandemic citizens are asked on a regular basis by institutions to exert social responsibility (SR) (e.g., Galluzzo, 2020, in Italy and Alexopolou et al., 2021, in Greece); still, people might conceive the concept of SR in different ways.

To the best of our knowledge, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding citizens' conceptualizations of what it means to be socially responsible during a pandemic, as well as its potential antecedents and consequences. We believe that filling this gap could support policymakers and health practitioners to more effectively communicate health-related messages within a pandemic context.

The social context plays an important role on how people respond to the pandemic (Van Bavel et al., 2020). If exploring these differences is potentially useful to better tailor political responses and interventions in different contexts, studies on the effects of the pandemic mostly have a single-country sample (Ruiz et al., 2021), leading to limited opportunities to learn about cross-cultural variation. This study aims to provide a better understanding of country differences and cross-cultural variation during the pandemic; as it was theorized in previous epidemics, not necessarily "one size fits all" (Bennet & Carney, 2009). We focused on a Greek and on an Italian sample. Both countries had experienced strict lockdown measures during 2020 and 2021, with the maximum stringency in April 2020, more relaxed restrictions between May and October 2020, and another pick in late February 2021 (Hale et al., 2020). It is to note though that despite restrictions were applied rather horizontally in Greece during 2021, in Italy they changed from region to region week by week, with some regions often experiencing more relaxed restrictions (Italian Ministry of Health, 2021). In the meantime, the number of COVID-19 cases has been almost double in Italy (WHO, 2021). While Italy was the country firstly hit by the pandemic in Europe, the international news media have described the Greek case as unique, since a lockdown was imposed early, when mortality was lower than in neighbouring countries (Skapinakis et al., 2021).

The attested differences in the early response to the pandemic between Italy and Greece are intriguing as these two Mediterranean EU member states share a number of similarities in terms of ecology, economy, and culture. For example, they both score clearly above the mean in the dimension of cultural tightness-looseness among 68 countries (Uz, 2015), indicating relatively loose norms and tolerance of deviant behavior, which has been shown to systematically relate to lower success in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (Gelfand et al., 2021). According to Hofstede Insights (2021), both Italy and Greece present high levels of uncertainty avoidance, which are even higher in Greece (It = 75; Gr = 100). Therefore, we would expect both countries, when compared to weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, to express a higher emotional need for rules, and a need for clarity and structure. On the other hand, Italy presents higher levels of individualism than Greece (It = 76; Gr =

35). We would expect that in Greece, as a more collectivist country (Hofstede, 2011), people will believe more strongly that everyone should look after their cohesive in-groups and extended families, they will assign a greater importance to relationships, and they will have a stronger tendency to classify others into in-groups and out-groups. We believe that the above cross-cultural similarities and differences might play a role in shaping different conceptualizations of what it means to be socially responsible during the COVID-19 pandemic, which should be considered when designing and implementing health-related policies.

We decided to employ a mixed methods approach following an exploratory design, where qualitative data were collected and analyzed to then be used for building a quantitative measure to further learn about the research topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Since to the best of our knowledge there is no literature on the meanings of SR within a pandemic across different national contexts, we employed a qualitative methodology to explore these (Study 1), which allowed to increase the ecological validity of the study. Then, in Study 2, we employed this knowledge to build a measure on the different meanings of SR, with an emphasis on the role of compatibility of what it is perceived as socially responsible and adherence to preventive measures against COVID-19. We adopted a derived etic approach to develop a measure of the meanings of SR according to what is learned to be common between the two cultures (Berry, 1989). Finally, we explored potential antecedents (trust and human values) and consequences (adherence to COVID-19 preventive guidelines) of SR.

Study One

What does it mean to be socially responsible during pandemic times? As suggested by Prosser et al. (2020), it might not always be straightforward to decide what it is moral to do during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals are likely to experience dilemmas between the perceived duty to adhere to social distancing rules and the moral duty to provide care for vulnerable individuals in their communities, such as by providing emotional support or joining a protest. According to these authors, if adherence to COVID-19 preventive rules is presented under a moral framework, in the long term this can become a threat for relationships, with a possibility that individuals will be “socially ostracized by friends for refusing to attend a social gathering or challenged for avoiding important in-person workplace meetings” (p. 655). In this study, we were interested to explore which meanings the concept of SR can undertake within the pandemic context, their impact on social relationships, and how these meanings might change across different cultural contexts.

Research Questions

1. What does it mean to be socially responsible during the pandemic? How does this affect relationships with others?
2. What are the similarities and differences across Italy and Greece?

Method

The research questions suggested a methodology that would enable the exploration of participants' conceptualizations of SR. Consequently, we adopted a qualitative research design, using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection/Process

We conducted interviews on Zoom between January and February 2021. At that time, COVID-19 cases were increasing both in Italy and Greece and both countries were in a lockdown (Hale et al., 2020).

Although advances in technology and the use of Internet have offered qualitative research new flexible and cost-effective ways and opportunities to conduct research, such as online interviews, the choice of online instead of in person interviews in this study was more of a necessity rather than a desired method of data collection, given the fact that both Italy and Greece were facing very strict lockdowns during the time the study was conducted, limiting (if not prohibiting) the possibility of in person interviews.

The peculiarity of establishing the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Fontana & Frey, 2008), technical difficulties and authenticity in participants' answers (Sullivan, 2012) were our main concerns in conducting interviews online. While the interviewer-interviewee relationship is important in every interview, we were aware that establishing this relationship online can be different (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). To deal with this possibility, we engaged in building and maintaining rapport with the participants throughout the whole interview process. Following Deakin and Wakefield's (2013) suggestion, prior to interviews interaction (e.g., finding the suitable time and date for the interview) enhanced rapport with participants.

To deal with possible technical difficulties that might undermine the interview process, we aspired to ensure our access to the Internet, as well as our familiarization with the Zoom platform. Furthermore, prior to the interviews, we aimed to secure that all participants were familiar with videoconferencing and provided them with every related information necessary.

Regarding authenticity in online interviews, according to Sullivan (2012), access to verbal, nonverbal and social cues communications platforms such as Skype provide, can attribute to online interviews an equivalent authenticity level with face-to-face interviews as this enables the evaluation of the visible aspects of the impression management process, especially when the topic of interest is not sensitive and does not require the processing of visual cues that do not concern only the upper body part a web camera captures (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). For this reason, we encouraged participants to also use their web cameras, to create an environment almost comparable to the onsite one in terms of the existence of nonverbal and social cues and impression management (Sullivan, 2012).

Last but not least, the preferred communication platform for the interviews was Zoom, not only because of the researchers' experience and familiarization with it, but also due to its relative ease of use and security-privacy features. First, participants are not required to download Zoom or to have an account. Only the researcher is required to download the program, making it easily accessible to participants (Gray et al., 2020). Second, Zoom can

require password protection and provides users with the possibility of safely storing the meeting recordings on the host's device without involving third-party software (Archibald et al., 2019). Third, the online meeting is stored both as a combined video-audio file and an audio only file, providing the participant the chance to choose the version they prefer their interview to be stored (Gray et al., 2020).

Interviews were conducted in the participants' native language by the corresponding native speaker investigator. They included questions about what it means to be socially responsible during the pandemic by addressing participants' behavior, the ideal citizen's behavior, and others' behavior within this context (see [Appendix](#)). Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed ad verbatim.

Sample and Recruitment Process

We selected university students aged 18-25 who lived in Italy or Greece during 2020. We focused on people of young age because this group has been largely portrayed by the media (e.g., Martikainen & Sakki, 2021) and politicians (e.g., Alexopoulou et al., 2021) as acting irresponsibly by putting others into risk.

Overall, 26 participants were interviewed ($n = 13$ per country). This number was based on thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020), which was reached at 11 participants for both countries, but we also included two more participants from each country to add to the variability of the sample and to the quality of the saturation.

The average age of the participants was 22.5 ($SD = 1.7$) in Italy and 22.8 ($SD = 1.4$) in Greece. Most of the interviewees identified as females (10 females and 3 males in Italy; 7 females, 5 males and 1 non-binary identifying person in Greece). Also, both Italian and Greek participants mostly identified as left-winged. Participants came from different regions of Italy and Greece as we aimed to include some variety in the regions for each country. Participants were studying different subjects at their university, with most of them specializing in social sciences or engineering. The detailed demographic profiles of participants are presented in the [Appendix](#).

We followed both a convenience (Robinson, 2014) and a snowball sampling (Welch & Patton., 1992) as we first recruited familiar contacts ($N = 4$ in Italy; $N = 6$ in Greece) matching the inclusion criteria, who also suggested other possible participants.

Ethics and Reflexivity

The study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. To act with beneficence and respect towards the participants, we ensured participants' information anonymity and confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms to them. Specifically, each participant was mentioned under the initial of their country of origin ("I" for Italy or "G" for Greece) and a number indicating the order in which they were interviewed, followed by the name of the region they come from in Italy or in Greece (e.g., if the participant came from Rome, Italy and was interviewed first, then they would be assigned the pseudonym: I01, Rome). Also, participants were informed before the interview about their intact right to withdraw from the

study at any moment or not to answer to questions they did not desire to.

As in-depth interviews concern the co-construction of knowledge between the participant and the interviewer (Brinkmann, 2014), we recognized our unexcluded involvement during the whole procedure as individuals also experiencing the pandemic and the dilemmas that SR encloses. Also, sharing the same nationality with participants (either Italian or Greek) and having lived in the same country with them (either Italy or Greece) either during or before the pandemic added to our unexcluded involvement throughout the whole procedure. For these reasons, we used self-reflection to maintain a more neutral position towards participants and analysis.

Data Analysis

While data were collected in Greek and Italian, they were analyzed directly in English. Despite none of the researchers could speak both Italian and Greek, we attempted to share with each other in English the exact meanings of participants' quotes during the analysis to ensure that we both apprehend the essence of participants' words and to reflect together on both Italian and Greek quotes.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was preferred for its resilience in in-depth investigation of participants' perceptions and experiences. The coding process was accomplished following an inductive approach. Initial codes and themes retrieved from the data were evaluated on their significance, potential overlap, and richness in relation to the research questions. Following the recursive nature of thematic analysis, we read and re-read the interviews to ensure that there was no lost data, and that codes and themes were accurately linked to the data.

Results

Four main themes were identified regarding what it means to be socially responsible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. *Being Socially Responsible Means Caring about Others*

Both Greek and Italian participants denoted the significance of caring about others as a way of being socially responsible during the pandemic. Participants identified three different ways of doing so: the first two are "emotionally and practically supporting others" and "respecting preventive behaviors to protect others' physical health". Within these two codes, "others" often had a connotation of "close ones", especially when these belonged to a vulnerable group. A third way to be socially responsible dealt with influencing others to comply, which was mainly focused on the protections of one's community. Expressing their need to care about others, one Greek and one Italian participants mention:

G08, Amaliada: "Because it is a strange condition that we are in, so there must be solidarity between us."

I05, Emilia Romagna: “When acting in a society you behave also thinking that there is someone else too, it is not only you... maybe [you do that] by using [COVID-19 related] precautions, or in other ways”

2. *Being Socially Responsible Involves Dealing with Dilemmas on How to Act*

These different ways of “caring about others” often ignited dilemmas to both Greek and Italian participants on how they should act.

Specifically, dilemmas existed between participants’ need to protect their and others’ physical and mental health, to address their social needs, to be politically active and to support their local economy. Protecting physical health was perceived as incompatible with participants’ need to go out either for meeting friends, or joining a political protest, or eating at a local restaurant.

This incompatibility was attempted to be solved in different ways, where the most outstanding one was for participants to engage in compromises between their incompatible needs, which sometimes were negotiated with others:

G05, Attiki: “I believe that meeting with some specific friends every time, a strict circle, is completely normal and humane, otherwise we [...] will fall into depression. It is not possible. So, in a way, you adjust the pandemic to the human characteristics.”

IO4, Lombardy: “Furthermore, she [my friend who experienced a psychological crisis] is quite strict about it [restrictions]...I will have to take a COVID test before going to see her... to hug her I will have to dress with rubbish bags, harnessed like the doctors.”

Other ways of resolving dilemmas concerned finding alternatives that excluded the danger to contract COVID-19 or conforming to others’ way of acting.

3. *Meanings of SR Are Influenced by Perceptions and Trust*

While encompassing some commonalities, this theme denoted significant differences between Italy and Greece.

Similarly, unclear guidelines communicated by governments were perceived by both Greek and Italian participants as creating confusion about what it means to be socially responsible and how to act, amplifying the existing dilemmas.

One of the strongest differences between Greek and Italian participants derives from the completely different way the government was perceived. In their definitions of SR, Greek participants underlined the irresponsibility of the Greek government that, according to them, precedes SR. Greek participants stressed the fact that talking about SR is absurd when the Greek government does not abide by the preventive behaviors themselves and handle the pandemic ineffectively. On the other hand, Italian participants expressed feelings of tolerance towards politicians and the Italian government regarding the way they have been acting and handling the pandemic. Thus, Italian participants’ connotations of SR were

accompanied by favorable feelings towards the government. The next two quotes reveal this discrepancy between Greek and Italian participants:

G07, Giannena: "I would not blame [...] it only to the citizens, only to the society. [...] Definitely it is the [Greek] government's fault. Definitely it is the way they are dealing with the situation to blame."

I13, Basilicata: "I have never doubted or criticized the actions of the Italian government because I realize that it is an emergency situation that is...difficult to manage."

Another difference in Greek and Italian definitions of SR was found in the importance of rules in relation to SR. Italian participants considered adherence to the rules the Italian government imposes to tackle the pandemic as the way to be socially responsible:

I07, Umbria: "He [the ideal citizen during the pandemic] is surely that person who conforms to the rules given in the country where they live."

Contrarily, for Greek participants, SR during the pandemic encloses the importance of critically reflecting towards the rules imposed by the Greek government. Hence, someone can still be socially responsible even if they do not adhere to the rules:

G03, Attiki: "But I do not think that someone who does not obey the laws is not an ideal citizen, if they do it [not obeying the laws] with critical thinking..."

4. Meanings of SR stimulate social connectedness or disconnectedness

The meanings and enactment of SR clearly impacted participants' social relationships with others. Many participants reported experiences of social connectedness; for example, it was reported that sharing similar preventive behaviors (either by complying or by not complying) decreased the occasions for judgments and quarrels, and made them feel "lucky".

I08, Sardinia: "It happened with my colleagues [...] during the first lockdown especially they supported me emotionally a lot, they were calling me all the time, sometimes they were telling me <<you don't know how much we would like to visit you, hug you, but now we can't>> [...] They were close to me while respecting the rules".

On the other hand, many participants reported experiences of social disconnectedness, such as disapproval, anger or frustration towards people not complying. Participants also reported some experiences of polarization; for instance, that they were accused of overreacting by being too compliant by friends and people in the wider environment.

G07, Giannena: “Mostly anger. This is the main feeling I have. I have anger towards older and younger ones who are so selfish. They only care about themselves. From the younger ones who go out for example and overcrowd, to the older ones who also do not wear masks when they are outside, they go to church...”

The experience of being reprehended by strangers because they were judged as not compliant enough was mostly Italian:

I01, Veneto: “I was running with my sister, like in March or April [2020] in the fields, since I live in the countryside [...] and we were running in the little streets where almost nobody is around [...] or in the street nearby the highway, and the truck drivers were screaming us things like: «Stay home pieces of shit!»”

In both countries most participants also expressed feelings of tolerance toward people not complying or perceived as complying less than them, stating that others might have different behaviors due to different needs and experiences.

G08, Amaliada: “Of course, I have to say that I justify people’s behavior a little bit because they have been through a situation which is very painful and tedious, eh...and while I do not want to see the behaviors that I told you before, like overcrowding etc., I feel an understanding [towards these people] from the view that people are very tired and have somehow gotten lost in it [the pandemic] and maybe they do not know how they should behave.”

Study 2

In the second study we aimed to further explore the meanings and connotations of SR across Italy and Greece by examining potential antecedents (human values and trust) and consequences (adherence to measure) of what it means to be socially responsible.

The Role of Human Values

In Study 1, when discussing SR, participants often related it –explicitly or implicitly– to values; for example, they referred to the importance of caring about others to protect personal and others’ physical and emotional health, and to support the local economy.

Similarly, some authors have theorized on how values can influence the way people behave during the pandemic. In particular, based on Schwartz’s theory on human values (Schwartz, 2017), Wolf et al. (2020) hypothesized that individuals giving more importance

to self-transcendence (e.g., responsibility) and conservation (e.g., security) values might also show a higher level of adherence to COVID-19 preventive guidelines, while openness to change (e.g., freedom) and self-enhancement (e.g., ambition) should predict lower adherence.

Based on findings from Study 1, we hypothesized that in regard to the role played by self-transcendence values, a possible limit of this theorization is that it does not account for the fact that ideas of what it means to be a self-transcendent (in our case, a socially responsible) person can differ, and for this reason self-transcendence values might not necessarily predict higher adherence to COVID-19 preventive guidelines. Based on the real examples participants have made during the interviews, we constructed a quantitative scale to have an index of the compatibility between what is believed to be socially responsible during the pandemic and adherence to preventive measures ('Meanings of SR').

The Role of Trust

In democratic countries, adherence to COVID-19 preventive rules is greatly dependent on citizens' voluntary compliance and respect to governmental indications (Sibley et al., 2020). Reasonably, there has been great interest in the investigation of the factors affecting the societal response to these requests, with a focus on the role of trust. Available studies show that trust in governmental and institutional management of the pandemic is associated with higher levels of adherence (Devine et al., 2021).

According to data retrieved from the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2021), in 2021 71% of Greek respondents declared not to trust their national government, versus 58% of Italian respondents (European average: 59%). Furthermore, in 2019 in Italy 87% of the population believed that the problem of corruption was widespread in their country (versus 88% in 2022), while in Greece 95% of the population believed the same (versus 98% in 2022) (European Commission, 2022). This is consistent with findings from Study 1, where Greek respondents expressed distrust towards the national government.

In continuation with the findings of Study 1, where feelings of trust and distrust towards the government and politicians were really salient in the participants' conceptualizations of SR, we were interested in exploring how trust mediates the connotations of SR and whether "adhering-to-measures"-related meanings of SR indicate higher levels of trust in various societal agents.

Research questions

1. Do trust and human values predict meanings of SR?
2. Do meanings of SR predict adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures?
3. Does SR mediate the effect of human values and trust in predicting adherence to COVID-19 prevention guidelines?
4. Does country moderate the above relationships?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Overall, 718 participants filled in the questionnaire. Participants not aged between 18-30 years and those who failed one attention check were excluded from the analyses, leaving up to a total of 568 participants aged 18-30 who lived in Italy ($n = 282$) and Greece ($n = 286$) since the beginning of the pandemic. The average age of the participants was 24.2 ($SD = 3.0$) in Italy and 23.5 ($SD = 3.6$) in Greece. Most of the interviewees identified as females (Italy: 214 females, 64 males and 4 non-binary identifying respondents; Greece: 206 females, 79 males and 1 non-binary identifying respondents). Also, both Italian and Greek participants mostly identified as left-winged. Participants came from different regions of Italy and Greece, but the majority of respondents were from Lombardy (69 Italian participants) and Attica (121 Greek participants). Most of the respondents were full-time students (157 in Italy, 142 in Greece). Participants had different educational backgrounds, with most of them having studied or studying humanities (77 in Italy, 55 in Greece). Detailed information on the demographic profiles of participants is presented in the [Appendix](#). Data were collected from late-March to mid-April 2021, when both countries were in lockdown for a second season since the outbreak of the pandemic.

The study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Participants were recruited through social media and snowball sampling. Questionnaires were administered online through Google Forms. The research team built the questionnaires in English language and then the native speaking researchers translated them in Italian and in Greek when an already validated translation was not available.

Measures

Meanings of SR. The meanings of SR were measured with an 8-item scale developed on the basis of the themes that emerged in Study 1, esp. themes 1 and 2 (i.e., “Being Socially Responsible Means Caring about Others”, “Being Socially Responsible Involves Dealing with Dilemmas on How to Act”), while taking into account the role of significant actors such as the public authorities (as indicated in theme 3, “Meanings of SR Are Influenced by Perceptions and Trust”) and other people (as indicated in theme 4, “Meanings of SR stimulate social connectedness or disconnectedness”). In particular, the research team co-created items using examples of behaviors that were depicted by participants in Study 1 as a way to “care about others”, also involving a dilemma on how to act, the resolution of which was either compatible or incompatible with the COVID-19 preventive measures undertaken in the two countries of interest. Representativeness of the diversity and the unique content of the themes served as basic criteria for item selection, while respecting the practical necessity to have a short scale. The questionnaire was built in English and then adapted into Greek and Italian by two independent bilingual translators following back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1970).

In the final questionnaire, participants were introduced with a scenario in which restrictions were getting stricter in their region due to an increase of COVID-19 cases. They were then presented with the description of some young people's behaviors acting in controversial ways on the basis of the interview findings, e.g., "A person gets to know that a group of people are organizing a party during the lockdown. This person calls the local authorities to denounce the organizers of the party" and "A person occasionally has gatherings during quarantine with strict members of their family or/and close friends". For each of these cases, participants were asked how much from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) they believed that person to be socially responsible. In each of the scenario presented, one of the situations was compatible with full compliance (e.g., calling the authorities, not having strict gatherings) and the other was a product of critical appraisal which deviated from strict compliance (e.g., not calling the authorities, having strict gatherings). Higher scores on this scale imply stronger compatibility between what it is considered socially responsible and compliance, while lower scores are indicative of a critical appraisal based on subjective situational evaluations of participants. After removing two items for reasons of internal consistency, reliability of the 6-items scale reached acceptable levels ($\alpha = .67$ and $.71$ for Italy and Greece, respectively). The full scale appears in the [Appendix](#). The scale was used for the first time as a part of this Study.

Adherence to Measures Against COVID-19. Items used to measure adherence to measures against COVID-19 were inspired by the ones Bourgeois et al. (2020) used to measure non-compliance during the pandemic. We asked participants if they did any of the following during the first lockdown (spring 2020) or the recent lockdown(s) (winter 2020-2021): "visited someone else's house", "received a visit from someone not living with you", "traveled to an area beyond quarantine restrictions", "visited someone who belong to a high-risk group", and "have been physically too close to someone who did not live at your home". Participants responded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (very often). A pooled average was calculated for the two lockdown periods in addition to separate respective scores. Higher values indicate stronger adherence to measures. Reliability ranged from $.76$ to $.87$ across countries.

Trust. We developed an 11-item scale to measure trust following the guidelines of OECD (2017). We asked participants to state how much from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) they trusted various societal agents. Exploratory analysis using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation revealed four factors of trust: institutions (political system, government, police, the EU, professional media), scientists (scientists, WHO, health system), informal networks (social media, fellow people), and the church (one item). Reliability was satisfactory (Cronbach's α ranging from $.72$ to $.79$ across factors and countries), except for informal networks (McDonald's $\omega = .26$ -.30), probably since this was a 2-item factor.

Values. The 21-item Portrait Values Questionnaire-European Social Survey edition (Cieciuch et al., 2018) was used, which measures Schwartz's (2017) refined theory of basic values. Within this questionnaire, different people's portraits are presented in two sentences; the first one uses words like "It is (very) important to him/her", the second one includes wordings like "He/she thinks / likes / believes". An example item is: "It's very important to him to help the people around him. He wants to care for their well-being". After each portrait,

participants are asked how similar they believe to be to that person. This questionnaire is normally matched on the gender of participants, so that males will be presented with “he/him” pronouns and females with “she/her” pronouns; to overcome this gender-binary distinction we added a third version for participants identifying as non-binary (e.g. “It is very important for this person to help the people around them. This person wants to care for their well-being”).

Scores were calculated for the four higher-order values (self-enhancement, openness to change, conservation, self-transcendence) to increase reliability. Alpha coefficients ranged between .58-.74 for Italy and .61-.72 for Greece.

Demographics. For each participant we collected information regarding their gender (0=female, 1=male, 2=non-binary), age, living arrangement (0=alone, 1=with family/partner/roommate), region and density of residence (1=village to 5=city).

Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi v.2.0 (The Jamovi Project, 2021). The dataset is reported in [Appendix](#).

Country Mean Comparisons

T-test revealed that compatibility of the meaning of SR with compliance was clearly higher in Italy, while participants in Greece adopted a more critical appraisal of the construct (Table 1). Furthermore, adherence to measures against spreading of COVID-19 during the two lockdown periods was stronger in Italy than in Greece. The effect size of these differences was high. Trust in institutions and the scientists was higher in Italy, while participants from Greece tended to trust informal networks more. Church reached the lowest level of trust in both countries. The two samples differed in all measures of values, as follows: endorsement of self-protection or anxiety avoidance values (i.e., self-enhancement, conservation) was higher in Italy, while growth or anxiety-free values (i.e., openness to change, self-transcendence) were appreciated more in Greece. These differences were of small to medium size (Table 1).

Variables associated to the Meaning of SR

Compatibility of SR with compliance was positively related to adherence to measures against COVID-19, to trust in institutions and the scientists, and to the value of conservation, while it was negatively related to openness to change in both countries (see Table 2). Furthermore, it correlated positively with trust in church in Greece and with self-transcendence values in Italy.

We further explored the associations between Meaning of SR and other variables of interest employing a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, where we introduced demographics (i.e., age, gender, density of residence, and living arrangement) at block 1, trust and values at block 2, country at block 3, and the interaction terms of country by trust and country by values at block 4. In model 1, female gender ($\beta = -.26, p = .007$), living with

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, T-test and Effect Size of COVID-19-related Measures, Trust, and Values by Country

	Italy		Greece		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
COVID-19 measures						
Social responsibility	5.33	0.85	4.35	0.85	12.75***	1.07
Adherence to measures 2020	6.34	0.90	5.07	1.42	12.79***	1.07
Adherence to measures 2021	5.19	1.21	4.21	1.42	8.84***	0.74
Adherence to measures total	5.77	0.86	4.64	1.27	12.37***	1.04
Trust						
Institutions	3.51	1.04	2.25	1.11	13.99***	1.17
Scientists	5.30	1.20	4.28	1.25	9.98***	0.84
Church	2.06	1.48	2.17	1.56	-0.93	0.08
Networks	2.57	0.99	2.91	1.07	-3.85***	-0.32
Values						
Self-enhancement	4.94	0.93	4.27	1.15	7.71***	0.65
Openness to change	4.85	1.02	5.23	0.93	-4.65***	-0.39
Conservation	5.18	1.02	4.68	1.09	5.63***	0.47
Self-transcendence	6.04	0.69	6.17	0.66	-2.20*	-0.18

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2.

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between COVID-19-Related Measures, Trust, and Values by Country

	COVID-19 measures			Trust				Values		
	SRE	ADH	INS	SCI	CHU	NET	SEN	OCH	CON	STR
COVID-19 measures										
Social REsponsibility	--	.25***	.55***	.37***	.19**	.01	.09	-.14*	.43***	.10
ADHerence to Measures	.29***	--	.14*	.21***	.05	.04	-.18**	-.31***	.10	.00
Trust										
INStitutions	.37***	.13*	--	.54***	.42***	.30***	.14*	-.12*	.37***	-.07
SCientists	.41***	-.01	.63***	--	.13*	.41***	.01	-.16**	.14*	.01
CHUrch	.11	-.11	.29***	.14*	--	.22***	.01	-.11	.42***	.03
NETworks	.03	-.01	.65***	.29***	.22***	--	-.06	-.10	.07	.00
Values										
Self-ENhancement	.01	-.07	.06	.07	.02	.05	--	.35***	.30***	.06
Openness to CHange	-.14*	-.20**	-.13*	-.14*	-.04	.06	.23***	--	.10	.36***
CONservation	.44***	.10	.30***	.19**	.30***	.06	.32***	.01	--	.37***
Self-TRanscendence	.15**	.08	.07	.11	-.01	.03	-.01	.25***	.29***	--

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Note. Lower left: Italy; upper right: Greece.

family or a partner or a roommate (as opposed to living alone) ($\beta = .37, p = .010$), and living in a small town or a village (rather than in a big city) ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$) explained 7.8% of the variance of interpreting SR as compatible with compliance. Nevertheless, these effects of demographics became non-significant in model 2, where trust and values increased the amount of explained variance of the meaning of SR by a respectable 44.5%. Specifically, more trust in institutions ($\beta = .31, p < .001$) and in science ($\beta = .22, p < .001$), and stronger endorsement of conservation values ($\beta = .31, p < .001$) was related to higher compatibility of SR with compliance, while more trust in the church ($\beta = -.09, p = .006$) and in informal networks ($\beta = -.20, p < .001$) and stronger endorsement of openness to change values ($\beta = -.09, p = .007$) were related to a more critical appraisal of SR. Not only these effects remained significant in model 3, when the role of country was accounted for, but another set of values, those of self-enhancement ($\beta = -.07, p = .041$), emerged as associated to a critical interpretation of SR. Country itself ($\beta = -.25, p = .002$) added a small but significant 1% to the amount of explained variance of the meaning of SR over and above demographics, trust and values. In line with t-test findings, compatibility of SR with compliance was more evident in Italy than in Greece. The interaction of country by trust and country by values did not increase the amount of explained variance of the dependent variable any further in model 4. Only one in eight interaction terms was significant, i.e., trust in institutions predicted higher compatibility of SR with compliance in Greece, as compared to Italy, although the direction of this relationship was the same in both countries ($\beta = .32, p < .001$).

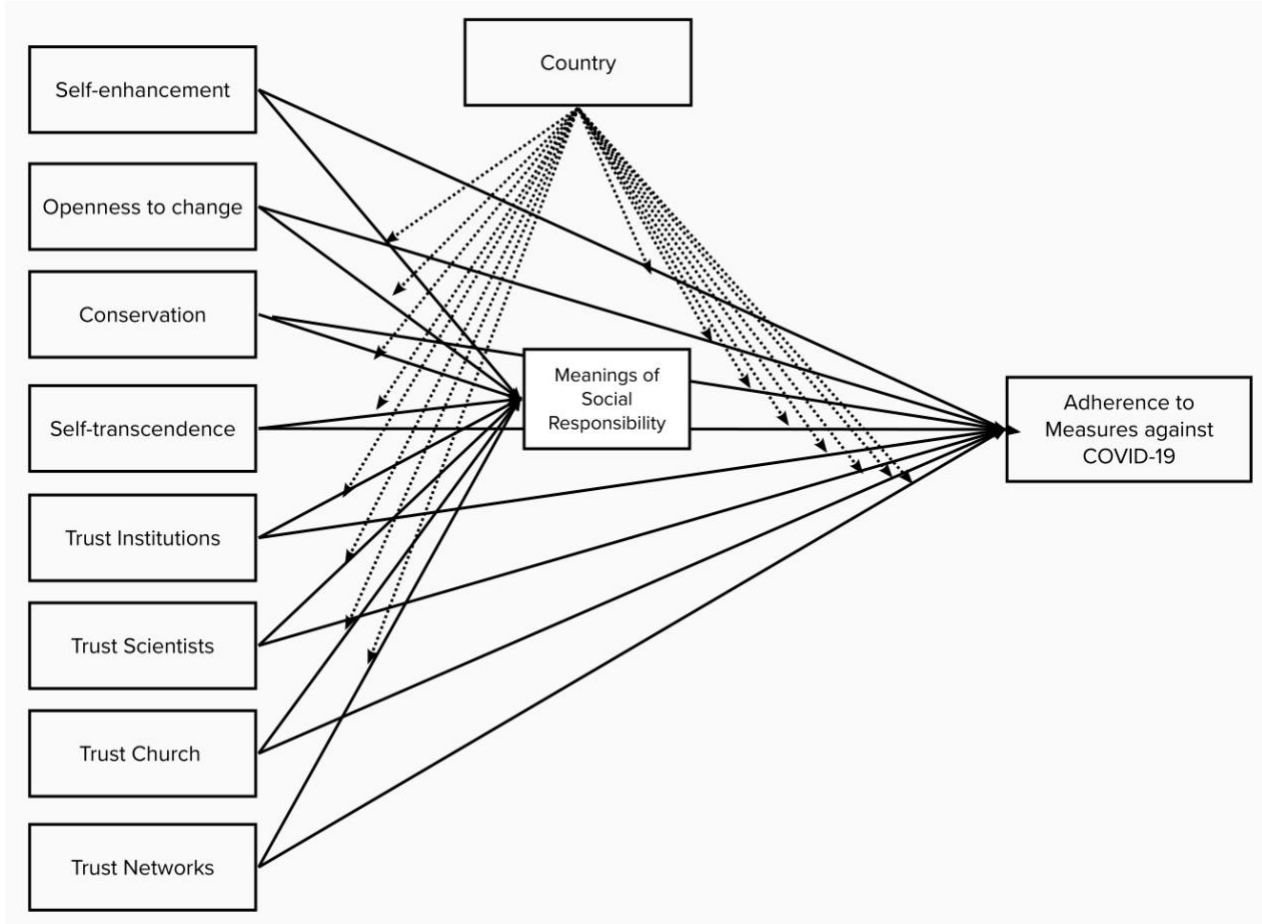
Direct and Indirect Effect of the Meaning of SR on Adherence to Measures against COVID-19

To examine how the meanings of SR were related to adherence to measures against COVID-19, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression. In this analysis, the meaning of SR was entered as a predictor at block 3, after demographics (block 1), and trust and values (block 2). Country (block 4) and the interaction of country by the meaning of SR (block 5) followed. Overall, 33.7% of the variability of adherence to measures against COVID-19 across the two lockdown periods was cumulatively explained by demographic factors (7.4%), trust and values (18.9%), the meaning of SR (2.9%), and country (4.5%). In model 4, adherence to measures against COVID-19 was associated with older age ($\beta = .10, p = .010$), more trust in scientists ($\beta = .10, p = .045$), lower endorsement of openness to change ($\beta = -.20, p = .001$) and self-enhancement values ($\beta = -.09, p = .041$), higher compatibility of SR with compliance ($\beta = .21, p < .001$), and by living in Italy ($\beta = -.58, p < .001$). The interaction of the meaning of SR by country was non-significant, as were the interaction terms of trust by country and values by country.

We tested the mediating role of the meaning of SR in the relationship of trust and values with adherence to measures against COVID-19 using the jAMM module (Gallucci, 2020); in particular we employed the GLM mediation model, which applies the maximum likelihood estimation method, and it is based on the lavaan R package (Rosseel et al., 2012). Findings are summarized in Table 3, while the paths of the mediation model tested are depicted in Figure 1. This analysis confirmed the direct effect of compatibility of SR with

Figure 1.

Conceptual Model of the Mediation Analysis of the Meanings of Social Responsibility in the relationship of Values and Trust with Adherence to Measures against COVID-19 Moderated by Country



Note. Moderator main effects are not shown. Covariances among IV are estimated but not shown.

compliance on adherence to measures against COVID-19 in both Italy ($\beta = .21, p < .001$) and Greece ($\beta = .17, p < .001$). Furthermore, a number of indirect effects of the meaning of SR were revealed in predicting adherence to COVID-19 measures from trust in institutions, trust in scientists, trust in informal networks, and endorsement of conservation values in both samples. The indirect effect of the meaning of SR in the relationship of trust in church and openness to change with adherence to measures against COVID-19 was significant only among Greek participants, while the indirect effect of the meaning of SR in the relationship of self-enhancement values with adherence to measures against COVID-19 was significant only in the Italian sample. Self-transcendence values had no direct or indirect impact on adherence to measures against COVID-19.

Table 3.

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Trust and Values on Adherence to Measures against COVID-19 through Social Responsibility by Country

Predictors	Italy			Greece		
	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect (SR)	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect (SR)
Trust						
Institutions	.08	.04	.04*	.03	-.06	.08***
Scientists	.07	.01	.05**	.19**	.16*	.03*
Church	-.03	-.01	-.01	-.07	-.05	-.02*
Networks	-.13*	-.03	-.03*	-.07	-.04	-.03**
Human values						
Self-enhancement	-.04	-.02	-.03*	-.13*	-.12*	-.01
Openness to change	-.12*	-.11*	-.01	-.32***	-.29***	-.03*
Conservation	.06	-.02	.08***	.15*	.10	.05**
Self-transcendence	.07	.06	.00	.06	.05	.01

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .010$. *** $p < .001$. Note: Criterion variable: Adherence to measures against COVID-19. SR: Social Responsibility. Numbers are standardized OLS regression coefficients.

Discussion

In this study we investigated the meanings of SR during the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of potential antecedents (human values, trust) and its consequences on adherence to the measures taken by the governments against spreading of COVID-19. We adopted a cross-cultural approach by comparing Italy and Greece, two Mediterranean countries which differ in terms of economic and social indicators. The results of both the qualitative and quantitative studies are interconnected and complementary, raising some interesting points for discussion.

According to a cross-sectional study on adolescents, the most commonly self-reported reason to engage in physical distancing was SR and not wanting to spread the virus (Oosterhoff et al., 2020). Still, Prosser et al. (2020) concluded that the moralization of COVID-19 might create a division between “distancers” and “not distancers”. This was confirmed in Study 1, especially in the Italian sample. On the other hand, participants also expressed tolerance towards people with different levels of adherence. They also engaged in compromises, sometimes co-created with others, which were useful in dealing with dilemmas and in sustaining their social relationships. This is coherent with Arvan’s (2019) suggestion that a progressive willingness to “work across the aisle” to settle moral issues cooperatively is key to reducing polarization.

Regarding human values, the hypothesis of Wolf et al. (2020) that higher endorsement of openness to change and self-enhancement would negatively predict adherence was

confirmed in our study. Similarly, stronger endorsement of conservation indirectly predicted higher adherence through higher compatibility of SR with compliance. Interestingly, in contrast with what was expected by other researchers but in line with our qualitative findings, self-transcendence values did not predict adherence in Study 2. As shown in the interviews of Study 1, the ways of being socially responsible during a pandemic did not always strictly correspond to adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures. Coherently with the fact that these meanings mostly had a connotation of “following the rules” in Italy, while this was not observed in Greece, a positive correlation of self-transcendence values with compatibility of SR with adherence was only observed in Italy. In Greece, instead, the idea that perceived irresponsibility of the government preceded responsibility of the citizens resonates with the notion of “responsible citizens against an irresponsible state” (Alexopoulou et al., 2021, p. 9).

Values can serve as an explanatory framework for country differences, though sometimes in less obvious ways. Greece is a more collectivist culture than Italy (Hofstede, 2011). According to previous research, individualism can predict an increase in pandemic growth (Güss et al., 2021) and in COVID-19 deaths (Dheer et al., 2021). Therefore, it might be expected for people in Greece to be more compliant to COVID-19 guidelines than in Italy. Despite so, collectivism does not predict cooperation with out-group members (Koch & Koch, 2007). Moreover, in the interviews of Study 1 we found that during the pandemic the government in Greece was perceived as an outgroup, while in Italy it was not. Coherently, in Greece trust in government was lower and following preventive COVID-19 guidelines was perceived as less socially responsible than it was in Italy. It might be that in Greece the interaction between collectivist values and perceiving the government as an out-group had led people to cooperate, but according to rules which were negotiated within the in-group and not externally imposed. Future research should further investigate the complex relationships between collectivistic values, trust in institutions, and adherence to COVID-19 behavioral guidelines, by also considering the role of ingroup/outgroup distinction.

The findings of this study raise some points of discussion in relation to the role of trust. On the one hand, the existence of an external threat might lead citizens to trust institutions and governments more as an attempt to protect themselves from the external threat (Sibley et al., 2020). On the other hand, people can often face an external threat with suspicion regarding its nature and cause (Van Prooijen & van Dijk, 2014). While there is some literature about how in some countries, Italy included, trust in government increased during the pandemic (Bull, 2021; Goldfinch et al., 2021), this does not seem to be the case in Greece, where many participants expressed distrust toward the government and institutions. Coherently, in Study 2 both trust and adherence to guidelines, as well as compatibility between meanings of SR and compliance were higher in Italy than in Greece. These findings are in line with data from Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2021) presented in the introduction of Study 2, where distrust towards the government appeared to be higher in Greece. Future research should investigate why trust in institutions increased in some countries but not in others during the pandemic, since this seems to play an important role in predicting adherence to COVID-19 preventive guidelines (Devine et al., 2021) as well as vaccines' acceptance (Lindholt et al., 2021).

In Study 2 Italian participants self-declared higher adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures when compared to Greek participants during both the first (spring 2020) and the second (winter 2020-2021) lockdown. While both studies revealed the important role of human values, trust and different conceptualizations of SR can play in the public response to preventive measures, we recognize that other variables, such as the number of deaths and the consequent perception of danger and risk, might have had an influence, too. In fact, Italy was the first country in Europe to be hit by the pandemic. During the first lockdown the number of deaths by COVID-19 was substantially higher in Italy, with a pick of 15.51 people per million in a day, compared to a pick of 2.01 people per million in a day in Greece (Ritchie et al., 2022). During the second lockdown death tolls became more similar, even if still higher in Italy with a pick of 16.76, compared to 11.58 in Greece (Ritchie et al., 2022). Coherently with this, Yang et al. (2020) found that adolescents and young adults with a higher risk perception were more likely to adhere to COVID-19 preventive measures. Future research should explore how risk perception might interact with different conceptualizations of SR and trust and result in a different response to preventive measures.

Furthermore, not all forms of trust yielded similar associations with the meaning of SR and adherence to preventive measures. Trust in institutions and in scientists predicted higher compatibility between meanings of SR and compliance, whereas this pattern was reversed for trust in informal networks, and in church for Greece, which predicted lower compatibility. In the same realm, one of the few studies to explore the role of different forms of trust across cultures also revealed that prescribed COVID-19 prevention behaviors were associated positively with trust in science but negatively with trust in fellow citizens (Pagliaro et al., 2021). Such findings underline the importance for institutions and scientists to inspire trust in citizens and motivate them to follow COVID-19 preventive guidelines.

Limitations and Conclusions

This research presents some limitations. We used convenience samples due to mobility restrictions and lack of resources. The exploratory nature of the study design does not allow for making assumptions about causality. Moreover, we focused on aspects of SR related to compliance with restriction measures, while the associations of SR with proactive measures, like vaccination, are yet to be explored.

The above limitations being acknowledged, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first cross-national study to explore different conceptualizations of SR within a pandemic. We found that being responsible in this context corresponds to be caring of others, but this can be reflected in different ways across individuals and cultures. We also found that the meanings of SR are shaped, at least to a certain extent, by human values and level of trust in various societal agents, which may account in part for country differences in behavioral responses to governmental recommendations and measures against spreading of the disease.

Our findings raise implications for institutions, scientists and researchers. First of all, it might be more effective to frame health-related messages according to culturally relevant values in the specific country of interest; for example, in line with Hofstede's model (2011), in a collectivistic country like Greece it might be worthwhile to stress the importance of

adherence to preventive measures as a way to take care of family and friends. Another suggestion from this study relates to how to communicate uncertainty. Both Italy and Greece present high scores in the dimension of uncertainty avoidance; coherently, participants reported negative feelings in associations with guidelines that were perceived as unclear. It becomes evident that it could be helpful to find effective communication strategies in situations where scientific uncertainty is high. An example in the literature is provided by Han et al. (2021), who found that uncertainty-normalizing communicative strategies can mitigate ambiguity aversion. Our findings suggest the importance of trusting the government in order to value official indications during the pandemic, stressing the importance for governments to increase citizens' trust. Following this rationale, a study published by Gozgor (2021) suggests that, in order to enhance trust, governments should be consistent, credible and transparent when communicating around pandemic-related developments. Furthermore, in light of our findings related to feelings of social disconnectedness and polarization reported by participants of Study 1, in case of future public health emergencies we suggest that governments, health practitioners and researchers carefully assess the effects of these experiences with regard to health promotion, social cohesion and quality of interpersonal relationships.

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