COMMENTARY

Pandemics and consumers' mental well-being

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Abstract

This article presents the immense impact that pandemics can have specifically on consumers' mental well-being, extending many of the well-being topics examined in this special issue on pandemics and consumer well-being. Avenues for future research in the area are suggested, with expanded discussion and future research suggestions related to four consumer characteristics including three areas associated with negative mental well-being (parenthood, suffering with chronic illness, aging, and family) as well as another characteristic associated with positive mental well-being (religion). The article concludes with a pressing call to action for academics and others to step up to the purpose in their careers and make a difference in the world for good in relation to consumers' mental well-being.

KEYWORDS
aging consumers, consumer well-being, consumers' mental well-being, health, pandemic, parenthood, pregnancy, religion

1 INTRODUCTION

This special issue of the Journal of Consumer Affairs examines the influence of pandemics on consumer well-being in general. The term consumer well-being reflects the consumption journey from pre-acquisition to disposal (Lee et al., 2002) and involves both emotional and cognitive responses, characterized by three elements: consumer satisfaction, perceived quality of life, and positive emotions (Zhao & Wei, 2019).

Papers in this special issue examine many different aspects of consumer well-being as they intersect the COVID-19 pandemic. These papers center around two broad themes—(1) how the
pandemic has negatively influenced consumption behaviors (e.g., with panic buying), generalized well-being, and led to preventative behaviors to try to avoid catching the pandemic illness (e.g., with mask-wearing) and (2) how the pandemic changed consumption behavior and well-being in neutral (e.g., with goal pursuit changes) or positive ways (e.g., with digital exercise programs).

With regards to the more negative and preventative research, several papers examine pandemic prevention behaviors, including mask wearing and perceived marketplace influence (Schneider & Leonard, 2022) and perceived access to healthcare and pandemic prevention behaviors (Vann et al., 2022). Other papers examine the effects of the pandemic on consumer well-being for different consumer groups including effects on subsistence consumers (Nath et al., 2022) and segmentation of consumer behaviors during COVID, especially in relation to stockpiling and panic buying behavior (Sheng et al., 2022). We also had several papers that investigated excess consumption during pandemics including stockpiling behavior (Amaral et al., 2022), panic buying as a maladaptive coping behavior (Im et al., 2022).

In contrast, research that focused more on generalized or positive influences of the pandemic examined such topics as specific types of consumption behaviors and corresponding changes during the pandemic, including online physical activity behaviors (Cronshaw, 2022), food and beverage consumption (Jaud & Lunardo, 2022), and effects on sustainable consumption (Hüttel & Balderjahn, 2022). Other papers focused more on consumers’ psychological responses to the pandemic including risk perceptions and consumer purchase behavior (Li & Qian, 2022) and goal orientation effects on well-being (Sonmez, 2022). Articles in this special issue also examined morality based consumer responses including religion versus escape behaviors on life satisfaction (Ekici & Watson, 2022), religiosity's influence on service failure response and emotional well-being (Sarofim et al., 2022), and mortality salience and altruism (Jin & Ryu, 2022). Other papers examined consumers’ financial positions with regards to the pandemic including financial preparedness and pandemic prevention behaviors (Warmath et al., 2022) as well as financial changes for parents before versus during the pandemic (Garrison et al., 2022). Lastly, other research took more of a macro focus outside of purely centering around the consumer looking at pandemic consumption behavior changes and governmental regulations (Güngördü Belbağ, 2022) and firms’ response to changed pandemic-related consumption habits (Nayal et al., 2022).

One component of consumer well-being that has received less attention, however, is consumers' mental well-being. Consumers' mental well-being is an important component to understanding overall consumer well-being (Anderson et al., 2013; Kemp et al., 2020). While research on mental well-being is often reserved for the field of psychology, this is unfortunate given the profound influence of mental well-being on a person's outlook on life (Lara et al., 2020) and behavior in general (Patel et al., 2013; Slade et al., 2017).

Marketing has the potential to have positive influences on consumers' mental well-being (e.g., through encouraging messaging, facilitating healing in life’s challenging experiences, fulfilling wants and needs, helping consumers secure a deal, etc.) or negative influences on consumers’ mental well-being (e.g., through creating dissatisfaction with current possessions, challenges with product operation, asking uninformed questions that trigger flashbacks to prior hurt, negative service experiences, reduced views of one's body image, etc.); however, empirical research examining marketing's influence on mental well-being outcomes is limited. As such, in this article, I argue for the importance of greater research examining consumers’ mental well-being, especially as it relates to pandemics. Not only this, but I urge academics,
practitioners, policy makers, and allied partners alike with a call to action to make a difference in the mental well-being of consumers during this time and onward.

2 | CONSUMERS' MENTAL WELL-BEING DURING A PANDEMIC

Very recent research coming out on the COVID-19 pandemic suggests many negative influences of the pandemic on mental well-being (Cullen et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020). For example, Pfefferbaum and North (2020) report negative emotional outcomes of the pandemic including “stress, depression, irritability, insomnia, fear, confusion, anger, frustration, [and] boredom” (p. 511) that stem from confinement, challenges with medical care, feelings of inadequate goods needed for daily survival, and financial challenges. In an early study of Chinese residents’ reactions to the pandemic, Zhang and Ma (2020) found that over half of participants in their study expressed apprehension and fear regarding the pandemic, with increased levels of stress as well. Spoorthy et al. (2020) found increased levels of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and stress in response to the pandemic, though varying based on sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., females and older consumers expressed more distress).

Additionally, recent news articles suggest a great divide between the benefits associated with government mandates designed to protect the health of citizens and the detriments to the mental well-being of citizens forced into isolation with accompanying depression, fear, and anxiety associated with such restrictions (Brier, 2020; Brody, 2020; Kecmanovic, 2020). Even the World Health Organization (2020) acknowledges the impact of trying to protect one’s physical health related to COVID-19 and the negative corresponding effects on mental well-being.

Prior research examining consumers’ mental well-being, in general, has shown that mental well-being can be negatively influenced by marketing practices, such as making consumers feel dissatisfied with current possessions by emphasizing reasons for needing something new (Mitchell & Hill, 2010). Marketing practices can also promote mental well-being by offering sales promotions and helping consumers feel satisfaction in obtaining a deal (Yazdanifard, 2015). Fitting with this, Cho et al. (2017) discuss how the psychological component of marketing can be used to promote consumers’ mental well-being as opposed to the exploitation of cognitive deficiencies. In terms of consumer actions, Dahl et al. (2018) show that consumers engaging in physical fitness and healthy eating practices are more likely to exhibit enhanced physical and mental well-being. These handful of examples highlight the potential for marketing to influence consumers’ mental well-being.

Arguably, the mental well-being of consumers is an area of great concern presently and has the potential to have long-term effects on consumer behavior. Yet, this is an under-researched area. One such reason for the lack of research in this area is the stigma associated with mental well-being (Mak et al., 2007). Not only is talking about mental well-being stigmatized (Ahmedani, 2011), but pursuing help and support to promote healthier mental well-being is also stigmatized (Bharadwaj et al., 2017; Haugen et al., 2017).

There are many avenues for researchers to contribute to the nascent understanding of consumers’ mental well-being specifically in relation to pandemics. Some areas for research include (1) examining differences in mental well-being based on demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, income, education, occupation), (2) identifying how different marketing practices influence mental well-being both positively and negatively, (3) exploring consumers’ coping mechanisms (e.g., religion) that help in dealing with negative marketplace situations, (4) testing...
situational factors related to the pandemic and outcomes on consumer mental well-being, (5) observing consumers' history with preexisting addictions/disorders (e.g., gambling or alcohol addictions, eating disorders, etc.) and influences on consumption outcomes, (6) investigating the emotional outcomes of major life transitions during the pandemic that necessitate consumption changes, (7) exploring consumption and mental well-being changes in relation to boredom or working from home, (8) examining the influence of mindfulness and yoga practices on consumers' mental well-being before, during, and after the pandemic, (9) understanding how consumption practices and emotional outcomes in relational exchanges with family or friends change in response to the pandemic, or (10) identifying how chronic physical or mental health conditions influence pursuit of healthcare during the times of a pandemic.

Note that this is just a sampling of research ideas to stimulate thought and by no means represents an exhaustive list. In the sections to follow, I elaborate on four of these areas with more detailed examples for future research that could be conducted (specifically, the situational factor of parenthood/life's transition to parenthood, suffering with chronic health conditions, the demographic characteristic of age and associated pandemic vulnerability, and, lastly, the potential positive coping mechanism of religion).

2.1 | Parenthood

Situational factors lead some consumers to struggle more with the outcomes of the pandemic, particularly those with school-aged children who have been forced at times (or some still currently) to manage their children and their children's education at home (Hsu, 2020). Related to this, consumers navigating life transitions with pregnancy during the pandemic often find themselves in a situation of isolation and unsatisfactory telehealth interactions with medical providers during pregnancy (Weinstein, 2020). Pregnancy can be an exceptionally challenging time in one's life by itself, but the pandemic multiplies these challenges, likely negatively influencing consumers' mental well-being.

Some interesting avenues for further research here might examine if and when parents are turning to convenience foods and products to ease busier lifestyles with kids at home. Additionally, research could examine how increased family interactions change consumers' mental well-being and related consumption patterns. In terms of pregnancy, research should seek to understand how the consumer journey through pregnancy is altered and how this has long-term effects not only on the parent's mental well-being but also future effects on the newborn child's mental well-being. Changed patterns in large scale consumer celebrations (e.g., baby showers, birth celebrations) would also be an interesting area for future research, with a specific focus on understanding how changes to these events influence consumers' mental well-being both during the celebration and in future reflection. Additionally, research needs to identify how stacked negative experiences, such as the pandemic partnered with the tragic loss of baby during pregnancy or infancy influences mental well-being challenges and the ability to cope and move forward with healing from such loss.

2.2 | Chronic health sufferers

The media has highlighted how consumers with chronic illnesses are oftentimes more fearful of receiving medical or psychological help, given fears of acquiring the virus, leading to reduced
use of healthcare resources (Hafner, 2020). Additionally, many preexisting health conditions make consumers more susceptible to the virus (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). This not only changes consumption patterns but also places these consumers at greater long-term health risk due to potentially delaying or ignoring health problems that need more immediate attention. Not only that, but consumers with chronic health conditions are also more likely to already be suffering from reduced mental well-being (Kagee, 2008; Strine et al., 2008), suggesting greater negative influences on consumers’ mental well-being in response to a pandemic.

Future research in this area should explore how those consumers that already have reduced mental well-being prior to the pandemic are responding to the pandemic differently in terms of consumption outcomes and satisfaction from consumption experiences. The consumers that are the most vulnerable to the virus, given their preexisting conditions, should be surveyed to identify if they are satisfied with the alternative health solutions they are receiving as well as seek ways to improve these solutions. Research is also needed to identify how consumption communities can be created by medical institutions or other entities to facilitate interaction in virtual or safe social distance settings to reduce feelings of isolation and resulting negative effects on consumer mental well-being.

2.3 Aging and family

It is well known that the elderly are some of the most vulnerable to the virus and, as a result of this, are more likely to experience feelings of isolation and loneliness due to greater limits placed on activities and more strict adherence to social distancing practices (Sepulveda-Loyola et al., 2020). Arguably, it is not only the elderly that suffer, but family members also likely struggle during times of a pandemic as they desire to stay close to their elderly family members or share the burden of mental well-being frustrations. Thus, research needs to extend beyond just identifying the negative mental well-being outcomes for elderly consumers to research examining downstream influences on family members and consumption practices as well.

For example, research in this area could identify what services elderly consumers’ family members are using to support their elderly family members during this time as well as how family members are handling their own mental struggles in supporting elderly family members. Another interesting area for further research would be to investigate how service opportunities have expanded to allow consumers to have access to grocery delivery and similar delivery services. As part of this, research should specifically identify how these services are being used differently by consumers of different ages. In other words, are elderly consumers utilizing delivery services? And what challenges are arising if they are? Other beneficial research could examine ways to facilitate connection between younger and older family members that are not living together but desire social closeness. Research is also particularly needed to identify ways to best support the most vulnerable elderly consumers during times of a pandemic to enhance their mental well-being.

2.4 Religion

The prior three consumer characteristics focused on situations that can lead to reduced mental well-being, but what consumer characteristics might promote enhanced mental well-being?
One particular characteristic worthy of further investigation is religion, which has been shown to have positive influences on consumer coping with the pandemic (Kadir, 2020; Pirutinsky et al., 2020). More generally, religious values serve as a foundational motivation and life backbone for the more than 80% of consumers worldwide that are religious (Pew Research Forum, 2017). These religious values have been shown to have profound influences on mental well-being outside of the field of consumption and marketing (for reviews, see Garssen et al., 2021; Hackney & Sanders, 2003).

The beneficial effects of religion on mental well-being raise the question, how does religion influence consumers’ mental well-being in relation to the pandemic? Also, how might more religious consumers respond differently in the marketplace during a pandemic in comparison to less or nonreligious consumers? Research could examine if perhaps decreased access to in-person religious services makes religious support networks more challenging to rely on, which could lead to pursuit of consumption activities to compensate this need for support and strengthened mental well-being. Alternatively, other research might explore how religious consumers could feel a greater sense of calling to positively influence their community and support local businesses during a pandemic, given calls in religious scripture to love one’s neighbor as one’s self, resulting in positive influences on mental well-being. Future research might also examine the ways that religious consumers use different coping mechanisms in the marketplace in response to the pandemic and how these coping mechanisms influence consumers’ mental well-being.

2.5 Combining these and other characteristics together: The additive effect

While each of these consumer characteristics can be explored in isolation, this is a likely inaccurate understanding of how consumers are suffering in terms of their mental well-being in response to the pandemic. Just as stress is additive in other times of life (Fleshner et al., 2011; Roberts & Levenson, 2001), the mental well-being stressors that consumers face are likely additive as well.

In other words, someone suffering with chronic digestive issues faces one level of stress. Someone that is suffering from these chronic digestive issues and is pregnant as well as trying to help their parents manage existential anxieties likely faces a much greater, additive level of stress. With that being said, it is important to acknowledge that each person tolerates stress differently based on coping skills, prior life experiences, demographic characteristics, and so forth (Matud, 2004; Mroczek & Almeida, 2004), so what leads to substantial reductions in mental well-being for one consumer is not likely the same as another consumer. So what can be done to help promote consumers’ mental well-being? The next section addresses this question.

3 Call to action: Make a difference

Allow me for a moment to step away from reviewing the literature and proposing conceptual ideas for future research and instead write from my heart about this topic and life as an academic (and former practitioner). In my own personal experiences as well as in talking with other practitioners, I find that most of us enter into practitioner careers because we enjoy
interacting with consumers and want to offer them enhanced customer experiences. In short, we want to make a positive difference in their lives. Those of us that are academics often transfer to academia because we find ourselves with unanswered questions that we want to research further and also desire the opportunity to be a mentor to students. Again, there is the drive to make a positive difference in the operations of businesses and the lives of our future generations of practitioners (i.e., in students' lives).

With that being said, it is so easy to get caught up in the game—to race for the next publication, to fight for that promotion, to just survive through the daily grind of emails (and far too many zoom conferences now with the pandemic). These are taking us away from the passion and purpose that guided us to our careers in the first place. I want to advocate for you to step back from these oftentimes menial (albeit essential) tasks and remember why you got into your career in the first place. What was your motivation? Why do you do what you do? What really drives you forward to stay in your career day in and day out?

Now is your chance to act upon that. You have the ability to make a difference. You can help to positively influence consumers' mental well-being. I encourage you to think about your closest spheres of influence and then expand outward. First, how are you caring for your own mental well-being? Are you taking the self-care practices that you need during this time? As the old adage goes, if you cannot care for yourself, you cannot care for others. Sure, stuffing our faces with a package of double-stuffed Oreos or indulging on an entire carton of Ben & Jerry's Half Baked ice cream may be delicious or even deserved at times, but using consumption as an avenue for finding mental well-being is not going to be long lasting.

Next, what are you doing to care for the mental well-being of your family? Friends? Coworkers? Colleagues? Community? Any other group of people that you are associated with? Even simple practices like sending a text message to someone to let them know you care, purchasing some food for your local food bank, offering to pick up groceries for a highly vulnerable consumer, inviting a friend on a socially distanced outdoor walk, or sending an encouraging note with a flower to someone in your local nursing home can positively influence your own mental well-being from the positive affect generated by doing something good (Vlachos et al., 2013). Not only that, but these small actions also benefit the mental well-being of others by letting other people know that someone cares about them—they are not in complete isolation. This enhanced mental well-being turns into more positive consumption outcomes as well as, more broadly, enhanced interactions in life in general.

Again, this latter part of this article is something that I wrestle with constantly when the day to day activities of my job pull me away from the reason I arrived here in the first place—to make a difference. During the unstable and challenging times of the pandemic, the opportunities to make a difference, specifically in relation to consumers' mental well-being, are prominent. Therefore, with that, I want to end with several questions for you and a call to action. First, what is the purpose of your career to you personally? What motivates you to continue in your career every day, even on the most challenging of days? And lastly, what can you do today to practice self-care for you personally to enhance your own mental well-being as a consumer, and what is one action you can take this week to enhance the mental well-being of someone around you?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This article is written in honor of my son, Solomon Onyx, who unexpectedly passed away at just three weeks old on January 16, 2021. He was my motivation for writing this article, especially in relation to parenthood and mental well-being. Although not talked about in the article,
navigating the death process, particularly with my first child, brings a whole new dimension to challenging times that are navigated during COVID in regards to mental well-being outcomes. Sweet Solomon—your light shines through this article and all the lives you touched while here on earth.

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**How to cite this article:** Minton, E. A. (2022). Pandemics and consumers’ mental well-being. *Journal of Consumer Affairs, 56*(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/joca.12444