COMMENTARY

Pandemics and consumer well-being: Provenance and research priorities

Debasis Pradhan

Xavier School of Business, XLRI, Jamshedpur, India

Correspondence
Debasis Pradhan, Xavier School of Business, XLRI, Circuit House Area (East), Jamshedpur 831001, India. Email: debasis@xlri.ac.in

Abstract
This article advances the riveting discussion on how this special issue contributes to the consumer well-being literature. Specifically, this article endeavors to present an eclectic account of how the pandemics has had a lasting impact on the consumer well-being, its provenance and future research priorities for academics and practice. First, it briefly discusses the origin and relevance of the evolving issue of consumer well-being during pandemics. Second, it presents several directions for future research and third, it offers key insights for policymakers. It includes multiple research priorities that present vastly contrasting manifestations of consumer well-being. This article argues that future research will need to examine the drivers of consumer well-being during pandemics, the mechanisms that underlie the influence of pandemics on consumer well-being and the boundary conditions that accentuate/mitigate the influence of pandemic-induced factors.

KEYWORDS
anti-consumption, consumer behavior, consumer vulnerability, consumer well-being, future research agenda, pandemics, research priorities

1 INTRODUCTION

The Journal of Consumer Affairs (JCA) announced a special issue on “Pandemics and Consumer well-being” in the year 2020. This special issue invited papers on pandemics and the
outcomes influencing consumer well-being. We received encouraging response from the academic community and support from the American Council of Consumer Interests (ACCI). Several high-quality submissions went through multiple rounds of rigorous review process, out of which only a select few could finally pass muster. We are now ready to present the special issue containing an eclectic compilation of research papers on a very timely theme. We stay focused on the ACCI’s avowed theme of “researching consumer interests” which is reflected in every single paper of this special issue.

COVID-19 can arguably be described as the most cataclysmic event in the recent history of mankind for its large-scale destruction, loss of lives, and the indelible scar it has left on our psychological and emotional well-being. Billions of people around the globe have been deeply affected by the seemingly endless periods of lockdowns and forced quarantine, their physical existence and livelihood often being at stake. The pandemic has impacted the well-being of the consumers in two vastly contrasting ways. On the one hand, the freedom of movement and the freedom of speech of consumers in most places have been severely curtailed (Gerstmann, 2020) along with an increase in citizen surveillance (Harari, 2020), much to their chagrin. This has negatively impacted the sentiments and overall well-being of the consumers. On the other hand, the lockdowns have offered consumers the opportunity to stay at home and to work from home, while their primordial quest for convenience (Candel, 2001) has gone through a paradigm shift. However, there is a lack of clarity over the evolution of rapidly growing consumer well-being research during pandemics, its provenance, and priorities for academics and practice. Therefore, this article first presents a brief account of the origin of and the rationale behind the “pandemic and consumer well-being” debate and then, it advances the debate beyond the collection of this special issue by offering several future research agendas.

2 | PROVENANCE

The rapidly changing marketing paradigm shows that physical, social, social and psychological well-being of consumers is one of the primary goals of marketing (Sirgy, 2021). This is enhanced during a pandemic (Hill, 2020) which is why policymakers, corporations, and consumer interest groups have been laying an increasing amount of emphasis on consumer well-being through their actions and plans (Price et al., 2018). While most of the literature consumer well-being (Chaplin et al., 2014; Farrell & Hill, 2018; Hill, 2002; Hill & Adrangi, 1999; Jagadale et al., 2021; Martin & Hill, 2012) explores conditions under ‘normal’ circumstances, pandemics, such as COVID-19, offers an opportunity to take a fresh look at the “new normal.” Newly emerging areas of research on consumer well-being are likely to assume significance during the current pandemic that is characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity. In the current setting, we believe that the scopes and opportunities to make distinctive contributions to academics, practice, as well as policy formulation are plentiful.

3 | RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Most of the adaptations consumers made during this period are likely to stay and create a new global normal. Of these, a few notable changes are (i) rethinking of the social contracts in the reorganized power-negotiation between the state and its people; (ii) defining the future of work and consumption through the intervention of e-commerce and e-working tools; (iii) moving
from globalization to regionalization by localizing production and supply change (Tonby & Woetzel, 2020). The pandemic that has caused great stress, pay cuts, job insecurities, and above all, a fear of an unknown enemy-like disease has taken a huge toll on the consumers, causing them profound physical and emotional harm. It has also pushed them to the edge of vulnerability, fueling widespread speculation on the state of well-being. This has undeniably impacted people, especially those employed in logistics, marketing, and healthcare who have borne the brunt of the devastation. People who were already suffering from burnout were pressed to work even harder due to the indispensability of their job, negatively affecting their physical well-being and causing them severe mental trauma.

Consumers who had to work under duress from home were deprived of the comfort and freedom of a formal workplace. In so doing, they suffered from a novel form of anxiety stemming from a constant fear of losing job, perceived ambiguity in assessment of their performance, and anxiety over an imminent loss of control over normal functions. Future researchers should explore the magnitude of change in their well-being during pandemic and post-pandemic periods, the effectiveness of their coping mechanisms during the pandemics, and the restoration of their normal selves in the post-pandemic period. A longitudinal study with a multiple-wave design should be employed to examine the varying levels of well-being at different stages of the pandemic and detect the key influencers.

The last two years of the pandemic has accentuated the already-declining physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of consumers. This period instantiated a multiple-threat setting (Cannon et al., 2019), wherein the fear of contracting the disease was exacerbated by an increasing realization of the ephemeral nature of life, and the ubiquity of a resource crunch. This in turn, has shaken the confidence of consumers and jeopardized their well-being. The shortage of physical resources and the scarcity of vaccines in the face of death made it worse in several parts of subsistence marketplace. In future, academicians and policymakers should examine whether and how mortality salience (Rindfleisch et al., 2009) affects consumer well-being in the presence of resource scarcity. Researchers should specifically probe whether, under the spell of anxiety, consumers would act prosocially or selfishly?

Amidst this catastrophe, issues of consumer welfare also deserve the attention of scholars. For instance, a consumer’s perception of scarcity (Shah et al., 2015) is influenced not only by the unavailability of products and services but also by the paucity of time (Inman et al., 1997). The news of insufficient supply and the sudden announcements of lockdowns gave consumers little time to replenish their supplies in some of the largest emerging markets such as India. This might have negatively influenced their cognitive ability (Cialdini, 2009) and adversely impacted their well-being. It remains to be examined whether limited resources and supply are likely to encourage more socially responsible consumption behavior (Webb et al., 2008) during pandemics, which can motivate consumers to recycle, reuse, repair, and share.

As a result of the imposition of self-isolation and driven by the policy of physical distancing, consumers have lived through a period of moral distress (Cacchione, 2020) mostly because of their inability to take physical care of and attend to their ageing parents, relatives and friends during a turbulent period instantiating the threat and inevitability of death. Researchers should investigate the evolving phenomenon of moral distress during pandemics and offer key insights that can guide policy formulation for the mitigation of moral distress in consumers.

The pandemic unexpectedly resulted in more consumers adopting anti-consumption (Kotler, 2020), voluntary simplicity and brand avoidance (Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Kuanr et al., 2020, 2022), buying cheaper products and choosing more of do-it-yourself options, similar to the way consumers behave during stagflation (Shama, 1981). Whether there is a change in
the decision-making of consumers in the post-pandemic period needs to be researched in future. Chaney and Lee (2021) recently examined the anti-vaccination sentiments and what drove the vaccine hesitancy. While anti-consumption is associated with positive individual and societal outcomes (Hogg et al., 2009), vaccine avoidance/rejection can have a deleterious impact on the well-being of consumers. Thus, it remains a major predicament for the government and policymakers at large over how to persuade the anti-vaxxers by overcoming their resistance. However, anti-vaxxers may act out of their free will and may argue that it is reasonable to reject vaccines and it gives them happiness. Thus, it remains to be examined whether vaccine avoidance behavior of consumers engender vulnerability (Hill & Sharma, 2020), or it boosts their morale, thus contributing to their well-being.

During the pandemic, products and services were delivered digitally (Ekholm & Rockstrom, 2019) and AI-driven “liquid consumption” (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) has become the standing norm with consumers adjusting their coping strategies to deal with the digital goliath (Mick & Fournier, 1998). Extant literature indicates that normal activities, such as exercising and normal interpersonal communication with friends and peers foster consumer well-being, whereas time spent on social media has a deleterious influence on well-being. Moreover, in an unprecedented setting, like that of a pandemic, consumers are forced to interact more often on social media. They also have to depend on the virtual conversational agents, rather than the human agents for their purchases. This has a huge impact on the satisfaction and other marketing outcomes across different stages of customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021; Nam & Kannan, 2020; Roy & Naidoo, 2021). However, whether and how these digital agents have enhanced or jeopardized customer experience during the pandemic is unclear. Since consumer well-being is now contingent on the assemblage (Hoffman & Novak, 2018) comprising smart objects/machine (e.g., Alexa), brands, and other hardware, it is imperative that researchers probe how the evolving man–machine-brand interaction during the pandemics impacts consumer well-being. Specifically, scant attention has been paid to the dehumanizing (self-reduction, for instance) experience (Haslam, 2006) of consumers who had to communicate with chatbots/robots in the absence of alternatives. Furthermore, there is a lack of unanimity over the role of pandemics in creative consumption. Some studies indicate that self-restriction can lower creative consumption (Burroughs & Glen Mick, 2004), while another shows that resource scarcity fosters product use creativity (Mehta & Zhu, 2016). Therefore, researchers should examine whether and when pandemics accentuate/attenuate the creative consumption of consumers.

The uneven distribution of resources, interruption in access to technology, and information asymmetry during this period made matters worse for consumers who now greatly depend digital modes of transaction for their livelihood. However, uncertainty over the quickly unfolding situation, and multiple and often vastly opposing predictions about future by multiple agencies have made the consumers increasingly skeptical and vulnerable. Future research must examine under what conditions pandemic-induced fear and uncertainty would accentuate/debilitate consumer well-being. Academicians should probe whether self-contraction/self-expansion works as a psychological mechanism underlying the influence of pandemics on well-being.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I gratefully acknowledge the opportunity given by Prof. Ronald Paul Hill, the Editor of Journal of Consumer Affairs to co-edit this special issue on the theme “Pandemics and consumer well-being.” I specially thank my fellow co-editors and the reviewers for their constructive and constant support, which made this special issue possible. I thank Sonia Raisurana for her proofreading services.
CONFLICT OF INTEREST
We declare that we have no conflict of interest to report.

ORCID
Debasis Pradhan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2982-7971

REFERENCES
Bardhi, F. & Eckhardt, G.M. (2017) Liquid consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(3), 582–597.
Burroughs, J.E. & Glen Mick, D. (2004) Exploring antecedents and consequences of consumer creativity in a problem-solving context. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(2), 402–411.
Cacchione, P.Z. (2020) Moral distress in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 29(4), 215–216.
Candel, M.I. (2001) Consumers’ convenience orientation towards meal preparation: conceptualization and measurement. *Appetite*, 36(1), 15–28.
Cannon, C., Goldsmith, K. & Roux, C. (2019) A self-regulatory model of resource scarcity. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 29(1), 104–127.
Chaney, D. & Lee, M.S. (2021) COVID-19 vaccines and anti-consumption: understanding anti-vaxxers hesitancy. *Psychology & Marketing*, 1–14.
Chaplin, L.N., Hill, R.P. & John, D.R. (2014) Poverty and materialism: a look at impoverished versus affluent children. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 33(1), 78–92.
Cialdini, R.B. (2009) *Influence: the psychology of persuasion*. New York: HarperCollins.
Ekholm, B. & Rockstrom, J. (2019) Digital technology can cut global emissions by 15%. *World Economic Forum*, 22–25. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/why-digitalization-is-the-key-to-exponential-climate-action/
Farrell, J.R. & Hill, R.P. (2018) Poverty research and measurement: making the case for consumption adequacy. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 52(3), 770–791.
Gerstmann, E. 2020. How the COVID-19 crisis is threatening freedom and democracy across the globe, Forbes https://www.forbes.com/sites/evangerstmann/2020/04/12/how-the-covid-19-crisis-is-threatening-freedom-and-democracy-across-the-globe/#13f9ca34f16.
Hamilton, R., Ferraro, R., Haws, K.L. & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2021) Traveling with companions: the social customer journey. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 85(1), 68–92.
Harari, Y.N. (2020) The world after corona virus. *Financial Times*, 20, 2020 https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75
Haslam, N. (2006) Dehumanization: an integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(3), 252–264.
Hill, R.P. (2002) Consumer culture and the culture of poverty: implications for marketing theory and practice. *Marketing Theory*, 2(3), 273–293.
Hill, R.P. (2020) Pandemic 101. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 54, 393–394.
Hill, R.P. & Adrangi, B. (1999) Global poverty and the United Nations. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 18(2), 135–146.
Hill, R.P. & Sharma, E. (2020) Consumer vulnerability. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 30, 551–570. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1161
Hoffman, D.L. & Novak, T.P. (2018) Consumer and object experience in the internet of things: an assemblage theory approach. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(6), 1178–1204.
Hogg, M.K., Banister, E.N. & Stephenson, C.A. (2009) Mapping symbolic (anti-) consumption. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 148–159.
Inman, J.J., Peter, A.C. & Raghubir, P. (1997) Framing the deal: the role of restrictions in accentuating deal value. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(1), 68–79.
Iyer, R. & Muncy, J.A. (2009) Purpose and object of anti-consumption. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 160–168.
Jagadale, S.R., Chaudhuri, H.R. & Kadirov, D. (2021) Quality-of-life as chronotopification and futurization: subsistence consumer experiences in India. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 55(1), 59–86.
How to cite this article: Pradhan, D. (2022). Pandemics and consumer well-being: Provenance and research priorities. Journal of Consumer Affairs, 56(1), 28–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/joca.12445