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The Lonely Reason Impeding Compliance with COVID-19 Prevention Guidelines

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To reduce transmission of the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19), the US Center for Disease Control recommends that all individuals follow a series of prevention guidelines (e.g., wearing a mask, physical distancing, and vigilant handwashing). However, some individuals have been unwilling to comply with them. In the present research, we explore whether feelings of loneliness impact the willingness of consumers to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines (such as wearing a mask, physical distancing, and handwashing). The experience of loneliness is particularly pertinent to the study of pandemics, as the physical distancing and quarantine efforts encouraged during them require people to stay home and limit face-to-face socialization. Furthermore, the majority of scientists believe that COVID-19 is not likely to go away any time soon due to possible reduced immunity and the emergence of new COVID-19 variants. Thus, a more holistic understanding of compliance may prevent further contraction and transmission of COVID-19 and provide a deeper understanding of how to better handle future pandemics.

Research on reciprocal altruism suggests that loneliness may have a negative impact on compliance with COVID-19 prevention guidelines. Many of these guidelines—such as wearing a mask, washing hands vigilantly, and physically distancing from others—require individuals to follow behaviors aimed at keeping others safe (Cheng et al., 2020), which ultimately contribute to collective well-being. However, these guidelines are costly as they often inconvenience consumers and can be perceived as uncomfortable. Accordingly, reciprocal altruism theory would suggest that investing in these collective behaviors may be less worthwhile for lonely consumers (Roberts, 1998; Trivers, 1971; Van Vugt et al., 2007). Loneliness decreases one's ability to experience the social benefits—such as higher social standing and increased access to shared group resources (Miller, 2000; Zahavi, 1975)—that often come to consumers who display altruism through their behaviors and consumption. As such, we might expect lower compliance with COVID-19 prevention guidelines among lonely (vs. non-lonely) individuals.

Experiment 1A tested whether loneliness affects consumers' willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines. 147 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of two loneliness manipulations (lonely vs. non-lonely) (Jiao and Wang, 2018). In the lonely condition, participants wrote about a time in their life when they felt socially isolated, while in the non-lonely condition, participants wrote about a time when they felt socially connected. Afterward,

participants were asked in the next week, to what extent do you plan to... 1) practice social distancing; 2) thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water (scrub back and front of hands for 20 seconds); and 3) wear a mask when you are around others (people outside of your immediate household) (1 = Never to 5 = Always) ($\alpha = .67$). As expected, individuals in the lonely (vs. non-lonely) condition were less willing to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines ($M_{lonely} = 4.23$ vs. $M_{non-lonely} = 4.46$; $F_{(1, 145)} = 4.74, p = .03$).

Experiment 1B tested the underlying mechanism “sense of obligation to reciprocate.” 186 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to the lonely vs. non-lonely manipulations from Experiment 1A and later answered the willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines scale ($\alpha = .72$) from Experiment 1A. Afterwards, participants answered the five-item reciprocity scale ($\alpha = .92$) (from Jami, Kouchaki, & Gino, 2021), which served as our mediator. As expected, individuals in the lonely (vs. non-lonely) condition were less willing to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines ($M_{lonely} = 2.87$ vs. $M_{non-lonely} = 3.19$; $F_{(1, 184)} = 6.43, p = .01$). Hayes’ Process Model 8 confirmed that a lower sense of obligation to reciprocate mediated the moderated effect ($[-.10, -.01]$), providing evidence that lonely (vs. non-lonely) participants displayed less willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines because they experienced a lower sense of obligation to reciprocate.

Experiment 2 tested whether the use of communal or agentic advertising appeals would impact consumers' willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines. Specifically, we expected that when COVID-19 prevention guidelines were advertised using agentic-focused appeals, the negative effect of loneliness on willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines would be eliminated. 210 undergraduates participated in a between-subjects design with one manipulated, independent variable (appeal type: agentic or communally focused) and one measured independent variable (loneliness). First, participants were asked to view an advertisement that was manipulated to use either an agentic or communally focused appeal type. Later, participants completed the willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines scale ($\alpha = .67$) and completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980) ($\alpha = .88$). As expected, we found a significant interaction of loneliness and the advertisement appeal type ($\beta = .23, t_{(1, 206)} = 2.06, p = .04$). Specifically, when the advertisement used a communally focused appeal, we found that as an individual’s level of loneliness increased, they were significantly less willing to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines when exposed to an ad using a communally focused appeal ($\beta = -.34, t = -2.24, p = .03$). Most importantly, though, when the ad used an agentic-focused appeal, the difference in willingness to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines between individuals higher and lower in loneliness was no longer significant ($\beta = .12, t = .73, p = .47$).

Across three experiments, we find that lonely individuals are less willing to comply with COVID-19 prevention guidelines because lonely (vs. non-lonely) individuals report experiencing a lower sense of obligation to reciprocate. Our results suggest that lonely individuals may be less inclined to comply with COVID-19 preventions guidelines, but that agentic advertising messages can encourage lonely consumers’ compliance.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Coronavirus, Loneliness, Reciprocity, Health, Reciprocal Altruism, Agentic*

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