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Empathy, Altruism, CSR, and Consumer Boycott Behavior During Covid 19: Lessons Learned

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As Covid-19 became a global pandemic, life as businesses and consumers know it changed dramatically. Suddenly, in-person shopping became rare while social distancing and working remotely became common practice. The impact of Covid-19 reached beyond the obvious death toll and economic recession and contributed to a shift in what is considered relevant and what is secondary. The Covid-19 pandemic was officially declared an international public health emergency in January 2020, and it introduced unprecedented changes for all levels of society (WHO Emergency Committee, 2020). Over time, the practice of remaining 'socially distanced' evolved from a recommendation to an imperative measure taken as a precaution against the spread of the virus. In order to stay afloat, businesses were forced to quickly adapt to these new city, state, and nation-wide protocols. Stores that once had customers shuffling past one another established one-way aisles and limited the number of in-store shoppers (Smith, 2020; Trader Joe’s, 2020). Retail stores and restaurants developed online ordering systems and offered curbside pickup. Service providers that once met face-to-face organized online meetings with clients. Although some have been hit harder than others, every industry has been affected in one way or another as a result of social distancing and other guidelines enforced for Covid-19-prevention, and most businesses are still facing those effects (Koren & Pető, 2020). In addition to the global pandemic, other political, social, and environmental issues were exacerbated by the public health emergency. The United States in particular faced its 2020 presidential election, which brought several issues to light and even resulted in the politicization of the pandemic itself (Halpern, 2020). Citizens closely looked at the presidential candidates’ statements about how the pandemic should be handled, and it’s highly likely that citizens considered each candidate’s attitude toward the pandemic when they decided who to vote for (Baccini et al., 2021). Concerns about presidential candidates’ stances on LGBTQ+ rights also played a role in who citizens supported in the election (Scott, 2020). A surge in the Black Lives Matter movement triggered by the death of George Floyd led to both violent and peaceful protests, looting of businesses, and increased discussion over social media and by the popular press (Dave et al., 2020). All of these events occurring so closely together on the timeline resulted in a time of crisis experienced by everyone across the nation. The events that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to the constant buzz over social media and news channels in response to those events, suggest a potential increase in consumer interest in political topics during the course of the pandemic. In this study, we will aim to determine if such an
increase in interest occurred, and if so, what factors have influenced it and what effect it has carried.

The main objective of this study was to determine how empathy and altruism affect interest in social issues under extreme times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, this study aimed to apply its findings to the realm of marketing and management. The data revealed that consumers’ altruism and empathy levels do, in fact, have positive significant effects on their interest in socially responsible topics exacerbated by Covid-19. This interest has a positive effect on corporate social responsibility. Buycotting behavior exhibited specifically in support of acceptable responses (as determined by consumers) to Covid-19 topics is positively affected by both interest and CSR, although it is important to note that consumer perception of CSR has a mediating effect on the relationship between interest and buycotting behavior during Covid-19. In other words, it could be said that consumers who are naturally more altruistic and empathetic will be more likely to be interested in participating in public support of businesses engaging in Covid-19 related CSR initiatives. Such CSR initiatives include, but are not limited to, social distancing, requirement of mask-wearing, provision of health and safety measures for employees, frequent sanitization of stores/service equipment, and provision of curbside pickup options. This study analyzed the impact of consumer levels of altruism and empathy on interest in Covid-19 exacerbated topics like employee treatment, social justice, and the environment. Further, this study emphasized the importance of CSR efforts supporting current topics, which have been found to contribute to consumer buycotting, an active choice of businesses with which consumer values are aligned, particularly those businesses that followed CDC guidelines, social distancing protocols, respect for human rights, and protection of the environment. This study re-emphasises the importance of CSR efforts, even in times of the greatest of crises and contributes important information to literature regarding marketing and management during the Covid-19 pandemic and future crises. Given the recency of the pandemic, the existing literature and information in general about business practices during Covid-19 is sparse. If we can identify significant associations between business-related factors that have occurred during Covid-19, we may be better prepared with information that could help businesses stay afloat in future times of crisis.

**Keywords**: social distancing; covid-19; marketing; empathy; altruism; csr

**REFERENCES (Upon Request)**

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**Ania Izabela Rynarzewska, Ph.D.,** is finishing up her appointment as an assistant professor in Sports Marketing and Analytics in the Stetson Hatcher School of Business at Mercer University, and looking forward to her new position as an assistant professor in Marketing at Georgia College & State University in August, 2022. Her PhD in communication with emphasis in marketing and quantitative tools was attained from Florida State University. She is a former scholarship tennis player at FSU's Women's Tennis team and a National Champion of Poland. She is a successful entrepreneur, as an owner of Lux Leonis, her upmarket personal care products are being sold in both in B2C and B2B markets. Her research has been presented at conferences including Academy of Marketing Science, The Association for Consumer Research,
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