**Coping With the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis by Self-Gifting: A Conceptual Framework**

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**Introduction:** Since COVID-19 emerged in 2020, it has significantly influenced consumer psychology, which, in turn, has affected consumer behavior. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the COVID-19 pandemic has had mental health implications due to the virus mitigation activities of social distancing and stay-home orders. A survey by Science Daily (2020) revealed that 27.8% of U.S. adults have been experiencing depression, which is four times higher than pre-pandemic numbers. Another survey found that 65% of respondents reported that they have experienced more loneliness since the outbreak of COVID-19 (Berman, 2020). According to Sneath et al. (2009), an individual experiences psychological distress due to various life events, ranging from personal crises (e.g., divorce, illness) to collective tragedies (e.g., natural disasters). Those who face such stressful life events may seek to cope with the resulting psychological distress by purchasing products to feel better (Kemp & Kopp, 2011).

Self-gifting is a growing consumption phenomenon that consumers often engage in for therapeutic reasons (Clarke & Mortimer, 2013). Therapeutic self-gifting is typically prompted by negative psychological states, such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Luomala & Laaksonen, 1997), as consumers engage in self-gifting “to alleviate negative moods, and deal with personal sadness” (Clarke & Mortimer, 2013, p. 474). The COVID-19 pandemic, as a major life event that has induced psychological distress, could be a strong predictor of therapeutic self-gifting, particularly as a coping mechanism (Luomala & Laaksonen, 1997). Past studies have examined the linkage between stressful life events and such consumption behaviors as impulse buying and compulsive buying (Sneath et al., 2009). More recently, studies have investigated panic buying and hoarding during the pandemic (Arafat et al., 2020). However, therapeutic self-gifting behavior driven by COVID-induced psychological distress has not yet been examined in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to construct a conceptual framework for studying how COVID 19-induced anxiety, depression, and loneliness may influence consumers’ therapeutic self-gifting.

**Literature Review and Development of Conceptual Framework**: The conceptual framework was developed based on Emotion Regulation Theory, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, and previous literature on self-gifting and depression. Emotion Regulation Theory posits that people engage in emotion regulation “to dampen, intensify, or simply maintain an existing emotion” and tend to down-regulate negative emotions (Kemp & Kopp, 2011, p. 2). Through self-gifting, consumers attempt to repair their psychological distress by engaging in purchasing something which can provide positive affective benefits (Mortimer et al., 2015).

According to the S-O-R model, stimuli lead to behavioral responses mediated by the organism (Wu & Li, 2018). The stimuli are defined as external elements, such as environmental stimuli, that influence individuals’ internal states (Wu & Li, 2018). In this study, the perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and necessary social isolation are identified as *stimuli*. Organism refers to an affective intermediary state (Wu & Li, 2018). Thus, consumer anxiety, depression, and loneliness resulting from the perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation constitute the *organism*. Response is the consumer’s subsequent behavior (Wu & Li, 2018). Therapeutic self-gifting prompted by the consumer’s affective state (i.e., organism) constitutes the *response*. Drawing on the S-O-R model, the environmental factors (i.e., perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation) are expected to generate anxiety, depression, and loneliness, which lead to the likelihood of self-gifting as a means to relieve such distress. This process is illustrated in the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1).

Regarding environmental stimuli, one’s level of perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation may influence psychological distress. The perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has been found to have a direct effect on anxiety and depression (Pérez Fuentes et al., 2020). Moreover, as social isolation has been in practice to slow the spread of the virus, it has been considered to induce anxiety, depression, and loneliness due to a loss of sense of connectedness (Arafat et al., 2020). Serving as the organism, consumers’ anxiety, depression, and loneliness may prompt therapeutic self-gifting. According to Emotion Regulation Theory, consumers in psychological distress attempt to repair their affective states by engaging in purchasing things that provide positive affective benefits (Kemp & Kopp, 2011). Past studies found that when consumers are anxious and depressed, they are likely to purchase self-gifts to relieve anxiety and cheer themselves up (Mortimer et al., 2015). Moreover, single people or those who live alone are more likely than married individuals to purchase self-gifts to alleviate distress (Ward & Tran, 2008), which implies that loneliness may be associated with self-gifting.

The relationship between psychological distress (i.e., anxiety, depression, and loneliness) and therapeutic self-gifting likelihood can be more prominent when a level of self-indulgence is involved (Mortimer et al., 2015). Self-indulgence is “a way to give someone more attention through gift-giving, gratification and someone’s desires due to lack of self-control” (Ningtias et al., 2019, p. 130). Self-indulgence is considered to positively influence therapeutic self-gifting. That is, self-indulgence may increase the likelihood of therapeutic self-gifting as a means to reduce anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

**Discussion:** The proposed conceptual model illustrates how the perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic creates anxiety and depression as social isolation contributes to an increase in feelings of loneliness. The resulting psychological distress may influence therapeutic self-gifting by consumers. Self-indulgence plays a moderating role that may enhance the effects of anxiety, depression, and loneliness on therapeutic self-gifting likelihood. This conceptual framework is the first attempt to illustrate the linkage between COVID-induced psychological distress and therapeutic self-gifting. In the future, an empirical study should be conducted to test the conceptual model via primary data. The findings will provide beneficial insights for marketers and consumer researchers to understand how consumers’ psychological distress is affected by the perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation, and how this plays a role in therapeutic self-gifting. A better understanding of therapeutic self-gifting as means of coping with psychological distress in general and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic is needed.

**Response**

**Organism**

**Stimuli**

Perceived threat of COVID-19 Pandemic

Therapeutic

Self-gifting Likelihood

Depression

Loneliness

Anxiety

Social Isolation

Self-Indulgence

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model

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