Coping With the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis by Self-Gifting: An Empirical Investigation
Sukyung Seo, Nancy Hodges, and Jin Su, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Introduction: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect on people's lives, including the disruption of normal social interaction (Berman, 2020). Hubbard et al. (2021) noted increases in depression (by 33.7%), anxiety (by 31.9%), and stress (by 29.6%) during the pandemic. Such disruptions can impact consumer behavior in a variety of ways (Sneath et al., 2009). Indeed, Kemp and Kopp (2011) suggested that consumers often seek to resolve negative affective states by purchasing or consuming products that provide them with positive affective benefits. For example, consumers who experience depression or stress due to negative life events (e.g., bereavement, job loss) may purchase something nice for themselves to prompt positive emotions (Park, 2018).

Self-gifting, a growing type of consumption behavior, is often used for therapeutic purposes (Park, 2018). That is, consumers engage in therapeutic self-gifting to feel better. Given this function of self-gifting, it is plausible that a challenging life event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which increases the potential for negative affective states, may play a critical role in a consumer's use of therapeutic self-gifting behavior as a coping mechanism (Luomala & Laaksonen, 1997). Despite the negative and wide-ranging impact of the pandemic on mental health, therapeutic self-gifting behavior driven by COVID-induced psychological distress has yet to be fully investigated within the literature. To address this gap, the purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which COVID-induced negative affective states, such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness, influence consumers' therapeutic self-gifting behavior.

Literature Review: To address the study's purpose, a conceptual framework was developed based on Emotion Regulation Theory, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, and in light of prior studies on self-gifting. The S-O-R model posits that stimuli affect an organism (e.g., consumers' affective and cognitive processes), which then leads to behavioral responses (e.g., consumers' subsequent behaviors) (Wu & Li, 2018). Drawing on the S-O-R model, in this study the stimuli (i.e., perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic or PTC) is expected to lead to psychological distress (i.e., the organism), which, in turn, is expected to result in therapeutic self-gifting behavior (TSGB) as the response.

The COVID-19 pandemic is perceived as a threat to an individual's quality of life and well-being (Song et al., 2021). Thus, PTC may prompt TSGB as a means of securing quality of life and well-being (H1; see Figure 1). PTC has been found to have a direct effect on anxiety (Pérez Fuentes et al., 2020). According to Doson (1985), anxiety tends to eventuate from the perception of threat: threats of important loss or the ability to cope may occur. In this regard, PTC may be an antecedent to feelings of anxiety (H2). Anxiety may prompt depression, as there is a commonly-found link between diagnoses of anxiety and depression (Stavrakaki & Vargo, 1986) (H3). Anxiety that is primarily driven by the threat or fear of loss has been found to strongly correlate with feelings of loneliness (Khademi et al., 2015). It is possible that similar feelings may occur from the pandemic, as fear of the loss of significant others (i.e., family members, friends) has increased due to the spread of the virus (Pérez Fuentes et al., 2020) (H4). Conversely, individuals who are lonely are often reported to exhibit depression, and the two are frequently linked in the literature (Perlman & Peplau, 1981) (H5). Per the Emotion Regulation Theory, consumers in psychological distress attempt to alleviate a negative internal state and boost positive emotions by purchasing products/services that help them to feel better (Kemp & Kopp, 2011). Likewise, prior studies posit that those who are experiencing psychological distress are likely to engage in self-gifting to relieve stress because it can be used to achieve hedonistic goals (Ward & Tran, 2008) (H6 and H7).

Methodology: With IRB approval from the researchers' university, an online survey was conducted to collect data via Amazon MTurk. Survey questions were adopted from existing self-gifting scales (Lee, 2020; Mortimer et al., 2015; Radloff, 1977; Song et al., 2021), all of which have acceptable reliability (α > .80), and using a 7-point Likert scale. A total of 289 useable responses were received. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 65, with the majority aged 22-24, male (69.6%), with incomes between $60,000-$79,999 (27.0%), and with a graduate degree (69.6%). Structural equation modeling (SEM) using M-plus 8.0 was used to test the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework
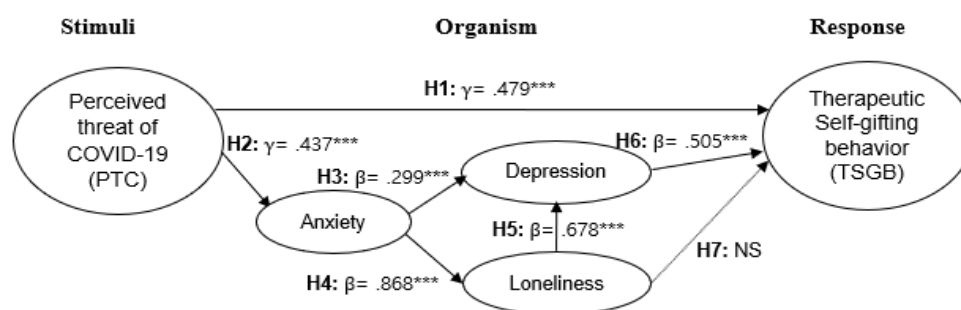
Note. *** significant at p < .001

Results: Fit indices of both the measurement model (χ^2/df = 2.091; GFI = .942; TLI = .935; SRMR= .038; RMSEA = .061) and the structural model (χ^2/df = 2.108; GFI = .940; TLI = .934; SRMR= .040; RMSEA = .062) were all satisfactory, indicating the model fit the data. Composite reliability (all above .80) and average variance extracted (all above .60) exceeded the minimum criteria, providing evidence of convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed by the confidence interval of 2 standard errors around the correlation between each pair of constructs in the model. As the confidence interval did not include 1.0, discriminant validity was supported. The SEM results indicated that PTC had a strong direct effect on TSGB (H1: γ= .479, p< .01) and also triggered anxiety (H2: γ= .437, p< .01), which, in turn, served as an antecedent to both depression (H3: β= .299, p< .01) and loneliness (H4: β= .868, p< .01). Depression was found to influence TSGB (H6: β= .505, p< .01). Loneliness, in turn, strongly influenced depression (H5: β= .678, p< .01); however, the direct impact of loneliness on TSGB was not significant (H7: NS).

Conclusions and Limitations: This study was the first attempt to empirically test the link between COVID-induced psychological distress and therapeutic self-gifting behavior using the S-O-R framework and based on Emotion Regulation theory. Results provide empirical evidence of the ways that consumers' affective states have been influenced by the perceived threat of COVID-19, including the extent to which it plays a role in their self-gifting behaviors. The findings indicate that the perceived threat of COVID-19 led to therapeutic self-gifting behavior. Moreover, anxiety driven by the perceived threat of COVID-19 elicited depression, which then led to therapeutic self-gifting. Even though loneliness driven by anxiety did not prompt therapeutic self-gifting behavior, it acted as a strong antecedent to depression, which was a trigger of therapeutic self-gifting behavior. Managerially, the results of the study provide insights for marketers and retailers to design marketing plans that focus on self-gifting as means of coping with psychological distress, especially during a challenging time (e.g., COVID-19). A limitation is that the study focused on therapeutic self-gifting only during the pandemic. It will be meaningful to conduct a long-term study to investigate whether therapeutic self-gifting behavior changes in post-pandemic. This study also can be

replicated in the context of other challenging life events (e.g., bereavement) to enrich findings regarding the impact of psychological distress on self-gifting behavior.

References

Berman, R. (2020, November 25). *COVID-19 has produced 'alarming' increase in loneliness* https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/alarming-covid-19-study-shows-80-of-respondents-report-significant-symptoms-of-depression

Doson, K. S. (1985). The relationship between anxiety and depression. *Clinical Psychology Review, 5*(1), 307–324. https://doi.org/10.1097/00005053-199501000-00006

Hubbard, G., Daas, C. den, Johnston, M., & Dixon, D. (2021). Sociodemographic and psychological risk factors for anxiety and depression: Findings from the COVID-19 health and adherence research in Scotland. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 28*(6), 788-800. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-021-09967-z

Kemp, E., & Kopp, S. W. (2011). Emotion regulation consumption: When feeling better is the aim. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 10*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb

Khademi, M. J., Rashedi, V., Sajadi, S., & Gheshlaghi, S. M. (2015). Anxiety and loneliness in the Iranian older adults. *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, 5*(2), 49–52. https://doi.org/10.5923/j.ijpbs.20150502.01

Lee, S. A. (2020). Coronavirus anxiety scale: A brief mental health screener for COVID-19 related anxiety. *Death Studies, 44*(7), 393–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1748481

Luomala, H. T., & Laaksonen, M. (1997). Mood-regulatory self-gifts: Development of a conceptual framework. *Journal of Economic Psychology, 18*(4), 407–434. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870(97)00015-9

Mortimer, G., Bougoure, U. S., & Fazal-e-hasan, S. (2015). Development and validation of the self-gifting consumer behaviour scale. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 14*(3), 165–179.

Park, J. (2018). Self-gifting as a therapeutic reward: Motivational approach for self-gifting promotions. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 24*(1), 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2015.1072576

Pérez Fuentes, M. del C., Molero Jurado, M. del M., Martínez, Á. M., & Gázquez Linares, J. J. (2020). Threat of COVID-19 and emotional state during quarantine: Positive and negative affect as mediators in a cross-sectional study of the Spanish population. *PLoS ONE, 15*(6), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235305

Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). Toward a social psychology of loneliness. In *Personal relationships* (Vol. 3). https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.2.229

Radloff, L. S. (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement, 1*(3), 385–401. https://doi.org/10.1177/014662167700100306

Sneath, J. Z., Russell, L., & Kennett-Hensel, P. A. (2009). Coping with a natural disaster: Losses, emotions, and impulsive and compulsive buying. *Market Letter, 20*(1), 45–60.

Song, S., Yao, X., & Wen, N. (2021). What motivates Chinese consumers to avoid information about the COVID-19 pandemic?: The perspective of the stimulus-organism-response model. *Information Processing and Management, 58*(1), 102407.

Stavrakaki, C., & Vargo, B. (1986). The relationship of anxiety and depression: A review of the literature. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 149*(1), 7–16.

Ward, C. B., & Tran, T. (2008). Consumer gifting behaviors: One for you, one for me? *Services Marketing Quarterly, 29*(2), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1300/J396v29n02

Wu, Y. L., & Li, E. Y. (2018). Marketing mix, customer value, and customer loyalty in social commerce: A stimulus-organism-response perspective. *Internet Research, 28*(1), 74–104.