

Information Overload and Information Distrust: How Does Information Environment Influence Consumer Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction The COVID-19 pandemic has been influencing consumer life profoundly since its global outbreak in 2020. Communication about the pandemic was argued as a driving factor in consumers' mental well-being (Fan & Smith, 2021). While abundant information exposure about COVID-19 provides benefits, it also leads to problematic information processing due to consumers' exposure to the excessive amount of information and the inaccuracy issue. This study aims to investigate how perceived information overload and perceived information distrust influence consumers' affective states during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, how consumers' individual experiences with COVID-19 impact their emotion formation process was explored.

Literature Review Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT) postulates that emotions are the results of an individual's subjective interpretation of stimuli in the environment (Lazarus, 1982; Folkman *et al.*, 1986). The CAT was widely applied to investigate how cognitive appraisal of an event or phenomenon elicits consumer emotions (Choi & Choi, 2019). A research framework (Figure 1) was developed based on the CAT to guide the current study. Information overload and information distrust are two significant stressors when consumers process COVID-19-related information (Bermes, 2021). Previous studies found excessive information would make consumers unable to picture the situation optimally (Fan & Smith, 2021). In addition, doubt about the truthfulness of the information might result in difficulties in conceptualizing the circumstance (Lee *et al.*, 2015). The roles of information overload and information distrust in influencing consumer emotions during the pandemic were explored as stimulus in this study (H1 and H2). Goal relevance and goal congruence are two major dimensions of cognitive appraisal of emotion (Lazarus, 1991). Goal relevance refers to the importance of a given situation to an individual, while goal congruence refers to how consistent a situation is with desire (Kang *et al.*, 2010). In the context of the pandemic, perceive risk and perceived uncertainty were proposed to depict the two appraisal dimensions respectively. Among various emotions generated during the pandemic, fear, anxiety, and hope were found to have significant influences on consumer behavior (e.g., Morón & Biolik-Morón, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2022). Thus, cognitive appraisals of the pandemic were proposed to impact consumer affections of fear, anxiety, and hope regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (H3 and H4). Moreover, extant literature claimed that individual

differences could influence how individuals cognitively appraise a situation and generate emotions (Folkman *et al.*, 1986). Previous research supported that COVID-19 involvement could impact consumer emotional responses and coping with the situation (Yang *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, consumer direct experiences with COVID-19 (i.e., infection and vaccination) were also found to be associated with consumer subjective evaluation of the pandemic (Qiao *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, consumers' COVID-19 involvement and their direct experience with the virus were proposed to moderate the cognitive appraisal of emotion (H5-H7).

Methodology Data were collected from 815 U.S. consumers aged between 18 and 65 in November 2021 via an online survey. Following IRB approval, a convenience sample was recruited by a sampling agency. Multiple items were adapted from previous studies to measure the main constructs of this study using 7-point Likert scales (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Chertok, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2022; Laato *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Luo & Cheng, 2021; Wu *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2020). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure the validity of the measurement model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and multigroup comparisons from AMOS 23 were used to test the proposed relationships.

Results Single-group SEM results (H1-H4) are shown in Figure 1. Findings indicate that excessive information may increase consumers' perceived risk and perceived uncertainty of COVID-19. A high level of information distrust would lead to a high perceived risk of the pandemic while not affecting perceived uncertainty. The perceived risk could significantly increase consumers' fear of the pandemic, which is a retrospective emotion. Differently, perceived uncertainty of COVID-19 was associated with prospective emotions, positively affecting anxiety, and negatively influencing hope. Additionally, consumers' COVID-19 involvement and direct experience with the virus were found to moderate the cognitive appraisal process in emotion, supporting H5-H7. In specific, for consumers who were actively following the progress of COVID-19, their information distrust level had a greater impact on the perceived risk of the pandemic compared to their less involved counterparts; also, their perceived uncertainty significantly influenced the level of anxiety emotion while the counterpart did not. For consumers who never contracted coronavirus, information overload did not affect their cognitive appraisal of the pandemic, which is the opposite for consumers who had

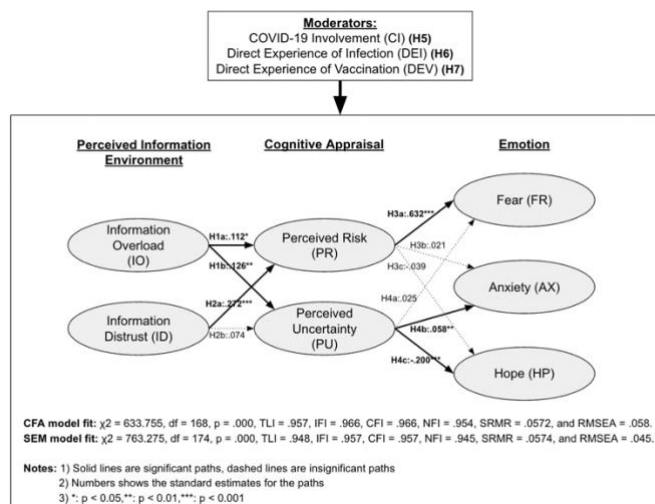


Figure 1. Research Framework & Single group SEM Results

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an infection experience. For non-vaccinated consumers, the relationship between information overload and perceived uncertainty was significant, but the same relationship was not found for vaccinated consumers. Also, information distrust more significantly led to the perceived risk of the pandemic for those who were not vaccinated compared to vaccinated consumers.

Conclusions Grounded on the CAT, this study confirms that the information environment significantly influences consumers' cognitive appraisals of the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequently their emotion formation. This study not only contributes to the literature on consumer well-being, but also lends managerial implications for effective communications about COVID-19 information to the public.

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