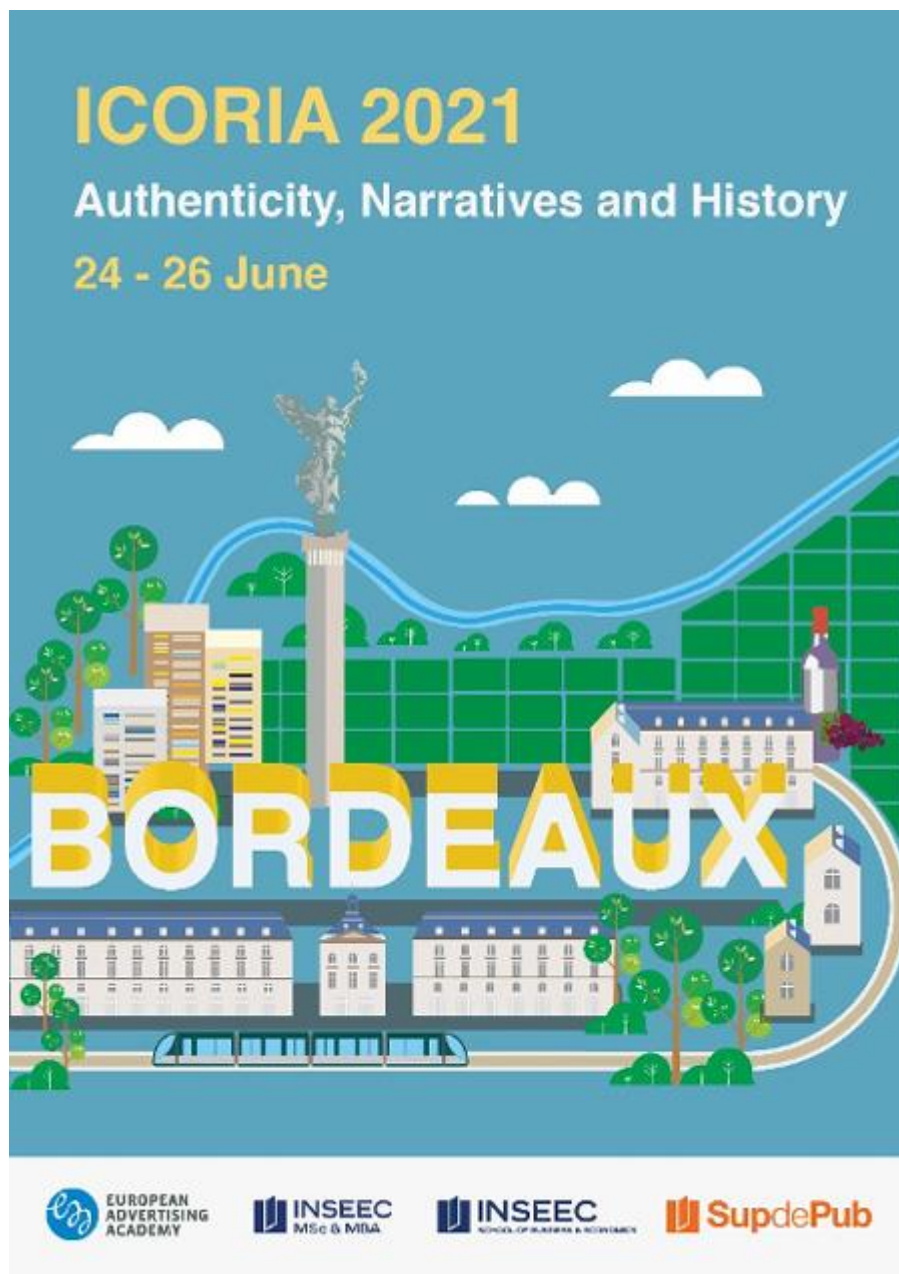


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**Advertising premium offers in the pandemic era:
the role of emotions in the consumer response**

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Advertising premium offers in the pandemic era: the role of emotions in the consumer response

Abstract

Two surveys, conducted among Polish consumers in different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, investigated how the pandemic-related emotions of sadness (about the restrictions) and disgust (with other people) shape the consumer response to advertising premium offers of electronic goods. Consumer personality was considered as a factor of pandemic-related emotions. In both studies, pandemic-related sadness was positively related to premium offer purchase intent, extraversion, and neuroticism, and pandemic-related disgust was positively related to neuroticism. Those findings were replicated in January 2021, and then, pandemic-related disgust was also positively related to purchase intent, and negatively related to extraversion. The results were interpreted based on consumer behavior theory and the pandemic context.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, premium offers, advertising, purchase intent, consumer emotions, sadness, disgust, consumer personality traits, extraversion, neuroticism

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be a long-term phenomenon, it may strongly affect consumer emotions and behavioral patterns. Specifically, the reduced volume of consumer purchases is of special interest to marketers and societies (Hesham, Riadh, & Sihem 2021). In the COVID-19 pandemic context, much research is focused on avoiding products and services related to physical contact with other people, like restaurants (Zwanka & Buff 2021), travels (Turnšek et al. 2020), and public transportation (Abdullah et al. 2021). Relatively lower attention is paid to products that are themselves unrelated to physical contact with other people, like electronic goods. The reduced willingness to buy electronic goods may be indicated by skipping premium offers (i.e., more costly product offers advertised as containing additional or extended features compared to standard offers). To our best knowledge, the existing literature on the COVID-19 pandemic impact on consumer behavior lacks the investigation of how the pandemic may impact purchase intent for premium offers of electronic goods. Especially, the role of pandemic-related emotions and the role of consumer personality in that relationship appears to be understudied. This study aims to bridge that gap in terms of two emotions, that is sadness and disgust. In this paper, pandemic-related emotions are defined as specific emotional reactions to the pandemic context in terms of physical contact with other people. Namely, pandemic-related sadness is feeling sad about the pandemic-imposed limitations regarding contacts with other people, and pandemic-related disgust is feeling aversion to contacts with other people during the pandemic. We consider two personality traits in NEOAC (Big Five) model (White, Hendrick & Hendrick 2004), namely extraversion (characterized by warmth, gregariousness, and positive emotions, among others), and neuroticism (containing the aspects of negative emotional qualities, like anxiety, depression, also oriented on other people, like hostility). We chose these two traits because they both are related to emotional reactions, as extraversion is connected rather with positive

(vs. negative) emotions, while neuroticism is the opposite. Additionally, extraversion is related to socialization, which is under pressure during the pandemic. Below we develop hypotheses, and then test them in two surveys (Study 1 and Study 2), conducted in different stages of the COVID-19 epidemic in Poland: Study 1 took place in October 2020, during the surge of the “2nd wave” of the epidemic, and Study 2 was in January 2021, during the stabilization after the “2nd wave”. Both studies used young and high-educated adults. However, in Study 1 we recruited via an online panel, while in Study 2 the participants were recruited by students of marketing-related courses. Comprising those two different stages of the pandemic and recruitment methods was aimed to increase the external validity of our hypothesis testing and provided the opportunity to observe and interpret changes in the studied relationships along with the development of the pandemic situation.

Hypothesis development

According to the Appraisal-Tendency Framework (Lerner, Han, & Keltner 2007), incidental emotions may influence consumer decisions. Sadness, for instance, may increase seeking high-reward options (Raghunathan & Pham 1999), in line with compensatory consumption mechanism (Garg & Lerner 2006), and the ‘misery is not miserly’ effect (Cryder et al. 2008). In line with this, hedonic (vs. utilitarian) motives were found by Koch et al. (2020) to better predict purchase intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic (however, those authors interpreted that finding as a result of the better opportunities to engage in leisure activities during the lockdown). On the contrary, long-lasting sadness related to the loss of the environmental incentives of contacting other people during the pandemic may lead to apathy (Stuss, van Reekum, & Murphy 2000), meaning a lack of motivation to various activities (Marin 1990), which may include buying a premium offer. Thus, we consider two competing hypotheses:

H1. (compensatory mechanism) Pandemic-related sadness is positively related to premium-offer purchase intent.

H1'. (apathy-related mechanism) Pandemic-related sadness is negatively related to premium-offer purchase intent.

Although extraversion is generally viewed as connected with positive rather than negative emotions (Watson & Clark 1992), extraverts - as more socialized individuals - may suffer more from social distancing. Płomecka et al. (2020) demonstrated the negative relationship between extraversion and propensity to feel sad during the pandemic, Folk et al. (2020) reported a positive relationship, while the study of Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld (2020) does not support any of the above directions. Therefore, we formulate two competing hypotheses:

H2. (socialization mechanism) Consumer extraversion is positively related to pandemic-related sadness and has an indirect effect on premium-offer purchase intent through pandemic-related sadness.

H2'. (positive-emotion mechanism) Consumer extraversion is negatively related to pandemic-related sadness and has an indirect effect on premium-offer purchase intent through pandemic-related sadness.

Individuals who rank high on neuroticism are generally more inclined to negative emotions, such as sadness (Watson & Clark 1992, Verduyn & Brans 2012). Neuroticism may be also linked to difficulties of adaptation to lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic (Morales-Vives et al. 2020). Consequently, we expect that

H3. Consumer neuroticism is positively related to pandemic-related sadness and has an indirect effect on premium-offer purchase intent through pandemic-related sadness.

Emotional response to an object may be spilled over other objects (Forgas 1995). In line with the Appraisal-Tendency Framework, previous research evidenced that disgust may negatively affect purchase intention (Lerner, Han, & Keltner 2007, Shimp & Stuart 2004). Therefore, pandemic-related disgust may be spilled over product offers, especially and in turn discourage to buy extra features in premium offers. On the other hand, pandemic-related disgust is focused on other people, not on material products (given that they are not perceived as contaminated by humans). As such, pandemic related-disgust may trigger a compensatory mechanism in which avoiding people make consumers approach material products. The above considerations lead us to two competing hypotheses:

H4. (spill-over mechanism) Pandemic-related disgust is negatively related to premium-offer purchase intent.

H4'. (compensatory mechanism) Pandemic-related disgust is positively related to premium-offer purchase intent.

In general, negative emotions, such as disgust, are negatively related to extraversion (Watson & Clark 1992), and positively related to neuroticism (Druschel & Sherman 1999; Verduyn & Brans 2012). Moreover, extraversion is connected with socialization, which may make people less tend to feel disgusted with other people, even in the pandemic context. Therefore, we expect that

H5. Consumer extraversion is negatively related to pandemic-related disgust and has an indirect effect on premium-offer purchase intent through pandemic-related disgust.

H6. Consumer neuroticism is positively related to pandemic-related disgust and has an indirect effect on premium-offer purchase intent through pandemic-related disgust.

Study 1 (October 2020, during the surge of the epidemic “2nd wave”)

Method

Five-hundred thirty-three Polish participants (58.7% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 28.3$, $SD = 4.8$) recruited by an online consumer panel took part in a survey in October 2020, when the number of new SARS-Cov-2 infections surged in Poland (this was called “the 2nd wave”; GCDL 2021, Reuters 2021). The participants were asked to imagine they are going to buy a new smartphone and headphones. Then, the participants were exposed to a verbal ad presenting a premium offer of a smartphone and headphones (i.e., the ad offered extra features for a higher price). Afterward, purchase intent was measured with a three-item scale adapted from Lepkowska-White, Brashear, & Weinberger (2003), $\alpha = .944$. Eighty-seven percent of the participants confirmed they thought, to some degree, about the pandemic while reacting to the offer. Pandemic-related emotions were measured with items related to the offline shopping experience. For pandemic-related sadness, we used five items inspired by Williams & Aaker’s (2002) scale for sadness, e.g., “I would be sad if I could not contact other people.”, $\alpha = .945$. For pandemic-related disgust, we used six items inspired by Shimp & Stuart’s (2004) scale for disgust, $\alpha = .917$., e.g., “I would feel aversion to contacting other shoppers.”. With the items adapted from Juric, Lindenmeier, & Arnold (2020), we measured extraversion (four items, $\alpha = .906$), and neuroticism (three items, $\alpha = .750$). All measurements used slider response scales coded from 0 to 100. All scale items are presented in Table 1.

Results

In all models, purchase intent for a premium offer served as a dependent variable. In a parallel mediation model (PROCESS, Hayes model 4) with pandemic-related emotions as mediators,

and extraversion as an independent variable (Fig. 1a; $\beta_{\text{total}} = .214$, $t = 5.043$, $p = .000$; $\beta_{\text{direct}} = .173$, $t = 3.738$, $p = .000$), there occurred a positive indirect effect through sadness ($\beta = .048$, $\text{CI}_{95\%} [.006, .095]$). Extraversion was positively related with sadness ($\beta = .412$, $t = 10.419$, $p = .000$), and sadness was positively related with purchase intent ($\beta = .117$, $t = 2.543$, $p = .011$), in support of H2 and H1, respectively. There was no significant effect of extraversion on disgust ($p > .1$), providing no support for H5, and a positive effect of disgust occurred on purchase intent ($\beta = .103$, $t = 2.432$, $p = .015$), in line with H4'. In a parallel mediation model with pandemic-related emotions as mediators, and neuroticism as an independent variable (Fig. 1b; $\beta_{\text{total}} = .109$, $t = 2.520$, $p = .012$; $p_{\text{direct}} > .1$), there occurred a positive indirect effect through sadness ($\beta = .025$, $\text{CI}_{95\%} [.006, .052]$). Neuroticism was positively related with sadness ($\beta = .142$, $t = 3.314$, $p = .001$), and sadness was positively related with purchase intent ($\beta = .178$, $t = 4.120$, $p = .000$), in support of H3 and H1, respectively. Neuroticism was positively related to disgust ($\beta = .214$, $t = 5.050$, $p = .000$), in line with H6. There was no significant effect of disgust on purchase intent ($p > .06$), thus study 1 provides no clear support for H4.

Study 2 (January 2021, during the stabilization after the epidemic “2nd wave”)

Method

Eight-hundred twenty-six Polish university students (50.8% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.3$, $SD = 2.7$), recruited by students enrolled in marketing courses, took part in a survey in January 2021, when the number of new SARS-Cov-2 infections in Poland stabilized after the “2nd wave” (GCDL 2021, Reuters 2021). The stimuli were similar as in Study 1. To enhance thinking on the pandemic, the instruction mentioned the pandemic context (“Before visiting the website with smartphone and headphones offers, you are checking the latest news about the pandemic.”). Ninety-one percent of the participants confirmed they thought, to some degree, about the pandemic while reacting to the offer. With the same scale as in Study 1, we

measured purchase intent ($\alpha = .924$), and pandemic-related emotions ($\alpha_{\text{sadness}} = .933$, $\alpha_{\text{disgust}} = .921$). Both extraversion ($\alpha = .892$) and neuroticism ($\alpha = .822$) were measured with four items adapted from Juric, Lindenmeier, & Arnold (2020). All measurements used seven-point response scales coded from 1 to 7. All scale items are presented in Table 1.

Results

Like in Study 1, purchase intent for a premium offer served as a dependent variable in all models. In a parallel mediation model (PROCESS, Hayes model 4) with pandemic-related emotions as mediators, and extraversion as an independent variable (Fig. 2a), an inconsistent parallel mediation occurred ($p_{\text{total}} > .05$, $p_{\text{direct}} = .1$): the indirect effect through sadness was positive ($\beta = .026$, CI95%[-.047, -.006]), while the indirect effect through disgust was negative ($\beta = -.017$, CI95% [.006, .033]). Extraversion was positively related with sadness ($\beta = .259$, $t = 7.707$, $p = .000$), and sadness was positively related with purchase intent ($\beta = .098$, $t = 2.774$, $p = .006$), in support of H2 and H1, respectively. Next, extraversion was negatively related with disgust ($\beta = -.111$, $t = 3.197$, $p = .001$), and disgust was positively related with purchase intent ($\beta = .156$, $t = 4.532$, $p = .000$), in support of H5 and H4', respectively. In a parallel mediation model with pandemic-related emotions as mediators, and neuroticism as an independent variable (Fig. 2b; $\beta_{\text{total}} = .161$, $t = 4.668$, $p = .000$; $\beta_{\text{direct}} = .131$, $t = 4.004$, $p = .000$), there occurred a positive indirect effect both through sadness ($\beta = .017$, CI95%[-.034, -.003]), and disgust ($\beta = .013$, CI95%[-.026, -.002]). Neuroticism was positively related with sadness ($\beta = .201$, $t = 5.885$, $p = .000$), and sadness was positively related with purchase intent ($\beta = .086$, $t = 2.480$, $p = .013$), in support of H3 and H1, respectively. Next, neuroticism was positively related to disgust ($\beta = .092$, $t = 2.654$, $p = .008$), and disgust was positively related with purchase intent ($\beta = .137$, $t = 4.004$, $p = .000$), supporting H6 and H4', respectively.

Discussion

Our empirical results suggest that, in line with our expectations, pandemic-related sadness and disgust may influence consumer premium-offer purchase intent. The effect of sadness on purchase intent remained positive across studied periods of time (i.e., October 2020, and January 2021). According to our theorization, it may be related to the compensatory mechanism, in line with Appraisal-Tendency Framework, and not to the apathy-related one. In both studies, sadness was positively related to both extraversion (indicating that the socialization-related mechanism prevails over the positive-emotionality mechanism) and neuroticism, and the latter is positively related to disgust.

Only in January 2021, had disgust a negative relationship with extraversion, and a positive effect on purchase intent in both mediation models (indicating the compensatory mechanism, and not the spill-over one). The positive effect of disgust on purchase intention for premium offers in October 2020 was visible only in the parallel mediation model with extraversion as an independent variable, while no such effect was observed in the parallel mediation model with neuroticism as an independent variable. In the latter model, neuroticism has a positive effect on purchase intention, which may suggest that the positive effect of disgust on purchase intention in the first model might be an artifact resulting from the association between disgust and neuroticism. Perhaps, pandemic-related disgust played a larger role (as a factor of premium-offer purchase intent, and an effect of consumer introversion) in January 2020 compared to October 2020 as the pandemic-related disgust was more developed among consumers in the later (vs. earlier) stages of the pandemic. As a consequence, the relationship between extraversion and premium-offer purchase intent is inconsistent in January 2021. This suggests the existence of two mutually opposing mechanisms within that relationship: the first one going through pandemic-related sadness, in which purchase intent is increased, and the

second mechanism going through pandemic-related disgust, in which purchase intent is decreased as extraversion decreases the disgust.

Some of the parallel mediations tested in our studies were partial. Firstly, in the parallel mediation in Study 1 (October 2020) with extraversion as an independent variable, the direct effect on premium-offer purchase intent is positive. Perhaps, extraversion may increase purchase intent also through positive emotions (e.g., joy) that are related to this personality trait. Those positive emotions might be diminished in January 2021, along with the fatigue with the pandemic, and therefore, this direct effect was not visible in Study 2. Secondly, in the parallel mediation in Study 2 (January 2021) with neuroticism as an independent variable, the direct effect on premium-offer purchase intent is positive. Perhaps, other negative pandemic-related emotions (e.g., fear) related to this personality trait perhaps strengthen the purchase intent through compensatory mechanisms similar to those proposed in our theorization for sadness and disgust. Those other negative pandemic-related emotions might be less developed in October 2020 (vs. January 2021), as the pandemic was in the earlier stage, and therefore this direct effect was not visible in Study 1. Put together, our research contributes to bridging the gap in the existing literature in terms of the links between consumer intent to purchase premium offers of products unrelated to physical contact with other people, consumer emotions, and personality traits in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Put together, our results extend the existing literature on the impact of the pandemic conditions on the effectiveness of premium-offer ads of products unrelated to physical contact with other people, using the perspective of consumer pandemic-related emotions and personality traits.

For advertisers, our results provide several cues on how to promote, in the pandemic context, premium offers on products unrelated to physical contact with other people. Our results suggest that in the pandemic context, advertisers may enhance the effectiveness of a

premium-offer ad by appealing to extravert behaviors (like spending time together with other people), and to sadness with pandemic isolation, given that consumer reactions, as possibly among Polish consumers in October 2020 and January 2021, are dominated by the compensatory effect of sadness. The effectiveness of a premium-offer ad may be also enhanced by appealing to neuroticism-related behaviors (e.g., worrying about the pandemic), and disgust with other people, given that consumer reactions, as possibly among Polish consumers in January 2021, are dominated by the compensatory effect of disgust. Moreover, such ads may be targeted to consumers high in the personality trait they are referring to. For example, picturing a gregarious person, who is sad about being deprived of friends during the lockdown, may increase the effectiveness of a premium-offer ad of electronic goods especially among extroverts.

Although our research reflects different stages of the pandemic, the studied relationships may differ across countries and specific lockdown measures being undertaken. Future research on the pandemic impact on premium offer purchase intent may also investigate the role of other pandemic-related emotions, like fear or anger.

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Figure 1. Pandemic-related emotions as mediators between personality traits and purchase intent for premium offers – Study 1 (October 2020); *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

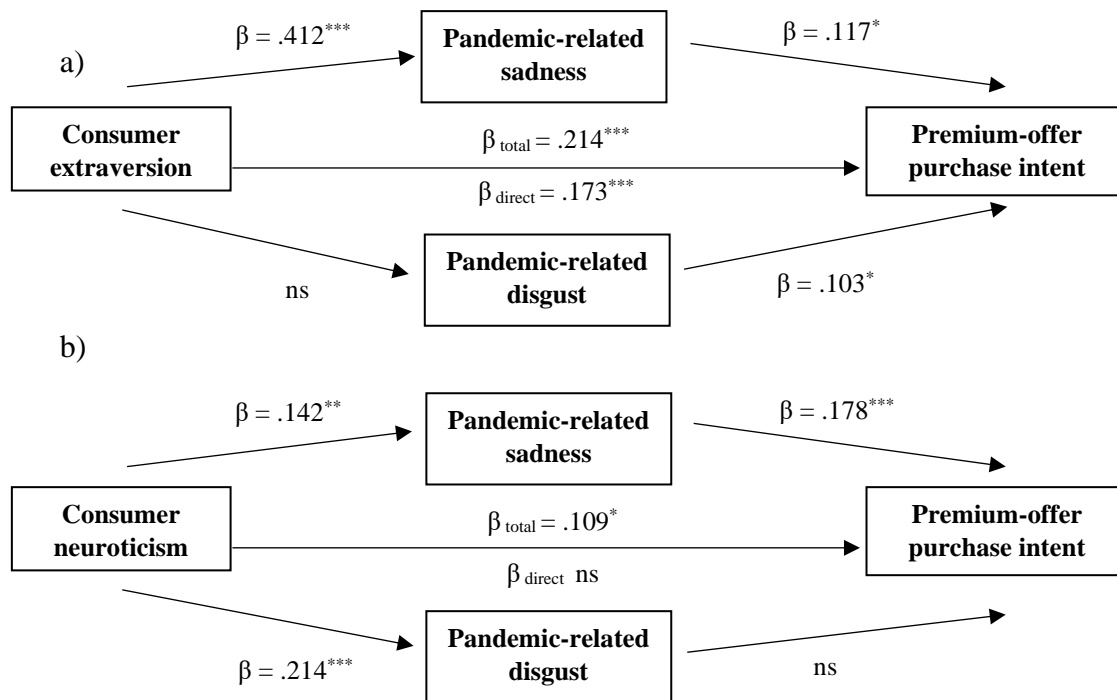


Figure 2. Pandemic-related emotions as mediators between personality traits and purchase intent for premium offers – Study 2 (January 2021); *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

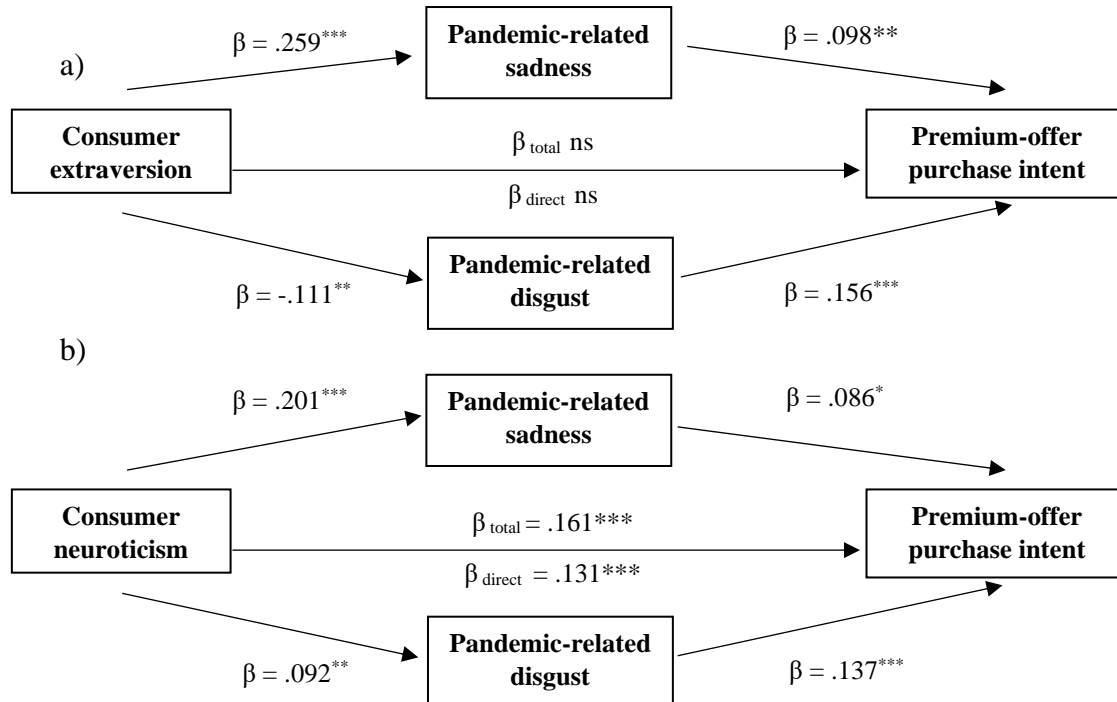


Table 1. Measurement scales

Construct	Items used	References	Reliability	
			Study 1	Study 2
Premium-offer purchase intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is likely that I would buy an extended offer • I would definitely consider buying an extended offer • I would like to buy an extended offer 	Adapted from Lepkowska-White, Brashear, & Weinberger (2003)	$\alpha = .944$	$\alpha = .924$
Pandemic-related sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would feel sad if I could not contact other people • I would be saddened if my contact with other people would be restricted • I would feel slightly lonely having no contact with other people • It would be a bit hard for me if the contact with the point of sale was more difficult • I would feel somewhat helpless if the contact with others was more difficult 	Inspired by Williams & Aaker (2002)	$\alpha = .945$	$\alpha = .933$
Pandemic-related disgust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I imagined myself and other people in the point of sale (filler item) • I would feel some kind of aversion for contacting other people in the point of sale • I would feel aversion to contacting other shoppers • I would feel uncomfortable if I imagined other people near me • I would grimace at the thought of contact with other people • I would feel uncomfortable if I had to contact the sales assistant • I would feel a certain distance to the sales assistant 	Inspired by Shimp & Stuart (2004)	$\alpha = .917$	$\alpha = .921$
Consumer extraversion	<p>I would describe myself as a person who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiates contacts with people • is talkative and communicative • enjoys being with people • is sociable 	Adapted from Juric, Lindenmeier, & Arnold (2020)	$\alpha = .906$	$\alpha = .892$
Consumer neuroticism	<p>I would describe myself as a person who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is more emotional than others • is quick-tempered • changes moods easily • is more sensitive than others¹ 	Adapted from Juric, Lindenmeier, & Arnold (2020)	$\alpha = .750$	$\alpha = .822$

¹ The item was excluded from the analysis of Study 1 due to the low correlation with the other scale items and lowering the scale reliability.