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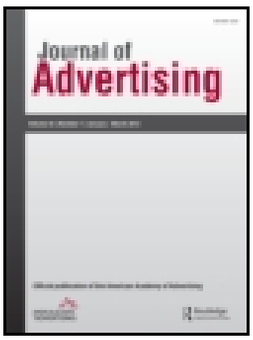

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Advertising in a Context Harm Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Context harm crises concern the challenges of advertising morally sound products in a context that is failing, as during COVID-19. Following Koselleck, we argue that crises interrupt the trajectory of existing social processes, thereby preventing consumers' expected future outcomes. We propose a three-step future framing advertising strategy in response: (1) mourning a future that was lost to facilitate emotional adaptation; (2) reconstructing a new future to facilitate rational action under conditions of ambivalence; and (3) establishing mythologies for future-oriented identity work to facilitate the existential demands of crises. We then discuss health messaging from the perspective of future framing.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown is a global (OECD 2020a), national (OECD 2020b), local (Davenport et al. 2020), and consumer crisis (Andersen et al. 2020). This poses a profound challenge to traditional advertising strategies, which build on underlying assumptions about generalized social and institutional stability, as well as economic growth (Holm 2016). Previous work on crisis in advertising has addressed product harm crises or how to manage public relations (PR) when a specific product, brand, or firm fails and causes harm in an otherwise well-functioning context (Coombs and Holladay 2001; Dutta and Pullig 2011; Gorn, Jiang, and Johar 2008; Xie and Keh 2016). However, less is known about advertising sound products and services from morally viable brands and companies in a wider context that is failing, as in the case of COVID-19. We term this novel form of crisis external to the firm a context harm crisis.

In this conceptual paper, we draw on the work of Reinhardt Koselleck (2000, 2002, 2004) to provide a substantive theorization of context harm crisis management through advertising. Koselleck and Richter (2006) provide three hallmark features that crises share: (1) a crisis disrupts or brings to cessation the trajectory of an existing process, thereby preventing an expected future outcome. We argue that this causes consumers the emotional harm of knowing there was a better future that could have been but did not happen. (2) A crisis creates a multitude of potential, other future outcomes that can be both good and bad. This generates the harm of unexpected cognitive labor consumers face in rationally planning for the future in the new context. (3) A crisis calls for decisive individual human intervention, which we theorize harms the viability of existing consumer identities, thereby necessitating new roles for consumers.

We term the advertising response of engaging these emotional, rational, and existential consumer ills caused by a context harm crisis "future framing." Ultimately, the purpose of adverting in a context harm crisis is to restore consumer hope by providing interpretative resources about an imagined future in which goals are emotionally, rationally, and existentially congruent and possible (MacInnis, de Mello, and Patrick 2004). In addition to unpacking a novel form of crisis and conceptualizing new advertising strategies to address it, we reorganize several streams of literature, thereby identifying new conceptual relations in the marketing and advertising oeuvre. MacInnis (2011) identifies these elements as key features of conceptual contributions.

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Our aim in this paper is to explore the implication of our concepts, context harm crisis and future framing advertising, for health messaging. Health messaging has received substantial attention in advertising research. For example, Sukran et al. (2003) explore communication of sensible alcohol behaviors, Peracchio and Luna (1998) address smoking prevention among youths, Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchandra (2003) study advertising campaigns for condoms to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, while Sundar, Kardes, and Wright (2015) explore messaging about body slimming creams and dietary supplements. Last, Kees and Andrews (2019) study the intersection of policy and advertising regarding consumer education campaigns about cannabis. This research unanimously stresses the efficacy of frequent repetition of a single message (Sundar, Kardes, and Wright 2015) and addresses the subjective, future-oriented emotions of pride and guilt (Coleman, Royne, and Pounders 2020). We aim to show that context harm crises require not only bespoke advertising efforts for various communities and societies but also an evolving, multistage approach not recognized in prior advertising literature on health messaging.

In the following, we begin with a critical discussion of extant literature on crisis in marketing and advertising research. Drawing on Koselleck's work, we then unpack our concepts of context harm crisis and future framing advertising in relation to COVID-19. In conclusion, we discuss the role of future framing advertising in addressing the persuasion context of desirable health behaviors (Sundar, Kardes, and Wright 2015) and health advertising.

Crisis in Marketing and Advertising

Crisis has received substantial interest in marketing, advertising, and consumer behavior literature. At the macro level, studies have addressed environmental (Humphreys and Thompson 2014), energy (Press and Arnould 2009), technology (Hoffman and Novak 2018), food (Gollnhofer, Weijo, and Schouten 2019), economic (Coskuner-Balli 2020), poverty (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), and migrant (Luedicke 2015) crises. At the institutional level, crisis has been addressed as a managerial issue (Siomkos and Kurzbard 1994), pertaining to corporate social responsibility (Klein and Dawar 2004), relating to marketing efficiency (Van Heerde, Helsen, and Dekimpe 2007), dependent on consumer transitory assessments (Vassilikopoulou et al. 2009), and inherently related to attribution of blame (Gao et al. 2012). At the micro level, consumer researchers have discussed personal (Thompson, Henry, and Bardhi 2018), existential (Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett 2009), emotional (Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010), masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004), and moral (Izberk-Bilgin 2012) consumer crises. However, none of these studies provide any substantive definition of crisis.

Dutton (1986, 502) succinctly explains this conceptual vagueness, stressing that "[i]n more cases than not, its meaning [crisis] has not been specified. … Instead researchers assume that a popular understanding of the construct is sufficient." This theoretical sentiment echoes across influential contributions in advertising research. In an early commentary, Fox and Geissler (1994) simply describe crisis as a strong word, capturing situations that cause alarm without specifying what it is about the situation that spurs negative emotions. This builds on Stewart's (1992) overview paper defining crisis as a state or condition that someone or something is in at a specific time, without further exposition about what that condition could be.

Advertising has typically focused on the managerial issue of product harm crises. Addressing negligence about a particular product that has negative repercussions for customers, Gorn, Jiang, and Johar (2008) define crisis as a situation that requires the ascription of guilt, making conditions that promote perceptions of innocence a relevant component of PR. Xie and Keh (2016) further define crisis as a situation that requires the identification of a culpable and blameworthy party. Advertising therefore focuses on symbolic and communication responses to manage issues of moral or use failure when products fail in an otherwise well-functioning context (Coombs and Holladay 2001) or reputation management post-product harm crisis (Dutta and Pullig 2011). However, these approaches do not address wider contextual crises, where no product or firm failure is involved. Beck (1992, 38) terms contextual crisis a "generalized social endangering," where the overall setting of human life is brought into question. The COVID-19 crisis captures this wider breakdown in social predictability and performance, which inaugurates an epoch of crisis (Rodgers 2011).

Conventional wisdom suggests that advertisers could deploy nostalgia—a selective recall of the past through rose-colored glasses to escape the pressures of an unpleasant present and future (Veresiu, Robinson, and Rosario 2022)—in a context harm crisis. Studies have shown how nostalgia is triggered in the marketplace by critical events regarding environmental

catastrophes, technological discontinuities, economic fluctuations, and geopolitical shocks (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Hamilton et al. 2014). Trying times spur consumers' desire to revisit the safety and comfort of a personally lived or imagined more peaceful past (Jacobsen 2020).

However, we argue that the escapism of nostalgic advertising strategies is unhelpful when confronted with consumers' pressing need for decisive, future-oriented action under broad crisis conditions. Phipps and Ozanne (2017) show that consumers, under one-off crises such as a power outage, work to recreate a sense of predictability to return to tacit habits. Robinson and Arnould (2020) further demonstrate that ongoing uncertainty about the future pushes consumers into sustained action, making iterative and adaptive planning toward the future a permanent component of their lives.

Outside of marketing, Reinhard Koselleck (2000, 2002, 2004) provides a substantive theorization of crisis, which can be applied in advertising. A crisis describes a sharp and sudden disruption to an established process (Koselleck and Richter 2006). According to Koselleck (2004), crisis gives rise to a particular experience of time indicating the end of an epoch that, in turn, creates a sense of impermanence and ambivalence about the future. Crisis establishes longer or shorter transitions toward a range of possible future outcomes that could be better or worse (Koselleck and Richter 2006). Yet, the concept of crisis is also associated with a responsibilization of individuals to take action and secure one outcome among many possibilities. Crises therefore create a moral duty to intervene and take control of the new impermanence and ambivalence in order to establish new processes that lead to the best possible future outcomes. Unlike a product harm crisis, the onus for action in a context harm crisis is therefore on the consumer and not the firm or brand. We propose that these features together capture a context harm crisis, which guide new advertising strategies.

How COVID-19 Destroyed Our Future

COVID-19 is a context harm crisis as it not only captures the end of an epoch by terminating sustained, decade-long growth in stock markets (Mitchell 2020), oil markets (Tobben 2020), and consumer markets (Tobben 2020) but also lurches the world in general toward an unpredictable future (Sibony 2020). This crisis has revealed, amplified, and accelerated social, institutional, and financial weaknesses that have been simmering for decades (Acharya 2018). This makes 2020 a "hinge in history" (Summers 2020, 1) or a crisis event that unleashed a period of profound and lasting structural uncertainty about the future, which requires adaptive responses.

As a concrete illustration, social distancing efforts in higher education spoil expected life transitions for young adults, since they may no longer have the traditional university experience or even leave their parents' home (LeFevre 2020). Some commentators describe this experience as "preparing for the unknown" (Tidman 2020, 1), while others stress that for people in general "2020 hasn't been the year that you expected" (Fitzmaurice 2020, 1). Constantly shifting regulations have also changed travel, disrupting tourism, anticipated reunions with family, and business travels (Becker 2020).

On a more pessimistic note, some commentators find that the future of globalization and world-spanning supply chains has been permanently impacted, thereby changing the way consumers receive and use goods. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2020) predicts a radical shortening of supply chains, while Altman (2020) anticipates a permanent souring of international trade due to COVID-19. Changes to income and working from home have impacted housing markets (Lussenhop 2020). Some consumers face a bleak outlook of potential eviction or forced relocation to cheaper housing or even homelessness, while others constantly reimagine their future domestic setup through home offices.

Disrupted patterns of consumption and the subsequent stalling of in-person retail forces consumers to reimagine the future role of the high street in their daily lives (Goldberg 2020). Eventing and entertainment have similarly been profoundly affected (Rhys 2020). In the United Kingdom, annual staples such as the pantomime have been canceled, making long held national Christmas traditions impossible to uphold, while Halloween is all trick and no treat due to social distancing demands in the United States (Maynard 2020). In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly ruined consumers' previously anticipated future, replacing it with a multitude of potential outcomes and highly responsibilized environments (Aboelenien, Arsel, and Cho 2020; Giesler and Veresiu 2014) that require decisive and immediate preemptive action on behalf of the individual consumer.

Future Framing Advertising Strategies

In the following, we propose three advertising responses to a context harm crisis. These responses assist consumers in reframing the future in order to demonstrate the sustained relevance of the offered

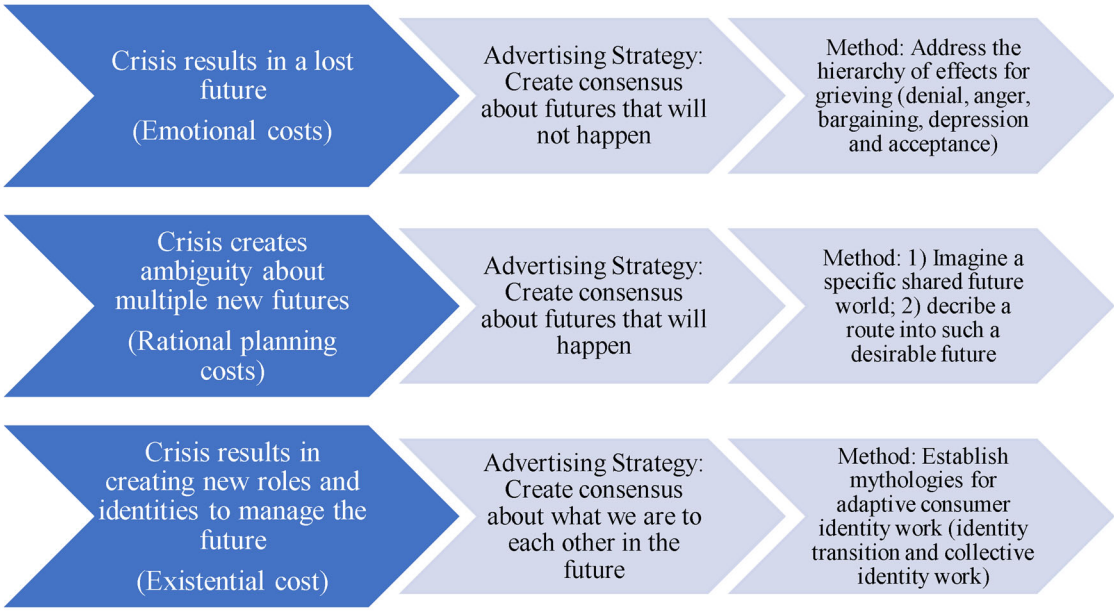

Figure 1. Advertising strategies in a context harm crisis.

product in the new emotional, rational, and existential context of the crisis (see Figure 1). Koselleck and Richter (2006) argue that crises push individuals to attend first to emotional, then rational, and finally existential considerations about their future. We propose that advertisers can respond to each stage of a crisis with a set of carefully calibrated negotiations about the future. Ultimately, the purpose of advertising in a context harm crisis is to restore consumer hope by reframing a consensus about an imagined future in which goals are emotionally, rationally, and existentially congruent and possible (MacInnis, de Mello, and Patrick 2004), which we term future framing advertising.

Mourning a Lost Future

As it disrupts progression into a previously expected future, a context harm crisis pushes consumers to experience a sense of emotional loss about what could have been, but did not happen. Gell (1992, 206) terms this a "temporal opportunity cost" and specifies that this is the cost of knowing there was a lost future that could have allowed for a better expenditure of time than the one that is actually occurring. In a study of how forgone alternatives influence consumer behavior, Tsiros and Mittal (2000) find that counterfactuals, or mental simulations of what might have been when choosing a product, are a cause of regret for consumers. Krishnamurthy and Sivaraman (2002) show that the displeasure of counterfactual reasoning stems from mentally undoing the pleasure one may actually experience in choosing something over another. Describing the lost opportunity costs inherent to counterfactual reasoning as the dark side of variety, Morewedge, Zhu, and Buechel (2019) point out that many alternatives to one's experiences, however, are not simply foregone, since another person may experience them. However, this is not the case in a context harm crisis. Koselleck (2002) argues that a crisis establishes systemic opportunity costs for every person and hence every product. It is the whole context which, as a value proposition, is framed by counterfactual inferences (Albrecht and Danneberg 2011) or consumers' thought experiments about what could have been. It is the future we could have shared together that is lost.

We propose that context harm crisis management through advertising involves addressing an initial mourning period for the future that did not happen. Current studies indicate that consumers go through five stages of grief (Berinato 2020; Weiss 2020). Since lost opportunity costs crowd out meaningful engagement with a product's value proposition, advertising must bring the consumer to an emotional state, whereby the value proposition is not wholly or substantially negated by counterfactuals. By progressing the consumer through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2014) through advertising, we propose that advertisers can lead their target consumer segments through a hierarchy of mourning effects (Barry and Howard 1990) at the outset of a context harm crisis. The Hyundai (2020) "#ThisIsUs Humanity Prevails" advertisement engages the hierarchy of mourning

effects by progressing the viewer through photos and videos of first angry then accepting individuals during the initial lockdown. The ad does not feature one image of a Hyundai automobile, instead addressing the context harm crisis directly with the emotional sentiment echoed in a powerful sentence superimposed on the imagery: "times like these make us grow, they make us progress for humanity" (see the supplemental online appendix for additional examples).

Managing the Futures That Could Be

As a context harm crisis creates a spectrum of unforeseeable eventualities (Koselleck and Richter 2006), consumers come to experience the future as ambiguous, radically open, and subject to choice. Existing research on dietary requirements has shown, however, that information overload and ambiguity also spur consumer apathy (Cornish and Moraes 2015). Studies in political marketing illustrate that apathy is less the outcome of individual, moral failures and more rational adaptions to systemic issues of undecidability (Mitchell 1990). Consumer research on the wedding market, for example, has demonstrated that ambivalence can drive resignation and even defiance (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997). Ricoeur (2016) stresses that there can be no individual action without imagining a meaningful future, insofar as the individual must use imagination to set up a schematization of the network of ends and means. It is in the anticipatory imagining of action outcomes that consumers try out different possible courses of action and play with practical possibilities of a product. Context harm crisis–driven ambiguity about the future therefore subverts the consumer's ability to assess the relevance of a product's end benefits and the quality of a product's performance (Meyvis and Janiszewski 2002).

We propose that context harm crisis management through advertising involves assisting consumers in establishing consensus about what constitutes a meaningful future to act toward. This has two components: (1) providing resources for imagining a specific future world within which the use of a product will be enjoyed and (2) addressing the added cognitive labor consumers face in planning an action route into such a desirable future. While traditional advertising often focuses on time metaphors, for example, "explore a new dimension of time," "built to withstand the test of time," or "we build the future" to convey product benefits (Spears 2003, 33), context harm crisis requires more specific exposition about what such a world will be and how to reach it. Similarly, since consumers must now spend substantial effort gathering information and establishing milestones in order to connect the present with an envisioned future through action, advertising must connect explicitly with planning behaviors (Townsend and Liu 2012).

Carlsberg's (2020) "Welcome Back to the Pub" commercial captures the twofold nature of imaginary and rational planning toward the future. Spoofing Steve McQueen's prisoner of war film, *The Great Escape*, the characters plan their way to the pub upon easing of lockdown restrictions, illustrating social distancing regulations along the way. The ad shows what life at the pub will be like in the future with outdoor seating only. This advertisement does the thinking about the future for consumers by providing an action template to reduce cognitive planning costs associated with ambiguity, which is not available to hedonically oriented commercials that stress taste (see the supplemental online appendix for additional examples).

Modeling New Future Consumer Selves

Sudden disruptions to conceptions of the future bring into existential question consumers' identities. This is because crisis creates a lag, whereby consumers must manage new roles with old identities. Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger (2009) show that consumers radically renegotiate who they are and establish emergent identities when afflicted by life-disrupting events, such as retirement. Savary and Dhar (2020) demonstrate that self-concept clarity affects choices, whereby consumers can be very averse to changes that have identity implications. Türe and Ger (2016) illustrate that consumers engage in identity work to make sense of changes over time using material objects to weave a coherent narrative between the past and the future. The authors argue that disruptions to identity narratives are unpleasant and therefore invigorate identity work.

We propose that context harm crisis management through advertising can provide resources to assist consumers in the often-unpleasant process of reconstructing a meaningful identity or at least come to terms with identity change. Specifically, advertising can establish mythologies for identity work (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). Such advertising efforts can address coping with tensions between old and new identities. Advertising can also provide and support novel discourses and practices to establish identity markers relevant to emergent roles in the post-crisis environment. Advertising can address the fatigue that appears from failure to routinely

disengage from ongoing and pressing identity work. Finally, advertising can address how context harm crises force change upon collective identities (Epp and Price 2008). The Bell Canada (2020) "Call From Anywhere" advertisement, for example, addresses the renegotiation of individual and family identities during the lockdown by destigmatizing the confluence of multiple demands. Through sympathy for the issues of working from home and self-online presentation experienced by the main character, the viewer is brought to reflect on one's own identity in the age of home offices and schools with multiple family members living under one roof (see the supplemental online appendix for additional examples).

Implications for Health Advertising

By introducing the concept of context harm crisis, we propose new advertising strategies for more severe and widespread health situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These crises cause not only personal risk but also a generalized risk by endangering the whole social setting through a profound disruption of shared expectations about the future. Our first opposition to traditional, single message health advertising (Sundar, Kardes, and Wright 2015) is that health messaging strategies appear in the three distinct and sequential consumer responses to the context harm crisis (see Figure 1). For example, it is difficult for consumers to engage with rational behaviors concerning the future benefits of mask wearing prior to emotional acceptance of the pandemic as an actual health threat. Advertisers must therefore carefully plan out the three stages of messaging that cater to changing challenges in the market as the context harm crisis evolves.

Similarly, because COVID-19 has a destabilizing effect on consumers' sensemaking about the future by introducing ambiguity about outcomes, the context harm crisis disrupts consumers' rational and instrumental assessment of what could become a source of pride or guilt (Coleman, Royne, and Pounders 2020). This is clearly illustrated in the highly bifurcated consumer responses to masks in the United States. Mask wearing has become a contentious, political issue rather than a health one, where some consumers accept the practice as integral to social responsibility and enabling freedom (Corporation for Public Broadcasting 2020), while others see it as a cause for concern about social repression of individual liberties (Howard Stern Show 2020). This example goes to the heart of health messaging in a context harm crisis: repetitive reminders to wear a mask will not engage with the inherent ambivalence about the meaning of the product in light of a fractured future that has been established due to a derailed engagement with the acute emotional phase of the context harm crisis.

Ultimately, the purpose of health messaging in a context harm crisis is less about this or that product, but about swiftly establishing consensus around what will and will not happen in the future so as to drive coordinated action in society as a whole (Bell Canada 2020). In the face of a viral pandemic, heterogeneous response levels in a social setting contribute to a calamitous "whack-a-mole" (Hogarth 2020, 1) effect that aggravates and lengthens the context harm crisis and allows for rival meanings about the future to propagate.

Consequently, we see the aim of our future framing advertising strategy comprising emotional, rational, and existential issues as pursuing three kinds of consensus: (1) consensus about what will not happen; (2) consensus about what will happen; and finally, (3) consensus about what we are to each other. As consumers change through the transformative potential brought about by the crisis, a society must reconstitute. Concerted efforts across all markets could therefore frame the persuasion context in beneficial ways for health messaging. The UK supermarket coordination of advertising in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests provides important insights into such wider advertising collaborations with the aim of establishing consensus (Skopeliti 2020).

Finally, while COVID-19 as a triggering phenomenon applies globally, the personal and social processes, and therefore consumer expectations about the future that it interrupts, differ from setting to setting and require bespoke advertising efforts (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). Eisenstadt (2002) captures how social processes are highly differentiated across modern societies, while Taylor (2004) shows how normative expectations toward the future are differentiated across various communities and societies. Future research can therefore explore the differential effect on lost opportunity costs for consumers in different societies experiencing a context harm crisis. The future that did not happen in an egalitarian welfare state like Denmark, resulting in lost social solidarity through the atomizing effects of the lockdown, will differ from the future that did not happen in a class society like the UK, where citizens will experience lost opportunities for social advancement due to the ossifying effects of the lockdown. Ultimately, few things are as corrosive to the social fabric as a ruptured

future. Advertising therefore provides value to society at large by partaking in the deliberative process about what will be.

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