

# Can brands influence social outcomes? The impact of COVID-19-related brand advertising on social distancing behavior

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Researchers from Clark University, Indiana University, and Georgia State University published a new *Journal of Marketing* article that

assesses the impact of COVID-19-related brand advertising on social distancing behavior.

The study is authored by Ayan Ghosh Dastidar, Sarang Sunder, and Denish Shah.

The initial public policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic was rife with chaotic decision-making and wide variations in the implementation of governmental guidelines. Social distancing was the primary intervention proposed by most governmental agencies, but these measures/mandates saw mixed results.

Brands, for their part, were quick to incorporate COVID-19-related narratives in their [advertising](#) strategies. While such advertisements likely influence [brand](#)-related outcomes (such as sales and customer awareness), it is not clear whether they impact social outcomes unrelated to the brand—the so-called "spillover" effects.

Dastidar says that "By analyzing advertising and mobility data, we find that counties where brands ran a greater number of COVID-19-related advertisements generally showed higher levels of [social distancing](#). This societal 'spillover' of advertising was quite substantial." For example, a 1% increase in COVID-19-related advertising led to an average of 466 additional people (compared to 2019) staying fully at home each day.

This effect was more pronounced for larger markets such as New York (6,527 people) and Los Angeles (5,612 people). "Given that social distancing was critical to preventing virus spread (especially before the vaccine was developed), this spillover effect may have saved lives," he adds.

The study finds varying effects of advertising based on brand-level and demographic variables. "Our results indicate that the effect of

advertising on social distancing behavior is amplified among more educated populations but attenuated in more conservative counties, which tend to contain a higher white population," explains Sunder. These findings have substantive implications for the power of brand advertisements to affect important societal outcomes and for government communication strategies.

Could brand advertising fill the void when government agencies fail to adequately respond to public crises? The answer seems to be an overwhelming yes. A recent study by the Edelman Trust Barometer found that those surveyed trust businesses (61%) more than governments (53%), and an astounding 86% believe that CEOs must lead on societal issues, while 68% want CEOs to step in where governments fail.

These results concur: COVID-19-related brand advertising effects on social distancing behavior are almost 11 times stronger in the absence of a cogent policy response (e.g., shelter-in-place, masking) from government agencies. This suggests that brands may have a critical role to play in weathering public crises.

## **The effect of salience**

Salience is identified as one of the primary underlying psychological mechanisms that help explain these findings. "When the pandemic was less prominent or salient in people's minds," says Shah, "brand advertising played a more significant role in making the pandemic and its consequences more salient in their mobility-related decision-making processes."

The research team also notes that the brand advertising effects vary based on factors, such as product category and demographics. For example, ads from certain product categories such as entertainment, alcohol, and tobacco, and politics have a negative effect on social

distancing behavior. Further, the effects are stronger in areas with greater population and higher levels of education.

## **Managerial implications**

This study offers the following guidance to brand managers and policymakers:

1. Brands have tremendous opportunities to disseminate socially relevant messages embedded in the narratives of their TV ads to impact socially beneficial outcomes. Brands can be strategic about their advertising not only from a brand-outcome standpoint but also from a societal-outcome standpoint.
2. Government agencies may need to rethink their communication strategies when dealing with major public health crises requiring public compliance with critical safety guidelines. They may benefit from adopting alternative means of communication to minimize reactance or annoyance. This may involve collaborations with trusted public figures and/or social media influencers or offering incentives to firms in certain categories (i.e., those with increased ad effectiveness) to incorporate relevant narratives in communications directed at their followers and consumers, respectively.
3. Brand managers and policymakers could use the findings from this study to devise more efficient, targeted, and timely communication strategies to deal with future health crises. The findings are generalizable to other public crises, such as climate change. Brand ads with relevant narratives may help increase the salience of the crisis and influence mitigative behaviors such as promoting recycling and switching to clean energy.

**More information:** Ayan Ghosh Dastidar et al, EXPRESS: Societal Spillovers of TV Advertising—Social Distancing During a Public Health

Crisis, *Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429221130011](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429221130011)

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