Exploring Consumer's Expectations and Perceptions of Brands During the Coronavirus Contingency

Expectativas y Percepciones de los Consumidores Hacia Las Marcas Durante la Contingencia por COVID-19

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Abstract

In the midst of a vast spread of COVID-19 across the world, legal regulations were introduced in most countries including social distancing, travel restrictions, and a lockdown in an attempt to slow down the spread of the virus. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has raised companies' awareness of the need to foster consumer's trust in order to survive a crisis. Therefore, the present paper aims to understand the expectations that consumers have towards the behaviors and strategies implemented by brands during the pandemic. This paper contributes to the discussion on how consumers perceive brand's reactions to the pandemic, by showing ways in which brands can foster brand trust through manifestations of competence, problem-solving and benevolence/integrity. Following an exploratory qualitative research, findings of interviews with consumers suggest that they are informed and interested in brands' efforts towards the topic, and in fact the brand's positive or negative reactions to the pandemic can shape brand trust.

KEYWORDS: *Consumer perceptions, brand trust, brands, COVID-19*

Resumen

Derivado de la pandemia de COVID-19, las regulaciones legales fueron introduciendo en la mayoría de los países algunas medidas como el distanciamiento social, las restricciones de viaje, entre otras. La pandemia sensibilizó a las empresas sobre la necesidad de fomentar la confianza de los consumidores para sobrevivir a dicha crisis. Por lo tanto, el presente trabajo tiene como objetivo comprender las expectativas que tienen los consumidores hacia los comportamientos y estrategias implementadas por las marcas durante la pandemia. Esta investigación contribuye a la discusión sobre cómo los consumidores perciben las reacciones de la marca ante la situación, mostrando formas en que las marcas pueden fomentar la confianza de marca a través de manifestaciones de competencia,

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resolución de problemas y benevolencia/integridad. Al realizar una investigación cualitativa por medio de entrevistas a profundidad, los resultados sugieren que los consumidores están informados e interesados en los esfuerzos de las marcas hacia el tema, e inclusive las reacciones que las marcas mostraron hacia temas de la pandemia pueden influir de forma positiva o negativa a la confianza de esta.

Palabras Clave: *Percepciones del consumidor, confianza de marca, marcas, COVID-19*
JEL: M31 Marketing

Introduction

On March 11 2020 the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Forbes, 2020). In the midst of a vast spread of the virus across the world, legal regulations were introduced in most countries including social distancing, travel restrictions and a lockdown in an attempt to to slow down the spread of the virus (Jeżewska-Zychowicz, Plichta, & Królak, 2020). There is no question that people around the world are trying to adapt to the new circumstances. Research concerning consumer behavior during difficult or uncertain times has been addressed before in the literature. Particularly, theory has established that when consumers experience life events that require new roles, dynamics, and create stress, they also modify their consumption lifestiles and brand preferences in an attempt to adapt to new circumstances (Mathur, Moschis & Lee, 2003). Talking about a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, research has suggested that when consumers feel there is a high risk of contracting a disease, their actions are motivated by the desire to protect themselves and their families. As expected, stressful events and difficult situations result in changes in consumption habits, as a way to handle stress and increase the perceived control (Mathur, Moschis & Lee, 2003; Zwanka & Buff, 2020). In other words, when facing a crisis, there is evidence to suggest that individuals incur in changes in their behavior that in a way, gives them some sense of control of the situation.

Furthermore, research from past stressful events has demonstrated that the effects in people in the light of crises, occur both during the event, and years after it ended (Zwanka & Buff, 2020). This suggests that the impact of an uncertain, difficult, or stressful event may lead to long-term effects in consumer behavior.

Having reviewed the history, it can be expected that the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped consumer attitudes, behaviors, values, and expectations. Further, other reconfigurations in consumer traits, sentiments, trust and engagement that ultimately leads to changes in purchasing decisions and buying patterns (Watson, & Popescu, 2021).

Therefore, the objective of this research is to understand the expectations that consumers have towards the behaviors and strategies implemented by brands during the pandemic. Particularly, this paper contributes to the discussion on how consumers perceive brand's reactions to the pandemic. Following an exploratory qualitative research, findings of interviews with consumers suggest that they are informed and interested in brands' efforts towards the topic, and in fact the brand's positive or negative reactions to the pandemic can shape brand trust. Managers can benefit from the results by

understanding consumer's perceptions of brand's communications during this time, the expectations from them in such complex times, and the importance in meeting such expectations to foster brand trust.

This paper is structured as follows: First, a literature review will be presented as a basis for understanding the phenomenon. Next, the methodology and data collection process will be detailed. Then, results of the first phase of this working paper will be presented. Finally, the discussion will address how results shed light on consumer's expectations and how brands can build trust during this Coronavirus pandemic. Managerial implications are also analyzed and the future research steps are detailed.

Literature Review

Brand's Perceptions and Consumer Change

We have learned that consumers have changed in many ways, and therefore brands are required to change as well to adapt to these new circumstances. Most importantly, as consumers are still facing this unprecedented pandemic, things have been put into perspective, and many individuals are rethinking their actions and what's really important in life. This also includes their relationships with brands.

A recent survey conducted with individuals around the world showed that consumers and their future purchase decisions will be influenced by how brands responded to the pandemic. Furthermore, some consumers have already reported a change in their brand preferences based on how they perceive brands to react and respond to the crisis (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020).

Brands that have been successfully surviving the challenges derived from COVID-19 pandemic had to quickly adapt their marketing strategies, often recurring to innovative ways to deliver products and services to consumers, and relying on the Internet to reach consumers confined at home. One tool that plays an important role in the communication with consumers is social media, however, on such platforms, brands can be vulnerable to negative perceptions based on their responses to the crisis.

Recent research has suggested that consumers care about how brands respond to the crisis, and can create negative perceptions of brands that are acting selfishly, displaying that no sacrifices have been made to help others cope with this situation (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Further, consumers expect brands to show awareness and compassion on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and find ways in which their products can be used to help people cope (Rogers, 2020). Treviño (2023) identified some examples of brands responding favorably to the COVID-19 crisis, and the importance of such reactions to the crisis. For example, global brands such as CocaCola, Audi, and Mcdonalds, were the first to modify some part of their logo to promote social distancing recommended to stop the spread of the virus. Other examples regarding company's actions includes Google, that has made Hangouts Meet free to its members, which contributes in keeping communication between people during the confinement, Amazon donated around 8,200 laptops to help students without devices to continue online

school, and Microsoft maintained the income to its hourly paid workers, despite having to work fewer hours at home (Littleton, 2020).

In Mexico, brands have also displayed positive reactions to the situation. For example, Grupo Modelo donated 300,000 sanitizing gel bottles produced with the alcohol extracted when manufacturing beer. Cinepolis, when closing their movie theaters, the billboards where movies titles are displayed shows the legend "Movies have shown us that there is always a happy ending, we are going to miss you. Take care." (Forbes, 2020).

We have learned that brands are created by offering much more than just providing functional benefits of their products and services, but their values and how they connect with consumers are also relevant. Therefore, it can be expected that brands that do not display compassion and interest with their employees and the overall society during this pandemic, can be a cause that fractures the psychological contract.

It is certain that how to cope with this unprecedented moment can be different for every brand. However, there is evidence to suggest that brands that respond with meaningful approaches have created positive perceptions, by giving consumers reasons to believe that together we can move forward this crisis (Trevño, 2023). This research attempts to continue conversation on such topics.

Consumers Trust

According to Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol (2015) the concept of consumer's trust refers to the expectations a consumer has on the company's reliability to deliver its promises. These authors propose a model of consumer trust that offers insights into the trust-building and trust-depletion processes; this model identifies three dimensions of trust: operational competence, operational benevolence, and problem-solving orientation. Operational competence refers to the expectation of a Companys ability to perform in a consistent and competent manner in order to fulfill promises made to the consumers; operational benevolence, consists of the behaviors that reflect a company's motivation to place consumers' interests ahead of its own with a sincere concern for their wellbeing; and problem-solving orientation, refers to consumer's evaluations of the company's motivations to anticipate and solve problems.

Most research has focused on the consequences of trust, for instance consumer's trust has been recognized in previous literature as an essential element for fostering strong relationships, loyalty and sustainable market share (Flavian, Guinaliu, & Gurrea, 2006; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpandé, 1993; Urban, Sultan, & Qualls, 2000). However, relatively few studies have been focused on company behaviors, practices, or mechanisms that contribute in building consumer's trust (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2015).

COVID-19 and Consumer's Trust

Threatening contexts such as an economic crisis or a pandemic have the potential to impact consumers both psychologically and financially, making consumers more risk averse in their

consumption decisions; therefore, brand trust becomes particularly important in such contexts. In an economic crisis, there is a negative mental impact on consumers that makes them more eager to save money either because they lost their job or they fear losing it. Financially, as a result of a changed perception of risk, consumers reduce consumption by prioritizing necessary products and/or switching to cheaper options (Köksal, & Özgül, 2007; Mogaji, 2020; Sharma & Sonwalker, 2013). Because of this change in perception of risk it is important for brands to develop or increase consumers' trust if they seek to protect and maintain the relationships with their current customers and create new ones with potential buyers.

According to the Edelman Trust barometer (2020) report, people identify a bigger need for trust in brands during the pandemic because of both personal and societal reasons. Personal reasons include an increase in personal vulnerability and a reliance on brands to help consumers get through day-to-day challenges, keep the community safe, and to be a good symbol because consumers use brands to express their values. Societal reasons include the resulting environmental impact of a brand's production and delivery processes, brand's involvement in major social issues and problems, and the potential of technology innovations such as robotics and AI to harm society if misused.

For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic raised companies' awareness of the need to foster consumer's trust in order to survive the crisis and chaos that resulted from it (Edelman Trust barometer, 2020). Following the announcement of the lockdown, dramatic images of supermarket shelves emptied of key items such as food, bottled water, toilet paper, hand sanitizers, among products, as a result of consumers' panic purchases for these products (Laato, Islam, Farooq, & Dhir, 2020; Mohan, Berg, & Poblet, 2020). Short-run panic buying behaviors became self-perpetuating, despite the emphasis of a sufficient supply of these products made by the government and industry representatives, in response to the fear of a global disruption of production and supply chains (Hobbs, 2020).

Because of the shock caused, the pandemic has been considered as a catalyst to rebuild trust. The COVID-19 and its consequences in the market environment required organizations to develop strategies in an entrepreneurial agility and flexibility mode, in order to develop systems, operations, and tactics to reach consumers (He & Harris, 2020). According to Morton (2023) companies implemented different strategies to build or maintain consumer's trust through problem-solving, benevolence/integrity, and competence during the pandemic. For instance, companies have continued their corporate social responsibility programs and redefined their purposes (integrity), have helped consumers meet their needs through innovation to preserve product value and ensure competent performance (competence), and have implemented strategies to keep consumers safe, such as contagion-risk and cybersecurity-risk reduction strategies (problem-solving).

Related with these practices, the concept of brand activism becomes relevant, as it is an emerging marketing tactic in which brands take a stance on social and political issues through the re (definition) of their purpose and values based to create social change and marketing success, in this sense the concept is an evolution of corporate social responsibility (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consumers tend to support brands on social issues, but they expect consistency in brands' practices and preached values; in fact, some consumers do not easily trust brand claiming commitment to social issues and are likely to use available platforms (e.g. social media) to accuse them of woke washing

(Mirzaei, Wilkie, & Siuki, 2022). Therefore, brand activism can be risky if brands incur in inconsistencies between the brand's values and practices leading to claims of hypocrisy or inauthentic brand activism which can damage consumers trust and loyalty (Rivaroli, Spadoni, & Bregoli, 2022; Warren, 2022).

Based on the literature review regarding consumer trust and perceptions during difficult times, this research intends to understand how perceptions of brands during this uncertain time derived from the coronavirus pandemic, may contribute to build brand trust. Therefore, the following research question will be addressed: What are the expectations that consumers have towards the behaviors and strategies implemented by brands during the pandemic?

The next section will address the methodology employed to address this phenomenon.

Methodology

The present research adopts an exploratory approach using a qualitative methodology to shed light on the perceptions of consumers and their expectations of brands during this pandemic. Particularly, the data collection process included in-depth interviews with 22 participants, which included 12 men and 10 women, of 32 years of age on average. All interviews were held through Zoom software and lasted around 30 minutes on average. There was a diversity in the occupation of participants, considering that we find both students, employees, and housekeepers (See Table 1). Interviews were recorded and later, transcripts were made from such recordings.

For the analysis of collected data, the coding strategy as proposed by Miles and Hubberman (1994) was used. The coding was made using a three level of analysis. First, a descriptive codification was conducted, which attributes a class of phenomena to a segment of a text, offering little or no interpretation. Then, a second round of coding was made and handled more interpretatively, this allowed for a more complex analysis on motives. Finally, a third round of coding, also referred as pattern coding was followed, as it is more inferential and explanatory, and focuses on identifying emergent patterns between events and relationships (Miles & Hubberman, 1994). As the coding process was conducted, relationships between quotations and codes were registered.

Table 1

Participants Summary

Interview	Participant	Age
1	Abraham T	51
2	Briana G	20
3	Carlos E	20
4	Ana B	26
5	Claudia S	51

6	Cristina L	44
7	Edgar L	47
8	Fernando L	34
9	Fernando V	57
10	Joaquin B	17
11	Laura S	19
12	Leonardo M	21
13	Manuel V	22
14	Marcelo P	21
15	Mariana D	20
16	Mariana M	50
17	Mauricio D	20
18	Pablo C	23
19	Pablo J	20
20	Rocío B	46
21	Sofía G	22
22	Viviana C	57

Source: Ellaborated by the authors

Results

Discussions with participants moved towards their perceptions on how brands have addressed the pandemic so far. Most interviewees were aware that some companies had changed their communication and had touched the Covid-19 topic at some point. Most of the mentioned communications were around campaigns to help inform the community about the virus, its symptoms, how it can be spread, and the basics around how to prevent getting it.

Similarly, other mentioned examples are around how companies help their employees during this difficult time. For example, modifying working hours, providing material to prevent contracting the virus, continuing their payment even though the stores are closed, among others.

"I saw some campaigns [of companies] in which they are explaining how they help their employees… so that they can work less [time] so that there are not so many people in the offices. They also give them support and try to avoid letting people go. They are also giving them help in the transportation topic, so that employees can have less risk when going [from and to] work." (Abraham, 51).

Further, some younger participants - that use social media heavily - mentioned how companies are using influencers, celebrities or athletes to make awareness of their support campaigns around the topic. Particularly, campaigns about staying at home to maintain social distance, and other campaigns about funds and donations of food and medical supplies to people in need. Overall, people were aware of such efforts made by the brands they follow and were easily remembered during the conversation. Regarding this perception, participants also reflected on their thoughts about the approach some brands are having towards supporting the community during the coronavirus pandemic. People are having a favorable opinion about brands not only joining the conversation but going "all in" in trying to mitigate some of the negative aspects of the pandemic. Interviewed participants used the words "favorable", "i'm glad", "it's good", "i'm thankful" to describe their feelings towards brands summing with initiatives to help.

"I believe that… when this is over [the pandemic], people will know who were the brands that helped… I believe people will be aware of the brands that helped, or sent funds, or which what we consumed [bought] the company gave a part [of the profit] to people in need. I believe that this is something people will not forget, and will have in mind who were the brands that helped the most during this phase" (Briana, 20).

During the interview, it was also discussed with participants what will be the best way brands can help during this time. As the pandemic has been going forward, people have agreed that information about the pandemic is valuable. Mentioned examples of this include the importance of wearing a mask, staying at home, maintaining social distance, washing hands, not touching face, among others. Most participants are certain on what type of support they are expecting from brands at this point of the pandemic. Suggestions include being transparent on the results of donations of funds and products to people in need, focusing on employee support, generating employment opportunities, and supporting doctors and medical staff. However, one topic that was present in all conversations was around the economic affectation that the pandemic is having over people. Therefore, the number one priority when expecting support by brands, resulted in maintaining or lowering prices in products and services, promotions, payment facilities and credits. This can be found in many of the narratives with participants of the interviews:

"It's good [to have low prices], because this is everyone's situation" (Abraham, 51).

I think that [maintaining low prices] is a good strategy. There are a lot of people that are having a really hard time, economically speaking. There are many people that have been fired from their jobs, that

don't have money to take food to their homes. The fact that companies are doing something for people, is something really good…[...]...they could try and lower prices for basic products (Rocío, 46).

"[Companies should maintain] accessible prices, I know they probably also are being affected as a company, but consumers and citizens are also affected… there are people that had their salaries reduced, lost their jobs, they are not generating, or they depended on sales to have a commission, etc. So I believe that the first thing companies should consider to help consumers is to maintain accessible prices." (Pablo, 23).

Additionally, this concern was also the number one priority with participants of the research. Following discounts, promotions, affordable shipping and providing information about what they are doing with their staff and product management during the pandemic. Finally, several people emphasized that a good way to help consumers is to provide quick and easy ways to buy their products through friendly websites and apps. Because people at this moment cannot visit physical stores that often, it is important to include good quality pictures, videos and other visual cues that can help consumers reduce uncertainty and ultimately make a decision. Table 2 summarizes some of the ways participants believe brands can support consumers during these difficult times.

Table 2

How Brands can Help Consumers During the Pandemic

Brands Support

Maintaining employees safe (equipment, or home office options)

Reduce or Maintain Accessible Prices

Discounts/Promotions

Free/affordable shipping

Provide information

Online transaction through website or app

Sanitary precautions

Maintaining stock

Free/Accessible returns and changes

Recycle

Drive thru

Donations

Finally, it was also discussed how companies that are not supporting the cause are mostly considered as if they do not care about the people and the situation. However, participants commented on the fact that there is also a fine line between supporting for the right reasons and supporting only to get noticed. In other words, people felt that there were some brands that are not honest in their motives for the support, rather they believe it is only a marketing campaign trying to obtain awareness and positive perceptions from consumers. As one participant mentioned:

"It's good that companies want to contribute… but, if maybe they take it as an opportunity for them to promote themselves, so that people notice them… to have more presence, to be more notable in social media…[ ] I don't think that's right. They should do it but not make publicity out of it…(Pablo, 20).

In sum, Table 3. addresses the different dimensions of trust found and the examples in which participants made emphasis on their expectations towards brands.

Table 3

Trust Dimensions and Consumers Expectations Towards Brands

Trust Dimension	Consumer Expectations Towards Brands
Competence - provide tranquility to consumers by:	Reduce or Maintain Accessible Prices Offering Discounts or Promotions Free or affordable shipping Maintaining Stock Free or Accessible returns and changes
Problem-solving - showing concern of the situation and anticipating problems by:	Offering Drive Thru options Online Transaction options Contagion risk reduction strategies Maintaining Cyber security

Benevolence/Integrity - behaviors that reflect honesty, empathy, and concern for the wellbeing of consumers and society by:	Provide Information Sanitary Precautions Donations Maintaining Jobs or Salaries Keeping employees safe Recycle

Source: Ellaborated by the authors

Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned before, consumers' trust is important as it is considered an essential element for fostering strong relationships, loyalty and sustainable market share (Flavian, Guinaliu, & Gurrea, 2006; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpandé, 1993; Urban, Sultan, & Qualls, 2000). Further, research has suggested that when consumers transition into new roles and lifestyles while adapting to stressful life events, marketing opportunities are also created. During this adaptation process, consumers rethink and evaluate their consumption priorities, their needs for products and services, and ultimately their brand preferences. Particularly, in difficult times like the COVID-19 pandemic, is when brands need to maximize efforts to strengthen relationships with consumers. So far, lessons learned from this research can attempt to describe the expectations that consumers have towards brands.

Results from this research suggest consumer's expectations and perceptions of brands may shape the dimensions of brand trust. For example, one of the most mentioned dimensions, and therefore, perhaps the most important is competence. Consumers expect brands to show competence, by avoiding malpractices of increasing prices to take advantage of the increased demand for certain products. One of the major concerns of participants in this study, is the difficult economic situation for families derived from this pandemic. Cases of lost jobs or income reductions were discussed, so in consequence, consumers expect brands to be empathic of this situation and reduce or at least maintain accessible prices for their products or services as a way of support. Additionally, competence can also be achieved by maintaining and ensuring stock of the products make consumers feel safe and reduce panic purchases. Participants in the study reflected on how if they are informed by the company that products (like toilet paper for example) are guaranteed to continue to be available for them, then they would not make changes in the quantities they normally purchase. This in turn, will alleviate the stress from fear of not being able to find the product in the future.

Next, results confirm some acts of problem-solving as an important dimension of consumer trust. First, contagion risk reduction strategies are strongly valuable for consumers. As results suggested, when brands provide the new option to make online orders through websites or apps, as well as drive thru options to avoid unnecessary trips and visits are important. Many consumers in fact have used online shopping for the first time during this pandemic. Consequently, consumers expect that brands offer safe and private online spaces to feel compelled to make online transactions. Therefore, cyber security is also an important expectation during this pandemic. Additionally, interviews

with customers confirm that higher expectations for in-store safety and behavior as their shopping frequency and in-store duration have reduced (Wang, Xu, Schwartz, Ghosh, & Chen, 2020).

Finally, results also suggest that brand's integrity is expected during these times more than ever, and that is a prerequisite for consumer's trust. Consumers want to be informed by brands about the pandemic in general, as well as ways in which they can remain safe. Even though this information is often shared by governments, cities or health organizations, consumers also showed favorable opinions from companies or brands that use their communication to confirm sanitary precautions. Examples of these include the safe distance, wearing a face mask, washing hands for twenty seconds, and giving preference to open spaces. By spreading the best practices to maintain safety, consumers feel they are showing concern for their wellbeing and summing up to the efforts of mitigating the negative impacts of this Coronavirus pandemic.

Additionally, when discussing with participants the topic, special emphasis was placed on the importance of summing up to support the cause. Examples of brands that were positively remembered during this pandemic by participants include those that make donations to vulnerable communities or segments, as well as to the health personnel. Additionally, companies that use their resources (raw material, materials or equipment) to manufacture products required during this pandemic, such as antibacterial gel, ventilators, facemasks, among others, were also mentioned as exceptional. Basically, consumers feel that during these times companies should truly engage in helping the society to overcome this pandemic, even if this means making donations or changing their operations for a while to help. In the same level of help, consumers value and expect companies to help their employees, by doing their best to maintain jobs, and offering opportunities to maintain safety (flexible or home office options for example, or safety equipment for their jobs). However, participants reflected on the importance of acting truly responsible for the right reasons, as using the pandemic as an opportunity to show off the help efforts as a marketing strategy, will negatively affect their perceptions towards that brand. Finally, it is worth reflecting on the fact that participants explicitly commented on how they are willing to change brand preferences when companies do not show - with their acts and their communications - that they are truly committed with society as a whole during this pandemic.

This research found that consumers are aware of brand's actions during the contingency, and have expectations derived from the psychological contracts they form with brands. Consistent with Sobande (2020), when a brand's actions and messages are moving in the line that states that "we're all in this together", then such expectations are met and positive perceptions can be formed. However, this research also suggests that there is a very fine line between displaying real concerns towards people, or doing "good" to pursue awareness and ultimately, profit. As this topic emerged during the interviews, it was clear that consumers are critical, educated, and informed when talking about brand's activities.

Previous literature has found that the consistency between a company's values, business practices, and marketing strategies contributes to consumer's trust; hence, woke washing practices should be avoided (Mirzaei, Wilkie, & Siuki, 2022; Rivaroli, Spadoni, & Bregoli, 2022; Warren, 2022). In this study, results show that participants expect companies to support the cause, yet their expectations

go further and they expect them to be honest and not to use their support as a promotion strategy to gain awareness.

Contributions, Future Research and Limitations

The present research contributes to the literature by exploring how consumers view companies and their expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, findings suggest that consumers are informed and interested in brands' efforts towards the topic, and in fact have changed some brand preferences because of the brand's positive or negative reactions to the pandemic. This research confirms that when establishing a relationship with brands, consumers also form a psychological contract in which expectations of the relationship are established. Consistent with the literature, the narratives of participants confirms that they believe that even when the pandemic is over, people will continue to remember brand's actions when the situation was complicated, and will probably make changes in purchasing decisions and brand preferences. As a next step, this research will continue to explore this relationship with a quantitative study that can measure consumer's trust by the confirmed dimensions of this study. This will give a complete picture of the phenomenon in an attempt to fully understand consumers' expectations and shed light to companies on strategies that help society, their customers and ultimately their business.

As no research is the extent of limitations, the present study is based on a small sample of consumers from a medium-high to high socioeconomic class in northern Mexico, which conditions during pandemic have been affected in a way, but are not in an extreme situation as other people can be in the country. This in fact needs to be taken into consideration as their responses are expected to be different from people that are suffering other conditions such as extreme health issues or loss of their jobs, and in that cases, their priorities are different. Finally, this research is exploratory in nature, with the intent to get an overview of the phenomenon. The next step in this research project is using a quantitative data collection method, which is currently taking place to offer better understanding. Further, as previously mentioned, results suggest that participants expect companies to support the cause with a genuine purpose, and not to use their support as a promotion strategy to gain awareness. Future research could address whether consumer's perceptions of the motives behind a brand's support during the pandemic can result in perceptions of woke washing and distrust. Overall, this research calls for further discussion on the conversation around consumer trust during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people identify a bigger need for trust in brands during these uncertain times. Consumers value and trust brands that help others get through day-to-day challenges, keep the community safe, and be a good symbol to society.

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