

Atalay, A. Selin; El Kihal, Siham; Pfrang, Thilo

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## RESEARCH NOTE

# The impact of fear on the effectiveness of customer empowerment-messages in online retailing

A. Selin Atalay<sup>1</sup>  | Siham El Kihal<sup>1</sup> | Thilo Pfrang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Management Department, Frankfurt School of Finance & Management, Frankfurt, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Behamics, St.Gallen, Switzerland

## Correspondence

A. Selin Atalay, Professor of Marketing, Management Department, Frankfurt School of Finance & Management, Adickesallee 32-34, 60322 Frankfurt, Germany.  
Email: [s.atalay@fs.de](mailto:s.atalay@fs.de)

## Abstract

We explore the effectiveness of empowerment-messages in two contexts of fear caused by an existential threat: COVID-19 pandemic and economic fear. We show in a field experiment that an empowerment-message, which increased sales of an online retailer by 13% before COVID-19 lockdowns when fear was low, does not have the same effect post-COVID-19 lockdowns when fear is high. Three follow-up experiments show that when fear is low, an empowerment-message makes individuals feel responsible and increases purchase. When fear is high, an empowerment-message does not make individuals feel responsible and does not improve purchase. We find that personal control that is generally desired, does not resonate with individuals in the context of fear caused by an existential threat. This implies that marketers should reconsider their use of marketing efforts that empower consumers in high fear contexts.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19, economic fear, empowerment, existential threat, fear, online retailing

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 was characterized as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020a). In response, many countries imposed lockdowns: closed schools, shops, restaurants and took away freedom in daily activities from their citizens in where and when they can go. Additionally, individuals self-imposed restrictions on themselves: They stopped going out, kept grandchildren away from grandparents. Official measures, coupled with personal measures of caution imposed, had an unprecedented impact on businesses and consumers. While businesses struggled financially, individuals struggled emotionally: "Pandemic fear" was high (Ornell et al., 2020).

In late March 2020, we observed an unexpected trend in a field experiment. We were studying the effect of a customer

empowerment-message, "Now in your bag, soon in your hands," on online sales of an apparel retailer. This empowerment-message increased conversion rates by 13% before the COVID-19 lockdown. Postlockdown, online sales increased as the brick and mortar shops were closed; however, the empowerment-message which successfully nudged customers to purchase stopped working. The retailer aborted the experiment to avoid losses. We explore why the empowerment-message stopped working.

The message "Now in your bag, soon in your hands," refers to the products in the shopping bag. It is a subtle nudge to *empower* customers. The phrase "in your hands" is equated with authorization. Broadly, empowerment refers to an intrinsic task motivation reflecting a sense of control and responsibility over the task at hand. Individuals feel empowerment through self-determination (Deci et al., 1989; Seibert et al., 2011; Spreitzer, 1995). Empowering customers

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lead to attitudinal and behavioral benefits for brands (Acar & Puntoni, 2016). Nudges, designed to empower customers are common: Beats by Dr. Dre's "Hear what you want," Under Armour's "I will what I want," Barbie's "You can dream it, you can be it" are notable examples. These slogans empower customers through self-determination. In our study, the phrase "in your hands" also links to individuals' self-determination.

We ask if such empowerment-messages are effective when fear is high. This question is relevant beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Take, for example, the fear instantiated by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This conflict instantiates not only fear for one's life (i.e., potential nuclear attack), but also economic fears (i.e., supply chain disruptions and increase in food prices). Both the pandemic fear and economic fear are existential threats. A field experiment and three experiments support that when fear caused by an existential threat is high, the empowerment-message is not effective: Only when fear is low, the empowerment-message makes customers feel responsible, thereby improve purchase.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Fear is the emotional response to uncertainty and lack of personal control (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Fear has been the common response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020; Park et al., 2022; Schimmenti et al., 2020), which globally instantiated uncertainty and lack of personal control. Individuals also experience fear, in contexts of economic, environmental, and political turbulence (Chapman University, 2018) where uncertainty is high and personal control is lacking (Hamilton et al., 2019).

When in fear, one generally takes action to reduce uncertainty and regain control (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Since fear is an emotional response to lack of personal control, one could predict that the fear instantiated by COVID-19 would motivate individuals to take action to reduce the uncertainty and regain control. As such, the empowerment-message in our retail experiment, which tells customers it is "in your hands" and gives them responsibility and control, should have a favorable outcome.

Personal control refers to the capacity of individuals to act autonomously. Individuals value having control (Averill, 1973; DeCharms, 1968; Langer, 1975; Skinner, 1996). There are many benefits of having control, for instance, individuals anticipate being more satisfied with their choices when they have control over their choices and choice processes (Ariely, 2000; Botti & Hsee, 2010). The desirability of control, however, varies as choices become more difficult. For example, Botti et al. (2009) studied choices made in highly consequential contexts. They showed that when individuals face a hard decision with substantial consequences (i.e., a medical decision), taking the responsibility to make the choice instantiates negative feelings, and deferring the choice to experts is preferred. They explain that highly consequential choices condemn the choosers, and the responsibility in making the decision, control, is not desired. Similarly, in the context of a hard decision (i.e., when options are more or less differentiated), Botti and McGill (2006)

showed that perception of responsibility, the perception that ownership of the outcome of a decision resides with oneself leads to choice deferral. This is due to a desire to avoid control.

The COVID-19 context is unprecedented. At the outbreak of COVID-19, medical professionals and lay individuals alike knew very little about this virus, false information circulated in the media (Ornell et al., 2020). Individuals did not know how one could catch the virus or what would happen if one caught it (World Health Organization, 2020b). In this environment, simple decisions became consequential: for many individuals, the decision to visit their parents felt like a major responsibility. Similarly, ordering take-out or going to the supermarket felt like major decisions as they could be highly consequential. The fear in the COVID-19 context is caused by an existential threat, marked by uncertainty and lack of personal control. We expect that the responsibility placed on individuals by an empowerment-message will not resonate with individuals in this context as well as other contexts where fear is caused by an existential threat (i.e., economic threat). We hypothesize that when fear caused by an existential threat is high, an empowerment-message will not be effective in increasing purchases. The responsibility given to consumers by the empowerment-message is not received or desired (see Figure 1 for the conceptual model).

*Hypothesis 1:* Fear negatively impacts the effect of an empowerment-message on purchase.

*Hypothesis 2:* The moderating effect of fear on purchase is mediated by feelings of responsibility instantiated by the empowerment-message.

## 3 | STUDY 1: PANDEMIC FEAR AND PURCHASE BEHAVIOR

Study 1, a field experiment, tests Hypothesis 1 in collaboration with an online, multibrand retailer in Switzerland during March 1–24, 2020. Switzerland went into COVID-19 lockdown on March 17, 2020. The retailer is one of the largest apparel retailers in Switzerland and offers sports fashion and accessories for men, women, and children.

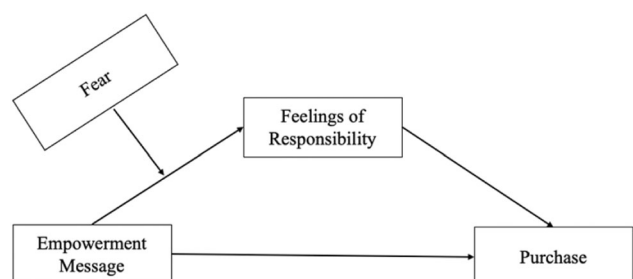


FIGURE 1 Overview of the conceptual model.

### 3.1 | Design and procedure

The experiment was a two-cell between-participant design where empowerment-message was manipulated. The dependent variable is the conversion rate, if a customer made a purchase or not.

#### 3.1.1 | Empowerment-message manipulation

Customers shopping on the retailer's website were randomly assigned to empowerment-message and no-empowerment-message conditions. Consumers in the empowerment-message condition were exposed to the empowerment-message, "Now in your shopping bag, soon in your hands" as they viewed their shopping bags ( $n = 7883$ ). Consumers in the no-empowerment-message condition were not exposed to any message ( $n = 2814$ ).

### 3.2 | Results

#### 3.2.1 | Model-free evidence

We first plot the conversion rate for the empowerment-message and no-empowerment-message conditions across all days during the pre- and postlockdown periods using a local polynomial approximation (Figure 2). We find that while the empowerment-message was successful in increasing the conversion rate compared to no-empowerment-message prelockdown. The empowerment-message stopped working postlockdown. Observing the downturn in conversion rates, the retailer aborted the experiment on March 24, 2020, to avoid losses. Figure 2 demonstrates the sharp decrease in conversion rates for the empowerment-message condition postlockdown. Figure 3 shows pre- and postlockdown

averages of conversion rates and demonstrates the strong effect of the empowerment-message before lockdown.

#### 3.2.2 | Model-based evidence

We investigate the impact of the empowerment-message in the prelockdown period (Model 1, Table 1), the postlockdown period (Model 2, Table 1), and compare the change in conversion rate between the empowerment-message and no-empowerment-message conditions, pre- and postlockdown using a difference-in-difference analysis (Model 3, Table 1). Three findings are noteworthy. First, Model 1 shows that the empowerment-message had a positive effect on the conversion rate prelockdown. Second, Model 2 shows postlockdown the empowerment-message did not have an effect on conversion rate. Third, Model 3 shows

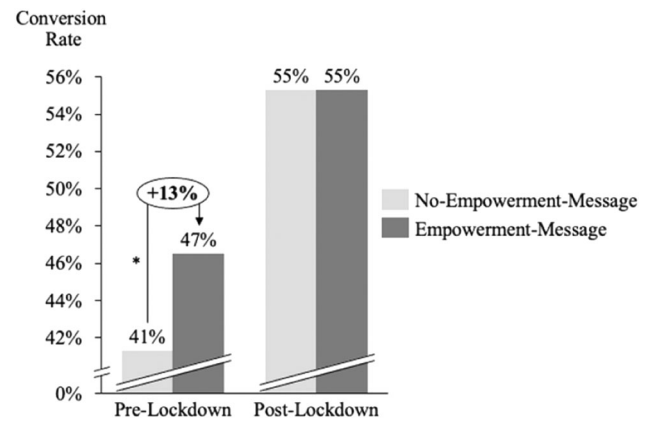


FIGURE 3 Study 1: Averages of conversion rates by condition. \*  $p < 0.01$ .

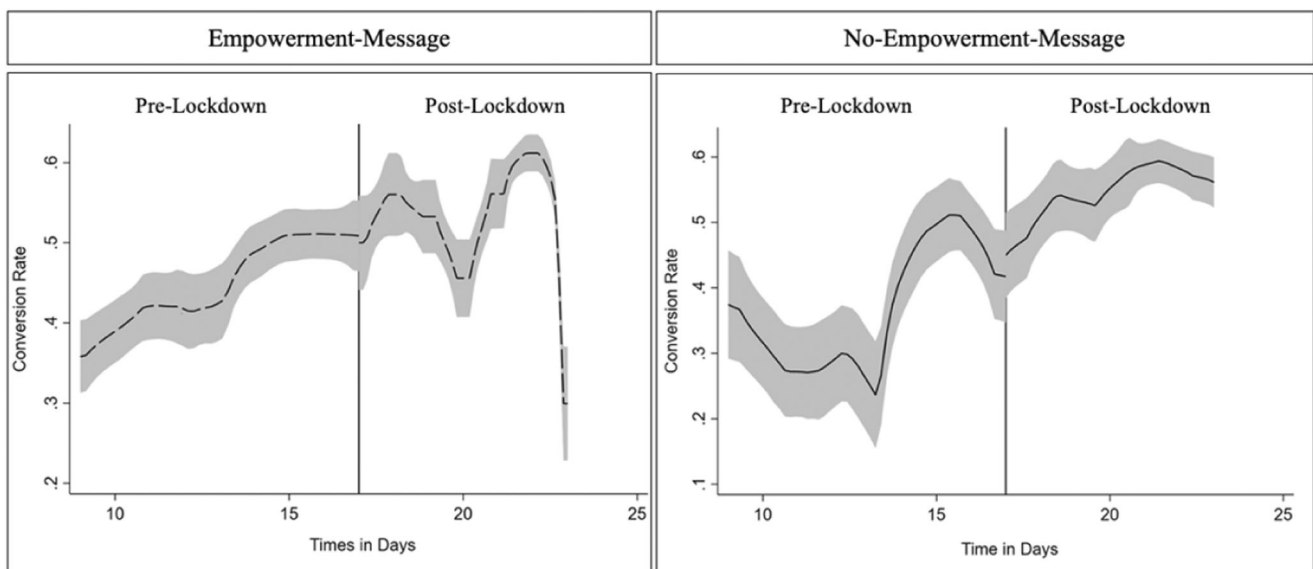


FIGURE 2 Study 1: Conversion rate by condition. The x-axis denotes the number of days in March 2020. The lockdown started on March 17, 2020, in Switzerland.

**TABLE 1** Study 1—Estimation results for conversion rates pre- and postlockdown and difference-in-difference analysis for both periods

	Model 1: Conversion rate prelockdown	Model 2: Conversion rate postlockdown	Model 3: Conversion rate in both periods
Empowerment-message	0.208*** (0.064)	0.002 (0.062)	0.208*** (0.064)
Lockdown			0.561*** (0.076)
Empowerment-message × Lockdown			-0.206** (0.089)
Constant	-0.350*** (0.055)	0.211*** (0.053)	-0.350*** (0.055)
Observations	5321	5376	10,697

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.1$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .; \*\* $p < 0.05$ .

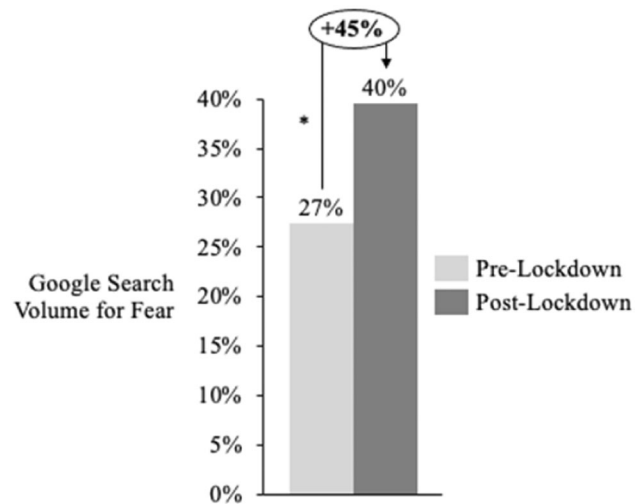
that the conversion rate increasing effect of the empowerment-message decreased post-lockdown ( $\beta = -0.206$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ). Although conversion rate generally increased postlockdown since offline shops were closed, the empowerment-message failed to increase conversion rates (compared to no-empowerment-message) as it did prelockdown (Figure 3).

### 3.2.3 | Lockdown and fear

The field experiment does not include a measurement of fear. To approximate fear, we studied Google trends for Switzerland for the keyword “fear.” This approach is consistent with Park et al. (2022). Google trends measure the relative search volume for keywords in a specific area. We extracted the search volume for the keyword “fear” in Switzerland, for the experimental period. The average relative search volume for the keyword fear shows a strong and positive increase in the searches for the keyword “fear” postlockdown compared to prelockdown periods (Figure 4). The average relative search volume prelockdown is 27%; it significantly increased by 45% postlockdown and had an average of 40% ( $p < 0.001$ ). We reestimated Model 3 from Table 1 using this fear measurement. The results corroborate the results from Model 3 (Table 2). High fear reduced the effectiveness of the empowerment-message in increasing conversion rate. For completeness, and to understand feelings of disgust and concerns for dirtiness in the Swiss population at the time of the study, we conducted additional google trends analyses for the keywords disgust, disgusting, and dirty. There were no differences in the search volume for any of these keywords pre- and postlockdown. The search volume was very low in each case.

### 3.2.4 | Discussion

These results suggest that the fear instantiated by COVID-19 lockdowns changed individuals' responses to the empowerment-



**FIGURE 4** Study 1: Google trends search volume for fear in Switzerland, in the pre- and postlockdown periods. \*  $p < 0.001$ .

message. Since the retailer stopped the experiment, a limitation is that the observation period of the field experiment is not very long.

## 4 | STUDY 2: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PANDEMIC FEAR

The purpose of Study 2 was to test Hypothesis 1 if the effect of the empowerment-message on purchase is explained by fear, and replicate the results from the field experiment by including a direct measurement of fear.

Two hundred twenty-two participants on Mturk participated in the study for \$75. After eliminating 41 participants who took

more than two standard deviations from the mean duration to finish the study, and failed an instructional attention check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), responses from 181 participants (52.5% females) remained in the data set.

**TABLE 2** Study 1—Estimation results for conversion rate using changes in fear during the experimental period

	Conversion rate in both periods
Empowerment-message	0.272*** (0.069)
Fear	0.006*** (0.001)
Empowerment-message × Fear	-0.005** (0.001)
Constant	-0.278*** (0.060)
Observations	10,697

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.1$ .  
\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .; \*\* $p < 0.05$ .

## 4.1 | Design and procedure

The study was a two-cell between-participant experiment where empowerment-message was manipulated. Fear and purchase likelihood were measured.

### 4.1.1 | Empowerment-message manipulation

Empowerment-message was manipulated in the context of a shopping scenario. Participants were asked to imagine they were shopping online for a fleece jacket. In the no-empowerment-message condition, participants were shown a shopping bag as one would see on an online retailer where the product and price were visible. In the empowerment-message condition, the same shopping bag was shown with the addition of the empowerment-message, “Now in your shopping bag, soon in your hands” (Figure 5).

### 4.1.2 | Measures


Participants rated how likely they are to buy the fleece jacket, and how stressed, afraid, worried, and disgusted they felt (1 (not at all)–7 (extremely) scale). We included questions taken from Duncan et al. (2009) perceived vulnerability to disease scale: (1) *If an illness is “going*

#### Empowerment-Message Manipulation

Now in your shopping bag. Soon in your hands.

### MY SHOPPING BAG

YOUR ORDER QUALIFIES FOR FREE STANDARD SHIPPING

PRODUCT	QUANTITY	PRICE	TOTAL PRICE
 <p><b>FLUFFY YARN FLEECE FULL-ZIP JACKET</b> SKU# 418712COL015MAD05000 COLOR: OFF WHITE</p>	1 REMOVE MOVE TO WISH LIST	\$29.90	\$29.90
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>			<b>\$29.90</b>

CHECKOUT

#### No-Empowerment-Message Manipulation

### MY SHOPPING BAG

YOUR ORDER QUALIFIES FOR FREE STANDARD SHIPPING

PRODUCT	QUANTITY	PRICE	TOTAL PRICE
 <p><b>FLUFFY YARN FLEECE FULL-ZIP JACKET</b> SKU# 418712COL015MAD05000 COLOR: OFF WHITE</p>	1 REMOVE MOVE TO WISH LIST	\$29.90	\$29.90
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>			<b>\$29.90</b>

CHECKOUT

**FIGURE 5** Empowerment-message manipulation in Studies 2–4.

around," I will get it; (2) My past experiences make me believe I am not likely to get sick even when my friends are sick.

## 4.2 | Results

Participants in the experimental conditions were not different in terms of perceived vulnerability to disease ( $p = 0.592$ ), or how they felt; afraid ( $p = 0.474$ ), stressed ( $p = 0.778$ ), worried ( $p = 0.904$ ), disgusted ( $p = 0.182$ ).

To test the moderating role of fear on the effect of the empowerment-message on purchase likelihood, we first computed a composite score of fear by averaging the ratings of afraid, stressed, worried ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Next, we used the PROCESS module (model = 1, Hayes, 2013) with purchase likelihood as the dependent variable, empowerment-message as the independent variable, and fear as the moderator. The interaction between empowerment-message and fear is negative ( $B = -0.340$ ,  $SE = 0.164$ ,  $p = 0.039$ , Table 3). The empowerment-message increases purchase likelihood for only those low in fear (conditional effect = 1.044  $SE = 0.448$ ,  $p = 0.021$ , 95% CI [0.160, 1.928]); there was no effect of empowerment-message on purchase likelihood for those in moderate to high fear,  $p = 0.367$ , and  $p = 0.440$  respectively.

We identified the levels of fear at which the empowerment-message by fear interaction is significant, using the Johnson–Neyman technique (Hayes, 2013). The empowerment-message by fear interaction is only positive and significant for individuals who are low in fear with fear scores below 2.93 on the 1–7 scale. The moderation results were robust when controlling for disgust.

### 4.2.1 | Alternative explanation and a follow-up study

To rule out if the empowerment-message tested, referring to the product "in your hands" lead to feelings of disgust and dirtiness in the COVID-19 context explains why the empowerment-message stopped working, we conducted a follow-up study. Two hundred and thirteen participants on Mturk took part in the study. After eliminating 15 participants who took an unreasonably long time to finish the study, responses from 209 participants (48% females) remained in the data set. The study was a two-cell between participant experiment, where empowerment-message was manipulated (empowerment-message/no-empowerment-message) using the same procedure as in Study 2. Upon viewing the shopping bag with the empowerment-message manipulation, participants responded to the questions, "How disgusted are you feeling right now?," and "How worried are you that your hands might be dirty right now" on a 1 (not at all)–7 (very much) scale. Participants in the empowerment-message and no-empowerment-message conditions were not different in terms of how disgusted ( $p = 0.366$ ) and how worried they were that their hands might be dirty ( $p = 0.208$ ). This result suggests that the empowerment-message did not instantiate feelings of disgust or dirtiness about one's hands. We rule out that the empowerment-message instantiates feelings of disgust or dirtiness about one's hands.

**TABLE 3** Study 2—Moderation results

	B	SE	t	p
Dependent variable model (DV = purchase likelihood)				
Constant	4.574	0.481	9.506	0.000
Empowerment-message	1.611	0.684	2.354	0.020
Fear	0.270	0.114	2.373	0.019
Empowerment-message × Fear	-0.340	0.164	-2.075	0.039

Note:  $N = 181$ .

### 4.2.2 | Discussion

Study 2 and its follow-up support Hypothesis 1 and replicate the results from Study 1 using a direct measurement of fear. The empowerment-message affects individuals' purchase likelihood differently based on fear. Next, to add external validity, we test Hypothesis 1 in a nonpandemic context, namely the context of economic fear.

## 5 | STUDY 3: THE MODERATING ROLE OF ECONOMIC FEAR

The purpose of Study 3 was to provide additional support for Hypothesis 1 in the context of a different fear. The Chapman University survey of fears shows that the economic fear of not having enough money for the future is among the top 5 fears for individuals (Chapman University, 2018). Hamilton et al. (2019) discuss that environmental uncertainty such as not having enough money for food instantiate fear (i.e., stress and anxiety) and feelings of lack of control.

Ninety-four participants (80.8% females) on prolific participated in the study for \$.75. All participants passed the instructional attention check.

### 5.1 | Design and procedure

The study was a four-cell between participant experiment where empowerment-message (empowerment-message/no-empowerment-message) and economic fear were manipulated. Purchase likelihood was measured. We used the same empowerment-message manipulation as in Study 2.

#### 5.1.1 | Economic fear manipulation

The manipulation was a writing task where participants in the fear condition wrote about their thoughts and emotions when thinking about not having enough money for their future. Participants in the no-fear condition wrote about their thoughts and emotions when thinking about having enough money for their future.

## 5.1.2 | Measures

Participants rated *how likely they are to buy the fleece jacket*.

## 5.2 | Results

To test the moderating role of fear on the effect of the empowerment-message, a fear measure was computed by text analysis. Fear was coded as 1 if participants used words related to fear (e.g., worried, stressed, afraid, anxious) in the writing task, and 0 otherwise. To test the moderating role of fear on the effect of the empowerment-message on purchase likelihood, we run a linear regression model with purchase likelihood as the dependent variable, empowerment-message as the independent variable, and fear as the moderator. The results replicate that the interaction between empowerment-message and fear is negative ( $B = -1.568$ ,  $SE = 0.761$ ,  $p = 0.039$ , Table 4). The empowerment-message increases purchase likelihood for only those low in fear, (*conditional effect* = 1.250  $SE = 0.526$ ,  $p = 0.020$ , 95% CI: [0.205, 2.295]); there was no significant effect of empowerment-message on purchase likelihood for those in high fear,  $p = 0.564$ .

### 5.2.1 | Discussion

Study 3 replicates the results from Study 2, supports Hypothesis 1, and adds external validity testing economic fear. Next, we test the mediating role of feeling responsible (Hypothesis 2).

## 6 | STUDY 4: THE MODERATING ROLE OF FEAR AND THE MEDIATING ROLE OF FEELING RESPONSIBLE

Studies 2 and 3 show that the empowerment-message is effective only for individuals who are low in fear. Recall that we hypothesized, the empowerment-message will increase purchase likelihood only for those consumers that are low in fear through the ability of the empowerment-message in making them feel responsible (Hypothesis 2). Six hundred forty-two participants on Mturk participated in the study for \$.75. After eliminating 72 participants who took an unreasonably long time to finish the study, and failed an instructional attention check, responses from 570 participants (46% females) remained in the data set.

### 6.1 | Design and procedure

The study follows the logic that, if due to COVID-19, individuals are high in fear and the empowerment-message does not increase purchase likelihood for those who are high in fear by failing to make them feel responsible, then, if we experimentally lower fear, the

**TABLE 4** Study 2—Moderation results

	B	SE	t	p
Dependent variable model (DV = purchase likelihood)				
Constant	4.550	0.407	11.160	0.000
Empowerment-message	1.250	0.526	2.380	0.020
Fear	1.223	0.563	2.380	0.033
Empowerment-message × Fear	-1.568	0.761	-2.060	0.042

Note:  $N = 94$ .

empowerment-message should make individuals feel responsible and increase purchase likelihood as it did before COVID-19.

The study was a  $2 \times 2$  between participant experiment where empowerment-message and fear were manipulated. Feeling responsible and purchase likelihood were measured.

The same empowerment-message manipulation as in Studies 2 and 3 was used.

### 6.1.1 | Fear turn off manipulation

As the study took place during the COVID-19 lockdowns when the general population was high in fear (Schimmenti et al., 2020), we “turn off” fear to study how the empowerment-message works differently through fear. To this end, *prior* to the shopping task that included the empowerment-message manipulation, half the participants read a brief text about protecting oneself from COVID-19, designed to lower fear (*fear turn off* condition). Participants in the *no fear turn-off* condition read a similar text about a topic not related to COVID-19 (Table 5). This manipulation is consistent with the literature. When in fear, individuals take action to reduce uncertainty and regain control (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Lerner & Keltner, 2000).

Upon reviewing the shopping bag, all participants indicated their purchase likelihood for the fleece jacket as in the previous studies. They also responded to a self-report scale of feelings of responsibility. Specifically, they rated *how responsible they felt as they completed the shopping task* on a 1 (not at all)–7 (extremely) scale. We again measured disgust and perceived vulnerability to disease.

## 6.2 | Results

Participants in the experimental conditions were not different in terms of perceived vulnerability to disease ( $p = 0.511$ ), and how disgusted they felt ( $p = 0.226$ ).

### 6.2.1 | Feelings of responsibility

Neither empowerment-message ( $p = 0.163$ ) nor fear turn off ( $p = 0.145$ ) had any main effect on self-reports of feelings of



responsibility. The interaction effect was significant ( $B = 0.544$ ,  $SE = 0.228$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ). Participants in the empowerment-message condition reported higher level of feelings of responsibility when fear was turned off ( $Mean_{EM/turnoff} = 5.44$ ,  $SD_{EM/turnoff} = 1.32$ ) compared to when fear was not turned off ( $Mean_{EM/noturnoff} = 5.13$ ,  $SD_{EM/noturnoff} = 1.39$ ;  $p = 0.056$ ). Participants in the no-empowerment-message condition did not vary in feelings of responsibility depending on if fear was turned off or not ( $Mean_{no-EM/turnoff} = 5.12$ ,  $SD_{no-EM/turnoff} = 1.34$ ;  $Mean_{no-EM/noturnoff} = 5.36$ ,  $SD_{no-EM/noturnoff} = 1.38$ ;  $p = 0.145$ ).

**TABLE 5** Study 3—Fear turn off and no fear turn off manipulations

Condition	Manipulation
Fear turn off	Coronavirus: How to stay safe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently and for at least 20 s.</li> <li>- Do not cover your cough and sneezes with your hand, use your elbow.</li> <li>- Wear a face mask in public.</li> <li>- Do not touch your face with your hands.</li> <li>- Keep at least a 6 feet distance between people.</li> </ul>
No fear turn off	Biking in traffic: How to stay safe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wear a helmet each time you are biking.</li> <li>- Make sure your clothes are bright and visible.</li> <li>- Do not listen to music with headphones.</li> <li>- Equip your bicycle with proper lights.</li> <li>- Signal your turns to drivers and pedestrians before you make a turn.</li> </ul>

To test if feelings of responsibility mediates the effect of the empowerment-message on purchase likelihood and if this mediating effect is moderated by fear turn off, we used the PROCESS module (model = 7, bootstrapping of 5000 samples, Hayes, 2013) with empowerment-message as the independent variable, purchase likelihood as the dependent variable, feelings of responsibility as mediator and fear turn off as moderator. The results revealed that the positive effect of the empowerment-message on purchase likelihood is mediated through feelings of responsibility only for those participants for whom fear is turned off (Table 6). First, the empowerment-message instantiated feeling responsible for only those in the fear turn off condition (*conditional effect* = 0.315,  $SE = 0.159$ ,  $p = 0.47$ , 95% CI [0.003, 0.627]). There was no significant effect of empowerment-message on feelings of responsibility for those in the no fear turn off condition (*conditional effect* = -0.229,  $SE = 0.164$ ,  $p = 0.163$ , 95% CI [-0.552, 0.093]). Second, for participants in the fear turn off condition, the indirect effect of the empowerment-message on purchase likelihood, through feelings of responsibility was significant (*conditional indirect effect* = 0.050,  $SE = 0.031$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , 95% CI [0.001, 0.120]). For participants in the no fear turn-off condition, the indirect effect of the empowerment-message on purchase likelihood through feelings of responsibility was not significant (*conditional indirect effect* = -0.362,  $SE = 0.031$ ,  $p > 0.05$ , 95% CI [-0.104, 0.018]). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

#### 6.2.1.1 | Discussion

The results suggest that fear moderates how responsible the empowerment-message makes individuals feel and thereby impacts

	B	SE	t	p
Mediator variable model (DV = responsible)				
Constant	5.357	0.115	46.764	0.000
Empowerment-message	-0.229	0.164	-1.397	0.163
Fear turnoff	-0.234	0.160	-1.459	0.145
Empowerment-message × Fear turnoff	0.544	0.228	2.385	0.017
Dependent variable model (DV = purchase likelihood)				
Constant	4.729	0.298	15.892	0.000
Empowerment-message	0.235	0.145	1.621	0.106
Responsible	0.158	0.053	2.959	0.003
	<b>B</b>	<b>BootSE</b>	<b>BootLLCI</b>	<b>BootULCI</b>
Conditional indirect effects of moderator (DV = purchase likelihood)				
No fear turnoff	-0.036	0.031	-0.104	0.018
Fear turnoff	0.050	0.031	0.001	0.119

**TABLE 6** Study 3—Moderated mediation results

purchase likelihood. The empowerment-message does not change how responsible those individuals who are high in fear feel. A limitation is that feelings of responsibility is captured by self-reports. Future work can use other measures to capture this construct.

## 7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

We studied the impact of fear caused by an existential threat (i.e., COVID-19 and economic fear) on consumer decision making in online retailing. We found that the empowerment-message is successful in increasing purchase when fear is low, while it fails to do so when fear is high: for those low in fear, the empowerment-message increases purchase through increasing how responsible individuals feel.

We investigate the relationship between fear and consumer behavior in a context where fear is naturally prevalent as opposed to experimentally manipulated (Studies 1, 2, and 4). This contributes to our field's understanding of fear effects in consumer behavior. Past studies of fear studied fear in researcher-induced contexts presenting methodological problems, in that too few levels of fear or too narrow a range of fear are studied. To this end, our work extends the learnings from Mcdaniel and Zeithaml (2006). We investigated an empowerment-message in a series of field and online experiments, future research can study other empowerment-messages that are more direct, less figurative in language as well as other types of fears.

Additionally, we study fears that are caused by an existential threat and uniquely take control away from individuals. We show that being in control, which is generally desired, does not resonate with individuals in the context of fear which is highly consequential in nature such as fear due to a pandemic or future economic wellbeing.

New variants of COVID-19, quarantine rules, vaccine mandates, and other regulations that reduce individuals' control make it clear that the impact of COVID-19 on our society will continue. Lockdowns are still prevalent as large economies like China continue to implement zero-COVID policies. Additionally, there will likely be events such as economic, political, and environmental unrest inducing similar fear. The most recent example is the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that impacts the entire world. Under such circumstances, similar reactions to empowerment-messages as reported in the current work may be expected.

Marketers assume that customers demand empowerment and respond positively to empowerment efforts (Acar & Puntoni, 2016). Particularly, femvertising, female empowerment advertising, (Åkestam et al., 2017) is common. Campaigns such as Cover Girls' "#Girls can" and Always' "Keep going #Likeagirl" seek to empower women. In the managerial context, efforts of empowering salespersons are generally effective (Anderson & Huang, 2006). Companies empower their employees so that employees behave more ethically, improve operations and provide better service. Medical professionals empower their patients to improve the sustainability of the medical system. Our work suggests that these empowerment efforts which are undeniably successful during "normal" times when fear is low, may go astray under conditions when fear is high. When fear is high, empowerment-messages will not be effective unless fear can be

situationally reduced. Similarly, when fear is high, other marketing efforts that are designed to give individuals control should also be avoided as they may backfire like the empowerment-messages. Generally speaking, we encourage all marketers to pretest their marketing efforts before implementation when major environmental forces are in effect (i.e., pandemic, economic crisis, political conflict).

*Note:* The data reported in Studies 2, 3, and 4 are available upon request. Data reported in study 1 are proprietary.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. Specifically, for providing the data from Study 1 the authors need to get permission from the collaborating retailer. The data from Studies 2 and 3 are available upon request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

A. Selin Atalay  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4852-9697>

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