

# Time to Flatten the Curves on COVID-19 and Climate Change. Marketing Can Help.

Martin Mende and Vasubandhu Misra

The health, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in our lifetime, and no individual in this globalized, interconnected world is immune from its effects. This pandemic is a fundamental challenge for consumers, companies, and governments. Against this background, our commentary underscores linkages between public health, environment, and economy and explores how lessons from COVID-19 can help prevent other large-scale disasters.<sup>1</sup> We focus on global climate change (GCC), because rising temperatures increase the likelihood of future pandemics.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, experts consider GCC “the largest public health threat of the century” (Wyns 2020). Although societal crises are underresearched in marketing, we propose that marketers should add their expertise to help avoid future crises. Notably, the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing (JPP&M)* is uniquely positioned as a premier outlet for corresponding research at the intersection of marketing and policy.

## COVID-19 and GCC: Linkages, Differences, Similarities

COVID-19 and GCC are linked, and better understanding these linkages can (*literally!*) be vital for consumers, companies, and societies at large. First, COVID-19 affects GCC: the dramatic steps taken to fight COVID-19 have improved GCC indicators (e.g., emissions, air/water quality). Second, GCC bolsters the effects of COVID-19: public and environmental health are inextricably intertwined, and this connection links humanity, from the vulnerable to the wealthy. With COVID-19, the weakest links in the global health chain threaten health everywhere (*The New York Times* Editorial Board 2020).<sup>3</sup> Of the emerging

infectious diseases, 70% are zoonotic (Jones et al. 2008); COVID-19 demonstrates this fact at great peril. However, this pandemic offers an opportunity to learn and to mitigate future calamities by recognizing conceptual distinctions and similarities between COVID-19 and GCC.

In terms of *differences*, COVID-19 unfolded within months to affect humanity globally, whereas GCC has emerged relatively slowly, and its impact has often been contested. Differences also extend to solutions: COVID-19 may be overcome in 18–24 months, whereas GCC solutions remain complex, long-term, and heavily debated; yet addressing GCC requires a “multi-generational commitment to population-wide lifestyle changes” (Trembath and Wang 2020).

In terms of *similarities*, both crises are characterized by exponential growth patterns. This insight is crucial because people often struggle to accurately process exponential growth curves, which helps explain why many underestimated COVID-19 (Kunreuther and Slovic 2020).<sup>4</sup> A stronger emphasis on helping consumers, managers, and policy makers respond to threats that grow exponentially is crucial for learning from COVID-19 and fighting GCC (e.g., Meyer and Kunreuther 2017), because—as COVID-19 has forcefully demonstrated in a matter of months—the survival of people, companies, and society is at stake.

the fact that the pandemic disproportionately affects poor communities. For instance, the threat of COVID-19 is “on average, greater for cities and people exposed to higher levels of pollution, which are most often people living in poorer areas. The same is true for the health impacts of climate change, with one of its major causes, the burning of fossil fuels, also adding pollution to the air and disproportionately impacting the health of those in poverty” (Wyns 2020).

<sup>4</sup> While beyond the scope of our commentary, we note that risks of future disasters are also downplayed, denied, or ignored for reasons other than a lack of understanding exponential growth (e.g., political reasons, self-interest). Such factors can have a nontrivial impact on how, when, and why consumers, firms, and governments respond to GCC.

<sup>1</sup> We underscore that solutions to future problems must be reached *without* the cost of human life (> 270,000 deaths as of May 8, 2020, and counting), unhinged unemployment rates across the world, and rising angst.

<sup>2</sup> For example, GCC might cause future pandemics when melting polar ice potentially releases (presumably extinct) viruses; other crises might result from extreme weather (e.g., storms, droughts) and sea-level rise (Wyns 2020).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the vulnerabilities of essential workers (e.g., roles considered lower-status and involving seemingly menial tasks) raise the specter of the public health risk to societies across the world, because the pandemic shows that their well-being has an impact on everyone. Closely related to this issue is

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## COVID-19 and GCC: Relevant for Marketing and JPP&M?

Marketing is “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (<https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/>). COVID-19 affects these facets, and we must understand the extent to which marketing might change. Kotler (2020) predicts tectonic shifts:

This period of deprivation and anxiety will usher new consumer attitudes and behaviors that will change the nature of today’s Capitalism. Finally citizens will reexamine what they consume, how much they consume, and how all this is influenced by class issues and inequality.

This prediction raises fundamental questions, detailed next.

### New Consumers?

In terms of consumers, two broad scenarios seem possible. First, driven by the health, economic, and social trauma caused by COVID-19, consumers may “become more conscious of the fragility of the planet, of air and water pollution, of water shortages, and other problems” (Kotler 2020). This could increase consumer awareness about connections between consumption and GCC. Second, in an alternative scenario, the trauma of the pandemic may trigger the urge to “return to the normalcy” of the pre-COVID-19 lifestyle (Trembath and Wang 2020). Marketers have a responsibility to examine which scenario emerges and why. Indeed, the marketing discipline is uniquely qualified to help more effectively “sell” the former scenario to consumers so that they can make more informed decisions when “voting with their wallets.”

### New Companies?

As is painfully apparent, some companies perish, others endure, and some flourish due to COVID-19. This pandemic can be an inflection point for companies to help fight GCC more effectively; for example, marketers can help develop and promote persuasive visions of a future world that allows natural resources to be nourished but used sustainably, while allowing economies to grow and feed an equitable, healthy population. Marketers can help generate quantifiable indicators of corresponding organizational behavior and promote practical but universal best practices for companies to meet. Accordingly, a new “Future World 500” index could replace the *Fortune* 500 as the benchmark of organizational performance.<sup>5</sup> The alternatives to this seemingly utopic future world are bleak. The world

<sup>5</sup> Consumers play a key role here, too, which triggers important marketing questions. For example, after COVID-19, which consumers would support (and to which extent) a self-imposed carbon tax with corresponding implications for pricing of products and services offered by the corporations of the “Future World 500”?

is warmer than the preindustrial period by 1° C<sup>6</sup> and is forecasted to warm further by at least .5° C by 2050; this magnifies our risk of widespread infectious diseases, food/water scarcity, mortality, and conflicts and wars.

### New Policy?

COVID-19 exposes the interconnections between public health, environment, economy, and governmental actors. Consequently, system-level coordination and reflection are needed, especially as governments push to jumpstart their economies. Difficult trade-offs are weighed as local, state, and national leaders try to manage the need to save humankind and the economy; these trade-offs may further encumber environmental frailties. The exploitation of the environment has the potential to create longer-term challenges to global health and economic well-being, too.<sup>7</sup> To account for these challenges, we can revise our metrics beyond gross domestic product to consider countries’ *green* gross domestic product (linking economic growth to environmental consequences) and human well-being (e.g., gross domestic well-being) (Kotler 2020).

### Marketing Progress!

COVID-19 brought immense hardship globally, but future disasters due to GCC could be worse.<sup>8</sup> It is up to individuals, communities, managers, and policy makers to pursue a sustainable future. *JPP&M* is the thought-leading forum on the interface between marketing and policy, and it has a successful tradition of publishing high-quality research on topics related to ecology, social responsibility, health, and (de)regulation. *JPP&M* can continue to help move consumers, managers, and policy makers fight GCC; the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that it is important for the entire marketing community to help!

### Authors’ Note

The authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

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<sup>6</sup> This increase in temperature is nontrivial: it is partially a manifestation of Earth’s energy imbalance of about 1 watt/m<sup>2</sup> from the energy trapped by greenhouse gas emissions (Trenberth, Fasullo, and Balmaseda 2014). This energy imbalance is about 510 × 10<sup>12</sup> watts (or 510 terawatts), a multiple of the current global electricity generation, which is about 5.7 terawatts.

<sup>7</sup> Notably, some countries have successfully decoupled fossil fuel pollution and economic growth. Indeed, the United States decreased its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 6% and yet grew its gross domestic product by as much as 28% between 2000 and 2014. However, in the process the United States also became one of the most unequal nations, with the top 1% of the population holding wealth that exceeds the wealth of the bottom 80% (Sawhill and Pulliam 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Stephen Hawking claimed that humans may have to colonize another celestial body within the next 100 years to avoid perishing in a doomed planet beset with climate change and associated perils.

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