

## A Case Report on Consumer Purchasing of the Squishmallow™ Plush Toy during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nadiah Berekzi<sup>1\*</sup>; Nazir Berekzi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor at Norfolk State University, Norfolk, VA, USA.

### Abstract

The overarching purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the purchasing habits of the consumer. The general research problem of this study was to evaluate the way people shopped and interacted online during the pandemic. The specific research focus was to determine the impacts of the pandemic not only on the mental health of the consumer, but the social impacts associated with consumer popularity of the Squishmallow™ plush toy. This study incorporated a literature review of 15 published reports including sources from advertising, marketing, and consumer report journals along with social media and news outlets. The major findings of this study revealed that increased online shopping directly linked to staying home and adhering to the health guidelines during the pandemic, the creative marketing by the parent company of the plush toy and the viral sensation of the plush toy impacted the sales and purchasing habits of the consumer that led them to purchase Squishmallows™ at an all-time record. In summary, the findings of this study revealed that a combination of marketing and the consumer desire to connect with others during the pandemic impacted the sales of a plush toy. This study is relevant to the business community, social media venues and helps the consumer understand how the pandemic impacted their finances and purchasing habits.

### Introduction

The research objective of this study is to determine the connection between the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumers and the intense popularity of Squishmallows™. During the COVID-19 pandemic there was large-scale change and uncertainty. This impacted not only the way people thought, but also the way people shopped. As the pandemic began many consumers participated in panic buying and hoarding, which resulted in new habits of frugality. Prior to the pandemic in 2017, Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, a private company that has been in the industry for 37 years released Squishmallows™. According to the Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC website, the Squishmallow™ is a plush toy ranging from 3.5 to 24 inches long that is available in more than one thousand different characters [4]. Since launching the toy in 2017, the company has sold fifty million Squishmallows™. Jonathan Kelly, CEO of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, stated that the Squishmallow™ succeeded to an extent that he could never have imagined. Kelly began working to create the Squishmallow after a trip to Japan. He had seen whimsical plush toys with rotund proportions and quirky features and predicted that a similar product would stand out in the American market. After working with his creative team, the Squishmallow™ was created, a plush toy that comes in a variety of characters and sizes, made of ultra-soft machine washable polyester, and each with their own name and personality.

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Correspondance to: [Nadiah Berekzi](#)

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

Email: [nabarekzi@nsu.edu](mailto:nabarekzi@nsu.edu)

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Squishmallows were relatively popular, until 2020 when they became sensationalized. People were travelling, waiting in the cold, scouring shelves, and fighting to buy a stuffed toy called the Squishmallow™. The aim of this study is to explore the possible connection between the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumers and the intense popularity of Squishmallows. This study provides a new perspective on toy trends and the consumer based on how the pandemic impacted consumers, and the possible long-term effects that the pandemic may have on the consumer. The main question of this study focuses on: How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence consumer behavior, and to what extent was this influence responsible for the success of Squishmallow™ sales? People became deeply emotionally invested in Squishmallows, and it is unknown if this is simply the use of extremely effective marketing, or if there were other factors at play, such as the pandemic on the consumer. Although there have always been popular trends in toy purchasing, the success of the Squishmallow™ is largely, but not completely, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic caused consumers to change their purchasing habits, but the popularity and success of the Squishmallow was also due to Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC's consumer-based marketing and the role of social media that exposed the Squishmallow™ to many different people all over the world.

### The impact of COVID-19 on consumer decision making

The COVID-19 pandemic affected consumers in many ways, and these impacts on consumers' mental health and lifestyle choices resulted in greater frugality and a search for normalcy through purchasing decisions. A report from the National Retailer Federation from 2020 indicated that 74% of consumers believe the pandemic will impact their lifestyle including but not limited to budgeting, dining out, and vacations during the next 5 years [6]. Consumers respond in many ways to crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, and past trends and research on the pandemic suggest that as people face crises their feelings of fear and uncertainty will result in a greater need to control their purchasing decisions. This can cause a consumer to choose to budget and adopt frugal habits or to attempt to make purchases that make them feel a sense of normalcy. Kelly Goldsmith, a consumer behaviorist, and marketing professor at Vanderbilt university, introduced the idea of a panic buying consumer that makes purchasing decisions based on a fear of scarcity. Goldsmith supports this conclusion of great changes to consumer behavior with the changes in marketing strategies by companies, as they had to change immensely to adapt to consumers making market decisions based on fear-based frugality [2]. Zhoufan Zhang, a professor of business administration and economics at Texas A&M university at Kingsville, Texas, contrarily claimed that these changes in consumer behavior were based on a social networking term known as fear of missing out, or FOMO, instead of the reasons of scarcity and frugality [14]. Based on Zhang's research, the authors concluded that consumers that do not readily or easily have access to products and experiences that help them to define themselves may plunge into an identity crisis and may then result in them trying to redefine their self-concept [14]. This would explain why people were greatly changing their spending habits and became more likely to begin new hobbies or look for uplifting products. If they were unable to live as they normally would because of restrictions in place due to COVID-19 then they will participate in greater introspection. As consumers struggled with these external and internal factors, they began to use shopping to return to normalcy by purchasing things that they thought would bring them com-

fort, or items that reminded them of life before the restrictions placed due to the pandemic.

There was further evidence that this change in consumer behavior was not just a reaction to economic stimulus, but instead a shift in thought and behavior of people due to the conditions of the pandemic. Many people had drastic changes to living conditions and mental state during the pandemic and this also played a role in individual consumption. A study published in 2020 by Nina Vindegaard, et al., revealed these important connections. Vindegaard stated that there were clear trends that could be observed such as a decrease in psychological well-being in the general public, increased levels of psychiatric symptoms evident among health care workers, and patients who already had preexisting psychiatric disorders reported that their psychiatric symptoms were becoming worse [13].

Shailesh Pandita, researcher from the school of business at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, conducted a study on how the pandemic affected student's mental health. The study consisted of interviewing students enrolled in public universities in India and asking about how COVID-19 impacted them. The results were varied, but the greatest surprise from the research was that many answers did not indicate overwhelming negative impacts [5]. Students were able to identify both positive and negative effects that they faced during the pandemic. Time with family and loved ones and participating in self-care activities are both results identified by the students that indicate a positive psychological response to the pandemic. Although many different fears and mentions of instability were also included, it was not overwhelming enough to identify only negative psychological effects occurring. There were also responses that mentioned increased digital recreation, this included things such as a greater use of social media sites or online gaming. The resulting conclusion was that although students faced many different stressors due to the pandemic, many were able to identify positive results such as being able to connect with family and an increased value of self-care activities. This contradicts the claim made by Goldsmith that consumers were making decisions that reflected a fearful and negative mental state. These unexpected positive impacts on students were yet another way that the pandemic impacted the consumer, specifically the young consumer.

The reaction of consumers varied in many ways, but most fell into the categories of those who wanted to, and tried to, return to normal spending habits and those who adopted new budgeting methods and became more cautious spenders. Steven Rayburn who is an associate professor of marketing at the McCoy College of Business Administration in the business school of Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, conducted a three-year longitudinal study during the pandemic using the responses of university students via online surveys on how different purchasing decisions made by consumers were impacted by the pandemic [6]. Rayburn acknowledges the initial reactions of fear and uncertainty but found that attitudes changed as the pandemic continued [6]. At the peak of the pandemic and then when restrictions began to be lifted consumers were adapting and became more focused on a return to normalcy. The consumers at the end of the crisis fell into the group of wanting to return to normal habits or adopting crisis habits into new methods of shopping and purchasing [6]. This connects the differences between Goldsmith's claim that spending was fear-based and Pandita's results that indicated a consumer that experienced positivity during the pandemic by looking at the

pandemic in its entirety [2,5,6]. There is support for this “return to normalcy” spending when looking at recreational markets during the pandemic. There was a rise in the alcohol and marijuana markets during the pandemic, which along with other factors was due to a consumer seeking to make purchases for fun or to remind them of what they were allowed to do before restrictions were instated (World Drug Report 2021 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.XI.8). The pandemic’s impact on mental health paired with initial panic purchasing has created an unsure consumer, but a consumer that is looking to have a good time. The pandemic has created an entire generation of people that adapted new spending habits due to their shared experiences. Whether they choose to participate with greater frugality or a greater appreciation for the luxuries that they may be able to purchase, all consumers during the pandemic have been impacted in some way.

### COVID-19 as the reason for the success of Squishmallows™

As the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the consumer greatly, it changed how the consumer makes purchasing decisions and how companies advertise to this new consumer, both of which created conditions that furthered the popularity and success of the Squishmallow. The pandemic created a consumer that was both frugal and searching for comfort and joy, and Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC created a plush toy that was both inexpensive and comforting. The Squishmallow may have simply filled a void that the pandemic created in consumers, especially younger consumers. In an interview for the *Souvenirs Gifts & Novelties* magazine Jonathan Kelly, Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC CEO, stated that, “Fans often mention that stuffed animals like Squishmallows help relieve stress and anxiety, so Squishmallows were very timely additions to people’s homes in 2020 and 2021” [8]. This supports that although the brand was aware of this search for comfort and was trying to adapt to new needs of the consumer, that timing was also crucial.

A crisis such as a global pandemic impacts consumers immensely, as times of crisis will result in a change in spending and will impact the economy. Russel Zwanka, author, and associate professor of marketing at the university of Michigan, worked with Cheryl Buff, the associate dean of the college of business at Siena college, and they proposed that the pandemic will yield a generational cohort that will share unique views on consumption because of the effects of the pandemic [15]. This is because their shared experience with scarcity and the limits placed on hedonic purchasing will create a generation of consumers that budget, yet also share an appreciation for the non-essential items that they may have had to cut back on during the pandemic. This connects to the Squishmallow™ because as people had to change their purchasing habits to focus on the essential as the pandemic continued, they became tired of this and sought the gratification of hedonic, or purely for joy, purchases. This claim was supported with evidence from the great recession of 2008, and how it impacted millennials. Zwanka claimed that the recession caused an “entitlement cohort” of millennials. As older generations that went through the 2008 recession became more focused on budgeting and cheap alternatives for goods they desired, there was a younger group of millennials that left the recession with a tendency to be more frivolous and have a “you only live once” or, YOLO, attitude [14]. This connects to the research on Squishmallows™ because the consumer base for the Squishmallow™ began with young people searching for joy during a time of great change and stress, which is quite like the way the millennial generation reacted to the recession of

2008. The research done by Rayburn also supports the above assumption that as restrictions began to lift or curtailed, people were looking forward to going shopping for fun, or returning to their normal consumption habits [6].

The amount of stress, financial and emotional, that was placed on the consumer left them looking towards shopping as a way of purchasing items that would evoke feelings of comfort or familiarity. The search for familiarity became difficult as the pandemic seemed to change the world, but toys stayed the same. Even though there have been many technological advancements in the toy industry, the plush toy remains. A plush toy will always be available because its selling point is its comfort. This is because of a human desire for physical comfort and touch. As people searched for constants and comfort during the pandemic, the plush toy was there. Specifically, the Squishmallow™. Rayburn’s research on consumer reactions to the pandemic revealed that as many people searched for familiarity, they found it in places such as the grocery store, or searched for it in other places, like the use of online shopping [6]. Either way, he claimed that “familiarity was the bedrock of stability” for many different people during the pandemic [6]. Although the Squishmallow™ specifically may have not been familiar to all, it was still a comforting plush toy, which many people have a positive experience with. Kelly Deen, who is the senior vice president of marketing at the parent company of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, Jazwares, made a comment on this search for comfort and stated the following: “Even though the craze was coming before the pandemic, it certainly hit a fever pitch in the past year, and this craving for comfort is a big part of it” [4]. The pandemic was able to create a greater demand for comforting products that created feelings of joy, and the Squishmallow™ fulfilled these qualities while also being a new product.

The many changes to how consumers shop created an environment that called for change by advertisers as well, which led to developing more digital advertising and testing new advertising methods. Laura F. Bright, a professor of advertising at the University of Texas at Austin, stated that advertising methods have had to change greatly, and this is because of a need to adapt to current conditions such as the digital age and new consumer values [1]. However, there is still much that is unknown about what methods of advertising will be most effective during a pandemic. For example, Goldsmith’s research indicated that people feeling loneliness have a greater desire for “not near me” purchasing options [2]. This is applicable to those who, during the pandemic, felt lonely or disconnected socially. People during the pandemic went on road trips or tried to discover a variety of new things from home, which put more pressure on digital advertising. The Squishmallow was advertised in a variety of ways, but one of the main ways was using media. It’s increase in popularity was largely due to social media, and the greater presence on social media because of the pandemic. As well, the Squishmallow may have simply been the previously mentioned return to comfort and familiarity that the consumer was searching for. These factors further demonstrate how the Squishmallow owes much of its success to the conditions provided by the COVID-19 pandemic as it demanded more digital marketing and created a comfort-seeking consumer.

### The effective marketing of the Squishmallow

The quick popularity of the Squishmallow is important, but why this occurred can be attributed to not only social media and the conditions created by the pandemic, but also the marketing of the Squishmallow™ and Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC’s suc-



successful creation of a consumer-brand relationship. Additionally, there are many traits of the Squishmallow™ that were highly researched and were part of the marketing plan of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC that aimed to create a successful product. These marketing methods may not be the sole cause of the Squishmallow™ success, but they explain why the trend continued instead of dying out after initially becoming popular. Squishmallows™ emulated many of the characteristics of past successful toys, and as well Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC was able to create an effective consumer-brand relationship, and these factors combined led to the Squishmallow's immense success. Anu Valtonen, researcher and professor that received a Ph.D. from the Aalto University of Economics, investigated the attractiveness of Teddy Bears, and claimed that although Teddy Bears may seem to have random popularity, their success is actually because of their physical traits such as cuteness and softness. She suggested that the design of the Squishmallow™ may have just been cute and soft enough to exploit human vulnerability. This is because a cute object can evoke feelings of safety and sympathy in a consumer because they appear to be non-threatening and helpless [11]. At a time when people were searching for comfort to combat the stress and uneasiness of the pandemic, a cute toy was the perfect product. The design was an important factor in how successful the Squishmallow™ was because its selling point was often centered in cuteness and comfort. Along with this, Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC used many other marketing strategies that were built on the product to ensure a loyal customer base.

The customization of product development is one of the crucial factors to a toy's success and the Squishmallow™ was able to engage multiple consumer groups through this customization. An associate professor by the name of Hongyi Sun, working in the department of manufacturing engineering and engineering management at the City University of Hong Kong, conducted a study on what those working in toy development valued in the new product development industry [9]. Although many of these claims in the study are limited to the toy industry in Hong Kong and should not be overgeneralized, Sun developed a method of determining what was most valuable in new product development and stressed the importance of customization of this scale [9]. This further supports the findings of Morris and Martin, as even cross-cultural brands must customize their methods of marketing and development to their intended consumers [7]. Some of the most important elements of customization that occur during the process of product development are the timing of the release and the uniqueness of the product [7]. Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, knowing they have an audience of children and parents, was able to take inspiration from successful toys in Japan to create something unique to the American market. As well, although they released the Squishmallow™ in 2017 the customization of timing is not always a controlled factor. There was initial success for the Squishmallow™ after its original release, but it did not reach its potential for popularity until 2020. This is because the factor of timing allowed for the Squishmallow™ to be a present plush toy during the pandemic. Customization in the product development process is extremely important to the product's success, as not all products or consumers will be the same, but it is also important to acknowledge the uncontrollable unique factors that may also be present at the time of product release or soon after.

Other than the unique conditions of the release of the Squishmallow™, it achieved success because of product design and marketing. When looking into articles about the Squishmallow, many people draw parallels to the Beanie Baby™ craze.

Past the similarity of both being successful plush toys there are many similarities in the way that the products were developed and advertised. In the year 2000, Morris and Martin, completed an extensive study on the success of the Beanie Baby™ and concluded that Ty Inc. was able to create this success by using ten key techniques that encourage a strong customer relationship with the product [7]. This supports the findings of Valtonen because both found that physical factors paired with marketing techniques can be the most crucial part of if a toy, or other product, is popular with the consumer [11]. It was concluded that Ty Inc. was able to create this strong consumer relationship by incorporating attributes of nostalgic value, personification, uniqueness, facilitation, engagement, aesthetic appeal, quality/excellence, association, social visibility and image congruence, and price risk [7]. Some shared traits between the Beanie Baby™ and the Squishmallow™ are easily observable, such as the variation in characters and the inclusion of a unique personality through a name tag. These are both important traits because as personification of a stuffed animal may lead to an initial purchase, the variation of the product is what causes consumers to continue to purchase and become loyal to the brand. Jonathan Kelly, CEO of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, stated in an interview with the New York Times, "The success of Squishmallows comes from the exclusivity, which helps drive collectability" [4]. This aligns with the past research on why the Beanie Baby™ was so popular as well. Both the Beanie Baby™ and the Squishmallow™ were able to create two markets, one for initial purchasing and one for resale, and this was due to the many variations produced. The Squishmallow™ was not only appealing because of its cuteness, but also because of researched decisions by Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC to introduce variation and personality.

One of the surprising parallels between the Beanie Baby™ and the Squishmallow™ is in the pricing. Pricing can be an important part of product development for a producer because they must assess how high the demand will be by the consumer and as well how high they value their product. The similarity occurs as the Beanie Baby™ began at the price of \$4.50 and the Squishmallow™ gained much of its fame and popularity from being sold for \$5.00 at Five Below. Additionally, five dollars in 1995 when Beanie Babies™ first started to gain popularity is equivalent to nine today, which is closer to the cost of the larger Squishmallow™ size currently. The pricing is important because, during the pandemic especially, people were becoming more frugal and also facing financial hardship, so many were searching for an affordable toy. For an item that is aiming to create a strong consumer relationship with the product it is important to price the product low enough to encourage buying multiple or collecting. Jonathan Kelly even mentioned "Our high-quality toys offer value-add and low-price points, making them extremely competitive. This has contributed to our loyal customer base, which includes many of the country's best-known retailers and chains." This is important to note because it truly demonstrates how Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC was carefully incorporating different elements such as pricing to ensure the success of the Squishmallow by creating a customer base that repeatedly purchased them. With price and variability working together the Squishmallow was able to reach success much like the Beanie Baby™.

While both the Beanie Baby™ and the Squishmallow™ seem to be following similar paths of success, this does not undermine the importance of COVID-19 completely. The Squishmallow was not as popular as the Beanie Baby™, but it was close to

it. Where it failed to emulate the same characteristics that led to the success of the Beanie Baby™ it was lucky to be starting a rise of popularity during a time when people were seeking comfort and new passions.

### Squishmallows and social media

During the pandemic social media grew as a tool for advertisers, and as a place for people to find community, both of which played a part in the success of the Squishmallow™. The online presence of Squishmallows is what allowed people to become exposed to them, and as well take an interest in them. The Squishmallow™ can be found on many social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. On Instagram, the official account for Squishville, the name for the Squishmallow™ universe, has over 500 thousand followers and is verified by Instagram. On Twitter, there is slightly less of a following, with a total of around 100 thousand followers and many different popular Squishmallow related hashtags. Squishmallow support on Facebook is mostly found within individual communities and group accounts that either just post Squishmallows or are made to buy and sell them. The greatest support for the Squishmallow is on TikTok, where it originally began to gain popularity in the online world. On TikTok the hashtag #squishmallows has over 2 billion views, and this is only one of the popular Squishmallow hashtags. There are also hashtags such as #squishtok with around 700 million views and #squishmallow with around 800 million views. Squishmallows were able to reach a wider audience of people through this presence on social media, which was mostly consumer led.

One of the key factors suggested as an explanation for Squishmallow™ success was the use of technology and social media, especially the app TikTok. TikTok became largely popular during the pandemic and influenced many trends in style and purchasing because of this. This was also where a huge Squishmallow community developed. Zoya Unni, a New York high school student that received the title of a Regeneron scholar, worked with Emily Weinstein, senior researcher at Harvard with a focus on adolescent education, to investigate the trends in content on TikTok during the pandemic. It was concluded that TikTok substantially impacted adolescents' experience with the pandemic because during the first two months 2/3 of the content trending on TikTok was centered around Pandemic Life. They also found that there was often promoted content being shown, as this was a new avenue for marketing geared towards adolescents. More than 1/3 of trending TikToks included a paid promotion. As well, TikTok consisted of over 70% teenagers during 2020 when the investigation was done [10]. Both traits of TikTok support the claim that it was a place where adolescents and teenagers were interacting with advertising and being exposed to new products. Although Squishmallows were not actively being promoted on the app, the users of the app were used to seeing advertisements on the platform. Most of the Squishmallow content on TikTok was made by consumers instead of advertisers, so their success was facilitated through consumer interactions with each other.

As people on TikTok followed trends and interacted with each other they were able to form communities, one of which being the Squishmallow™ community, or "Squishtok". Users of TikTok were looking for comfort and an escape from the stress of the pandemic, so online communities were created based on strong bonds and common interests. This is what launched Squishmallows™ into the online market, and truly increased the demand for Squishmallows™ initially. Demand was increased

because in addition to the appeal of the Squishmallow™ itself people were also reflecting a sincere fear of missing out (FOMO), especially when they saw other people experiencing happiness and joy from their purchases of Squishmallows most prominently through social media platforms. Zhang, who conducted a study on FOMO, was able to identify social media as having a large influence on consumer decisions, as it facilitates the fear of missing out by viewing the way other people are interacting or shopping. He defined FOMO as individuals worrying about missing out on something that they believe would enhance their identity or way of life. This connects to the idea of community because if people joined the Squishmallow™ community their identity then included this, which means if they did not purchase new or desirable Squishmallows that this could potentially be a threat to their identity and happiness. So, although the purchase of Squishmallows™ became a trend, what was unique about the trend was that it did not fade out quickly. Instead of fading out, a community was created. Jonathan Kelly, CEO of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, commented on the online Squishmallow™ community, "It's a tight, passionate, supportive, and inclusive community where people befriend and comfort each other" [3]. Through this strong Squishmallow community on TikTok, which consisted of those who searched for Squishmallows or simply appreciated their cuteness, the popularity of the Squishmallow™ was sustained. Although this happened mostly through TikTok at the start, it also expanded to other social media and online resale sites becoming a product of Gen Z's similar to the Beanie Babies™ [3].

The Squishmallow™ community was even able to extend past social media, so there is also an argument that the community would have existed regardless of social media. Social media simply allowed for quick growth within the community. When looking at articles on the popularity of the Squishmallow there were often parallels drawn to the Beanie Baby™ craze, which also occurred because of a strong community of its consumers. In a study conducted on Beanie Babies™ by Morris and Martin, it was concluded that a crucial part of the success of Ty Inc. with the beanie baby was their website and the use of internet communities and resale. A secondary market of Beanie Babies™ was developed through the internet, and this also allowed people to find communities of shared interests and make new friends through these sales and discussions. What happened with the Squishmallow™ is extremely similar. There emerged a Squishmallow™ community on multiple social media platforms, and as well a secondary market of resellers making it similar to a gold rush or "Gold Plush" phenomenon as coined by Hayley Velasco [12]. These multiple elements of community would have occurred without social media, but TikTok was the impetus for initial Squishmallow™ popularity.

### Conclusions

The success of the Squishmallow™ was due to a variety of factors such as the conditions created by the pandemic, the marketing by Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC, and its presence on social media. However, there is no one definitive answer as to how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced consumer behavior, and to what extent was this influence responsible for the success of Squishmallow™ sales. Clearly, there is evidence that the consumer was impacted in several ways, many of which differ based on individual preferences, but the greatest shared impact was a feeling of overall uneasiness and fear during the pandemic. This in turn, made many people alter their spending habits, often turning to frugality. A limitation to the claim of frugality-based

spending is that much of the research that supports this is centered around initial reactions to the pandemic, which included panic buying and hoarding. There is still much further research that still needs to be done, as the pandemic and the many long-lasting effects on individuals and their spending habits continues. Likely, these long-lasting effects will follow past trends of consumers post crises, which includes continued frugality and returning to hedonic spending. The problem with making this prediction based on how people reacted to past crises is that there has been no crisis truly like the COVID-19 pandemic because of its severity and longevity, so there is no way to know completely how people will spend and act at its end.

Regarding the Squishmallow™, the success and popularity was greatly due to the pandemic amplifying the initial popularity. These factors for initial success were dependent on Squishmallow's start on social media and the marketing done by Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC. Social media cannot be the sole reason because there have been many popular trends before, but those trends have fizzled out and become seemingly obsolete. The difference with the Squishmallow™ is that a community was created on social media that sustained its popularity. This is partially due to the pandemic's impact on the consumer and because as people were feeling isolated and disconnected, they turned to social media for comfort and community, which the Squishmallow and surrounding virtual community filled. The effects of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC's marketing also does not outweigh the effects of the pandemic because the Squishmallow™ was released in 2017 but did not reach its greater success until 2020, when the pandemic and associated restrictions were placed. As well, as much as Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC was able to succeed using their strong customer base much of this was due to the online Squishmallow™ community, which was not started by or controlled by Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC. The Squishmallow™ seems to have been in the right place at the right time. There have been past trends in plush toys, but the success and popularity of the Squishmallow™ is largely because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the consumer. Although, the marketing strategies of Kelly Toys Holdings, LLC and its presence on social media greatly supported this success. This study revealed an important trend of consumer habits during the COVID-19 pandemic which are relevant to the scope of business journals, marketing and consumers interested in the reasons behind purchasing. In addition, the implications of this study link the consumer behavior to prior trends and help the community understand the broad impact of the pandemic beyond the health of individuals but that it impacts their buying behavior as well.

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