

## **Advertising Discourse: Indian Ads constructing Meaning and Empathy to thrive beyond Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 as given newer challenges to everyone including the advertisement and the advertising industry. Now the people react, behave and purchase differently in compare to the to the other time. They want advertisements to talks about their emotional well-being and help them fight fear, anxiety and loss with empathy and real solutions. The pandemic has uprooted the old way of using negative appeal like fear, guilt, sadness and anger in the advertisement discourse. The viewers want the advertisements to be more considerate and empathetic towards them and their needs now. They expect the advertisement discourse to be creative and sensitive, as it will motivate them to connect, share, survive and thrive the adversities, fear and anxiety that is prevailing in the society because of the COVID-19.

The study through a qualitative analysis and an empathy map has look into the advertisements discourse during the pandemic which has construct a meaning and empathy for the Indians. The Indian advertisements has used the emotive element, empathy, to make the narrative sticks in the mind of the pandemic-hit viewers. They have not only spread safety and awareness but reflected how the Indians are dealing with the pandemic situations being empathetic and using empathy in the content and message They have participated in a mass demonstration of humanity like the rest of the country incorporating realness and truth in advertising messages

**Key Word:** Discourse, Empathy, Viewers, Pandemic, Advertisements, Viewers

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Advertising is an effective medium of communication that gives messages on brands to its viewers. It talks about our everyday life and the emotions we go through. It being part of our socio-culture life not only attract viewers but establish their relationship with the brands. Advertisements stimulates the purchase decision through a mix of logical and emotion attributes of costumers through discourse. It motivates and persuade the viewer to buy a product or a service making it desirable. It further activates viewers participation with the brands and play a central role in establishing the relationship. The advertisements become part of our life and identity though the discourse initiated by it. They did this by capturing people's lifestyles and cultures and representing what we see, hear, feel and think around us though visual discourse narratives and storytelling. The Indian advertisements have developed the new narratives and storytelling during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have not only spread safety and awareness but reflected how the Indians are dealing with the pandemic situations being empathetic and using empathy in the content and message. Empathy comes from a German word, *Einfühlung*, meaning 'Feeling In'. There are many ways to feel and there are multiple ways of feeling empathy. It is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they must be feeling. According to Hodges and Myers "Empathy is often defined as understanding other persons experience by imagining oneself in that other person situation."<sup>1</sup>

The Indian advertisements has used the emotive element, empathy, to make the narrative sticks in the mind of the pandemic-hit viewers. They have provided reassurance to the viewers and the communities at large that they are with them in both feelings and pain. The advertisements were like the caring people prior to the COVID-hit society. It has mirrored the 'new normal' like working from home, parental caregiving, online classes, support of corona warriors, struggle of average Indian against an unknown disease, festival celebrated amid lockdown etc. through its messages. The advertisement of the present time has used empathy to represent the pains, fears, frustration and obstacles of the people and the society. They have helped the Indians to accept the present and thrive the crisis.

They have created meaning and empathy incorporating realness and truth in advertising messages. They have participated in a mass demonstration of humanity like the rest of the country. The key objective in establishing such discourses is to create a meaning and offer empathic support to the people during this global

pandemic. It turning out to be of great value and heart-warming for the viewers as the advertisements are responding to their needs with the discourse of creativity and empathy. Empathy is a best act to understand other person's emotions and perceptions during such crisis. It has helped advertisements to build relationship with the viewers.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A pandemic like COVID-19 has a far-reaching consequence on the society and the people. It is a human, economic, social and health crisis which is changing how we live, interact, connect or socialize. As Dr. K.R Subramanian writes, the causes of social change below affect or characterize every aspect of society across the world. On a macro scale, they shape all of our major social institutions (economics, politics, religion, family, education, science/technology, military, legal system, and so on. On a micro scale, they shape our values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. In sum, they influence our ways of life.<sup>2</sup> People have a right to know about the society in which they live. They have a right to know about the phenomenal changes or any social crisis which affect them. Advertisement has represented the changing society since its inception. Advertising simply keeping up with the changing ideological times.<sup>3</sup> They discourse the changes of the society in their messages. So, it is said Ads are wonderful examples of the diverse role discourses can fulfil in society.<sup>4</sup> Cook argues that advertisements are always in complex interaction with the texts around them, with music and pictures, and with the people who make and experience them.<sup>5</sup> Advertisements is a medium which guide and communicate the people during such social crisis. The advertisements not only reflect societal changes and crisis but come with solution too. They re-create and re-design themselves to find a balance between the changes in the society, viewers need and the message they deliver. The coronavirus pandemic too has changed the face of advertising over the last few months. They are trying to adjust with the new world with changing consumer habits and preferences and messages that is relevant to their target audience. People will remember brands for their acts of good in a time of crisis, particularly if done with true heart and generosity. The advertisement needed to deliver Feel-good content that alleviates anxiety and promotes positivity. Messaging will go a long way to enhancing the brand. <sup>6</sup>In such case empathy became critical as people feel vulnerable with the pandemic. Empathy has been always related to the healthcare sector advertisements and marketing. But now, empathy, the term's, which historical and etymological roots lie in the pagan mystic phrase that expresses this absorption—"I am you and you are I"<sup>7</sup> have to be realized by every advertiser who want to thrive beyond post-pandemic. The consumer research strongly stands for using empathy incorporating emotional appeal theme in advertisements. Even the consumer research has drawn from the traditional definition of the empathy response as an involuntary and unselfconscious merging with another's feelings and a person's capacity to feel within or in another person.<sup>8</sup> The advertisements have to do sincere efforts to understand the viewers feelings during this crisis and spread empathy through advertisements discourse as empathy directly enhance positive attitudes to an advertisement.<sup>9</sup>

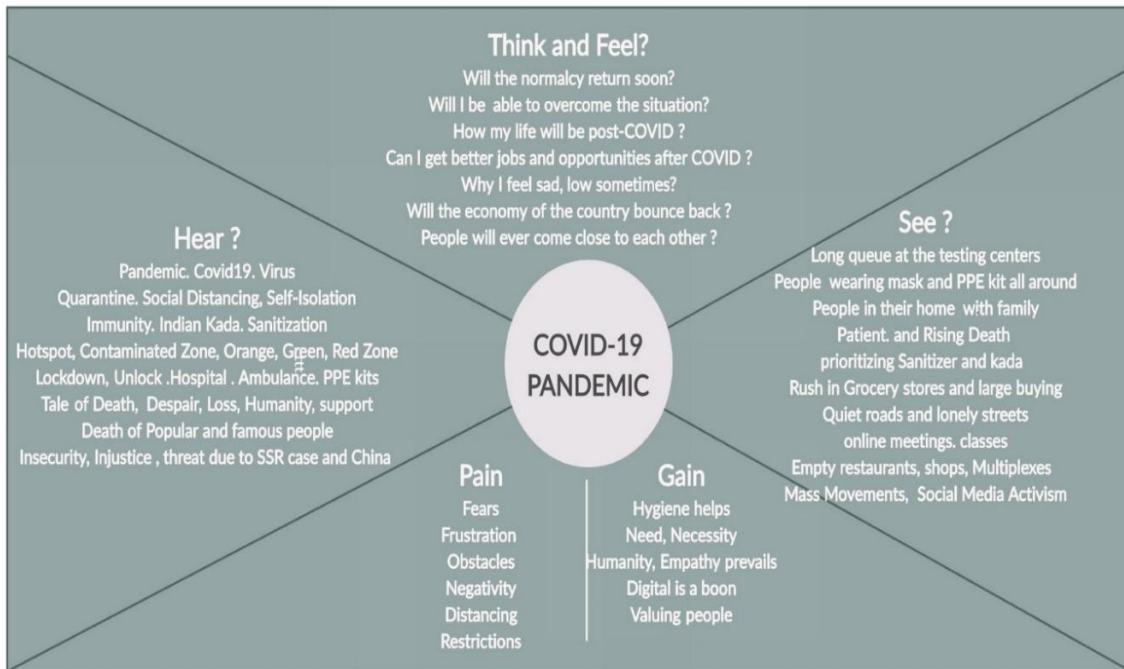
## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study has taken a qualitative analysis study with 21 (Twenty-One) Participants to find out their responses on the pandemic situation to build the empathy map. An online interview conducted based on recall test to understand their views and perceptions on the advertisements discourse during this global pandemic. The Empathy Map has been made to know what they think, feel, hear and see around them and the pain and gain they have experiences during the pandemic. The Participants have been selected through non-probability sampling method i.e. purposive sampling. The Participants selected belong to the age group of 20 to 35. It was assured that the Participants are exposed to every kind of media especially social media. They have been asked to recall an advertisement, irrespective of any medium, which have drawn their attention during these four months. Their responses have been sought and noted down to understand the advertisement discourse they recall. Participants' interpretive narratives were reviewed several times to build the empathy map and to code and analyze the narratives that is related to the messages of the advertisements.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

##### 4.1 Empathy Map

The empathy map which contain four quadrants has help us to understand the participant’s views and behavior during the pandemic. The participants were asked to give views on, what they think and feel, hear, see and what pain and gain they have come across being in the worst-hit pandemic i.e.COVID-19.



The map reflects that the COVID-19 is a highly stressful time with challenges and stress. Health risk and safety concern prevails in the mind of the participants along with fear and mental agony. So, they need empathy to overcome this situation and connect to others. Empathy has been never been more important than now. So, the advertisements need to be empathetic while communicating with the audiences even beyond pandemic. They have to more creative in their discourse to keep a true understanding of a viewer’s wants, needs and grievances. The empathy map helps to get a deeper insight of the participants state of mind and emotional changes that they have gone through this COVID-19 pandemic. It will help us to understand the reason and emotions behind their recalling the advertisement when asked to do so.

##### 4.2 Recall Test and Analysis

The Participants have recalled a recent advertisement which they think remembered or in their memory. It has been noted down and relevant meaning has been derived using key words to know their views and perception on the ongoing advertisements in different medium of communication. They have expressed their views on a particular advertisement, which have either attracted them or drew their attention because of its discourse. The Participants have been told to remember, bad or good, whatever emotion has stayed with them after seeing the advertisement.

4.2: The table describes the list of Participants, the recalled advertisement and meaning derived from it.

<b>List of Participants</b>	<b>Participants Responses</b>	<b>Derived Meaning</b>
Participant 1	“The logo of MacDonald’s was interesting and creative. The curve between the character was redesigned to reflect social distancing which is a common measure during the pandemic.”	<i>Logo: interesting and creative. reflect social distancing</i>
Participant 2	“I will appreciate the lifebuoy advertisement message which says “Please use any soap nearest to you not just lifebuoy”. It shows the brand is not encashing the pandemic situation but very considerate”	<i>Ad text: not encashing the pandemic situation but very considerate</i>
Participant 3	“Join the fight against COVID 19 of Paytm, I find this ad very motivating as it makes us unite to fight against pandemic, the public crisis.”	<i>Ad Tagline: motivating as it makes us unite to fight against pandemic</i>
Participant 4	“Made for India. Made by India ad of Amazon, I feel the pandemic has taught Indians to be self-independent like the ad says.”	<i>Ad Tagline: pandemic has taught we Indians to be self-independent like the ad says</i>
Participant 5	I feel the Amul ad were very much empathetic and responsible. One of its visual showing the Amul girl sitting next to her mother and enjoying her as usual breakfast Bread and Butter while the mother manages work from home as well as cooks. For the first time ever, the ad visuals made me realized the struggle of every Indian working women to strike a balance between the work and home during this pandemic.”	<i>Ad visuals and pictures: made me realized the struggle of every Indian working women to strike a balance between the work and home during this pandemic</i>
Participant 6	“Keep moving ahead with #NonStop Protection of Castrol Active automotive lubricant advertisement has arouse a sense of positivity and normalcy to find ways to keep ourselves moving despite the pandemic.”	<i>Ad Message: arouse a sense of positivity and normalcy to find ways to keep ourselves moving despite the pandemic.”</i>
Participant 7	“I find the black and white ad very nostalgic. All at our home was so happy to see those ads of 90s along with the return of Television epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. The lockdown period with the black and white ad of 90s was like a revival of our old spirit and remembering the good times”.	<i>Psychology of Colors in ad: black and white ad of 90s was like a revival of our old spirit and remembering the good times</i>
Participant 8	“I find the ad of Ixigo travel-based e-commerce website, #Sounds we miss, very innovative and creative. It reminded me of the pre-pandemic time and the normal life we used to have with these sounds. The sounds at airport. Railway station, tea stall and crowd places. The sounds in the ad filled me with hope and positiveness and now waiting anxiously for the pandemic to end.”	<i>sound effect used in ad: sounds in the ad filled me with hope and positiveness and now waiting anxiously for the pandemic to end</i>

Participant 9	<p>“Baja Allianz Life #IndiaSolveKartaJaa in You Tube is one of my favorite ad. It was very inspiring as it shows along with challenges and problems, India has problem solvers to come with solution to face the crisis. Proud to know the infamous but innovative Indians who have come with ideas to solve the pandemic problems through this ad”.</p>	<p><i>Ad script:</i>  <i>Proud to know the infamous but innovative Indians who have come with problem solving ideas during pandemic</i></p>
Participant 10	<p>“The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) ropes in actor Amitab Bachan to talk on precautions and to spread awareness on corona virus. on Doordarshan. But when the actor get himself infected from the virus, then what I feel a new ad should had been given from the source clearing that no one is free from the pandemic or carrying his recovery experience. But no such thing carried out which made me think the ads roping actors is just a gimmick for common man”.</p>	<p><i>Brand perception:</i>  <i>ads roping actors is just a gimmick for common man</i></p>
Participant 11	<p>“I found the Fevicol ad “Ab SabseMazboot door Indoor” both witty and informative. The ad through a short message has effectively spread awareness to stay window during the lockdown.</p>	<p><i>Ad Tagline:</i>  <i>effectively spread awareness to stay window during the lockdown</i></p>
Participant 12	<p>“Uber’s ad ‘Thank you for not riding with us right now’ is a meaningful way to tell that there are many ways of practicing empathy. Denying people to travel but to stay home that to by a transportation company to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is empathetic.</p>	<p><i>Ad strategy:</i>  <i>many ways of practicing empathy</i></p>
Participant 13	<p>“Surf Excel’s #Neki NahiRukegi has encouraged people to put empathy in action despite the social isolation. Through a little kid in the ad the message has been given that if there is a will, there’s always a way to do good even during this adverse present-day circumstance like pandemic.”</p>	<p><i>Ad script and visual communication:</i>  <i>encouraged people to put empathy in action despite the social isolation</i></p>
Participant 14	<p>“I find the Bino ad where Ranveer Singh searching for a good potato very meaningless. When almost half of the country struggling for basic food, searching for a good potato make no sense and do not connect with our present problems.</p>	<p><i>Ad message strategy:</i>  <i>meaningless, do not connect with our problems</i></p>
Participant 15	<p>“I like the punchline ‘Make Small Strong’ of Google and FICCI. It has called Indians to come together and unite in this challenging time of pandemic to support small businesses during. It is an initiative to start the financial activities within the country.”</p>	<p><i>Ad Tagline:</i>  <i>Called Indian to come together and unite in this challenging time of pandemic</i></p>
Participant 16	<p>“I very much admire Amul ads. One that inspire me mostly is ‘MBBS: Makhan Bole Bahut Shukriya’. The Amul girl seen expressing gratitude towards the corona warrior’s Indian doctors and healthcare workers who have been at the fore front of the fight against the deadly coronavirus.”</p>	<p><i>Ad Visuals and Illustrations:</i>  <i>expressing gratitude towards the corona-warrior’s Indian doctors and healthcare workers</i></p>

Participant 17	“Asian Paints #LiveFrom Home ad was a true bliss to remain calm and constructive during the present situation of uncertainty and fear. Watching Live our favourite singers from home was a relief in this lockdown.”	<i>Ad concept and strategy: remain calm and constructive during this present situation of uncertainty and fear</i>
Participant 18	“The IPL new advertisement 2020 ‘bahut ho gayaparivar’ has delivered an inappropriate and insensitive message in such crisis. It demeans the Indian middle-class family whom we connect with and who uplift mental wellbeing during this self-isolation and quarantine period.	<i>Ad illustration: inappropriate and insensitive message in such crisis</i>
Participant 19	“I was allowed to have Maggi despite the fact that it is not an immunity builder food because it highlighted in its ad ‘Ingredients that make India special’. Which mean now it contains Indian spices and herbs on which we mostly rely during the pandemic for building immunity. Suddenly I started feeling that the product has been Indianized for us, the Indians. The ad gives a feeling of inclusivity and pride of our Indian spices and herbs”	<i>Ad message strategy: gives a feeling of inclusivity and pride</i>
Participant 20	“I find the Vi ad of Vodafone and Idea Cellular not soothing nor creative but quiet irritating and unpleasant with repetitive words. Though it says we have to be ‘Together for Tomorrow’ but the ad has annoying with the crazy sound. we are used to calmness and quietness of lockdown.”	<i>Sounds effects and creativity: not soothing nor creative but quiet irritating and unpleasant</i>
Participant 21	Nike’s commercial advertisement ‘You can’t stop us’ message that a global pandemic can’t stop sports or sportsperson and their spirit has touched my heart. The ad in a split screen has shown different sport persons around the world who are gearing up to play sports. The ad encourages to come across the adversity and revive our life with full vigor.”	<i>Ad strategy and visuals: encourages to come across the adversity and revive our life with full vigor.</i>

When the Participants went through the recall test, it is found that most of them memorized those advertisements which have carried the message with sensitivity. While few among them recalled those messages, which were ‘insensible and inconsiderate’ according to them. The recall test reflects the emotional and social turmoil which they going through, being in pandemic. Their responses have been coded and further categorized to understand the elements and content in the advertisements which have drawn their attention.

### Enhanced Creativity with Sensitivity

The recall test also shows the elements of the advertisements that were effective and creative to draw their attention. The re-designed logos (**Participant 1**), tagline (**Participant 15, Participant 11, Participant 4, Participant 3**), advertisement concept and strategies (**Participant 19, Participant 17**), visuals and pictures (**Participant 21, Participant 16, Participant 5**), body text and messages (**Participant 6, Participant 14 and Participant 19**), use of sound (**Participant 8**), use of color (**Participant 7**) were helpful in grabbing the attention of the viewers as they were communicating empathy and sensitivity. Enhancing the creative with sensitivity, the advertisers could successfully reach to the viewers. Advertisements which lack those emotive elements were not appreciated by the Participants (**Participant 10, Participant 14, Participant 20**) despite using the famous film personalities like Amitab Bachchan and Ranveer Singh.

It shows a change in the viewers perception towards the brands and the advertisements due to the crisis. The advertisements need to bring creative changes with much sensitivity “Many elements of human behavior are going to change permanently and so will creativity. One side-effect of Covid-19 is that it made people more humane. Creatives now need to be sensitive to that when designing advertisements like never before.” talking to Arabian Business, Kalpesh Patankar, Chief creative Officer (COO) VMLY&R, MENA ahead of the upcoming Lynx Live digital event by Dubai Lynx, has expressed.<sup>10</sup> The people from advertising industries too feel that post-pandemic, the advertisements cannot jump into action immediately. They have to be sensitive in their creative strategies till the people come over the pandemic effect emotionally and psychologically.

#### **Induced feeling of Empathy and Inclusivity**

The coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic has been stressful for people all over the world. Negative emotions like fear, isolation, frustrations and restrictions has cause strong emotions in the people. The presence of positivity and the practice of inclusion in the enabled the viewers to embrace and liked the advertisements in compare to others. An emotional appeal is related to an individual’s psychological and social needs for purchasing certain products and services. Many consumers are emotionally motivated or driven to make certain purchases.<sup>11</sup>The advertisements including the emotional appeal related to the people and the community has made the messages more impactful and relevant. **The Participant 2, Participant 7, Participant 12 and Participant 13** feels the advertisement has made them realized; why it is necessary to be considerate and empathetic towards the people during a crisis. It has created a feeling of love, support, empathy for each other and they learn to be kind to others. Rumors, hindrances, fake news, communal tension, loss of income all have been part of the crisis since it spread, but such positive messages through advertisements have helped the Participants to remain optimistic and positive.

#### **Induced feeling of Survival and Revival**

It is this ability to remember the past, relate it to present and project into the future that is a special province of humans, and of great use to advertising. Advertising shows how the sponsor’s product or service aids the purchase in personal or social group survival.<sup>12</sup> The pandemic situation has presented many challenges before the community and the people. But the advertisements have played a prominent role to convince the viewers that there is always a chance of survive the crisis, revive ourselves and thrive despite the despair and loss. **Participant 21, Participant 8 and Participant 6** feels that they had been motivated and encouraged through the advertisements messages to keep moving on despite the obstacles of pandemic. The messages have helped them to get over the psychological distress and prepare themselves for a normal life ahead post-pandemic. They have filled with motivations and come up with survival strategies after viewing such advertisements.

#### **Induced feeling of Nationalism and ‘Atmanirbhar’**

The advertisements have also ignited the feeling of nationalism making a call to Indians to come together to support the economy of the country. To project a long-lasting brand identity, companies releases ads that convey messages using Indian flavor, taste, aroma, fragrance, color, and style to connect to the Indian audience’s “self-image”. The nation is no wonder a land of contrasts, yet there are commonalities that bind the individuals as Indians. Perhaps, this is the very idea behind making ads using symbolic representations of nationalism to promote brands.<sup>12</sup> The use of Indian herbs and species as an ingredient has somehow made the **Participant 19** feel more ‘desi’. **Participant 16** come across a feeling of patriotism, as the advertisement pay gratitude and recognized the day-night hard work of Indian doctors and health workers. It has aroused a feeling of patriotism to come forward and contribute for the country and the pandemic-hit people.

During crisis the country people are expected to contribute to the economy through mass consumption. Historian Lizabeth Cohen (1998) argued that right after World War II, American citizens were urged to fulfil their civic responsibility of reconstructing the nation’s economy by participating in mass consumption.<sup>14</sup> **Participant 15**, praised the advertisement that has called all to contribute to the economy with small purchases. It believed that the move will be a step towards a 'self-reliant India', as the post-COVID consumers, who are aware of the economic woes of the country, will put their money on local alternatives. This will give a much-needed push to the Indian economy on the path of revival post-COVID.<sup>15</sup> **Participant 4 and Participant 9** has liked the message to be ‘Atmanirbhar’ (Self-Sufficient) given in the advertisements of Amazon and Bajaj Allianz Life. The message is in terms with the “Atmanirbhar Abhiyan’ called by the Prime Minister for the Indians and for the revival of Indian economy. The advertisements carrying the same idea has aroused a sense of pride in consumers for being able to contribute to re-building of the nation.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

**Participant 10, Participant 14, Participant 20** find the advertisements meaningless, not soothing or making connections with the viewers. It shows the viewers have failed to connect with these advertisements because it lacks empathy. According to them the ads have no role to play in the current tide of the ongoing pandemic. Whereas, other Participants (**Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participants 4, Participant 5, Participants 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 9, Participant 11, Participants 12, Participant 13, Participant 15, Participants 16, Participants 17, Participant 18, Participants 19 and Participant 21**) have expressed that the advertisements and the message have helped them to connect with them as they include empathy. Empathy and all other positive emotions related to it, have help the viewers to live, connect, share, survive and thrive the adversities during the COVID-19. The advertisements have to help viewers fight fear, anxiety and loss with empathy and real solutions through the medium of advertising and communication. The Empathy Map has too suggested that the people are not going through favorable emotions during this time. They have their fear of loss, anxiety and obstacles as what they see, hear around them is not very pleasant. Uncertainty and crisis surround them like never before. The viewers and the customers would like to see the advertisements to be more considerate and empathetic towards them and their needs.

Hence, they have to create a ‘new meaning’ for their messages for the ‘new normal’ Indians post-pandemic, if they want to ensure their presence and thrive beyond pandemic. They have to adopt a sensitive approach in creation and communication strategies of the advertising. The viewers reactions, purchase and construction of meaning from the advertisement discourse will depend on to what extent they could feel them. They have to uproot the old way of using negative emotions appeal like fear, guilt, sadness and anger in the advertisement discourse for time being and stress on positive emotional appeal. Though, empathy appeal is important at all times, it become more crucial and critical during COVID-19, the worst pandemic in history.

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