

Judgments of Marketing Ethics in Times of Trouble

Yvetta Simonyan
University of Bath
Craig Smith
INSEAD

Cite as:

Simonyan Yvetta, Smith Craig (2026), Judgments of Marketing Ethics in Times of Trouble. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (134071)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



Judgments of Marketing Ethics in Times of Trouble

Abstract

Do consumers make different ethical judgments if they are under duress compared to those less constrained? We explore consumer evaluations of questionable marketing offers in “times of trouble” (Campbell et al., 2020), focusing first on a pandemic and in later studies on a range of crises (e.g., violent events, natural disasters). Experiences of the pandemic varied, from lockdown conditions to vulnerability and financial hardship. In two field studies we found that controversial offers were judged less unethical by those facing greater pandemic severity. Participants in lockdown and larger households rated egregious scenarios more leniently. Mediation analysis confirmed roles for disease vulnerability and financial difficulty. Our findings in the pandemic studies and our current studies across a range of crises (to be reported in the presentation) suggest ethical judgments can be compromised during crises, with implications for marketing practice.

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics