



The Moderating Role of Cause Scope on Consumers' Preference for Cause-Related Products under the Threat of Pandemic

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Abstract. The previous studies demonstrated that pandemic threat increased consumer preference for cause-related products (CRPs). The current research further proposes that cause scope plays a moderating role between pandemic threat and preference for CRPs. Specifically, when consumers are confronted with pandemic threat, they are more willing to choose CRPs associated with global (vs. local) causes.

Keywords: Pandemic threat; cause-related products (CRPs); cause scope

1 Introduction

Pandemics pose a great threat to mankind. To cope with the threat of pandemics, humans have developed a series of defensive behaviors over the long course of evolution, such as aversion to disease cues, rejection of external groups, obedience to norms, and so on. With the recent outbreak of the novel coronavirus pneumonia around the world, such issues have become particularly important. When a pandemic breaks out, epidemic-related information tends to spread through a variety of channels and forms, causing people to pay great attention. Schools, restaurants and workplaces have closed, and stores are running out of hand sanitizer, disinfectant, shelf-stable food and even toilet paper. This is a vivid illustration of how pandemics can provoke strong emotional responses in individuals that can influence consumer choices. This makes it all the more important to understand how pandemic threats affect consumer behavior [1].

Previous studies have demonstrated that pandemic threat increases consumer preference for cause-related products (CRPs). However, some factors may moderate the effect of pandemic threat on consumers' preference for CRPs.

The current research proposes that cause scope (local vs. global) moderates the effect of pandemic threat on consumers' preference for CRPs. Cause scope in CRM campaigns means the location of the cause supported by CRM campaigns, reflecting their physical distance from consumers. The local cause is associated with local social responsibility issues which affect specific communities or countries while the global cause is associated with global social responsibility issues which affect most countries.

By deeply studying the moderating role of cause scope on consumers' preference for CRPs under pandemic threat, we can better understand the changing patterns of consumer behavior and provide useful references for enterprises to formulate marketing strategies.

2 Literature Review and Hypothesis

2.1 Pandemic Threat

Pandemics refer to an epidemic disease that occurs in a very wide area, and most people lack immunity and affect many people. This kind of disease can easily cross international borders and have a significant impact [2]. The current research believes that the pandemic threat refers to the emotions of uneasiness, anxiety, worry and fear that individuals feel when they are exposed to pandemic-related information, and realize that their health, work, study and life may be in an uncontrollable and unpredictable state due to the spread of the pandemic.

Pandemics pose a great threat to human life, the global economy, industry development, people's daily life and mental health. Sociologists and psychologists have also found that pandemic threats can even have an important impact on cultural and interpersonal biases. The human impact of pandemic threats is also reflected in the area of consumer behaviors.

3 Cause-Related Products

Cause-related campaigns belong to the strategies employed by the companies to bear social responsibility. Generally, for a certain period, each time consumers purchase CRPs, the enterprise donates a certain amount of money to a chosen cause according to its prior commitment [3], among which the products are associated with a cause are called CRPs. How to effectively carry out cause-related marketing campaigns has attracted more and more scholars' attention [4-5].

The key to the success of cause-related marketing lies in whether consumers purchase CRPs. Only when consumers buy CRPs can the sales volume, sales volume and profits of enterprises be increased, non-profit organizations can obtain promised donations, and public welfare events can be promoted.

4 Moderating Role of Cause Scope (Local vs. Global)

Geographical scope in CRM campaigns means the location of the cause supported by CRM campaigns, reflecting their physical distance from consumers [6]. In the local (vs. global) scope CRM campaign, the physical distance between the donor and the recipient is near (vs. far) [7]. The cause scope can be determined as local community social

responsibility issues (e.g., community school fundraising) which affect specific communities and countries or global social responsibility issues (e.g., climate change) which affect most countries [7].

At present, there is no consistent conclusion about the impact of the cause scope in the CRM campaigns. Some researchers have found that consumers adopt a more positive attitude towards CRPs associated with local (vs. global) causes and are more willing to purchase such kind of products [8]. Some researchers disagree with this difference. For example, Vanhamme et al. (2012) proposed that consumers are more likely to agree with the adoption of local CRM campaigns but were more positive in evaluating the corporate image of global CRM campaigns [9].

In the current research, we propose that when confronted with pandemic threat, consumers are more inclined to choose CRPs associated with global causes. Pandemic threat makes people realize that the spread of diseases is often borderless [2] and deeply feel that they are members of the global family. Therefore, they are more willing to contribute their own strength to global CRM campaigns. Based on this, H1 is proposed.

H1: The cause scope (local vs. global) moderates the relationship between pandemic threat and consumers' cause-related product preference. Specifically, when confronted with pandemic threat, consumers prefer CRPs associated with global causes.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework.

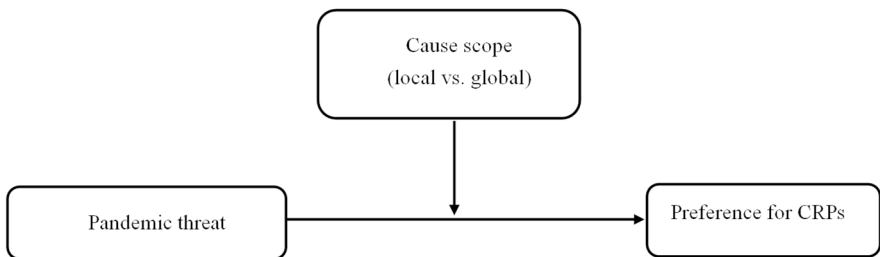


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework

5 Experiment

The experiment was to test the moderating role of cause scope between pandemic threat and preference for CRPs.

5.1 Method

Participants and design: One hundred and forty participants from wjx.cn participated in the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to either pandemic threat group or control group. After completing the experiment, each participant received a red envelope of 2 yuan in return.

Experiment procedure: Before the experiment, the participants were informed that they were going to finish several relatively independent tasks.

First, pandemic threat was manipulated following Huang and Jaideep (2020) with all participants being presented with the same set of four pictures of skin and oral lesions associated with lupus erythematosus (e.g., rashes on cheeks and nose, joint swelling) [10]. Lupus was deliberately chosen because it was a relatively unknown disease to manipulate the participants' perception of the pandemic. Participants in the pandemic threat group were informed that the disease was highly infectious, and that the pictures showed some of the symptoms of those infected with the pandemic. The control group was informed that the disease was a genetic disease, not infectious. The pictures showed some symptoms of patients with genetic disease. Next, participants were invited to take part in a seemingly unrelated product preference survey. The participants were informed that there were two types of cookies. One (Cookie A) promised to donate a part of the income from the cookies for the cause "Caring for Lonely Old people in the local area", while the other (Cookie B) promised to donate a part of the income from the cookies for the cause "Caring for Lonely Old people around the World". The participants reported their preference for the two types of cookies according to their current preference (1 = completely like cookie A, 8 = completely like cookie B). Then, participants filled in the answer attention test item. The attention test asked, "Is the disease contagious?". Later, participants were asked "To what extent that you feel pandemics threaten your health and life?" (1 = very little and 7 = very much). Finally, filled in the relevant personal information to complete the survey.

5.2 Results

Ten participants did not pass the attention test, so only the remaining 130 participants were analyzed ($M_{age} = 33.47$, 65.40% female). The perceived pandemic threat in pandemic threat group ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 0.92$) was significantly higher than that in control group ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.44$; $t = 2.33$, $p < 0.05$), which indicated the pandemic threat was successfully manipulated. The preference for CRPs associated with global causes in the pandemic threat group was significantly higher ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 2.23$) than that in the control condition ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 128) = 7.01$, $p = 0.009$), which supported H1. The results were shown in Figure 2.

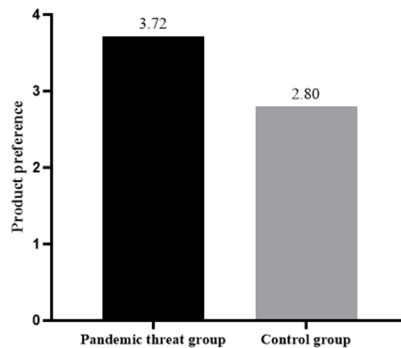


Fig. 2. Preference for CRPs associated with global causes

6 General Discussion

6.1 Conclusions

This study shows that compared with local causes, global causes can significantly enhance the impact of pandemic threat on consumers' preference for CRPs. Enterprises should fully consider this factor when formulating marketing strategies and promoting cause-related products and pay more attention to highlighting the connection between products and global causes to better meet consumer needs and improve the attractiveness and market competitiveness of products. At the same time, this research conclusion also provides a new perspective and basis for further understanding the changes in consumer behavior in the context of pandemics.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contributions of this research are multi - fold. Firstly, while prior studies only established the positive link between pandemic threat and preference for cause-related products (CRPs), this research delves deeper by identifying the moderating role of cause scope. It enriches the existing cause-related marketing theory framework. Secondly, it pinpoints a specific preference pattern during a pandemic: consumers' inclination towards CRPs associated with global causes over local ones when facing pandemic threats. This new finding offers fresh perspectives for researchers exploring the complex interplay among consumer behavior, crises, and cause - related marketing.

6.3 Practical Contribution

The research findings have far-reaching practical implications across multiple sectors. For businesses, it offers clear guidance on marketing strategies during a pandemic. By aligning their products with global causes such as global health initiatives or international poverty alleviation, companies can better resonate with consumers. For example, a beverage company could launch a limited - edition product line, with a portion of the proceeds going towards global vaccine distribution. This not only attracts more consumers but also enhances brand reputation and loyalty. Social organizations can also benefit. They can prioritize global-scale projects when collaborating with businesses during pandemics. This enables them to attract more resources and support, maximizing the impact of their initiatives. Policymakers can use these insights to formulate more effective policies. They can encourage cross- border cooperation between enterprises and non-profit organizations in the face of global threats like pandemics, promoting a more coordinated and efficient response to global challenges.

6.4 Research Limitations and Prospects

First, the current experimental methods might restrict the universality of the results. Although an attempt has been made to control the variables in the experiment, there could still be some unaccounted-for variables influencing the experimental outcomes.

We should enrich our experimental methods. More diverse experimental methods can be adopted. For example, experiments can be designed to use real-time epidemic data and social media feedback to observe changes in consumers' preference for CRPs at different epidemic stages. Second, there may be room for improvement in the depth and breadth of data analysis. The current data analysis methods fail to fully explore the potential information within the data. More complex statistical methods and models can be used to analyze the data, thereby revealing more potential influencing factors and trends.

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