'Give-a-little-help for a business': consumers' prosocial behavior towards for-profit companies

Abstract

The COVID pandemic prevented many firms from generating revenue. Thus, they shifted their communication to a 'give-a-little-help' appeal, asking consumers to purchase from them to help their business survive. However, since these messages often come together with discounts or other tangible benefits, it is unclear whether consumers are willing to buy products with the motivation to help a for-profit business. In a series of two online experiments and a field study, we show that consumers are indeed more likely to buy products as a response to this type of message because they are motivated to help vulnerable firms. A follow-up survey corroborates the findings.

Keywords: Prosocial Behavior, For-Profit Business, Business Vulnerability, COVID-19 Pandemic.

March 2020, the World Health Organization announces the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic (WHO 2020). Countries all around the world begin deploying efforts and containment strategies to control the disease. Some efforts employed include social isolation and lockdowns, depending on the severity of the spread in each country. Suddenly, half of the world's population find themselves isolated in their homes, and non-essential businesses 'temporarily' closed (Fahey 2020). This unexpected situation affected individuals and firms simultaneously. On one side, the virus impacted individuals and consumer behavior, setting new lifestyle habits and consumption trends, such as increasing online purchasing (Esper 2020).

On the other hand, a significant number of businesses so-called non-essentials (e.g., restaurants, shopping malls, hair salons) found themselves closed, prevented from generating revenue, and in need of cash, credit, and to cut costs to survive. As an immediate response, many for-profit businesses shifted their communication approach from 'product-service focused' to a 'give-a-little-help' appeal. These firms started asking consumers to purchase from them to help them survive. Because those messages often offer other benefits, such as discounts, it is unclear whether consumers are indeed willing to buy from for-profit firms with the motivation to help them.

Traumatic events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, often bring in great benevolent reaction (Small 2010; Zagefka et al. 2011). In extreme circumstances, the need for help is very salient (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011) and heightened by media coverage (Simon 1997). Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to observe all around the world, not-for-profit organizations, companies, government agencies, and individuals helping each other (Hamilton 2020). However, with so many people in need, are consumers willing to help a for-profit business? Using an online experiment and a field study, we show that consumers are indeed more willing to purchase products as a response to a 'give-a-little-help' appeal. A third online experiment shows that the reason for this behavior is the motivation to save a vulnerable firm. A follow-up survey corroborates the findings.

Understanding that consumers care about vulnerable firms to the point of purchasing products only to avoid them going out of business is not only novel and interesting per se, but it also has important implications. First, we add to the literature of prosocial behavior by showing that consumers care not only about other individuals and causes, but also about for-profit businesses. When they perceive that a firm is endangered, they are willing to help it survive. Second, we show that the 'give-a-little-help' appeal is useful to foster helping behavior from consumers. Thus, a practical recommendation to endangered firms is to use this kind of message to elicit help (i.e., sell more products). Finally, we show that the perception of vulnerability is crucial for the effectiveness of the 'give-a-little-help' appeal. Although we used the COVID-19 pandemic that increased many businesses' vulnerability as the context for this research, other circumstances can also make firms vulnerable and, therefore, willing and able to use a 'give-a-little-help' appeal. We further elaborate on this substantive aspect in the discussion section.

PROSOCIAL PURCHASING

Rational models of buyer behavior argue that consumer purchasing is benefit led (Small and Cryder 2016). Yet, we have massive evidence that many consumers' buying behaviors also aim to benefit others. For example, consumers buy products to help charities (Elfenbein and McManus 2010; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998), choose environmental-friendly brands (Huang, Yang, and Wang 2014), buy products from friends (Li, Liang, and Li 2018), and back crowdfunding projects to make products happen (Zvilichovsky, Danziger, and Steinhart 2018). There are several reasons for consumers to include a prosocial motivation into their buying behavior, such as emotional benefits (Aknin et al. 2013), personal support to

a specific cause (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001), moral concerns (Aguilera et al. 2007), and altruistic motives (La Ferle, Kuber, and Edwards 2013).

However, helping a for-profit business to generate revenue has never been one of them. The stereotype that consumers generally have about firms is far from eliciting sympathy. Consumers often see firms as competent (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010), insensitive (Rai and Diermeier 2015), and even immoral and harmful (Bhattacharjee, Dana and Baron 2017). Since individuals tend to help others when the need is salient (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011), and their action leads to a tangible benefit to someone (White, Habib, and Dahl 2019), even in an extreme situation, it is unlikely that consumers will think about helping a firm and act accordingly.

THE 'GIVE-A-LITTLE-HELP' APPEAL

But what happens if the firm shows that it needs help? Consumers know that not all for-profit businesses fit this dominant stereotype (Lu et al. 2020). On the contrary, some firms are vulnerable and, in difficult situations, can go out of business, but this vulnerability is seldom salient. Due to social isolation measures, many firms decided to show their vulnerability. Instead of focusing on their products and services, they began asking consumers to buy from them to help them survive. Many campaigns boomed (e.g., Nestle and Stella Artois in Brazil, see Figure 1a, b) asking individuals to help businesses by purchasing their products.

Figure 1 (a, b): Example of current 'Give-a-Little-Help' campaigns.



Figure 1a: Instagram post from the Brazilian shoes store Insectashoes. The message says – 'If you can afford it, help a small business survive the coronavirus;"
Figure 1b: Instagram post from a joint campaign by Stella Artois and Nestle. The message says – 'Over 4.000 restaurants have already been supported. Support a restaurant you too. To get a 50% off discount, just access apoieumrestaurante.com.br. Support a Restaurant'

Since this is a novel approach, its success is unclear. As the example in Figure 1b shows, many of these messages included some tangible benefits, such as discounts. Therefore, if the motivation to help a for-profit business exists is an open question. Although buying a voucher to go to a restaurant in the future with a discount seems a great deal, we have reasons to suspect that consumers are indeed willing to help firms.

Despite for-profit businesses have general negative stereotypes, it is reasonable that consumers care about specific firms. If some of them shut down, consumers may lose products and services they like, and individuals are loss averse (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991; Tversky and Kahneman 1991). Moreover, firms generate income for the entrepreneur and employees, so if they go out of business, individuals may be in need. Identifying these people (entrepreneur and employees) as victims of the COVID-19 pandemic makes their need very concrete and salient, factors that tend to prompt prosocial behavior (White et al. 2019).

Thus, we hypothesize that consumers are more likely to buy a product when the message uses a 'give-a-little-help' appeal because they believe that this act can help a vulnerable firm survive.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

We conducted four studies. Study 1 is an online experiment that assesses whether the 'give-a-little-help' message affects people's willingness to help a for-profit business. For external validity, Study 2 replicates the findings of Study 1 in a field experiment. Study 3 tests our mechanism, that is, by realizing that a firm is vulnerable, consumers become sensitive to the situation and thus help them. A follow-up survey shows consumers' past behavior.

STUDY 1

Our purpose is to examine our primary hypothesis that individuals are willing to help for-profit businesses as a response to the 'give-a-little-help' appeal. We predicted that after reading this message, participants would be willing to purchase a voucher and to spend more on it.

Method

Sample and Design. Three hundred fifty-five participants (M_{age} = 42.94, SD = 12.65, 68.2% female) were recruited by advertising in social media. The study adopted a single factor with three levels (type of message: 'give-a-little-help' to a for-profit business; 'give-a-little-help' to an entrepreneur; 'buy today, use later') between-subjects design. We compared the 'give-a-little-help' message with two control groups. The first is the 'give-a-little-help' to an entrepreneur since it is possible that consumers care about another person (the entrepreneur), but not about a for-profit business. The second is a message that says, 'buy today, use later'; therefore, that does not make salient that the firm needs help. The online experiment was conducted in Brazil, and the original survey was in Portuguese.

Procedure. Participants had to think of a restaurant that s/he visits often and likes. They were required to write down the name of the restaurant, their favorite dish, and how often they visited the place. Restaurants are an example of for-profit businesses that were closed for the public during the pandemic. The manipulation came next. In the 'give-a-little-help' to a for-profit business condition, participants read the following message (word changes in the 'give-a-little-help' to an entrepreneur condition are shown in brackets):

Suddenly, CORONAVIRUS! At this unprecedented moment, many firms [entrepreneurs] are threatened with their future, not knowing how to sell their goods and services, how to pay their employees and suppliers. Brazil has countless firms that will shut down, increasing unemployment and leaving future customers without their services. [These entrepreneurs have families to support, and these families will be without resources.]

Let's help each other, don't let a firm [an entrepreneur] shut down! Participate in this campaign, buy now, and receive later. How it works: while the crisis is in progress, you buy

a voucher from this restaurant that you thought about, and you will have six months, after the crisis, to consume the amount purchased.

PARTICIPATE: DON'T LET A FIRM [AN ENTREPRENEUR] SHUT DOWN, help it survive this crisis.

In the 'buy today, use later' condition, participants read the following message:

Suddenly, CORONAVIRUS! At this unprecedented moment, the restaurant is probably closed, and you cannot leave home to go there. But you can buy now to enjoy it when the crisis is over.

There is the possibility that you buy now and receive it later. How it works: while the crisis is in progress, you buy a voucher from this restaurant that you thought about, and you will have six months, after the crisis, to consume the amount purchased.

PARTICIPATE: BUY TODAY, ENJOY LATER.

We then measured participants' likelihood to purchase a voucher to help the restaurant using a slider that ranged from 0% to 100%; and how much they would pay for this voucher (from 0 to 500 Brazilian Reais; US$1.00 ~ R$5.00). The study's procedure is registered on As Predicted (https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=dz5mh3).

Results and Discussion

Willingness to Purchase. An ANOVA procedure revealed a significant main effect of the type of message on the willingness to purchase ($F(2,352)= 18.09$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2= .09$). Pairwise comparisons indicated that participants in the 'give-a-little-help' to a for-profit business condition were more likely to buy a voucher than in the 'buy today, use later' control condition ($M_{for\text{-}profit}= 66.47$, $SD= 30.87$; $M_{control}= 44.24$, $SD= 35.46$, $p< .001$), but were equally likely to buy a voucher as those in the 'give-a-little-help' to an entrepreneur condition ($M_{entrepreneur}= 66.12$, $SD= 31.56$, $p= 1.00$).

Willingness to Spend. Consistently to the previous result, an ANOVA procedure revealed a significant main effect of the type of message on willingness to spend ($F(2,352)= 4.24$, $p= .01$, $\eta^2= .02$). Pairwise comparisons indicated that participants in the 'give-a-little-help' to a for-profit business condition were willing to pay more for a voucher than in the 'buy today, use later' control condition ($M_{for\text{-}profit}= 124.42$, $SD= 89.32$; $M_{control}= 95.12$, $SD= 70.86$, $p= .03$), but equally to those in the 'give-a-little-help' to an entrepreneur condition ($M_{entrepreneur}= 121.40$, $SD= 95.13$, $p= 1.00$).

Study 1 provides preliminary evidence that consumers are willing to help a for-profit business when the need is salient, by being more likely to buy a voucher and by paying more for it. Interestingly, this willingness to help a firm is as strong as the willingness to help a person (an entrepreneur), provided that the need for help in both cases is equal. In this hypothetical scenario, no discount or other tangible benefit was offered, suggesting that the primary motivation for participants' responses is a willingness to help.

However, individuals tend to comply to help in hypothetical scenarios (Ajzen, Brown, and Carvajal 2004). Therefore, it is still unclear if people are willing to comply to support a for-profit business when helping implies real behavior.

STUDY 2

To provide external validity to our findings, we tested our primary hypothesis in a field experiment. We ran this experiment in partnership with Contém Café, a coffee shop that has students and staff from a college as its main customers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the coffee shop was about to go out of business.

Method

Sample and Design. Two hundred fifty-two students and staff from the college community participated in this field study run on May 16, 2020. The study adopted a single factor with two levels (type of message: 'give-a-little-help' x 'buy today, use later'). The field experiment was conducted in Brazil, and the original messages were in Portuguese.

Procedure. The campaign was sent through WhatsApp. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the two messages. Participants in the 'give-a-little-help' condition received the following message:

Hey guys, this is Contém Café and our community. In this unprecedented moment, many businesses are facing a threat to their future. This quarantine is very difficult for restaurants and coffee shops! Even more when the establishment depends almost literally on all the employees/students of a college! Contém Café needs our help! Don't let a firm go out of business! Participate in our campaign and support our business. This is how it works: while the crisis is in progress, you purchase a voucher from Contém Café (you choose the amount), and you have up to 12 months, after the crisis, to consume the amount purchased. PARTICIPATE: DON'T LET A FIRM GO OUT OF BUSINESS, help it survive this crisis. Click on the link to help.

Participants in the 'buy today, use later' condition received the following message:

Hey guys, this is Contém Café and our community. In this unprecedented moment, Contém Café is closed, and you cannot enjoy this cozy space near our college. But you can buy now to enjoy it when the crisis is over. Participate in the campaign 'buy now and enjoy later.' This is how it works: while the crisis is in progress, you purchase a voucher from Contém Café (you choose the amount), and you have up to 12 months, after the crisis, to consume the amount purchased. PARTICIPATE: BUY TODAY, ENJOY LATER. Click on the link to buy.

We then measured clicks on the link as our dependent variable. The study's procedure is registered on As Predicted (https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=ni8bv4).

Results and Discussion

Results were consistent with prior results: more participants in the 'give-a-little-help' condition clicked on the link (18.5%) than those in the 'buy today, use later' condition (6.2%; $\chi^2(1) = 8,83$; $p = .003$).

Study 2 replicated the finding of Study 1 in the field, providing real evidence that when the for-profit business makes its need for help salient, consumers are more willing to buy its product. However, we still do not have evidence that the reason for purchasing the product is because consumers believe that this act can help a vulnerable firm survive. Study 3 tackles this limitation.

STUDY 3

Study 3 aims to investigate whether consumers are more likely to buy a product because they believe that this act can help a vulnerable firm survive. If this is the case, consumers will be more likely to purchase the product only when they think that the for-profit business is vulnerable.

Method

Sample and Design. Four hundred seventeen participants (M_{age} = 33.55, SD = 10.33, 50.1% female) were recruited from an online panel (Toluna). Twenty participants failed an attention check and were excluded from our analyses, leaving a final sample of 397 participants (M_{age}

= 33.51, *SD* = 10.38, 50.4% female).[1] The study adopted a two (message type: 'give-a-little-help' x 'buy today, use later') by two (firm's vulnerability: high x low) between-subjects design.

Procedure. We used a similar procedure to Study 1, in which participants thought about a restaurant. We manipulated vulnerability by the size of the restaurant. Participants in the high vulnerability condition had to think about a small restaurant or snack bar. In contrast, those in the low vulnerability condition had to think about a big restaurant or fast-food chain. We used the same manipulations of the messages as in Study 1. We measured the same dependent variables (willingness to purchase and to spend) as in Study 1.

We then measured vulnerability. Participants read that "vulnerability is a particularity that indicates a state of weakness, which can refer to the behavior of people, objects, situations, ideas, etc. In the case of firms, businesses, or commercial establishments, being vulnerable means being fragile or weak to the point of closing the business" (Adger 2006). Then, respondents were asked, "to what extent the restaurant that you thought of is vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., could go out of business)?" using a scale ranging from 0 (not vulnerable at all) to 100 (extremely vulnerable). The study's procedure is registered on As Predicted (http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=vd63td).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. As expected, big chains were perceived as less vulnerable than small restaurants (M_{low}= 35.41, *SD*= 28.09, M_{high}= 46.99, *SD*= 27.46; *t*(396)= - 4.15; *p*< .001, *d*= .42).

Willingness to Purchase. We conducted a 2x2 ANOVA to assess the impact of the message type (‘give-a-little-help’ x ‘buy today, use later’) and firm’s vulnerability (high x low) on willingness to purchase. Participants reported that they would be more inclined to buy a voucher when they received the ‘give-a-little-help’ message (M_{help}= 67.98, *SD*= 27.79; $M_{control}$= 61.89, *SD*= 29.99, *F*(1,393)= 4.72, *p*= .03, η^2= .01), but there was no main effect of vulnerability (M_{high}= 66.28, *SD*= 28.64; M_{low}= 63.80, *SD*= 29,36, *F*(1,393)= .99, *p*= .32, η2= .00). Although the interaction term did not reach significance (*F*(1,393)= 3.52, *p*= .06, η2= .01), pairwise comparisons showed that when the vulnerability was high, participants were more likely to buy the voucher as a response for the ‘give-a-little-help’ than for the ‘buy today, use later’ message (M_{help}= 72.51, *SD*= 26.54; $M_{control}$= 60.75, *SD*= 29.40, *F*(1,393)= 8.32, *p*= .004, η^2= .02). When the vulnerability was low, both messages produced the same intention to purchase (M_{help}= 64.17, *SD*= 28.35; $M_{control}$= 63.31, *SD*= 30.81, *F*(1,393)= .04, *p*= .83, η^2= .00).

Willingness to Spend. We conducted a 2x2 ANOVA to assess the impact of the message type (‘give-a-little-help’ x ‘buy today, use later’) and firm’s vulnerability (high x low) on willingness to spend on the voucher. There was no significant main effect of message type (M_{help}= 137.90, *SD*= 111.49; $M_{control}$= 123.61, *SD*= 100.72, *F*(1,393)= 1.83, *p*= .18, η^2= .00), neither of vulnerability (M_{high}= 132.62, *SD*= 102.42; M_{low}= 129.42, *SD*= 110.82, *F*(1,393)= .14, *p*= .71, η2= .00), nor an interaction (*F*(1,393)= 1.90, *p*= .17, η^2= .00). However and more interestingly, pairwise comparisons showed that when the vulnerability was high, participants were willing to pay more for the voucher as a response for the ‘give-a-little-help’ than for the ‘buy today, use later’ message (M_{help}= 148.17, *SD*= 109.65; $M_{control}$= 118.82, *SD*= 93.93, *F*(1,393)= 3.79, *p*= .05, η^2= .01). When the vulnerability was low, both messages produced

[1] We administered an attention check question asking participants to recall information about the experimental scenario. The question was: “*What was this survey about?”* We provided the following response options: (a) Hair salons, (b) Restaurants, (c) Gyms, (d) Schools. Our results do not differ significantly when we include all participants in our analyses.

the same willingness to spend (M_{help}= 129.29, SD= 112.77; $M_{control}$= 129.59, SD= 108.86, $F(1,393)$= .00, p= .98, η^2= .00).

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

To corroborate our findings, we ran a survey to investigate if consumers have purchased products with the motivation to help a for-profit business.

Method

Sample and Design. Three hundred fourteen consumers (M_{age}= 38.61, SD= 17.69, 65.6% female) participated on this online survey. We sent the survey link to a pool of University students and asked them to share it on their social networks.

Procedure. Respondents should check which (if any) of the products they purchased during the quarantine. One of the options was a voucher to consume later from any business that was closed due to social isolation measures. After each option, they should rank their primary motivation for this purchase. One of the available options was to help the firm to not go out of business.

Results and Discussion

Our results show that 16.6% of respondents bought a voucher, and 40.4% of them alleged that the primary motivation was to help the firm. We then checked whether the motivation to buy the voucher was different from the motivation to buy any other product on the list. We then examined the difference between product type (voucher vs. others) and motivation. Interestingly, consumers who purchased the voucher (N= 52) were mostly motivated to help (59.6%), either the firm (40.4%) or its owner (19.2%), followed by the interest on a discount (28.8%) and on the product itself (11.5%). Consumers that purchased other products (N = 217) were mainly interested in the product itself (70.5%), followed by the motivation to help the firm (14.3%), its owner (9.2%), by the offered discount (6%). A categorical analysis of the data suggests that there is a motivational difference between buying a voucher from for-profit businesses and buying another type of product ($\chi^2(3)$= 64.282; p< .001).

Thus, even though our sample is not representative of the population, we can see that many consumers reported having bought a product with the primary purpose of helping a for-profit business.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The commonly negative stereotype that consumers have about for-profit firms is far from eliciting sympathy towards them. However, in a series of two online and one field experiment, we demonstrate that when a 'give-a-little-help' message is displayed, consumers are more likely to purchase a product, as long they realize that this firm is in need. We demonstrate that such behavior is explained by the motivation to support a firm in a state of vulnerability.

Detecting subtle motivations that drive consumers' prosocial behavior towards for-profit companies holds implications for businesses and entrepreneurs. The existence of a 'give-a-little-help' for a for-profit business' motivation may enhance consumers' participation in such campaigns, not only by purchasing or spending but also by spreading the word-of-mouth and advocating for campaigns that aim to help business in need. Businesses, entrepreneurs, and marketers may use such motivations and their underlying drivers to improve the design of campaigns, which may gain additional support if one can convincingly convey the message that by being helped, these businesses will be able to survive.

One limitation of this research is the fact that our field study was not able to capture actual sales. However, Contém Café decided to use the 'give-a-little-help' approach on their campaign that followed our field experiment. They sold 60 vouchers, and they even received 13 donations as a result of the campaign.

Our second limitation is that this research was performed in Brazil. Although there are no theoretical reasons to think that such prosocial behavior should happen only in Brazil, some cultural characteristics may vary and cause interesting differences. For example, the literature suggests that developed markets promote selfish value orientations (e.g., Kasser et al. 2007). Therefore, future studies may explore this phenomenon in a developed country.

Future work should also investigate whether 'making salient the benefits' (Bhattacharjee et al. 2017) of a business to the society could prompt individuals' willingness to help businesses. For instance, it could explore how certain types of benefits (e.g., firms create value to society, generate income, create employment, produce what individuals need) might interact with the 'give-a-little-help' appeal. Research might also investigate whether 'feelings of admiration' (Aaker et al. 2010) for the company would affect this phenomenon. Furthermore, since allocating financial resources to benefit others positively affects individuals' subjective well-being (Aknin et al. 2013), future studies could examine the role played by happiness on consumers' willingness to support a for-profit business.

Finally, we used the social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that increased many businesses' vulnerability as the context for this research. However, it is an open question whether our results apply in non-emergency settings. We believe so. It has caught our attention that companies such as Folha de Sao Paulo, a major newspaper outlet in Brazil, have adopted a 'give-a little-help' approach for the past year: '*Your subscription is worth a lot. We offer professional journalism that monitors the public authorities, transmits useful and inspiring news, counterpoints the intolerance of social networks, and draws a clear line between truth and lies. How much does it cost to help produce that content'?* We interviewed a manager at Folha, and he said that, although they have never run a controlled experiment, after adopting this approach, their revenue increased by 15%. Thus, future research could investigate what other types of settings the 'give-a-little-help' appeal would work.

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