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The Role of Uncertainty, Proactive and Preventive Advertising Messages During the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Uncertainty permeates human existence and often dictates individuals' perception, actions, and decisions. Such condition is often exacerbated by external factors and Global events like financial, geopolitical, and health related crises. While research has unraveled the power that public communications can have in reducing uncertainty, little is known on how commercial messages (for example advertising campaigns) can effectively address and communicate during such crises. The results of a preliminary study conducted with real advertising campaigns during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic show how individuals react more positively to an advert constructed on a proactive message (aimed at empowering the individual) than a preventive message (aimed at protecting the individual). Together with discussing the results, the authors suggest potential avenues for future research.

Key words: uncertainty; COVID-19; advertising; proactive messages; preventive messages

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Introduction

Uncertainty naturally intertwines with the human journey, touching upon myriad aspects of existence, spanning from individual choices to worldwide events (Brizi, Mannetti & Kruglanski, 2016). Individuals face uncertain situations in multiple contexts and at different levels of abstraction and specificity, from their everyday consumption decisions to a more general feeling on how events in society at large may affect their lives. Uncertainty can be particularly salient in situation of global crisis such as wars, terrorist attacks, financial meltdowns, or pandemics (Shechory Bitton, & Laufer, 2021), where individuals may have no clear indication. For example, in the offset of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals were presented with different information about a new virus, yet with no specific indications on how this could be treated or how long would it take to find a remedy. In the absence of a specific treatment or vaccination, one-third of the world was recommended to stay at home to limit the spread of the contagion, causing a massive shift in individual behaviors (Addo, et al, 2020).

During this period of uncertainty, a great focus was given to the role of the politicians and experts and their different communication strategies in reassuring the population and reducing their distress (Bogliacino, et al., 2021). The different media outlets also changed their programming – also due to the increased volume of audience who was forced to stay at home (Deng, Ekachain & Pokrywczynski, 2022). Even businesses and firms had to reposition their advertising campaigns, sometimes adapting in a very swift way to be more suitable to the dire times people were experiencing. While previous research (e.g., Malecki, Keating & Safdar, 2021) has thoroughly investigated the impact of health-based communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research on how commercial communication – that is advertising – has adapted (and its effect on individuals' perception) is limited. In this study, we aim at testing the effect of different communication strategies brands can use during a health crisis. Using real advertising campaign aired during the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020, we test the effect that different message frames –proactive or preventive – have on consumers goodwill. In the following, we provide a brief review of the literature on uncertainty in psychology and the role global crisis can have in individuals' perceptions of uncertainty. We then move to the role advertising can have in communicating a crisis and how different strategies can lead to differential effects. We present then the results of our experimental study, together with discussing the implication our findings can have for future research.

Theoretical background

Over the past decades, scholars have maintained an interest in exploring the psychology of uncertainty. Previous research in cognitive psychology, for example, has focused particularly on the examination of judgment amid uncertain conditions (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). In social psychology, the focus has been placed on how uncertainty shapes thoughts, emotions, and behaviors within social groups. Researchers have provided interpretations for well-known outcome variables, such as favoritism towards one's own group and derogation

of outgroups, by attributing them to situationally induced uncertainty (Hogg, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009), or an epistemic drive to evade uncertainty and ambiguity while striving for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). More recently, the focus of social psychologists has also revolved around the role of leaders in reducing uncertainty (Contu, Albarello & Pierro, 2024) as well as unravelling the interactions uncertainty can have with other variables, such as social dominance and prejudice (Contu, Aiello & Pierro, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have also focused on how individuals construe their social relationships to tackle and overcome difficult and uncertain moments. During times of crisis, individuals often unite, as seen in the solidarity and cohesion that emerge within groups following natural disasters or large-scale tragedies (Hawdon, & Ryan, 2011). For example, during COVID-19 pandemic, individuals formed aid groups in numerous countries (Ntontis, & Rocha, 2020). Moreover, crises may strengthen the sense of community across different social groups as individuals perceive a crisis to be a shared, global traumatic event, coupled with the necessity for unified responses (Drury, et al., 2016; Muldoon, 2020).

Thus, together with the preventive measures communicated (e.g., “stay at home”, “stay safe”), some governments and public health institutions turned also to proactive communication aimed at empowering individuals and incite them to “fight” and “defeat” the virus. Indeed, both strategies are not uncommon in communication studies, as they constitute a frame to direct individuals' perceptions and beliefs and they can be used effectively in public as well as commercial messages (Sarial-Abi, & Ulqinaku, 2020).

While the study of public communication during crisis has been object of numerous studies (for a review, Liu, Bartz & Duke, 2016), the investigations on how advertising and commercial communication portray different types of crisis - and individuals' reactions to it - is at its infancy. For example, a study by Lee, Taylor, and Chung (2011) on advertising communication evaluated the prevalence of specific advertising strategies (informative vs. emotional) during financial services crises in magazines over a period of five years. The results suggest that the advertising approach for a particular product or service depends on consumer involvement and their mainly rational or emotional relationship with the product or service. The results also highlighted an increase in the use of rational, functional, and utilitarian appeals in advertising. It seems, therefore, that the economic crisis prompts a reconsideration of the role of advertising, also modifying its content and providing consumers with rational information to reduce confusion and uncertainty. A study by Metastasio, Brizi, Biraglia and Mannetti (2017), instead, focused on the role that proactive (or preventive) advertising messages related to a financial crisis can have in shaping individuals' perception of the general outlook of the economy. Specifically, the study found that individuals exposed to a proactive advertising message for a sneakers brand (i.e., “Tackle the crisis”) had a more positive perception on how the economic outlook of the country would look in the following twelve-month period compared to individuals exposed to preventive advertising slogan (i.e., “Run away from the crisis”).

While the previous studies focused on individuals' reactions to advertising messages during a financial and economic crisis, in the current study we want to test whether proactive messages seen in advertising would be preferred to preventive messages also in the case of a health-related crisis like the one triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Participants

We recruited 243 participants (71.1% female, 28.9% male; 49.5% between 18 and 25 years old) from an Italian convenience sample agreed to participate in a between-subjects experimental design.

Procedure, Research Design and Measures

We randomly assigned participants to watch one out of the two real adverts related to insurance products and released on TV and social media platforms during (or immediately after) the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. We selected the advertising stimuli among all the ones available based on a slogan designed to be either proactive or preventive, and by keeping constant the type of product advertised and the length of the advert (around 50 seconds for both). In the proactive framing, the advert carried the main slogan "Together we are stronger", while in the preventive framing the advert's slogan was "Together we are safer".

After seeing the advert, participants filled in a one-item measure of purchase intention on a 1 to 7 Likert style scale ("If I had to buy an insurance policy, I would probably use this service provider" 1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree). Similarly, participants filled a series of items to measure their attitudes towards the advert (e.g., "The advert is engaging") on a 1 to 7 Likert style scale (1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree). Finally, participants completed a two-items manipulation check aimed at testing the efficacy of the proactive ad defensive frame on a 7 point Likert style scale ("How much this advert encourages you to overcome negative moments?"; "How much this advert encourages you to run away from negative moments?" adapted by Metastasio et al., 2017; 1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree).

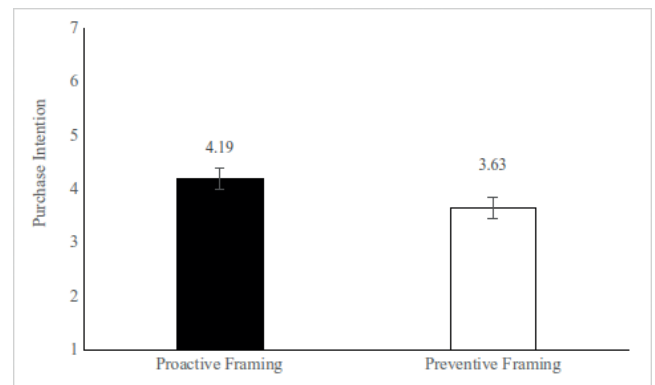
Results

The manipulation checks confirmed the efficacy of the treatment: participants who viewed the advert with a proactive frame considered it more encouraging to overcome negative moments compared to those in the preventive frame ($M_{\text{Proactive}} = 4.90$, $SD = 1.51$, $M_{\text{Preventive}} = 3.68$, $SD = 1.92$, $F(1, 242) = 30.58$, $p < .001$, $d = .71$).

Similarly, participants who saw the proactive advert declared a higher purchase intention than participant in the

preventive advert ($M_{\text{Proactive}} = 4.19$, $SD = 1.45$, $M_{\text{Preventive}} = 3.63$, $SD = 1.53$, $F(1, 242) = 8.64$, $p = .004$, $d = .38$). Figure 1 graphically represents this difference.

Fig. 1.



Concerning the attitude towards the adverts, we did not find a significant difference of the two types of adverts on the combined ($\alpha = .80$) attitude scale ($M_{\text{Proactive}} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.08$, $M_{\text{Preventive}} = 4.16$, $SD = 1.07$, $F(1, 242) = .49$, $p = .487$, $d = .08$).

Discussion and conclusions

Global events such as economic or health crisis may trigger individuals to experience great degrees of uncertainty. Such a state may be mitigated or exacerbated by individuals' media exposure, first and foremost in the form of news content but also in how companies communicate and portray such crises through advertising. In this study we suggest that by using different frames in advertising – proactive (i.e., tackling the crisis) vs. preventive (i.e., to stay safe from the crisis) – can generate higher purchase intentions towards the products of the company using a proactive framing. Taken together, our results show how in times of uncertainty like the ones determined by the COVID-19 health crisis, communications can be crafted in a way that can inspire individuals and increase their goodwill towards a product or service.

The results of our study may contribute to paving future research directions related to communications in time of uncertainty and measure their effectiveness. First, while the focus of the present study revolved around tackling uncertainty due to a health crisis, future research may investigate whether proactive (vs. preventive) messages induce individuals positive reactions in other uncertainty triggering situations. For example, scholars may investigate whether uncertainty related to geopolitical events (e.g., wars, migrations) would benefit public communications with proactive messages. Second, despite the naturalness of our research design (in terms of the stimuli selected and the timing – a real ongoing health crisis), future research may investigate the effectiveness of proactive message framings in a more controlled environment, contributing to disentangling potential mechanisms of the effect. For example, future research could test whether proactive messages impact on consumers' empowerment, which in turn

would trigger their purchase intentions. Alternatively, scholar may investigate other potential psychological mechanisms of this effect, such as individuals' resilience levels or self-efficacy.

Last, while proactive message framings seem to lead to higher intentions and, generally, to more positive evaluations (Metastasio et al., 2017), there may be circumstances under which a preventive framing would prove to be more efficacious. Future research can unravel these circumstances contributing to the understanding of when certain frames work better than others in uncertain situations. For instance, by adopting the regulatory fit hypothesis (Avnet & Higgins, 2006) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), one may expect that proactive communication is more efficacious for individuals with a higher promotion focus, whereas, possibly, the efficacy of preventive communications is stronger for preventive focus individuals. This hypothesis would make an interesting case for explaining how proactive or preventive communication strategies may impact targets with different characteristics. This may also inspire future research on the topic.

Ethical approval

This research received ethical approval by the University of Leeds (Code 0254)

Data availability statement

Data is available upon request to the authors

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No funding or financial support was received for this project

Authors' contribution

Alessandro Biraglia: conceptualization and writing; Renata Metastasio: conceptualization and writing; Gabriele Strisciunglio: Data collection and analyses.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Renata Metastasio is Co-Editor of this journal. To avoid any potential conflict of interest, she was excluded from the review process and was not involved at any stage in the editing of this manuscript. The authors have no other conflicts of interest to disclose.

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