



Loving My Local Business as My Neighbor:
Religiosity's Influence on Local Business Support
During a Pandemic

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Summary Brief

Loving My Local Business as My Neighbor: Religiosity's Influence on Local Business Support During a Pandemic

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Across three studies, we help inform how to encourage consumers to support local businesses during a pandemic by identifying why some consumers are more likely to support local businesses than others. Study 1 shows a positive relationship between religiosity and support for local businesses but only during a pandemic. Study 2 shows that this relationship is greatest for local (vs. non-local) businesses, and caring for one's neighbors mediates this effect. Finally, Study 3 uses advertising to prime a focus on neighbors, revealing that a neighbors-focused ad increases local business support to similar levels for consumers of all religiosity levels.

Introduction

Local businesses are struggling to survive in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has reduced consumer spending and also generated concerns among consumers about the risk of catching the virus while out shopping. The competitive pressures faced by local businesses are not new, with big box retailers long threatening local business success. However, the pandemic has intensified the challenges that local businesses face, necessitating prompt research to identify how to enhance the survivability of small businesses as well as encourage consumers to shop locally.

Our paper seeks to provide some insight into these struggles by identifying which consumers are more likely to support local businesses in response to a pandemic as well as the motives behind such support. We argue that an important consumer characteristic to investigate is religiosity. Over 80% of consumers worldwide adhere to some sort of religious belief (Pew Research Forum, 2017). Religion has also been shown to serve as a core value system for consumers and influence a wide variety of consumption behaviors (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016).

We expect consumers with higher religiosity levels to be more likely to support local businesses in response to a pandemic. Additionally, this should occur because these consumers place a greater priority on caring for their neighbors. According to belief congruence theory (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965), people seek to act in ways that align with their beliefs. We provide novel contributions to this theory and the literature on religion's influence on consumption by showing how times of crisis (i.e., during a pandemic) serve as a motivator for local business support, such that beliefs are more likely to guide behavior during these times.

Background

Religion, unlike the other demographic characteristics just discussed, is tied to a core value system (Minton & Kahle, 2014) that provides a theoretical link as to why such values should influence consumers' support of local businesses. Religious values universally encourage caring for one another (Schmidt et al., 2014). This universal care for community and neighbors across religious affiliations is why we focus on religiosity rather than religious affiliation in our studies. What matters most here is the strength of religious belief (i.e., religiosity) in explaining how strongly a consumer adheres to their religious values and lives these out in their life.

Fitting with more ethical and socially conscious consumers being more likely to support local businesses, it also seems likely that consumers with higher levels of religiosity (who express greater pro-sociality) should also be more likely to support local business. We expect this relationship between religiosity and local business support to be particularly strong during a pandemic, given that religious people are called to serve those in need during times of crisis (Lim, Liu, Egnoto, & Roberts, 2019; Markstrom, Huey, Stiles, & Krause, 2010). This expectation aligns with belief congruence theory (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965) where people (e.g., highly religious people) are more likely to act in ways that align with their core beliefs (i.e., religious beliefs). Importantly, we examine the influence of religiosity when a pandemic is present versus absent, with the expectation that religiosity will lead to greater local business support only when a pandemic is present because the pandemic presence highlights a time of great need. In other words, by examining these relationships, we provide novel contributions to belief congruence theory and the literature

on religion's influence on consumption by showing situations in which religious beliefs are most likely to influence behavior.

Study 1

Findings revealed that consumers with higher levels of religiosity are more likely to support local businesses when a pandemic is present but not absent. Study 2 proceeds to confirm the findings from Study 1 related to local business support during a pandemic as well as show that these findings occur most with local but not non-local businesses.

Study 2

Findings confirmed that religiosity positively influences business support during times of a pandemic, and these effects are indeed most prominent for local (vs. non-local businesses). We also confirm the relationship between religiosity and local business support using a behavioral dependent variable (i.e., donation percentage of the participant's survey payment), increasing the validity of our findings.

Additionally, we provide greater support for our theoretical model in showing that caring for one's neighbors mediates this relationship. Specifically, higher religiosity consumers express greater care for their neighbors during the pandemic, and this is, at least in part, what produces greater support for local businesses. A natural question that arises is how can this be useful to increase support for local businesses among consumers of all religiosity levels? Study 3 proceeds to answer this question using advertising.

Study 3

Findings confirmed that caring for one's neighbors is the reason that higher religiosity consumers are more likely to support local businesses in response to a pandemic. Higher religiosity consumers exposed to a control ad by a downtown business alliance encouraging support for local businesses responded with higher purchase intentions from local businesses in comparison to less or non-religious consumers. However, consumers who were exposed to a similar ad containing a message encouraging the viewer to think of local businesses as their neighbors responded with similar purchase intentions, regardless of their religiosity level.

General Discussion

Many local businesses are currently fighting to stay alive in response to the pandemic, with reduced consumer spending and increased concerns about catching COVID-19 by going out shopping (Redman, 2020). Our findings addressed this issue by showing that it is higher (lower) religiosity consumers who are most (least) likely to support local businesses but only during times when a pandemic is present. We also confirm that these effects occur most for local (as opposed to non-local) businesses and that this can be explained, at least in part, by higher religiosity consumers expressing greater care for neighbors. Finally, we show that priming a focus on caring for one's neighbors in the context of an advertisement is sufficient for increasing less or non-religious consumers' purchase intentions toward local businesses in response to a pandemic to similar levels as those of higher religiosity consumers.

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