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Prosocial Messaging During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Longitudinal Examination of Email Advertisements

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Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to evaluate how brands communicate with consumers through the COVID-19 pandemic and how messaging has shifted over time. The authors identify a typology drawn from extant literature and use it to understand how brands shape consumers' behavior.

Design/methodology/approach

Through a mix of interpretive and thematic analysis, the authors examine 858 US email advertisements and how these messages have evolved throughout the pandemic.

Findings

The authors findings demonstrate brand communication ranges from prosocial to brand messaging and brands employed different strategies at different phases of the pandemic. Specifically, while brands started out emphasizing socially desirable behavior before and directly after a national emergency was declared, COVID-19-related communications shifted to predominantly marketing-related messages later in the pandemic.

Originality/value

This study provides valuable insight into how brands adjust communication strategies through a prolonged cultural trauma and how these messages relate to authenticity, the triple bottom line and a social (versus branded) focus.

Keywords

Prosocial messaging, COVID-19, Advertising, Cultural trauma

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for businesses and consumers alike and has presented an interesting dynamic for consumerism and marketing. Consumerism is essential for society to function, and brands play a pivotal role in society functioning in our new normal. Scott *et al.* (2020) argue, “No one entity or institution is culpable in explaining the disaster around COVID-19” (p. 261). While policymakers and medical experts shouldered much of the burden, brands continue to play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perception. These strategies can enhance brand equity (Ajina *et al.*, 2020; Foroudi *et al.*, 2020; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005) and when connected to a cause, like COVID-19, it can extend consumers’ positive affect for the cause to the brand itself (Ricks, 2005). While most disasters are episodic (Baker, 2009), the ongoing pandemic presents a unique opportunity for brands to incorporate COVID-19-related communication into their brand equity strategy.

In their discussion of the pandemic’s impact on CSR, He and Harris (2020) note how COVID-19 is unique in that it is “a collective traumatic event for many consumers, causing them physical, psychological and emotional distress and harms” (p. 178). This global health crisis has many characteristics that mirror those of a cultural trauma: “These include a fundamental disruption of the taken for granted in daily life, a potential loss of trust in leaders and social institutions, negative attribution in the media, a contentious meaning struggle to determine what happened and who is responsible, with many competing accounts aired in various forums” (Demertzis and Eyerman, 2020, p. 431). As highlighted by Heffner *et al.* (2021), “The actions needed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 are in direct opposition to functioning daily life. This poses a critical challenge accomplishing extreme behavior change compliance, especially in such large populations.” As society seeks to navigate the ongoing crisis, firms have a pivotal role in helping consumers adjust. Thus, the purpose of this project is to understand how brands communicate with consumers around the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and how messaging changes over time. In this way, we continue the conversation of COVID-19 as a cultural trauma, adding to it the role brands play in shaping consumers’ new normal.

Literature review

Cultural trauma

In 2016, Baker and Baker (2016) introduced the concept of cultural trauma to marketing literature with their ethnographic analysis of tornado recovery in West Virginia. These collective traumas “can be distinguished from the process of making sense of it, including the group’s eventual recognition that a significant shift in collective identity has occurred” (p. 314). While experienced by the collective, Demertzis and Eyerman (2020) reflect that:

[...] cultural traumas are not the aggregate of individual trauma, affecting collective identity, where groups of individuals feel similarly affected by a fracturing existential security that a firm sense of identity afford (p. 429).

That is, as Bennett *et al.* (2016) discussed while reflecting on marketplace traumas, “Collective trauma happens to ‘them,’ people with particular status characteristics who are not like ‘us.’ In contrast, cultural trauma happens to ‘us;’ who ‘we’ are is reconsidered and expanded” (p. 280). The new normal begets new relationships throughout society between individuals, firms and our sense of duty toward society as a whole. Baker and Baker (2016) note that cultural traumas are characterized by four tenets:

1. the trauma event;
2. the collective discourse;
3. collective practices; and
4. the social structure.

This shared trauma drives marketplace and policy changes to “empower and/or protect the traumatized, disenfranchised and mistreated” (Bennett *et al.*, 2016, p. 281). In other words, the disruption of collective identity pushes firms and nation states to reflect on how societal structures are impacting individual consumers. Within the current context, this takes the form of social distancing and masking requirements, mandatory lockdowns and quarantines and a complete upheaval of business practices. Brands must figure out how to effectively communicate with consumers to reduce virus transmission (Ackermann *et al.*, 2021) while continuing to operate as a sustainable business.

The coronavirus, which acted as a catalyst to this cultural trauma, swept the world placing business and political leaders in a lurch. With the ongoing global disaster, we see increased “interdependence among consumers; businesses; local, state, and federal governments and agencies; nations; and a variety of other constituencies” (Scott *et al.*, 2020, p. 261). This interdependence places the onus of the crisis on the collective, and each stakeholder plays a part in information sharing throughout the network. In Thompson *et al.*'s (2017) words, “In our interconnected society, public health threats can extend far beyond their point of origin” (p. 356). Society as a whole must reckon with the effects of the pandemic and work together to find new ways to function.

From a social marketing perspective, firms can shape consumers’ behavior and influence perceived barriers through clear and consistent communication. Especially in disasters, Guion *et al.* (2007) highlight the importance of effective communication as consequences can be life and death. Thompson *et al.* (2017) note that the public depends on the media for accurate and up-to-date information to make informed decisions regarding health protective behaviors. In many cases, a simple informational intervention is effective in persuading consumers to take protective actions such as social distancing and vaccination (James *et al.*, 2021). The use of prosocial messaging increases the efficacy of campaigns by encouraging cooperative action to acclimate to the new normal.

Along with mass media, brands act as a conduit to disseminate information to the masses. This information comes in the form of brand promotion steeped with implicit and explicit cultural values, communicating to consumers what is important and what is acceptable behavior at a given time. In their analysis of mask wearing in retail settings, Ackermann *et al.* (2021) found brands must reinforce these cultural expectations through promotional messaging and other digital marketing tools, such as email communications. Doing so can inform consumers about public health measures to promote societal wellbeing throughout the crisis.

Unlike most natural disasters, the current health crisis affects all individuals, not just those in a specific geographic region. With minimal warning, global citizens’ lives were fundamentally altered, leaving stakeholder

groups scrambling to come up with a mitigation strategy effectively skipping the preparation stage of the disaster management process. Similar to the Ebola epidemic in 2014, marketers and communication specialists played a key role in individuals' experiences. Thompson *et al.* (2017) found high levels of media exposure resulted in increased stress and worry as well as impaired functioning. Related, Baker (2009) cites marketers as a resource to aid communities throughout disasters. The current pandemic offers a unique challenge for marketers. Brands must be sustainable to continue their business functions, but they also must be attentive to the context in which they operate.

Corporate social responsibility

Similar to a Black Swan event, the impact of the cultural trauma caused by COVID-19 results in personal, emotional, psychological, societal, economic and cultural pain, changing the world as we know it (He and Harris, 2020). Specifically:

[...] the Covid-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in the modern marketing history [...]. However the pandemic will end, it is already set to have long-lasting profound economic, social, political, and cultural impacts (p. 176).

In their analysis of health communication from governments and policymakers in the COVID-19 pandemic, Kim *et al.* (2020) note:

Effective public health promotions should raise awareness about health issues, educate target audiences about detrimental health effects, and persuade people to take action to avoid or reduce related health risks (p. 12).

Additionally, Ackermann *et al.* (2021) highlight how public health officials should not regard this from a single perspective. Instead, they must work with firms to reduce fear and increase compliance. This nudge can be extended to direct-to-consumer brands as well. While public health and safety are integral to a government's function, firms engage in public health promotions as a form of CSR.

While these communications are meant to encourage positive consumer attitudes, it is also "an opportunity to craft and distribute positive information to a wide range of stakeholders" (Groza *et al.*, 2011, p. 639). At the intersection of brand activism and marketing communication is brand equity strategy or "a set of processes that include acquiring, developing, nurturing, and leveraging an effectiveness-enhancing, high-equity brand or portfolio of brands" (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005, p. 69). This strategy shapes how brands communicate what is important to them. While brands have historically linked socially responsible activities to business practices in an effort to promote brand equity (Ricks, 2005), the pandemic has seen an influx of social messaging that is not tied to the brand itself. As He and Harris (2020) note in their analysis of CSR during COVID-19, "A firm's genuine and authentic CSR will build stronger rapport among its customers and the general public" (p. 177). Brands who lean on social messaging, especially during crises, are able to build meaningful connections with consumers that grow into brand loyalty that lasts beyond the threat itself. Using prosocial rather than fear-based appeals is directly related to the efficacy of public health messaging (Heffner *et al.*, 2021), and firms incorporating this type of messaging will see more positive affect.

While firms engage in socially responsible behavior for a variety of reasons, we see consumers becoming more cognizant of brands' messaging than ever before. In describing the exchange process, Murray and Vogel (1997) note, "The firm offers something of value – typically a social benefit or public service – to an important constituency, and, in turn, anticipates receiving the approval and support" (p. 142). As our global community experiences the ongoing cultural trauma, brands are incorporating messages to help consumers adjust to the new normal, specifically socially responsible messaging. Pelozo and Shang (2011) remind firms that they must be intentional about their choices of socially responsible activities in addition to how they incorporate language

regarding these activities into their brand communications. Marketing is uniquely positioned to help solve problems following a disaster and, as such, plays an important role in helping to build community (Baker, 2009) and influence consumer attitudes through strategic communication (Hanson *et al.*, 2019).

Advertising and marketing campaigns in times of disaster require firms to pivot quickly. It is especially important to examine sources of information during a pandemic, whether it encourages consumers to continue shopping or provides information on how to stay safe through policy or procedure. Insights from social science and business research can help guide firms and public health organizations in how to best communicate health recommendations to reduce harm (Banker and Park, 2020). Thus, we offer the following research questions to better understand how this communication was used and evolved through the first seven months of the pandemic:

RQ1. How can email advertising be used to promote socially desirable/responsible behaviors during the COVID-19 global public health crisis?

RQ2. How do advertising messages change over time during the course of the pandemic?

The typology and methods used to answer these questions are outlined below.

Core dimensions

Instrumental versus deliberative motivations

While firms crafted their marketing and advertising campaigns in regards to the pandemic, many have relied heavily on key concepts in the CSR domain. Building brand equity with consumers is no easy task, but doing so has substantial benefits for the firm. Foroudi *et al.* (2020) highlight how successful brands establish brand loyalty and high consumer perceptions of reputation, quality and performance. As firms navigate the pandemic, CSR is a tool that allows organizations to forge relationships with consumers.

The most basic of the concepts firms employ to build brand equity within the CSR domain is proactive (versus reactive) CSR. While all brands had to respond reactively to the pandemic – that is, the disaster was not a known threat until it was already imminent – their motivations for engaging in socially responsible messaging varied. In the case of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or public health crisis, brands engage in a blend of proactive and reactive behaviors to aid communities in disaster response and compensate for their absence in disaster preparation. This prosocial messaging can aid businesses whether to promote brand image or mitigate crises. Consumers view proactive CSR efforts as altruistic, while reactive CSR is viewed as reparations for irresponsible behavior (Groza *et al.*, 2011).

CSR is viewed as a firm's commitment to the world around them (Ajina *et al.*, 2020) and thus essential to a firm's success. It is one way businesses can be proactive at building brand equity and demonstrate goodwill toward the consumer, environment and society as a whole. It is doing more than the bare minimum or as Ajina *et al.* (2020) suggests, "CSR consists of the extra activities they do to protect the environment to improve stakeholders quality of life" (p. 594–5) which can result in a boost to brand equity. While reacting to environmental shocks such as a hurricane or pandemic can be reactive, the motivations, to truly be CSR then, should be rooted in goodwill.

Seele and Lock (2015) note that the key difference between proactive and reactive CSR communication is rooted in either a democratic deliberative process to resolve a social issue or instrumental economic strategies that put the company first. In a study of employee perceptions of socially responsible financial services, Ajina *et al.* (2020) found a similar result in that corporations were driven by instrumental or ethical motives. Instrumental CSR is viewed as a "mere marketing or public relations exercise" leading to "mistrust and criticism

from the side of stakeholders and scholars” (Seele and Lock, 2015, p. 402). This brand-centric form of communication views CSR as a tool to drive sales and support for a firm. As mentioned in Kotler and Lee’s (2005) book on corporate social responsibility, proponents of instrumental CSR suggest it can be used to support corporate objectives and build valuable partnerships as well as a positive brand identity. However, because consumers expect brands to act out of altruistic motives, many have challenged the moral legitimacy of firms, pointing to a credibility gap between what consumers perceive firms should do and what they actually do in regards to CSR communication (Seele and Lock, 2015). While it may benefit the bottom line, this branded communication is counter to the ethical organization consumers are looking for in CSR actions. This literature informs our typology of branded, instrumental messaging versus social or deliberative/ethical messaging.

Triple bottom line

The triple bottom line is one of the most popular frameworks in which firms expand their goals beyond profit to be responsible for their fiscal, social and environmental activities (Polonsky and Hyman, 2007). For CSR to truly be effective, it must be instilled in all business actions. As a brand equity strategy, the triple bottom line is forcing brands to balance people, planet and profit in their COVID-19 response. Just as the triple bottom line expands firm strategy beyond profit, brand equity strategy expands communication efforts beyond brand promotions. Organizations must lean on interconnectedness, portrayed through marketing strategies, to communicate their commitment to stakeholders (Mish and Scammon, 2010).

Through this stakeholder perspective, firms are able to center their tactics on consumers themselves. In an examination of the paradoxical nature of the triple bottom line, Ozanne *et al.* (2016) explain, “Successful organizations cycle among the competing goals of the triple bottom line so that, over time, competing tensions can be attended to and pursued effectively” (p. 258–259). In the current context, the pandemic has ignited concerns about systemic problems in all aspects of business, including each component of the triple bottom line (Mann *et al.*, 2021). To address this, firms shifted resources to address short-term societal needs caused by the virus such as health and safety precautions, social distancing and alternative delivery channels. Mish and Scammon (2010) echo this point: “Public firms wanting to adopt principle-based stakeholder marketing should critically evaluate practices that aim for long-term goals, even if they appear to reduce short term profits” (p. 24). This allows organizations to be more agile and use their resources wisely while reducing tensions and allowing firms opportunities for innovation (Ozanne *et al.*, 2016). Organizations’ ability to adapt to the pandemic and shift resources to support the health of both people and planet informed our typology of people versus profit.

Brand activism and authenticity

While an organization may appear to care for people and planet, the way firms frame their CSR messaging impacts consumers’ evaluations. As companies address consumers’ heightened concerns, the authenticity of their intentions are brought into question (Mann *et al.*, 2021). CSR and brand activism both require a level of authenticity, which requires continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism (Pittman and Sheehan, 2020). Brands that embrace brand activism exist on continuums of activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). To truly be authentic, firms should ensure all action “matches a brand’s purpose and values with activist marketing messaging and corporate practice” such that purpose, values, messaging and practice all play a part in authenticity (p. 449). In their discussion of brand authenticity through crises, Pittman and Sheehan (2020) explain:

Brand authenticity means being perceived as original and genuine, sincere, or possessing credibility and symbolic value. When a brand has successfully cultivated a reputation of authenticity, it differentiates itself from competing brands (p. 2).

This authenticity is seen in a range of CSR activities (e.g. corporate giving).

As brands craft promotions around COVID-19 and CSR issues, they must be attentive to how they frame their messaging. Firms should do so strategically and avoid bragging about their contributions (Mombeuil and Zhang, 2020) and try to build relationships with stakeholders. As brands activate around social issues, communicating with stakeholders is key. For a campaign to be successful, it should:

[...] disseminate authentic messages instead of 'adspeak,' entertain rather than lecture to their audience, opt for light humor over staid prose, entice consumers instead of making a hard sell, invite participation so that the brand is not kept separate from the buyer (Gendron, 2017, p. 13).

That is, for brands' messaging to ring true with consumers, it must center on the positive impact on the triple bottom line (Mombeuil and Zhang, 2020). By engaging with CSR initiatives and embedding the firm's mission into all actions (Samuel *et al.*, 2018), organizations can authentically connect with stakeholders and greater society. Thus, the final dimension of our typology is grounded in organizations' authentic messaging to consumers.

Method

A qualitative approach was used because the intent of brand messages is ultimately to result in consumer action (Mish and Scammon, 2010; Thompson *et al.*, 2017). He and Harris (2020) highlight how brands were forced to shift online as the prevailing method to reach consumers because of the pandemic. Thus, to better understand how brands incorporate social responsibility in their messaging through a cultural trauma, we use text derived from email advertisements as an artifact of brand strategy. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) assert:

There is no getting around the fact that documents are deeply embedded in people's work and leisure worlds – as prompts to action, as informational resources [...]. It is a rare circumstance indeed in which texts of some sort do not play a role in forming action (p. 231).

In the context of COVID-19, individual, business and organizational reactions to the pandemic spurred media coverage and diverse reactions; as such, this is a prime setting for qualitative inquiry (Bolat *et al.*, 2020).

Data collection

The authors collected a variety of advertising artifacts, including, but not limited to, notifications from branded smartphone apps, commercials available through video sharing and email advertisements. For the purposes of this paper, we focus specifically on email messages and advertisements sent directly to customers and clients for a snapshot of direct marketing strategies to a subscribed consumer base. Winet and Winet (2021) report the growing trend since 9/11 for companies to directly correspond with their consumer base via email during times of crisis. As such, we collected emails from any brand that qualified as direct-to-consumer messages. The only emails eliminated from the data-set were news subscription emails from specific news sources (e.g. The New York Times daily email).

Email advertisements and messages were solicited from students enrolled in business communication and business projects courses across 11 sections. Students who submitted emails for review were all classified as sophomores, juniors and seniors based on credit hour completion. 60% were female and 40% male. Approximately, 50% of the students who submitted emails for review were between 18 and 22 years old, 33% were 23–29 years old, 10% were 30–39 years old, 5% were 40–49 years old and the final 2% were 50 years old

and over. The students were above the national average in both age and racial diversity. Additionally, both authors contributed to the data pool from their personal and university email addresses.

We reviewed emails sent between January 20, 2020, and July 31, 2020, to capture the “critical initial time period in which the Coronavirus began to emerge within the United States,” consistent with Banker and Park (2020, p. 1037). We collected data in three phrases associated with federal recognition of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders. Winet and Winet (2021) argue that the emails to consumers during this time period mark the emergence of a new email marketing genre specifically related to crisis communication and maintaining connections with consumers. A summary of the three phases and their date ranges is presented in Table 1 and described below. In total, 858 email advertisements were collected, representing over 50 different industries, as categorized by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021; see Appendix for a full list of industries represented). Given the diversity of the contributors, the emails collected were also diverse in nature.

Phase 1 is an accumulation of all messages emailed to consumers before the government shut down because of the pandemic. January 20, 2020, marked the first confirmed case of the Coronavirus in the United States by the CDC (Holshue *et al.*, 2020). Based on a timeline published by *The New York Times*, President Trump declared a national emergency because of the COVID-19 case spike in the USA on March 13, 2020, prompting state and local officials to begin issuing stay-at-home orders to prevent the spread of the virus (Taylor, 2020). Phase 2 aligns with all federal stay-at-home guidelines and ends when President Trump’s stay-at-home guidelines expired (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). Phase 3, then, tracks easing restrictions following the expiration of all stay-at-home orders. Following a prediction by the CDC that on- and off-campus gatherings would result in a new spike of Coronavirus cases, and their guidelines posted on July 23 and 24, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), the authors decided the first back to school email advertisements would mark the end of Phase 3. While back-to-school advertisements related to COVID-19 are post-shutdown, the authors felt it signified a new phase of the pandemic, one in which messaging styles might evolve in a new normal.

Data analysis

Email advertisements were analyzed using a combination of interpretive and thematic analysis. First, the authors used interpretive analysis to “search for meanings and their interconnection in the expression of culture” (Bernard, 2011, p. 415). Palazzo *et al.* (2020) assert, “The interpretive approach assumes that as people interact with the world around them they create and associate subjective meanings to them” (p. 940). Given that direct-to-consumer marketing approaches are meant to inspire action, the meanings associated with these ads are important for inspiring prosocial behaviors. The authors first examined the advertisements for patterns (e.g. phrasing, formatting and linking), an essential step to qualitative analysis (Bernard, 2011; Patton, 2002). According to Bernard (2011), “broad general coding schemes are particularly useful for comparative research” (p. 313); therefore, at this stage, the authors worked in tandem with deliberate note-taking and communication about the patterns discovered.

Second, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data because it is flexible, allows researchers to examine emerging trends in marketing, and pairs well with theoretical coding approaches (Ajina *et al.*, 2020; Velayati *et al.*, 2020; see also Hussain and Melewar, 2020). Thematic analysis allowed the authors to place the email advertisements into themed categories (Owen, 1984; see also Ajina *et al.*, 2020) that represented the interpretive analysis through description. Patton (2002) explains:

Where more than one person is working on the analysis, it is helpful to have each person develop the coding scheme independently, then compare and discuss similarities and differences. Important insights can emerge from the different ways in which two people look at the same set of data, a form of analytical triangulation (p. 464).

Therefore, at this stage, both authors coded all of the data independently. After all emails were coded, any discrepancies were discussed and reviewed using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) until agreement was established. The authors aimed for consistency in the coding while being mindful of individual interpretation (Bernard, 2011).

As a final step in the coding process, the authors linked the themes to extant literature and previously existing marketing models (Bernard, 2011; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), using theory driven categorization for better understanding (Ajina *et al.*, 2020). Using the literature ensured that our categories were concurrent with previous literature (Berger *et al.*, 2020). Data were sorted into three distinct categories based on the dimensions discussed above: branded versus social messaging; profit or people orientation; and a scale of authenticity. The categories are described in Table 2 and explained in detail in the analysis that follows. Through these themes, we “draw a picture of the presuppositions and meanings that constitute the cultural world” surrounding the email advertisements (Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 530). Throughout this process, the authors ensured categorization consistency with the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The constant comparative method is a staple of ensuring sound thematic analysis (Ajina *et al.*, 2020; Tourky *et al.*, 2021), as it promises categories will have both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2002).

These core dimensions are drawn from literature above. First, authentic messages demonstrate continuity in marketing strategy, are credible as they relate to the values and mission of the brand and demonstrate originality, sincerity and integrity whereas inauthentic messages vary in consistency, leave questions about the credibility of corporate values and/or are insincere or lack integrity. Second, profit-driven messages focus on sales whether in person or through another medium while people-oriented messages focus on the consumer’s comfort, well-being and safety. Finally, social messages are steeped in deliberative motivations where firms intentionally communicate wellbeing for consumers whereas brand focused messages are merely a promotional tool to generate sales. Examples of each category can be found in Tables 3–5 below throughout the analysis.

Findings

Prosocial messages

Prosocial messages are the email advertisements that seek to promote people over profit, focused on the social over the brand and are considered authentic in tone. Table 3 contains examples of prosocial messages from the dataset.

Prosocial messaging encompasses people-driven and socially-oriented messaging. Messages in this category focus on safety and community. These messages announce elimination of services and closures, despite a loss of profit for the company. Whether internally-decided or government-mandated, they are framed as firm decisions to keep the customer and community safe. Prosocial messages do not self-promote with marketing tactics or request that consumers engage with the brand in another way (e.g. shop online, download the app). Should the consumer want to follow the brand more closely, messages in this category do share resources and sites of information. Our findings for this category are consistent with Winet and Winet’s (2021) assertions about brands offering more support:

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought on an unprecedented flood of heartfelt pep talks reassuring customers that they are not alone, which suggests an entirely different kairotic harnessing of the power of email messaging (p. 135).

These messages also encourage socially desirable behaviors like social distancing, frequent hand washing, cleaning measures, wearing a mask and even staying at home rather than coming to the store. Most focus on what the consumer and the company can do to keep everyone safe. The tone is authentic, expressing genuine

empathy for those affected by COVID-19 (e.g. senior citizens, students, frontline workers). Some describe how they are helping those impacted through giving campaigns without asking consumers to contribute. Others express their concern for consumers and send messages that encourage individual perseverance and resilience. Winet and Winet (2021) argue that this category of message could – by its very sincere, empathetic and personal nature – represent a new email marketing genre, one that is successful at maintaining relationships with consumers because of its authenticity. In fact, the authors even argue that the most successful email messages are the “We’re Here For You” emails that do not discuss COVID precautions, product discounts or encourage shopping; rather, the emails that are simply comforting make the most impact.

Brand messages

Second, brand messages are the email advertisements that seek to promote financial profit over consumers’ wellbeing, focusing on the brand over the social and are considered inauthentic in tone. Table 4 contains examples of brand messages from the data set.

Brand messages stand in direct contrast to the prosocial messaging in focus, orientation and tone. Many of these messages make only ancillary references to COVID-19 (e.g. references to masks, social distancing, working/school from home, curbside or delivery services). Here, the Coronavirus is used as a marketing strategy, rather than to encourage prosocial behavior or consumer safety. These messages embed the virus into their brand promotions and long-term strategy to incentivize consumers to shop or engage with their brand. Some messages have reformatted their emails so new permanent headers and footers draw attention to Coronavirus slogans and curbside/delivery services. In addition to long-term strategies in email formatting, other messages only reference or call out to COVID-19 in the subject line with unrelated content in the body of the email.

Others follow a problem-solution organization where they describe a problem specifically associated with the pandemic (e.g. needing to connect with others, missing out on joy) and answering it with their products or services. Winet and Winet (2021) explain that brands can use the direct-to-consumer emails as an opportunity “to showcase new products they have created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic” (p. 138). Because many companies have had to reimagine their business strategy in this new normal, advertisements in this category also describe repurposed or new products and services to encourage renewed engagement with the brand. Finally, messages that make reopening announcements or remind consumers about being open without addressing safety concerns also fall into this category.

Blended messages

Blended messages represent all brand communications that try to authentically balance concern for people and profit by incorporating both social and brand messaging into their communications. Prosociality can be thought of as a continuum where balanced messages exist between the poles. Banker and Park (2020) argue that prosocial messaging exists on a continuum between pure self-interest and purely prosocial. Rather than present only the dichotomy above between prosocial and brand messages, this category represents the middle ground of the continuum. With blended messages specifically, the level of authenticity ranges based on the message’s tone. Authentic blended messages demonstrate integrity, credibility and sincerity; in contrast, inauthentic blended messages lack originality falling back on previous marketing strategies, are insincere and/or lack credibility. Table 5 contains examples of blended messages.

These messages merge marketing strategy with prosocial messaging. While the prosocial messages did not ask for consumer engagement, blended messages continue to prompt or reintroduce suggested actions while still acknowledging safety and health concerns. Blended messages also mitigate concerns by directing consumers to engage in safer ways (e.g. shop online, download the app) or by reminding consumers about specific in-person safety procedures. While messages continue to encourage socially desirable behaviors, they also include

suggested consumer action, sometimes with incentives. Similar to prosocial messages, firms using blended messages explain how they are giving back to the community but also ask their consumers to contribute through shopping or through direct donation. Blended messages serve multiple goals, and while the focus of the message might not be on profit, Winet and Winet (2021) remind the reader that simple reassurances still “brings a company’s product to the top of our minds by establishing itself at the top of our inboxes” (p. 137) even while resembling true CSR or interest in people and planet.

The tone and authenticity of blended messages vary depending on where the focus falls along the profit-people and brand-social axes. For example, the Weight Watchers email equally incentivizes profit through new membership and people through the Healthy Giving Campaign; as such, this email would fall closer to the middle of an authenticity continuum (e.g. original, credible and sincere but perhaps inconsistent and lacking credibility because the giving campaign is internal). On the other hand, Lelo’s email advertisement is more inauthentic, focusing primarily on sales and incentivizing sales by using the Coronavirus curve as little more than a gimmick to stay indoors and use their products.

Prosocial messaging trends

In this section we discuss the overall trends of the email advertisements over time between the three categories. There are three noteworthy trends in the dataset. First, at the onset of the pandemic in the United States, advertisements were more prosocial and blended, but over time shifted to more brand-focused messages (see Figure 1 below). In the beginning, companies produced more authentic, socially driven messages. As the collective identity shifted to a new normal, brands followed suit back to marketing strategies using the pandemic to capture attention or to generate effective problem-solution messaging. This finding holds with Ozanne *et al.*’s (2010) assertion that companies cycle between people, planet and profit rather than committing to all at once. It is also consistent with Mish and Scammon’s (2010) finding that firms might place people and planet over profit in short-term actions.

Second, the highest frequency of messages in all categories occurred at phase changes (i.e. at the onset of government stay home orders and at the termination of those orders). This is consistent with Winet and Winet’s (2021) finding that there was a surge of emails in mid-March; this was the first phase change in our study, and this was when the most email messages were sent across the entire timeline (see Figure 2). Artifacts, such as email advertisements, evoke meaning in their own right, but also in relation to one another (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). When the majority of companies are responding to the changing cultural environment through email updates, it becomes expected that all brands will respond in this medium. Silence from a brand evokes its own meaning. Winet and Winet (2021) noted in a limitation that they were unable to detail the frequency of direct-to-consumer email messages related to COVID-19. Figure 2 below provides a detailed picture of the frequency of emails on a daily basis over time, showing the daily routine of emails as well as strategic pauses.

Third, because of the long-term nature of the pandemic, companies have folded COVID-19 into their overall marketing strategies. As seen in Figure 2, there are short term pauses in the use of COVID-19 messaging. During these pauses, companies used more traditional marketing strategies associated with Easter, Mothers’ Day, Memorial Day, Fathers’ Day and July 4th. However, after this initial pause, firms combined holiday advertising with COVID marketing strategies to ensure their marketing was relevant in the new pandemic normal. Although relevant to the pandemic normal, the changing frame of the message to more “adspeak” resulted in less authentic messages (Gendron, 2017). As references to the pandemic became more generic and ancillary over time, they lost the continuity, sincerity and integrity required for truly authentic messages (Pittman and Sheehan, 2020).

Discussion

Advertising through email can be used to promote socially desirable behaviors, especially when the messages are authentic, people-oriented and socially focused, even when there is brand content in the message. This echoes Pelozo and Shang's (2011) and Hanson *et al.*'s (2019) focus on intentionality with socially responsible activities and adds support that communication around these activities is equally important. As such, both the prosocial and blended categories illustrated how brands can and do promote responsible behavior during a global public health crisis as described by He and Harris (2020). There is an added emphasis on the need for authenticity (Mombeuil and Zhang, 2020) where consumers are demanding brands act in an ethical, deliberative fashion focusing on the health of people and the planet over profit (Ajina *et al.*, 2020; Groza *et al.*, 2011; Mann *et al.*, 2021). However, as time went on, email advertisements became increasingly brand-focused and profit-oriented, which resulted in less authentic messages. The third category of brand messages does not function to promote socially responsible behaviors; rather, the purpose of these messages was to (re)ignite consumerism with only ancillary references to the ongoing pandemic. While this drives profit by developing valuable brand identities (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005), it does little to balance the interests of multiple stakeholders beyond financial performance (Polonsky and Hyman, 2007).

Managerial implications

This research has a variety of implications for brand managers. First, it highlights a new genre of marketing communications to connect with consumers (see also Winet and Winet, 2021). As the coronavirus pandemic continues on, along with impending cultural traumas, brands must develop strategies to authentically engage consumers through person-oriented communications. Leaning on the triple bottom line, brands can emphasize how the wellbeing of the firm is not just based on profit but also the wellbeing of consumers and society as a whole. Doing so will build resiliency against environmental shocks to ensure long term success. Our hope is that this research serves as a roadmap for firms as they navigate how to authentically support consumers through future crises.

Research implications

The conceptual model presented above highlights how firms should incorporate authentic, people-oriented communications in their brand equity strategy. This research also identifies trends in a new genre of marketing communications identified by Winet and Winet (2021), namely the "We're Here For You" email. While research has looked at community reactions to cultural traumas (Baker, 2009; Baker and Baker, 2016; Bennett *et al.*, 2016; Demertzis and Eyeran, 2020), the authors add to our understanding of how brands specifically respond to these crises. It also adds to the conversation the importance of fostering consumer resiliency to brands' resiliency strategies (see also James *et al.*, 2021).

Limitations

A few limitations are worth noting. First, we only focused on one type of advertisement, but there were many different mediums used to advertise during the pandemic. Future research should take into consideration website updates, television commercials, smart phone app notifications and branded blogs and podcasts. Additionally, we did not include consumer perceptions or reactions to the email advertisements. Texts can connect consumers to their pasts, provide information for sense-making strategies in the present and future and even create communities around brands (Berger *et al.*, 2020; Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). As such, future research should gather consumer reactions to email advertisements, including reactions to messages in each of our proposed categories. Finally, despite the researchers' awareness of the cultural trauma and brands' retrospective acknowledgement of the severity of the pandemic, there is no way to determine how marketing managers at each firm evaluated the pandemic at the time of crafting their strategy. Thus, the authors are unable to comment on the intentionality of the authentic, people-oriented messages. However, it is our hope

that this research serves as a roadmap for firms’ best practices for authenticity in future crises. Despite these limitations, we hope that our study contributes to the scholarship surrounding COVID-19 and direct-to-consumer advertising strategies.

Concluding remarks

While our focus was on brand equity strategy in email advertisements to consumers, many of the prosocial messages had an underlying message of individual perseverance and resilience. In communication literature, resilience is regarded as “adaptive-transformative processes triggered by loss or disruption and involving five subprocesses,” the first of which is crafting a new normal (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 14). Baker (2009) reminds us that institutions play an important role in building resilience at the individual and community level. As we adjust to the new normal brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, brands are taking it upon themselves to aid in this transition. While many brands shifted to include more branded messages as the public health crisis continued, others focused on more altruistic messages centered on empowering their consumers to be more resilient during transformative times. Resilience from a communication perspective, then, is established through “storytelling, messages, routines, rituals, slogans, networks, and other means” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 16). Future research should explore how brands incorporate resilience into their strategy. Additionally, brands demonstrated resilience as they also adapted to a cultural trauma and a new normal at the firm level.

COVID-19 has been categorized as a cultural trauma in sociological literature as it alters our collective identity through shared trauma experiences. Brands have had to drastically alter their communications and brand equity strategy to promote socially responsible behaviors. Through a mix of interpretive methods and thematic analysis paired with extant literature, our typology of prosocial messaging suggests how messages vary based on authenticity, people versus profit orientation and social versus branded focus. While the authors hope another crisis like the pandemic does not happen again, we hope this manuscript serves as a roadmap for brands to authentically engage consumers in trying times.

Figures

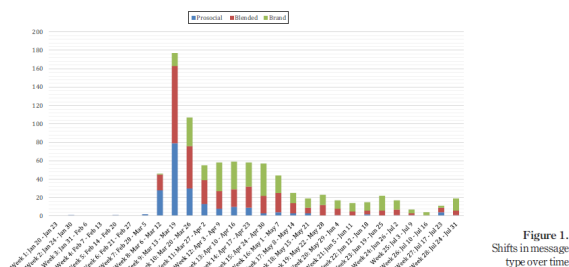


Figure 1. Shifts in message type over time

Figure 1. Shifts in message type over time

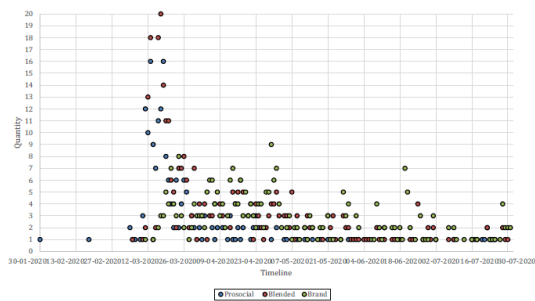


Figure 2. Daily email advertisement frequency

Table 1. Phases of data collection

Phase	Start date	End date	# of Emails
1: Pre-stay-at-home Orders	January 20, 2020	March 12, 2020	50
2: Shut down/stay-at-home	March 13, 2020	April 30, 2020	571
3: Opening up/new normal	May 1, 2020	July 31, 2020	237

Table 2. Three categories generated from themes in relevant literature

Category	Authenticity continuum	Profit/people dichotomy	Brand/social dichotomy
Prosocial messaging	Authentic	People-oriented	Social focus
Blended messaging	Authenticity varies	Blended orientation	Blended focus
Brand messaging	Inauthentic	Profit-oriented	Brand focus

Table 3. Prosocial examples

Excerpt from Email	Company
Rest assured, we are monitoring this developing situation closely, staying in regular contact with federal agencies, health organizations, and other experts. We've developed a host of resources to keep you informed and updated along the way, including our Travel Advisory on <i>southwest.com</i> and our Company blog, and we'll continue to post updates as this situation evolves. Thank you for your patience and trust in Southwest Airlines	Southwest Airlines
At the national level, we are looking into how best to move forward with our training group runs and other scheduled group events, with the promise that we will monitor situations at both the national and local level, communicate with local officials and event planners. . . . Look for direct communication from your local store's training program managers and marketing teams regarding the status of your local events over the coming days. In the meantime, out of an abundance of caution, we have temporarily stopped serving unpackaged food and beverages in our stores and at these kinds of events	Fleet Feet
We've always taken great pride in our clean and well-run stores, and we know this is more important than ever right now. On top of our daily cleaning procedures, we're adding hours to each store's payroll to make our routines even more rigorous. This means more time will be spent cleaning our stores, including cleaning surfaces like checklanes and touchscreens at least every 30 minutes. Like many others, we're taking guidance from the CDC , which recommends regular cleaning as one of the most important preventive measures we can take	Target
As part of our response to the worldwide health crisis, we're focused on using business to help protect lives through the development of the TOMS COVID-19 Global Giving Fund. . . . One third of the net profit from every Tom's purchase will contribute. . . . As always we're proud to represent a community that's rooted in giving	TOMS
To all the students out there we know this isn't how you imagined the semester going. Maybe your graduation got cancelled and you're not walking at commencement anymore or maybe you learn better in person but your classes are all online now just know that we see you, feel for you and BELIEVE IN YOU. Sending all the positive vibes as you figure out your new norm for this semester! We have made the difficult decision to temporarily close our US and Canada stores and our online store. Good vibes still available...	Victoria's Secret

Table 4. Brand examples

Excerpt from Email	Company
Subject: Safely from the store to your door with contactless delivery. Content: Mix and match. Choose two or more items for \$5.99 each. ORDER NOW	Domino's Pizza

Subject: Stay connected to loved ones with 50% off personalized gifts and more. Content: ENDS TODAY. 50% off everything. Shop Now. No code needed. Now more than ever, it's important to honor moms and grads with personalized gifts. . . . Stay connected by surrounding yourself and loved ones with uplifting moments	Shutterfly
These days, when social gatherings are a no-go, it's important to remember that we're all in this together and life goes on – however different it may look right now. In between juggling WFH and home schooling, we're spending more quality time with our families. We're finding time now for early-morning jogs and family strolls, living room yoga and reimagined at-home Friday date nights...because even though things have changed, happiness is still a go! EXPLORE BABY JOGGER	Baby Jogger
Welp, lots of us are stuck at home. We may be separated, but we can still rely on each other for a little comfort and maybe even a bit of fun! Introducing: Homebound Happiness Kits! . . . Who do you know who could use a pick-me-up? Oh, everyone? Yeah. Good thing these are so affordable!	The Sock Drawer
Introducing Touch-Free Pickup and Return at the Box. Movie nights are a cherished activity and we're doing all we can to help you enjoy them. That's why we've launched a Touch-Free experience at the Box to support our customers and communities during this challenging time	Redbox

Table 5. Blended examples

Excerpt from Email	Company
If you buy tickets on StubHub and your event is still happening, you are good to go! If your event is postponed, we will send you an email once the details are confirmed with next steps to get you to the event. If you can no longer attend your event for any reason, you can sell your tickets with confidence on StubHub in just a few quick steps. If you buy tickets on StubHub to an event that is canceled, you have the option to receive a <i>coupon worth 120% of your original order</i> to go to the live event of your choosing within the next 12 months. Alternatively, you can choose to receive a full refund for the original order amount (including service and delivery fees) to the original payment method	StubHub
Because we're #bettertogether, we want to make it easier for you to bring others along with you on the journey. Invite your friends for a free month of WW, and you'll earn a free month of membership for everyone that joins you. . . . <i>Along the way, you'll bond with the people you care about, while taking good care of yourself.</i> You see that same idea at work in our global <i>Healthy Giving Challenge</i> , happening right now. Members can turn all their WellnessWins into charitable rewards and WW will match their donations. Together, we'll provide more than 10 million meals and three million pounds of fresh produce for struggling families	Weight Watchers
Subject: Come by + say hi, but please wear a mask! Content: Let's watch out for each other. Masks are required in store. Nose and mouth must be covered for associates and customers. Learn more. Thanks in advance	Carter's
Some curves are hotter than others. We really love curves, but not this one. We're talking about the infection curve! We need everyone's cooperation to help flatten the Coronavirus curve. Stay in and have fun with LELO. <i>With every purchase above 149\$, you get LELO's funky sister-brand PicoBong REMOJI app-controlled toy COMPLETELY FREE. . . . Use code STAYHOME</i>	LELO
An estimated 37 million Americans face hunger — a number that's expected to grow as a result of the pandemic. We've provided 340,000 meals to Feeding America Food Banks, but with your help we can do more. . . . Give Now	Panera Bread

Appendix

Industry profile of emails collected

1. Accommodation
2. Accommodation and Food Service
3. Administrative and Support Services
4. Air Transportation
5. Ambulatory Health Care Services
6. Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation Industries
7. Apparel Manufacturing
8. Arts, Entertainment and Recreation
9. Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores
10. Computer and Electronic Product Manufacturing
11. Couriers and Messengers
12. Credit Intermediation and Related Activities
13. Education and Health Services
14. Educational Services
15. Electronics and Appliance Stores
16. Finance and Insurance
17. Financial Activities
18. Food Manufacturing
19. Food Services and Drinking Places
20. Food and Beverage Stores
21. Furniture and Home Furnishing Stores
22. General Merchandise Stores
23. Goods-Producing Industries
24. Health Care and Social Assistance
25. Health and Personal Care Stores
26. Hospitals
27. Insurance Carriers and Related Activities
28. Leisure and Hospitality
29. Miscellaneous Manufacturing
30. Miscellaneous Store Retailers
31. Monetary Authorities – Central Bank
32. Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers
33. Museums, Historical Sites and Similar Institutions
34. Nonstore Retailers
35. Nursing and Residential Care Facilities
36. Other Services (Except Public Administration)
37. Performing Arts, Spectator Sports and Related Industries
38. Postal Service
39. Printing and Related Support Activities
40. Professional and Business Services
41. Professional, Scientific and Technical Services
42. Real Estate
43. Religious, Grantmaking, Civic, Professional and ISimilar Organizations
44. Repair and Maintenance
45. Service-Providing Industries
46. Social Assistance
47. Sporting Goods, Hobby, Book and Music Stores

48. Support Activities for Transportation
49. Telecommunications
50. Trade, Transportation, and Utilities
51. Transit and Ground Passenger Transportation
52. Utilities

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