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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH VULNERABLE PEOPLE

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***Description*:**

The project focuses on investigating which communication strategy is the most effective at encouraging vulnerable people to engage with governmental offers of support, finding confirmation that this segment is best encouraged using a basic message void of additional monetary or psychological value.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

Governments and non-profit organizations typically support vulnerable people through specific support services. For instance, unemployed people may receive free training, or people with disabilities may receive financial aid for home renovations. While it is important to design these services, but it is also important to communicate them effectively. Past research suggests that imbuing communication messages with monetary incentives or

psychological value (e.g., scarcity appeal, social norms), that complement an offer, should foster message acceptance and drive engagement (e.g., Bonner & Sprinkle, 2002; Goldstein et al., 2008). However, vulnerable people may be particularly prone to exhibiting vigilance and mistrust towards such messages, leading them to reject well-intended support offers. This may explain why vulnerable people often do not seize these opportunities available to them (Harmeling et al., 2021). Therefore, our objective is to determine how to effectively communicate with vulnerable people to help them access and engage with the support they can receive. Specifically, we seek to answer two research questions: 1) How to enhance the value of a support offer through communication, in order to help vulnerable people engage with the offer? 2) How does vulnerability affect the effectiveness of different communication messages enhancing the value of support offers?

Method and Data

We conducted a field experiment study, in the form of a direct marketing campaign focusing on the area in and around Paris. This experiment was conducted in collaboration with Pôle emploi, a centralized governmental organization for employment. The aim was to support unemployed people's return to employment by focusing on the acquisition of new skills, in the form of training, especially in light of increased unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 9002 randomly selected unemployed people received one of six support messages by SMS, informing them about trainings that could help them find a new job. The basic text in the control condition stated that the trainings were free, remunerated, and explained the relevance of the training (i.e., Control – Plain Message). All other treatment conditions also used this plain message but built upon it by communicating additional monetary or psychological value, using conventional tactics (financial incentive, scarcity, sense of autonomy, encouragement, autonomy + encouragement). We therefore

created six conditions in our field experiment, which included one control condition and five treatments. Each support message contained text plus a link to the training platform. We measured whether participants engaged with the offer by clicking on the link.

Summary of Findings

We find that communication messages aiming to improve the actual and perceived value of the service are less effective in fostering offer engagement among vulnerable people, than a plain message which offers arguably less value. By matching our experimental data with socio-economic secondary data, we also show that the more people are vulnerable, the more their engagement increases when the message is plain and devoid of persuasion techniques. In fact, the results showed that all the support messages that communicated additional value generated less engagement compared to the plain control message. Moderation analyses using primary and district-level secondary data associated to vulnerability further highlighted that the level of vulnerability indeed enforces this tendency to mistrust value communicated in messages. This indicates that for vulnerable people a more moderate, careful, communication approach is required to foster engagement with support offers, therefore exposing normally effective communication strategies as ineffective when targeting vulnerable individuals. Lastly, given that we show that established marketing communication strategies are largely ineffective when aimed at vulnerable people, the current findings illustrate valuable boundary conditions of those strategies.

Statement of Key Contributions

For companies and institutions who communicate with vulnerable individuals our study has unequivocal implications: Managers need to create communication messages which provide basic information on the support offers, but do not promise additional incentives or

benefits. Vulnerable people are wary of such promises of more value, which considerably reduces the effectiveness of campaigns. Furthermore, the current research extends the novel, yet growing, literature uniting consumer vulnerability and marketing communication. While previous research focused on a) the barriers that prevent vulnerable people from accessing services aimed at them (e.g., Harmeling et al., 2021; Streitwieser et al., 2019) and b) the benefits that vulnerable people derive from engaging in services created for them (Gross et al., 2021), few have directly examined which marketing communication strategies work best at driving vulnerable people to engage with offers of support designed for them. Given the current interest in assessing the strengths of simpler communication as opposed to more complex communication strategies (e.g. Grant, 2021; Reddy et al., 2020), the notion of "less is more" appears to fit when focusing on communicating with vulnerable people. This research may therefore be of value to governmental agencies and non-profit organizations working at generating engagement among vulnerable people.

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