

Individual Social Issue Experiences: An exploration of the Future orientation of individuals, perceived consequences and feeling

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that an individual’s behaviour can be predicted on the basis of their time orientation. This study extends this view by examining individuals’ self-reported behaviour across two social issues (excessive alcohol consumption and speeding) in order to understand the relationship between immediate versus future time orientation, feelings and consequences in relation to two important social issues. A web-based self-administered survey was utilised to gather data from a convenience sample of largely university staff and students. The results indicate that future oriented individuals are more likely to assess few negative consequences and anticipate more positive feelings associated with their experiences related to the social issue.

Introduction

One of the difficulties in resolving social issues and their associated behaviours is that in many cases the actual consequences of undertaking identified social issue behaviours may not be realised until well into the future. Further, given that many social marketing campaigns promote the notion that engaging in social issue behaviours now, may have consequences that may not be seen until some time in the future (e.g., smoking – heart disease; recycling – improved environment), it is logical to expect that individuals’ responses to social issues and their associated behaviours may be influenced by where they are positioned in reference to time. Accordingly, undertaking social issue behaviours may be determined, to some extent, by an immediate orientation which focuses on the ‘now’, or by a future orientation based on what is expected to happen in the longer-term (Kaufman and Lane, 1994).

Literature Review

Based on the premise that there are valid and reliable differences across individuals in how they consider distant outcomes in deciding their current behaviour, Strathman et al. (1994) proposed an individual difference measure they termed consideration of future consequences (CFC). Strathman et al. (1994, p. 742) hypothesised that there are some individuals who “believe certain behaviours are worthwhile because of future benefits, even if immediate outcomes are relatively undesirable, or even if there are immediate costs”. Conversely, there are those who are more concerned with immediate benefits rather than costs or benefits that may not occur until further into the future.

Research has demonstrated that individuals high in CFC are more likely to practice positive health and environmental behaviours (Ebreo and Vining, 2001; Joireman et al. 2001; Lindsay and Strathman, 1997; Strathman et al. 1994) suggesting that such individuals are concerned with long term consequences – both negative and positive. In view of this, and given that many socially important behaviours are seen to involve identified risks, (e.g., unsafe sex, smoking, drug taking, drinking to excess, speeding), individuals’ temporal orientations, may

also influence the consequences they perceive to be associated with undertaking various social issue behaviours (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999). As such, it would seem that those individuals high in CFC are more likely to consider the negative consequences associated with these behaviours than those low in CFC (Rothspan and Read, 1996; Strathman et al. 1994). Given this circumstance, it could be assumed that high CFC individuals (who are more likely to practise positive social issue behaviours) would possibly assess that there are limited negative consequences associated with those behaviours.

Assessment of negative consequences

Consumer decision-making and consumption often involves risks which can result in negative consequences or outcomes. As such, in the context of decisions and consumption much attention has been devoted to researching risk. Since the 1920's risk has been studied extensively in economics, finance and decision sciences (Dowling and Staelin, 1994), however, Bauer (1960) introduced the concept of risk to the marketing literature when he proposed the notion of 'perceived risk'. Bauer (1960) argued that any action taken by a consumer involves risk which produces consequences that cannot be anticipated with absolute certainty, and some of which are likely to be unpleasant. Historically perceived risk, in the marketing literature, has been primarily concerned with purchase behaviour (e.g., Bettman, 1973; Dowling and Staelin, 1994); however, more recently the role of perceived risk has been examined within the context of social issue behaviours. For example, Nonis et al. (1996) examined perceived risk associated with donating blood studying donors and non donors and Rindfleisch and Crockett (1999) examined perceived risk associated with smoking focusing on smokers and non-smokers.

In terms of individuals who are oriented towards the future, and therefore, more likely to engage in positive social issue behaviours in areas such as health and the environment (Strathman et al. 1994), such individuals may see little potential for negative consequences associated with undertaking positive social issue behaviours. As such, it would be expected that they would assess (i.e., make the evaluation) no negative consequences associated with practising behaviours promoted in the community by social marketers. On the other hand, for those individuals more oriented towards the immediate, and therefore, less likely to engage in social issue behaviours promoted in the community, it could be argued that they would be more likely to make a subjective assessment (i.e., evaluation) of greater negative consequences associated with their behaviours. Thus,

H1: Consideration of future consequences has a significant negative effect on subjective assessment of negative consequences.

Feelings

Affect has been shown to be an integral aspect of the consumption experience (Burke and Edell, 1989). Moreover, as suggested previously, consideration of future consequences has been shown to provide some explanation of an individual's social issue behaviour (Strathman et al, 1994) and their assessment of potential negative consequences. Moreover, given that this characteristic focuses on consequences (immediate and future), the degree to which individuals exhibit this particular trait may lead them to anticipate specific feelings as a result of their particular orientation. Feelings are viewed here, in the context of affective reactions that individuals experience in relation to an encounter (Burke and Edell, 1989) or consumption experience (Richins, 1997) or even an anticipated experience. Within the context of social issues, an encounter or consumption experience could be likened to social issue behaviours undertaken by individuals. Thus, in relation to the degree to which

individuals exhibit CFC, it could be argued that high-CFC individuals who “consider the future and try to influence future outcomes” (Strathman et al, 1994, p. 746) are more likely to anticipate positive feelings associated with their behavioral experiences, than low-CFC individuals. This is because high-CFC individuals are more likely to practice social issue behaviours promoted within the community than low-CFC individuals (Rothspan and Read, 1996; Strathman et al. 1994). Thus, a consequence of being future focused may be that it leads to anticipating positive feelings for the individual (Burke and Edell, 1989) from an experience. Thus,

H2: Consideration of future consequences has a significant positive effect on feelings.

Assessment of negative consequences and feelings

An individual’s assessment of negative consequences may also exert an influence on feelings because when individuals enter into the behavioural process they have to deal with a conflict of choice – to behave one way or another. For some individuals, this conflict may be present because they will undertake social issue behaviours that are not promoted in the community (for example, speeding or drinking to excess). Thus, as alluded to by Luce (1998) this conflict may provide some indication of the ‘feelings’ that are present because of the subjective expectation or, possibility of loss (Stone and Gronhaug, 1993; Yates and Stone, 1992) surrounding the outcome of the course of action. The basis for this argument is that feelings arise in accordance with one’s subjective assessment of the negative consequences associated with a behavioural action (Stone and Gronhaug, 1993; Yates and Stone, 1992). Hence, individuals who assess there to be few negative consequences associated with their positive behavioural actions will, also, possibly have more positive feelings as a result of that assessment. In contrast, a greater subjective assessment of negative consequences may result in experiencing more negative feelings. Thus,

H3: Assessment of negative consequences has a significant negative effect on feelings.

Assessment of negative consequences and social issue experiences

It has been argued by Bauer (1960) that any action taken by a consumer involves risk which produces consequences that cannot be anticipated with absolute certainty, and some of which are likely to be unpleasant. Thus, a social issue experience may also be explained by the assessment of negative consequences. For example, it could be argued that individuals (whose social issue experiences involve undertaking positive social behaviours) may perceive greater certainty that their behaviours would involve less risk and, therefore, less likely produce unpleasant consequences than those individuals who undertake the opposing behaviours. Thus,

H4: Assessment of negative consequences has a significant negative effect on social issue experiences.

Feelings and social issue experiences

In the past there has been some examination of the motivational nature of affect, showing that some individuals appear to anticipate particular emotions at the prospect of goal success and/or failure (Bagozzi, Dholakia and Basuroy, 2003). These individuals may anticipate feeling positive emotions (e.g., happiness, gladness) if they achieve their goal and negative emotions (e.g., anger, guilt) if they fail. This suggests that affect plays an important role in decision making by determining what behavioural choices individuals make, and how they make those choices (Bagozzi et al. 2003). Moreover, just as an individual can anticipate negative feelings if they made the wrong purchase decision (Simonson, 1992), in relation to

the social issue experience, an individual could also anticipate negative feelings if they undertook the behaviour not promoted in the community (that is, speed or drink alcohol to excess). Thus,

H5: Feelings has a significant positive effect on social issue experience.

Method

A web-based self-administered survey was adopted in this study, where an email was sent to staff and students via the university email system notifying them of the study and requesting their participation. However, as the surveys were posted on the web, it may be expected that some of the respondents were not staff or students because of the unrestricted nature of self-selection of respondents (Forrest, 2003). The email included information on the purpose of the study and included a link to a unique Web site location where the surveys (i.e., speeding and excess alcohol consumption) could be accessed. Initially, respondents were required to choose 'one' social issue of interest by clicking on a link which directed them to the relevant survey. Both surveys were similar except for minor word adaptations. The data collection for the study ceased four weeks after the launch of the study. Therefore, any data collected after this date was not used in subsequent analysis.

Eight items were used to measure (CFC) based on the Strathman et al. (1994) 12-item measure with four immediate items retained from the original and four future oriented items adapted. Eight items were used to measure feelings and were adopted from Edell and Burke's (1987) feeling scale consisting of 52 feelings in three factors - upbeat feelings (UF), negative feelings (NF) and warm feelings (WF). These four positive and four negative items were chosen on the basis that they identified a wide variation in how the feeling construct could be stated (DeVellis, 2003). Four items were used to measure individuals assessment of negative consequences, and were generated by using Stone and Gronhaug's (1993) perceived risk measure as a point of reference. Consideration was given to these items capturing two aspects of negative consequences, that being to oneself, or to others as a result of undertaking behaviours associated with a social issue. A dichotomous variable (yes/no) indicated whether respondents' social issue experience was the same as the behaviour promoted in the community (i.e., undertaking the behaviour). A seven-point Likert scale format was used for the study.

Results

The administration procedure yielded 559 useable surveys for the Speeding sample and 587 usable surveys for the Excess Alcohol sample. In the sample female respondent were in the majority (68%) and respondent ages ranged from 18 to 86, with an average age of 29 years. With regard to practising the social issue behaviour promoted in the community, 64% of the sample reported their social issue behaviour was the same as the behaviour promoted in the community (that is, did not speed or did not drink alcohol to excess). Partial Least Squares (PLS) SEM analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Table 1 presents the hypotheses of the study and shows the path coefficients between the exogenous and endogenous variables, average variance accounted (AVA) for, R^2 and critical ratios. As indicated in Table 1, all paths have bootstrap critical ratios (Chin, 1998) which are significant (< 1.96) indicating that overall, the hypotheses are supported.

Table 1: Hypotheses Results

Predicted Variables	Predictor Variables	Path	Path Variance	R ²	Critical Ratio
H1 Assessment of Negative Consequences	Consideration of Future Consequences	-0.120	.0144	.01	3.44
H2 Feelings	Consideration of Future Consequences	0.156	.029		5.08
H3	Assessment of Negative Consequences	-0.486	.241	.27	23.74
H4 Social Issue Experience	Assessment of Negative Consequences	-0.166	.051		5.40
H5	Feelings	0.292	.110	.16	8.98
AVA				.15	

Discussion & Conclusions

This study adds to our current understanding of particular consumer behaviour variables and the role they play within the process that leads to individuals' social issue experiences. For example, previous research has shown that individuals high in the trait CFC (i.e., more future oriented) are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviours than low CFC individuals. However, as shown by the findings here the degree that individuals are immediate or future oriented is a factor in how they evaluate or assess negative consequences as well as the feelings they report experiencing. Thus, in characterising more future oriented individuals in terms of perceived negative consequences and feelings, they are more likely to have lower assessment of negative consequence and also anticipate more positive feelings associated with their positive social issue experiences.

Moreover, as shown by the findings, having assessed fewer negative consequences and anticipated more positive feelings, high CFC (more so than low CFC) individuals are more likely to undertake positive or pro-social issue experiences by engaging in those behaviours promoted in the community. Conversely, in characterising low CFC individuals who are more immediate oriented, they appear to assess greater negative consequences and anticipate more negative feelings, and also are still more likely to engage in a social issue experience that encapsulates a behaviour *not* promoted in the community (that is, speed or drink alcohol to excess). Understanding the interplay of these factors may provide some insight for social marketers. For example, it may be inferred that those individuals whose social issue experiences are characterised by behaviours *not* promoted in the community would be less cognisant of the risks or feelings associated with such behaviours. However, as illustrated by these findings, these individuals appear to have an awareness of the risks involved as they do assess there to be more negative consequences, as well as an awareness anticipating more negative feelings, nevertheless they continue to undertake negative or social behaviours not promoted in the community. It may be that part of the explanation of their apparent ability to deal with the risk and negative feelings can be attributed to an aspect of their personality – that is, their time orientation and their greater concern for the immediate benefits and costs rather than thinking ahead when making behavioural choices.

Although the explanatory power is limited because of the low AVA, the findings may provide some insights for social marketers. For example, even though the goal of social marketing is for individuals to engage in what might be termed social marketing exchange, ultimately any behavioural action, negative or positive, ultimately resides within the individual, rather than the social marketer. As such, understanding the drivers of social issue behaviours is critical.

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