



No Guns Allowed: How Retail Gun Control Policies and Consumer Values Influence Retailer Evaluations

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Summary Brief

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Across four studies, this research documents several findings. First, we demonstrate that the adoption of a gun control policy by a retailer increases consumers' brand favorability. Second, we highlight a boundary condition to this effect, such that a gun control policy decreases consumers' brand favorability for individuals high (vs. low) in support for gun rights. Third, we show that value congruence (i.e., the alignment between a consumer's own personal values and perceptions of the a brand's values; Zhang & Bloemer, 2008) is the psychological process underlying these effects. Fourth, we generalize our focal effects to a real world brand (Target) and show that the adoption of a gun control policy increases brand favorability for consumers low (vs. high) in patronage behavior of the brand, thereby elucidating an important practical implication of this work. This finding is interesting and unexpected in that gun control policies are actually influencing the less loyal customers the most. Finally, we find that a pioneer brand strategy in the adoption of a gun control policy by a retailer significantly increases, and a follower brand strategy directionally increases, consumers' brand favorability compared to the retailer having no gun control policy.

Introduction

Gun violence is a major societal problem in the U.S., and it has continued to become more ubiquitous in recent years. Largely as a result of the increase in gun violence, an increasing number of major retailers, such as Costco, CVS, and Whole Foods, have adopted gun control policies that ban customers from bringing guns into their stores. Given the growing prevalence of such gun control policies by retailers in the marketplace, an important question to ask is – how might such policies where retailers ban guns from entering their stores influence consumer behavior in retail environments? Specifically, how might the adoption of such a policy by a retailer influence consumers' brand favorability of the given retailer? The current research addresses this question of both theoretical and practical importance as well as discusses steps that policy makers can take to encourage such a policy.

Background

We draw on signaling theory (Spence, 1974) to theorize about how the adoption of a gun control policy by retailers may influence consumers' brand favorability levels. A large body of marketing research has leveraged signaling theory to explain how information is transmitted and received by different parties in the marketplace, and has shown that a variety of marketing actions can serve as signals to consumers. For example, a low price guarantee by a retailer signals the proximity of the retailer's price to the lowest price in the market (Dutta & Biswas, 2005). In addition, prior work has shown that online purchase return leniency can signal a commitment to customer service (Oghazi, Karlsson, Hellström, & Hjort, 2018). This marketing action leads to higher purchase intentions due to greater customer trust of the brand. Further, research has demonstrated that online retailers use price to signal customer service expectations that consumers should have (Mittra & Fay, 2010). This work finds that online retailers decrease customers' service expectations by signaling low service quality through lower prices with random-endings.

Related to this body of research, we predict that the adoption of a gun control policy by a retailer can be considered as a positive signal to consumers. Specifically, we posit that a retailer's gun control policy will be interpreted by consumers as a signal that the retailer cares about its customers and has good values. That is, it seems likely that consumers would perceive that the retailer cares about the well-being of its customers and wants to help protect them against the growing cases of gun violence and mass shootings.

Study 1

This study demonstrates that a retailer's gun control policy tends to increase consumers' brand favorability of that retailer. In addition, we show that consumers' individual levels of support for gun rights (i.e., their values) moderates this effect, such that a gun control policy decreases brand favorability for consumers high in support for gun rights. Further, we find that there is no effect of a gun control policy on brand favorability for consumers low in

support for gun rights. Finally, we find that individuals' political orientation did not influence the effect of a gun control policy on brand favorability, helping to rule out that potential alternative explanation for the observed effects.

Study 2

This study replicates the observed effects from the previous study by showing that a retailer's gun control policy increases consumers' brand favorability of that retailer. We also again find that consumers' support for gun rights (i.e., personal values) moderates this effect, such that for consumers high in support for gun rights, a gun control policy decreases their brand favorability levels. Finally, and importantly, this study provides evidence for the psychological process underlying the observed effects. Specifically, we find that value congruence significantly mediates the relationship between the gun control policy and support for gun rights interaction and brand favorability.

Study 3

In this study, we demonstrate the generalizability of the positive effect of a gun control policy on consumers' brand favorability to a real world brand (Target). We also find that consumers' patronage behavior of the retailer moderates this effect, such that the positive effect of a gun control policy on brand favorability manifests for consumers low (but not high) in patronage behavior. In addition, we find that consumers' religiosity does not influence the effect of a gun control policy on brand favorability, helping to rule out religious values as a potential alternative account of the observed effects.

Study 4

In this study, we find that a pioneer brand in the adoption of a gun control policy increases consumers' brand favorability compared to a brand that does not adopt a gun control policy. In addition, we find that a follower brand in the adoption of a gun control policy tends to increase brand favorability in comparison to a brand that does not have a gun control policy. This unexpected finding may be due to the fact that the follower brand is still taking a proactive action toward gun control, even if it was only after someone else already instituted such a policy. Perhaps consumers also assumed that the gun control policy was voluntary so still required initiative on behalf of the retailer, which could be different than if the consumer felt that the retailer was mandated to institute such a policy. Further, we show that consumers' support for gun rights moderates these effects, such that for consumers low in support for gun rights, a pioneer brand strategy in the adoption of a gun control policy increases brand favorability compared to having no such policy. However, for these consumers, there is no difference in brand favorability between the follower brand strategy and control conditions. Moreover, there was no effect of either the pioneer or follower conditions on brand favorability for those high in support for gun rights. Finally, we demonstrate that value congruence mediates these effects.

General Discussion

Across four studies, this work documents several findings. First, we show that the adoption of a gun control policy by a retailer increases consumers' brand favorability of the given retailer. Second, we highlight a boundary condition to this effect, such that a gun control policy decreases brand favorability for consumers high (vs. low) in support for gun rights. Third, we demonstrate that value congruence is the mediating mechanism underlying these effects. Fourth, we generalize our focal effects to a real world retail brand (Target) and show the novel and unexpected finding that the adoption of a gun control policy increases consumers' brand favorability for people low (vs. high) in patronage behavior of the brand, thereby revealing an important practical implication of this research. Finally, we demonstrate that a pioneer brand strategy in the adoption of a gun control policy by a retailer significantly increases, and a follower brand strategy directionally increases, consumers' brand favorability.

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