Masking Our Risky Behavior:
How Licensing Allows Us to Disregard Social Distancing

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Introduction

o COVID-19 has impacted the economy, politics, and society in unprecedented ways (Gadarian et al., 2020).

o In the US and Canada, conservatism is negatively associated with COVID-19 risk perception (Pennycook et al., 2020).

o Increasing cases in the US may be due to lack of concern, misperception, and reluctance to change behaviors (Pennycook et al., 2020).

Fear Appeals / Fear Reduction

o Fear of COVID-19 is a predictor of positive behavior change (Harper et al., 2020).

o Higher personal risk perception is a predictor of engaging in more protective measures (Wise et al., 2020).

o Individuals able to reduce fear through one avenue may be less motivated to engage in others (Maloney et al., 2011).

Moral Licensing

o When people act morally, they feel secure in their moral identity, making it more likely for them to act poorly in the future (Merritt et al., 2011; Cascio & Plant, 2015).

o People gain moral "credits" that can later be spent on something morally dubious (Lasarov & Hoffmann, 2018).

o Regarding COVID-19, individuals may feel that adhering to one protective measure licenses them to disregard other protective measures.

Hypotheses

H1: Conservatives will engage in less social distancing behaviors than liberals.

H2: People who are more concerned about COVID-19 will hold more positive attitudes toward social distancing policy and personal protective practices.

H3: People who hold more positive attitudes toward social distancing policy will engage in more social distancing behaviors.

H4a: Due to licensing, people who hold more positive attitudes toward personal protective practices will engage in less social distancing behaviors.

H4b: The endorsement of substitution myths will mediate the previous relationship.

H5: H2-H4 will hold when controlling for political orientation.

Methods

Participants

o *N* = 517 MTurk participants (613 completed, 96 excluded)

   o Age: *M* = 37.3 years, *SD* = 11.3
   o Political orientation (1=very liberal, 7=very conservative): *M* = 3.55, *SD* = 1.85
   o Race: 378 White, 63 Black, 10 American Indian/Alaskan Native, 52 Asian, 4 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 28 Hispanic/Latinx, 4 Other
   o Gender: 310 men, 198 women, 2 transgender, 1 nonbinary

Scales

o Fear
   o COVID-19 Concern (α = .838)
o Attitudes
   o Social distance policy support (α = .939) and effectiveness (α = .917)
      o Ex) closing schools, closing bars, shelter-in place orders
   o Personal protective practice adherence (α = .868) and effectiveness (α = .882)
      o Ex) frequent hand washing with soap, wearing a cloth face mask, not touching face
o Justifications
   o Belief in substitution myths regarding COVID-19 (α = .820)
      o Ex) "It is ok to go out to visit friends occasionally, as long as I wash my hands a lot and avoid touching my face."
o Behaviors
   o Going out in public (α = .899)
      o Ex) # of times in the past 2 weeks you have gone out to socialize, etc.
      o Does not include going to work
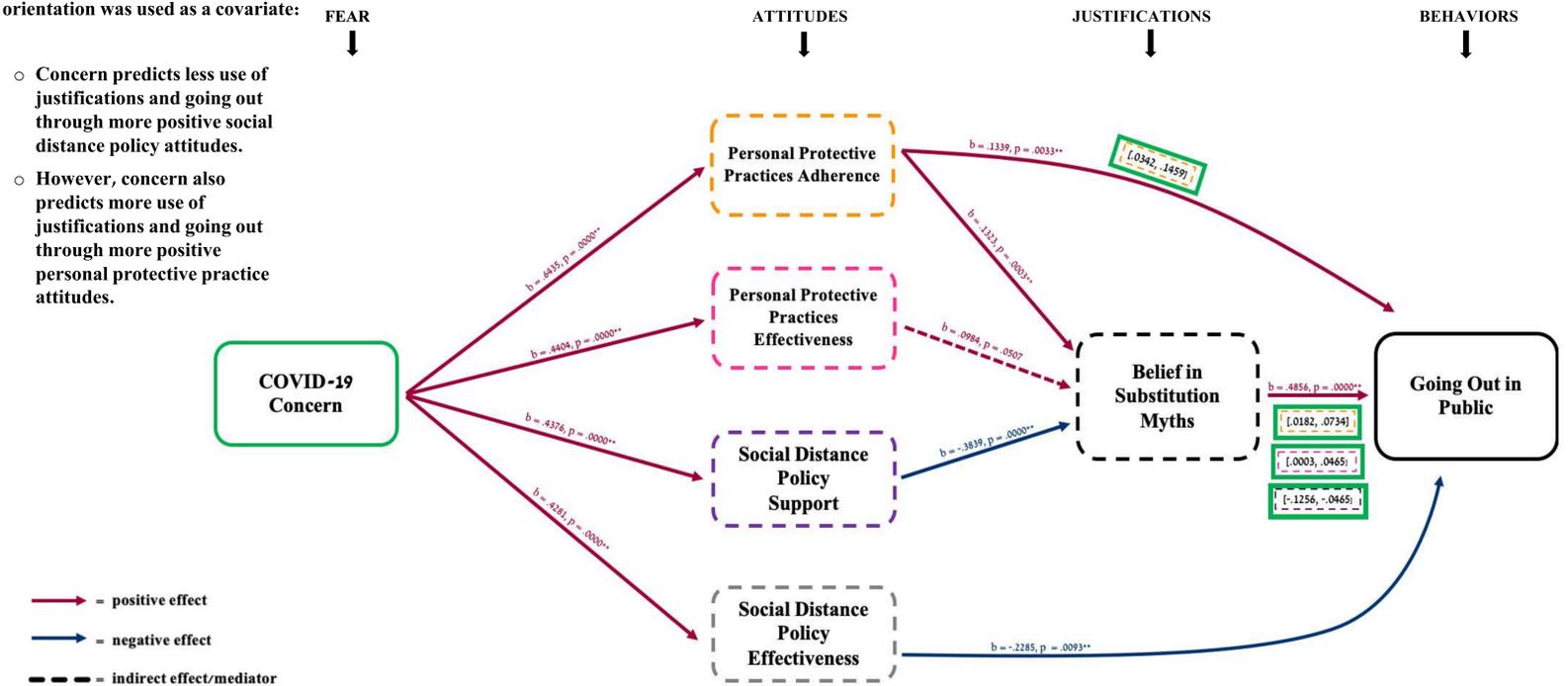   o Hours Spent Away from Home
   o Decreased Contact

Procedure

o This survey took place on April 15th, 2020, when most states were under a government mandated stay-at-home or shelter-in-place order (The CNN Wire, 2020).

Results

Correlations of political orientation and behaviors revealed that conservatives went out in public more (*r* = .287, *p* = .000**), spent more time away from home (*r* = .115, *p* = .010**), and decreased contact less than liberals (*r* = -.102, *p* = .021*).

Hayes' PROCESS Model 80 (2018) mediation analyses were used to test whether COVID-19 concern's effect on behaviors was mediated via attitudes and justifications. Political orientation was used as a covariate:

o Concern predicts less use of justifications and going out through more positive social distance policy attitudes.

o However, concern also predicts more use of justifications and going out through more positive personal protective practice attitudes.

*Confidence intervals are indicated on the final leg of each indirect effect and are color coded to match previous legs of the effect.

Discussion

Implications

o Licensing and/or fear reduction allows individuals who adhere to more personal practice measures to justify going out in public *more*, even though these individuals are highly concerned about the virus.

   o This effect holds when controlling for political orientation, meaning the licensing effect applies beyond partisanship.

o Policy makers should be aware that the public views health practices as substitutable precautions rather than additive ones.

   o Social distancing is the most effective health practice during a pandemic (Bai, 2020).

   o Overall protection is diminished when other practices are used in place of social distancing measures.

   o Personal protective practices undermine the effect that concern has on encouraging people to socially distance.

Limitations

o Self-report

o Participants asked to remember behaviors up to two weeks prior

o One-shot design

Future Directions

o Test politicization of personal protective practices and justifications over time

o Separate the effects of fear reduction and moral licensing

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