

Coronavirus Ethics: Judgments of Market Ethics in a Pandemic

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Office-hours link: <https://bath-ac-uk.zoom.us/j/99898202897?pwd=cXhFZTlvOW1pRUJwbW01c0R0d3hLUT09>

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns caused unprecedented changes. It is in this context that we explore consumer ethical judgments, building on an existing project on market ethics, for which data had already been gathered before the pandemic*. We anticipated a change in ethical evaluations as a result of the pandemic: with people hearing daily of thousands of “excess deaths” due to the pandemic and millions becoming unemployed, even the most egregious examples of unethical marketing practices might seem less important, particularly for those directly affected by the disease, or the measures taken against it, or the abrupt drop in economic activity (Bandura 1986; Goode & Iwasa-Madge 2019; Goolsbee & Syverson 2020; Horsley 2020).

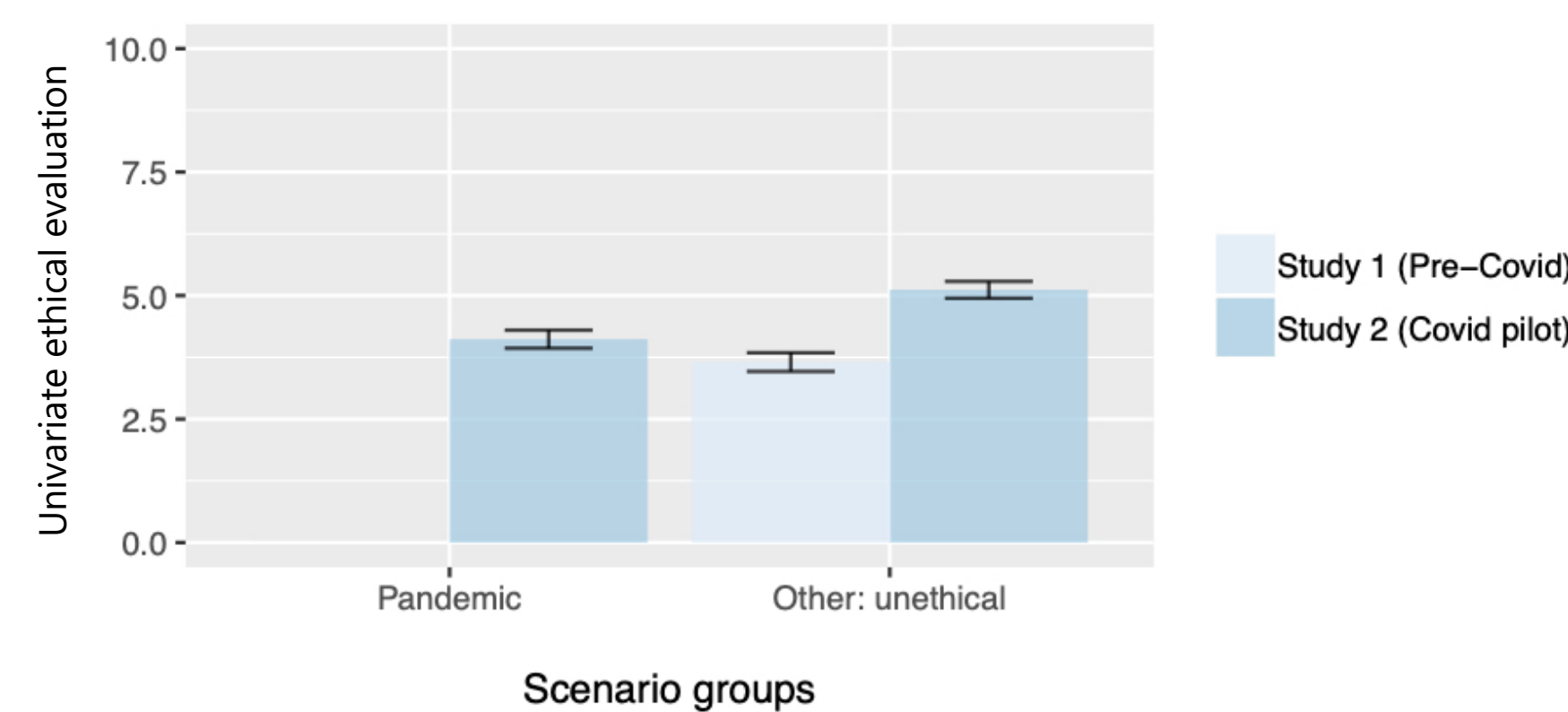
METHODS

We conducted a pilot study followed by the main study during the first half of 2020 when most participants were subject to lockdown measures. The results of these studies were compared to those from the “pre-covid” study we conducted in 2019. Recruited in the United States, via Amazon Mechanical Turk, participants in all three studies were shown descriptions of controversial marketing scenarios adopted from Sandel (2012). For each scenario, participants provided a univariate ethical evaluation of the offer. The “covid” studies also included questions related to the lockdown and pandemic at the end of the questionnaire.

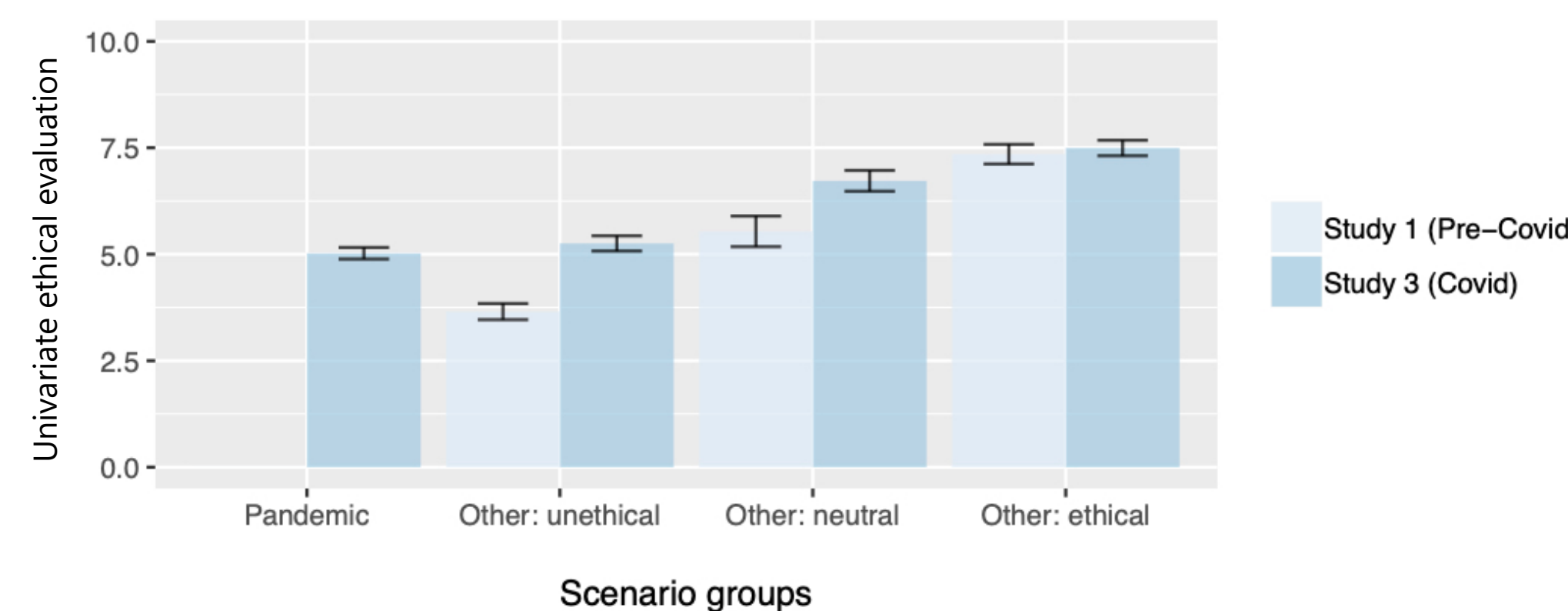
Studies	N of participants	Scenarios
Pre-covid (Study 1)	98	4 randomly selected from 16 scenarios from Sandel (2012)
Covid pilot (Study 2)	168	2 randomly selected from 8 scenarios evaluated as the most unethical in Study 1 + 2 randomly selected from 4 scenarios related to the pandemic
Covid main (Study 3)	331	2 randomly selected from 16 scenarios from Sandel (2012) + 2 randomly selected from 4 scenarios related to the pandemic

RESULTS

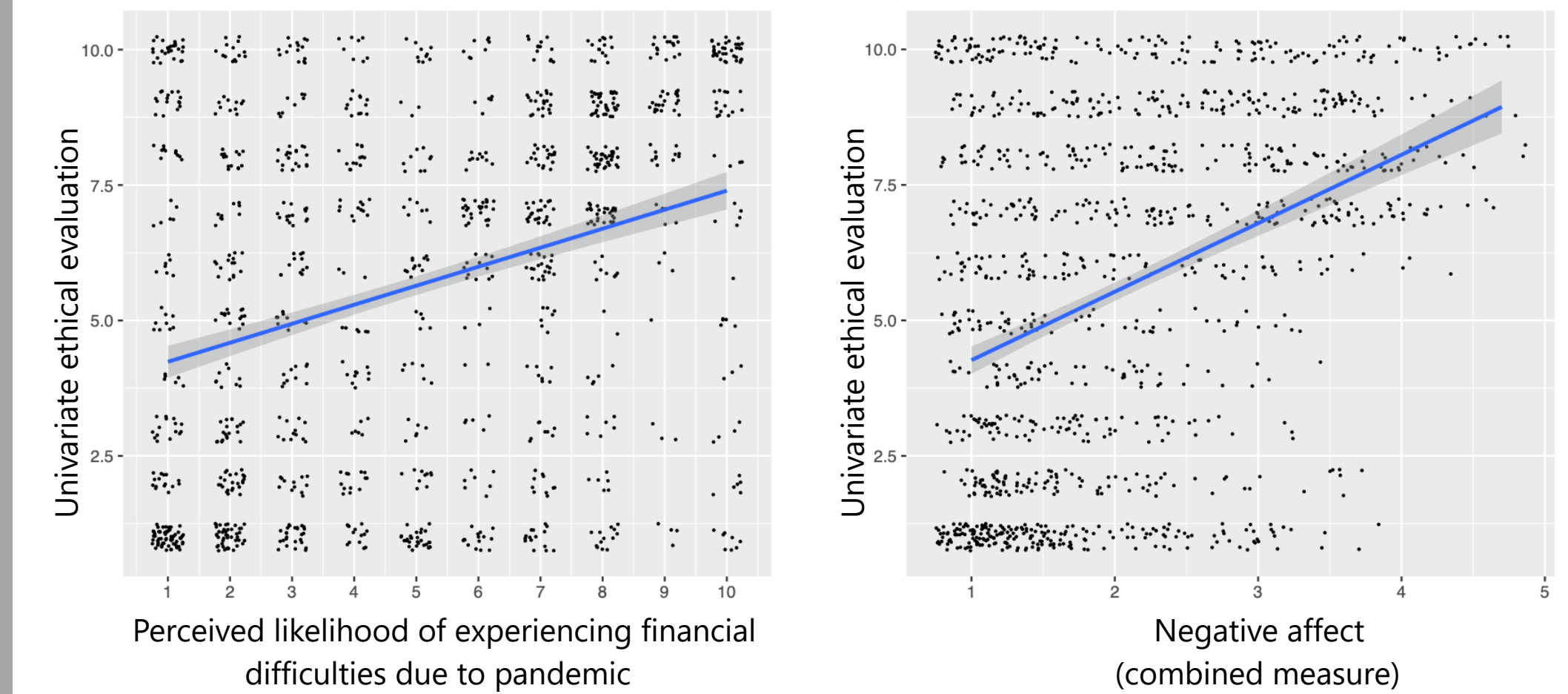
- Our analyses show that the scenarios, which were evaluated as unethical in Study 1, were perceived as more acceptable in Studies 2 and 3 ($p < .0001$).



- On the other hand, there was no significant difference in the evaluations for the scenarios, which were evaluated as ethical in Study 1.



- The regression analyses (controlling for scenarios), show that participants with larger households evaluated the scenarios as more ethical than those with smaller households ($p < .001$).
- Respondents who were in lockdown at the time the survey was conducted rated the scenarios as more ethical than those who were previously in lockdown ($p < .0001$).
- In line with Gaudine & Thorne (2001), participants evaluated the scenarios as more ethical when they reported higher degrees of negative affect, lower ratings of overall wellbeing and higher likelihood of experiencing financial difficulties ($p < .0001$).



DISCUSSION

Research on ethical decision-making in the pandemic has implications for policymakers as well as marketing practitioners. If ethical judgments that we might normally expect of consumers change markedly in a pandemic and under lockdown, there might need to be a greater reliance on policymaker intervention. For practitioners, there might also be a need for more deliberate self-regulation. Equally, ethical judgments more generally might be distorted, suggesting a greater requirement for scrutiny of decision-making with significant ethical considerations, be it by individuals as consumers (e.g., Would consumers be more inclined to cheat?) or as managers (Would managers be more inclined to engage in misconduct?). Finally, differences in responses of consumers according to lockdown characteristics might inform policymaker decision-making in developing lockdown policies.

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