

# Enabling consumer reciprocity through voucher campaigns

Enabling  
consumer  
reciprocity

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Received 22 February 2023  
Revised 18 May 2023  
22 June 2023  
14 July 2023  
Accepted 25 July 2023

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study proposes that reciprocity appeal may influence consumers helping behavior. The authors suggest that this influence depends on the target of reciprocity (direct vs. indirect), consumer–brand social distance (close vs. distant) and frequency of exposure to the appeal over time.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research was conducted through three experimental studies. They were carried out both through online experiment (Study 1) and in laboratory (Studies 2 and 3). Study 3 consisted of an experiment combined with longitudinal growth models, supporting the hypothesis that repetitive periods decrease reciprocity over time.

**Findings** – The results demonstrate that consumers close to a brand become more prosocial toward the company when the reciprocity appeal is perceived as direct (vs. indirect). In contrast, the indirect reciprocity appeal influences consumers distant from the company. Furthermore, reciprocity appeal decreases consumer helping behavior over time, but indirect reciprocity appeal attenuates this negative effect only to close customers.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research contributes to theory by showing that direct reciprocal appeals increase the helping behavior of close customers when company appeals are infrequently made.

**Originality/value** – This research is the first to empirically investigate the efficiency of voucher campaigns. Furthermore, it innovates by exploring a situation of direct consumer reciprocity in which the consumer decides to help a company with an expectation, but no explicit requirement, that the company will reciprocate.

**Keywords** Reciprocity, Consumer–company social distance, Helping behavior, Longitudinal growth models

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Consumer reciprocity is addressed in the marketing literature as the consumer helping behavior, defined as any extra-role behaviors that customers engage in to help a company (Johnson & Rapp, 2010). Although this literature is well established (see Gong and Yi (2021) for an exhaustive review), the Covid-19 pandemic (a context of extreme crisis for service companies) has brought an atypical situation that offers us new opportunities to broaden our knowledge about customer helping behavior (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020).

Consider two examples: (1) Cinemark, a well-established movie theater chain, has launched a promotion for customers to buy vouchers to watch upcoming movies in the future. Cinemark's advertising appealed to customers to avoid company bankruptcy during the pandemic; (2) Stella Artois' "Support a Restaurant" initiative encouraged customers to buy vouchers for future consumption at restaurants to help local businesses during the pandemic. These two cases suggest reciprocals exchange, where customers give up their current consumption in favor of helping to save the company. In other words, the customer is

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This research was supported by CAPES, a Brazilian government entity focused on training human resources.



required to support the company in the present at the expense of their consumption since there is only an expectation of future consumption, but it is not explicitly detailed (e.g., date and local of consumption, type, and quantity of product/service).

These cases illustrate two forms of reciprocity appeal: Cinemark suggests appealing to customers to buy vouchers to help the cinema itself (direct reciprocity), and Stella Artois' "Support a Restaurant" appeals to customers to help local restaurants (indirect reciprocity). Direct reciprocity refers to a situation where "Person A provides resources to Person B with expectation, but no explicit requirement, that the Person B will provide resources to Person A at a later point in time" (Goldstein, Griskevicius, & Cialdini, 2011, p. 442). In turn, in indirect reciprocity, Person A provides resources to Person B with expectation, but no explicit requirement, for receiving resources from a Person C (Baker & Bulkley, 2014).

Literature suggests that customers may be willing to increase the number of purchases, accept higher prices (Johnson & Rapp, 2010), and be tolerant of delays (Yi & Gong, 2008). However, no research has investigated how customers respond to reciprocal appeals to help a company, examining the purchase of vouchers for future consumption as a new form of customer helping behavior (see Gong & Yi, 2021). To address this gap, this research attempts to examine how kinds of reciprocity appeal (direct vs. indirect), consumer-company social distance (close vs. distant), and frequency of exposure to the appeal over time influence consumers' helping behavior.

Drawing on the Theory of Reciprocity (Simpson, Harrell, Melamed, Heiserman, & Negraia, 2018), the first hypothesis of the research posits that both types of appeals - direct and indirect reciprocity - enhance customer's helping behavior (H1). However, when the appeal is based on direct reciprocity, consumers close to the company will increase their helping behavior (i.e., buy a voucher for future consumption), compared to those distant from it (H2). A basic principle of direct reciprocity is selectivity, in which individuals tend to be more grateful and prosocial towards individuals who have acted prosocially towards them in the past (Baker & Bulkley, 2014). Thus, we argue that close customers are more likely to have received a prosocial experience from the company (such as a waiter's extra-role behavior in a past service) and therefore more willing to perform helping behavior in the present. Conversely, when the consumer is distant from the company, an appeal based on indirect reciprocity should be more effective in increasing customer helping behavior. The company's reputation for helping other important people is based on the prospect that one's generosity will be rewarded by observers (Simpson *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the reputation becomes more salient than the feeling of gratitude to those distant customers.

Furthermore, we demonstrate that frequency of reciprocity appeals is an important driver of consumer helping behavior (H3). Based on donor fatigue syndrome (Barnes, 2006), we suggest negative effects associated with continued or repetitive exposure to reciprocity appeals on customer helping behavior over time, as excessive appeals for help create fatigue in the target audience. Jensen, King, and Carcioppolo (2013) highlight that repeated exposure to appeals for assistance can lead to a decrease in the willingness of individuals to provide help. This decrease can be attributed to psychological and emotional exhaustion, as individuals may feel overwhelmed or desensitized by the constant requests for assistance. Moreover, when consumers are exposed to frequent reciprocity appeals, their cognitive load increases, as they need to allocate mental resources to evaluate and respond to each appeal (Sweller, 1988). Over time, this cognitive burden can lead to decision fatigue and a decreased likelihood of engaging in helping behavior.

In our research, we have made noteworthy contributions to the literature on consumer helping behavior. By conducting three experimental studies, we have expanded the understanding of how direct reciprocity campaigns, specifically through the use of vouchers, can serve as an effective tool for facilitating reciprocity during times of crisis. Our findings highlight the importance of customization based on the customer's relationship with the company, demonstrating that explicit appeals for assistance are more effective for close or loyal customers, while campaigns

emphasizing indirect reciprocity are more effective for more distant customers. Additionally, we have further advanced the literature by uncovering a time-dependent condition related to these campaigns. Our research indicates that repeated help-request campaigns can lead to donor fatigue, diminishing the willingness of consumers to provide assistance. This finding highlights the need for companies to carefully manage the frequency and timing of such campaigns, to avoid donor fatigue and maintain the desired level of consumer support.

## 2. Reciprocity appeals and consumers helping behavior

Customer helping behavior depends on the customer's acceptance of the principle of reciprocity. The principle of reciprocity suggests that individuals must return favors and pay their debts (Goldstein *et al.*, 2011). By this principle, individuals feel obligated to give back to those who have given them something positive (Gouldner, 1960).

In marketing literature, several studies (see Figure 1, top panel) show that when consumers receive a personalized gift from a company, they appreciate this gesture and will feel a certain tendency to buy something from said company in return (Beltramini, 2000). Good service can also influence customers to buy again (Yi & Gong, 2008). These actions are examples of direct reciprocity appeals and put the company as a giver and the customer as a recipient, who feels obligated to reciprocate toward the company (Simpson *et al.*, 2018).

Additionally, literature also investigates how consumers respond to companies' reciprocity appeals toward other important targets, such as donations to a non-profit organization (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004), environmentally conscious use of resources (Goldstein *et al.*, 2011), and support for a social project (Mantovani, de Andrade, & Negrão, 2017). The key feature of these actions is that customers are encouraged to act as donors, while the target of the donation (e.g., a non-profit organization or an environmental project) is the recipient. In these cases, companies perform appeals for indirect reciprocity, acting as supporting agents for environmental and social campaigns by encouraging customers to aid other significant targets.

However, in Covid-19 times, new situations of reciprocal exchange have emerged, such as vouchers campaigns (Christie, 2020). In these situations, the companies appeal for reciprocity through voucher sales for future consumption, where the customer is the donor, and the company is the recipient. Figure 1 reveals that none of the surveys considered the customer in the donor role (i.e., purchasing the voucher initially). Research has primarily concentrated on a type of early reciprocity from the company, wherein the company first provides something to the customer before triggering the customer's reciprocity.

Furthermore, previous research has not focused on examining how the repeated use of reciprocity appeals impacts customer helping behavior over time. Considering that crisis situations require increased dedication from customers, it is natural for campaigns to be repeated.

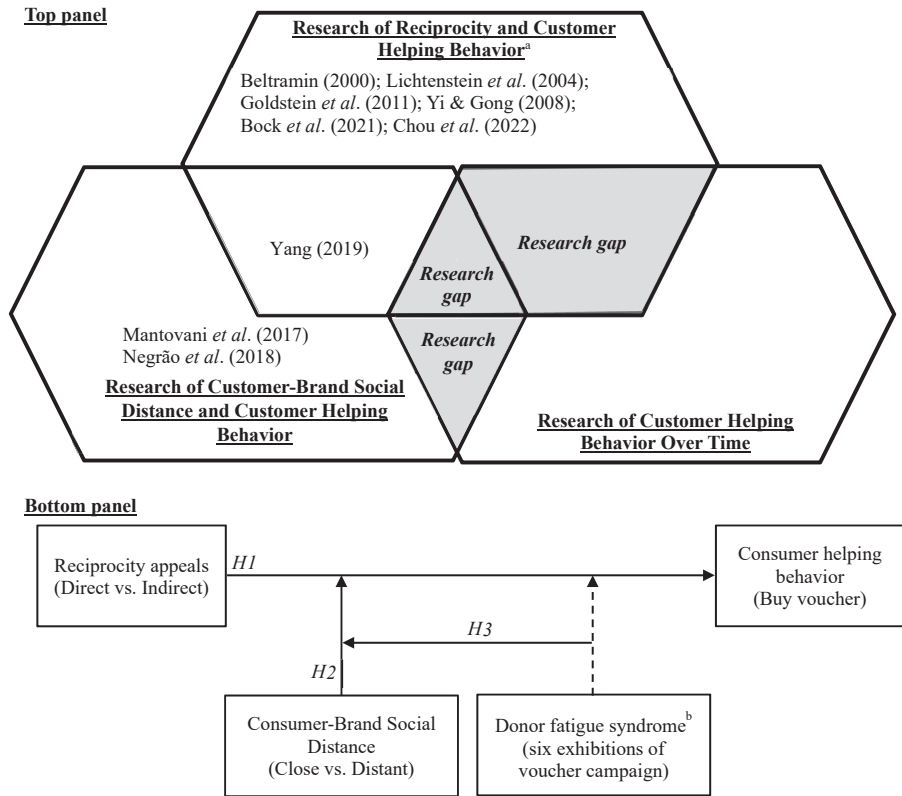
This study develops a theoretical framework to empirically test these gaps through three hypotheses (Figure 1, bottom panel).

## 3. Study 1

Study 1 was designed to test the role of appeals of reciprocity on consumer helping behavior (H1) and how consumer-brand social distance moderate this effect (H2). The basic prediction is that close consumers (vs. distant) to the brand will demonstrate greater consumer helping behavior when messages appeal to direct (vs. indirect) reciprocity.

### 3.1 Participants and design

Study 1 aimed to reproduce the conditions described in the cases presented in the introduction (Cinemark for direct reciprocity vs. Stella Artois for indirect reciprocity).



**Figure 1.**  
Empirical research of customer helping behavior and theoretical framework

**Note(s):** <sup>a</sup> No empirical research has addressed the effect of reciprocity between company and customer in which the customer initiates the relationship as a donor;

<sup>b</sup> The assumption of donor fatigue syndrome was only tested in Study 3;

The dotted line represents a relationship that was tested, but not initially hypothesized

**Source(s):** Figure by authors

The study had a 3 (appeals of reciprocity: direct vs. indirect vs. control) x 2 (consumer-brand social distance: close vs. distant) x 2 (brand: Cinemark vs. Stella Artois) between-subjects design. The data was collected online (snowball sampling); respondents had the chance to win cash prizes for their participation. We excluded respondents who indicated that they were not interested in the voucher campaigns (n = 23). We also excluded respondents who did not correctly answer a question that assessed their attentiveness while completing the survey (n = 41). The final sample consisted of 497 respondents (60.9% female; mean age: 35.8 years). Participants were randomly allocated into one of twelve conditions.

### 3.2 Procedure

Participants read a story about the voucher campaign carried out by one of the companies (Cinemark or Stella Artois). The priming messages for social distance manipulation indicated whether the participant was a customer of the brand or not, before they started reading the

report. The voucher campaign was an advertisement to help a company, called “Help save a company in a time of crisis”. Participants first saw the manipulation of consumer–brand social distance: “*Imagine that you are reading your social network feed and are faced with the following advertisement about the company Cinemark (vs. Stela Artois), which you have been purchasing products from for some time (vs. which you have heard of but have never bought products from)*”. All respondents then read a brief description of the company, according to the scenario to which they were exposed.

After that, participants in the reciprocity appeals conditions read: “*The ‘Help save a company in a time of crisis’ campaign seeks to encourage the sale of vouchers for future consumption as a way for customers to contribute to companies to survive during the Covid-19 pandemic*”.

Those in the direct reciprocity condition then read that the campaign’s goal was to “[. . .] contribute to our company to be able to continue offering quality products after the period of social isolation”. In contrast, those in the indirect reciprocity condition read that the goal was to “[. . .] contribute to companies in your community for them to be able to continue offering quality products to you after the period of social isolation”. Respondents in the control condition only read the company description and voucher campaign and were not exposed to the appeals of reciprocity.

Finally, participants were asked about their intention to purchase the company’s campaign voucher. The dependent variable (consumer helping behavior;  $\alpha = 0.92$ ) was measured with three items adapted from Spears and Singh (2004): “*To what extent do you intend to buy the company voucher to consume after three months, when isolation is likely to end?*”; “*How likely are you to buy the company voucher to consume after three months, when isolation is likely to end?*”; and “*How interested are you in purchasing the company voucher to consume after three months, when isolation is likely to end?*”. The scale for responding to the first and second questions was anchored at “Definitely will not” (1) and “Definitely will” (7), while the response to the third question was anchored at “Very low interest” (1) and “Very high interest” (7). We also used the 4-item Prosocial Behavioral Intentions Scale ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) (Baumsteiger & Siegel, 2019) as a control variable, as individuals with prosocial behavior might be inclined to engage in the campaign regardless of the appeal type.

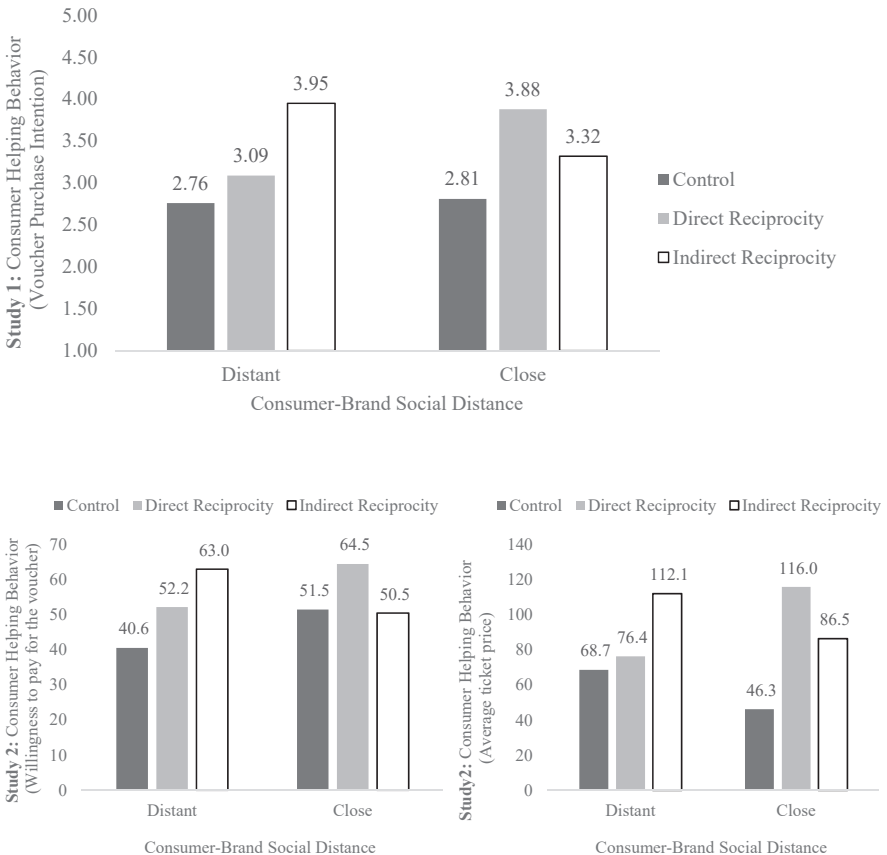
For the manipulation check, the respondents indicated their agreement to the appeal direction of the voucher campaign. The first item (“*The voucher profit directly helps company X [company name]*”) was measured from (1) strongly agree to (7) strongly disagree. The second item is a semantic differential scale in which the participant answered the question: “*Who benefits from the purchase of the voucher?*”, with a seven-point scale (“1 = other companies, 7 = the company itself”). The respondents also indicated how much they identified themselves as that brand’s customers on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

### 3.3 Results

A reciprocity type index ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) was created by averaging the two items described in the previous section, where high values (close to 7) indicate direct reciprocity, and low values (close to 1) indicate indirect reciprocity. An ANOVA shows significant difference among the three conditions ( $F(2,494) = 23.30, p = 0.001$ ), in which participants in the direct reciprocity condition reported reciprocity index ( $M_{\text{direct}} = 5.36, S.D. = 0.91$ ) greater than those in the indirect reciprocity condition ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 2.35, S.D. = 1.09$ ) and the control group ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.50, S.D. = 1.75$ ). Also, as expected, an independent sample *t*-test indicated that the participants in the consumer–brand socially distant condition felt that they were not customers ( $M = 2.35; S.D. = 1.48$ ), compared to the group close to the brand ( $M = 5.03; S.D. = 1.73$ );  $t(495) = -18.5, p = 0.001$ ).

An ANCOVA has shown interaction between the reciprocity appeals and consumer-brand social distance and consumer helping behavior ( $F(2,491) = 8.68, p = 0.001$ , Figure 2, top panel). Planned contrasts reveal that the direct reciprocity appeal has a greater effect on customers close ( $M_{\text{close}} = 3.88, SD = 1.77$ ) than distant to the brand ( $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.09, SD = 1.54; F(1,491) = 10.73, p = 0.001$ ). Conversely, consumers in the indirect reciprocity control increased their intention to engage in consumer helping behavior when they were distant from the company ( $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.95, SD = 1.84$ ), compared to the close group ( $M_{\text{close}} = 3.32, SD = 1.61; F(1,491) = 6.13, p = 0.014$ ). No differences were found for the control group ( $p = 0.85$ ).

Within the distant consumer-brand condition, consumer helping behavior was higher for those exposed to indirect reciprocity ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 3.95, SD = 1.84$ ) than for those exposed to direct reciprocity ( $M_{\text{direct}} = 3.09, SD = 1.54$ ) and control conditions ( $M_{\text{control}} = 2.76, SD = 1.39; F(2,491) = 11.53, p = 0.001$ ). For the close consumer-brand condition, the result was reversed. Consumer helping behavior was higher for those exposed to direct reciprocity ( $M_{\text{direct}} = 3.88, SD = 1.77$ ) than for those exposed to indirect reciprocity ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 3.32, SD = 1.61$ ), and control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 2.81, SD = 1.29; F(2,491) = 9.51, p = 0.001$ ).



**Figure 2.** Interaction between reciprocity appeals and consumer-brand social distance for consumer helping behavior

**Note(s):** Top panel: Study 1; Bottom panel: Study 2

**Source(s):** Figure by authors



Study 1 results show that reciprocity appeals influence consumer helping behavior (H1). Moreover, when the appeals were based on indirect reciprocity, customers distant from the brand demonstrated greater intention to engage in consumer helping behavior than those close to the brand. In turn, close customers tend to become more willing to buy the voucher when the campaign promotes direct rather than indirect reciprocity (H2).

#### 4. Study 2

In study 2, we tested hypothesis H1 again, but we created a fictitious company campaign instead of using well-known brand appeals.

##### 4.1 Participants and design

One hundred ninety-one undergraduate students (63.4% female, mean age: 23.2 years) from a university in the south of Brazil completed the lab study in exchange for course credit. We employed a 3 (appeals of reciprocity: direct vs. indirect vs. control) x 2 (consumer–brand social distance: close vs. distant) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly allocated into one of the six conditions.

##### 4.2 Procedure

Participants read a story illustrated with a folder about a voucher campaign carried out by a fictitious food company named *Cozinha Romana* [Roman Cuisine in Portuguese]. The priming messages for social distance manipulation indicated whether the participant was a customer or not of the brand before they started reading the story. The voucher campaign was an advertisement to help a company called “*Feeding tomorrow: Help save a company in a time of crisis*”. Participants first saw the manipulation of consumer–brand social distance: “*Imagine that you are reading your social network feed and are faced with the following advertisement about the company Cozinha Romana, which you have been purchasing products from for some time (vs. which you have heard of but have never bought products from)*”. Then all respondents read a brief description of the company: “*Cozinha Romana is a traditional Italian food restaurant in our city. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the company had to close its doors to respect the social isolation imposed by health agencies. As a result of the closure, Cozinha Romana is carrying out this voucher sales campaign*”.

After that, participants saw the folder with the words: “*Cozinha Romana Feeding tomorrow: Buy your voucher*” (see [Appendix](#)). Those in the direct reciprocity condition then saw the campaign’s goal was to “[. . .] allow our company to survive in the market during this turbulent period and maintain the tradition of serving quality food”. In contrast, those in the indirect reciprocity condition read that the goal was to “[. . .] allow our company to maintain twenty direct jobs and hundreds of indirect jobs, helping our city’s economy”. Respondents in the control condition only saw the intro words on the folder and were not exposed to the appeals of reciprocity.

After completing an unrelated task, participants were asked about their intention to purchase the company’s campaign voucher. We used three different criteria to measure the dependent variable: (1) Willingness to pay, in which the participant indicated a number response for the question: “*Indicate the amount in Brazilian Reais you are willing to pay for the voucher*”; (2) Willingness to accept delay, in which the participant responded to the question: “*How much time in days are you willing to accept to wait to consume the voucher products?*”; (3) Average ticket price, in which the participants were asked to analyze a menu with several products and their prices and, later, indicate which products they would like to consume with the purchase of the voucher. We also applied the Prosocial Behavioral Intentions Scale ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) and used the same items for manipulation checks.

### 4.3 Results

Similar to Study 1, the ANOVA tests have shown that the reciprocity index and brand distance check manipulations confirmed the experimental conditions.

An ANCOVA test has shown significant interaction between the reciprocity appeals and consumer–brand social distance and two measures of consumer helping behavior ( $F_{\text{willingness-to-pay}}(2,190) = 7.12, p = 0.001$ ;  $F_{\text{average-ticket}}(2,190) = 10.1, p = 0.001$ , see [Figure 2](#) [bottom panel A: willingness-to-pay; bottom panel B: average-ticket]).

Planned contrasts have revealed that the direct reciprocity appeal has a greater effect on customers close ( $M_{\text{close}} = 64.5, SD = 27.7$ , for willingness-to-pay;  $M_{\text{close}} = 116.0, SD = 62.3$ , for average-ticket) than distant to the brand ( $M_{\text{distant}} = 52.2, SD = 21.2$ , for willingness-to-pay,  $F(1,181) = 3.76, p = 0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{distant}} = 76.4, SD = 38.22$ , for average-ticket,  $F(1,181) = 4.55, p = 0.03$ ). Conversely, consumers in the indirect reciprocity control increased their intention to engage on consumer helping behavior when they were distant to the company ( $M_{\text{distant}} = 62.9, SD = 22.7$ , for willingness-to-pay;  $M_{\text{distant}} = 112.1, SD = 64.1$ , for average-ticket), compared to the close group ( $M_{\text{close}} = 50.5, SD = 18.8$ , for willingness-to-pay,  $F(1,181) = 8.34, p = 0.004$ ;  $M_{\text{close}} = 86.5, SD = 50.6$ , for average-ticket,  $F(1,181) = 7.38, p = 0.007$ ). No differences were found for the control group for willingness-to-pay ( $p = 0.14$ ), but distant customers ( $M_{\text{distant}} = 68.7, SD = 39.6$ ) reported higher average-ticket than close customers ( $M_{\text{close}} = 46.3, SD = 28.2$ ;  $F(1,181) = 4.55, p = 0.05$ ).

Within the distant consumer–brand condition, the consumer helping behavior was higher for those exposed to indirect reciprocity ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 62.9, SD = 22.7$ , for willingness-to-pay;  $M_{\text{indirect}} = 112.1, SD = 64.1$ , for average-ticket), than for those exposed to direct reciprocity ( $M_{\text{direct}} = 52.2, SD = 21.2$ , for willingness-to-pay;  $M_{\text{direct}} = 76.4, SD = 38.2$ , for average-ticket) and control conditions ( $M_{\text{control}} = 40.6, SD = 21.0$ , for willingness-to-pay,  $F(2,181) = 7.68, p = 0.001$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 68.7, SD = 39.6$ , for average-ticket;  $F(2,181) = 7.40, p = 0.001$ ). For the close consumer–brand condition, result was reversed. The consumer helping behavior was higher for those exposed to direct reciprocity ( $M_{\text{direct}} = 64.5, SD = 27.7$ , for willingness-to-pay;  $M_{\text{direct}} = 116.1, SD = 62.3$ , for average-ticket) than for those exposed to indirect reciprocity ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 50.5, SD = 18.8$ , for willingness-to-pay;  $M_{\text{indirect}} = 86.5, SD = 50.6$ , for average-ticket) and control conditions ( $M_{\text{control}} = 51.47, SD = 24.1$ , for willingness-to-pay,  $F(2,181) = 4.71, p = 0.01$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 46.3, SD = 28.2$ , for average-ticket,  $F(2,181) = 16.31, p = 0.001$ ).

The results of Study 2 also support the hypothesis that consumers distant from a brand have higher levels of consumer helping behavior when the reciprocity appeal is perceived as indirect. The direct reciprocity appeal influences consumers close to the company. Studies 1 and 2 have shown that consumers are receptive to reciprocity appeals that companies use in times of crisis. However, as the duration of the crisis is unpredictable, it remains unknown how customers behave in the face of repeated voucher campaigns over time. We address the issue in Study 3.

## 5. Study 3

### 5.1 Participants and design

To explore the hypothesis over time (H3), one hundred and sixty-seven undergraduate students (56.3% female, mean age: 24.5 years) from a university in the south of Brazil completed the lab study in exchange for course credit. The mixed-model experiment used a 3 (appeals of reciprocity: direct vs. indirect vs. control)  $\times$  2 (consumer–brand social distance: close vs. distant) between-subjects design and a within-subjects factor of time. Participants were randomly allocated to one of the six conditions.

### 5.2 Procedure

The first part of the study (between-subjects) repeated the direct reciprocity manipulation (vs. indirect vs. control) and the manipulation of brand social distance (close vs. distant). Details are described in Study 2 procedures and [Appendix](#).



In the within-subjects design, participants were exposed to five repetitions of the same voucher campaign immediately after receiving the stimulus assigned to their respective scenario, totaling six exhibitions. This procedure resulted in a level-1 sample size of  $1,002 (167 \times 6 = 1,002)$  repetitions of the voucher campaign, named cumulative voucher campaigns. Bolander, Dugan, and Jones (2017) describe that time can be measured with proxies such as repetitive tasks, exposures, and outcomes, among others, in order to perform a longitudinal growth model (LGM). As a manipulation control for the repetition of campaigns, we asked the respondents to indicate the order of the exhibition they had just seen. We excluded respondents who incorrectly stated the number of the exhibition.

After receiving the stimuli, participants were asked about their intention to purchase the company's campaign voucher. We used only one scale to measure the dependent variable: Willingness to pay, in which the participant indicated the number for the question: "Indicate the amount in Reais you are willing to pay for the voucher". This procedure was repeated six times, allowing the evaluation of engagement with the voucher overtime campaign (i.e., consumer helping behavior). Lastly, we applied the Prosocial Behavioral Intentions Scale ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) and used the same items for manipulation checks.

The data in this study were analyzed in a two-level multilevel growth model (see Bolander *et al.*, 2017), where consumer helping behavior (i.e., willing to pay voucher campaign) represents an intra-individual (i.e., time-varying) level 1 dependent variable and cumulative voucher campaigns represent a level 1 predictor variable. Reciprocity appeals and brand-customer social distance represent inter-individual level 2 predictor variables that do not change over time. In addition, inter-individual control variables were included at level 2. The analysis was conducted using HMLM (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Further details of multilevel growth models are outlined elsewhere in marketing literature (Bolander *et al.*, 2017).

### 5.3 Results

Results of the one-way ANOVA of the reciprocity type index ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ) show a significant difference between the three conditions ( $F(2,164) = 16.81, p = 0.001$ ). Planned contrasts show that participants in the direct reciprocity condition reported more frequently that the voucher campaign goal was to help the company itself ( $M_{\text{direct}} = 5.01, S.D. = 1.22$ ) compared to those in the indirect reciprocity condition ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 3.01, S.D. = 1.04, p = 0.001$ ) and the control group ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.87, S.D. = 1.02, p = 0.001$ ). Also, as expected, an independent sample *t*-test indicated that the participants in the consumer-brand socially distant condition felt that they were not customers ( $M = 3.24; S.D. = 1.09$ ), compared to the group close to the brand ( $M = 4.98; S.D. = 1.45$ );  $t(165) = -12.21, p = 0.001$ ).

Estimation results are presented in Table 1. We used a model with a homogeneous level 1 variance structure. Regarding the assumption on donor fatigue syndrome (Barnes, 2006), we suggest negative effects associated with continued or repetitive exposure to reciprocity appeals on customer helping behavior over time (Barnes, 2006; Jensen *et al.*, 2013).

Results show that as the number of views of voucher campaigns increases, the lower the willingness to pay for the voucher ( $b_{10} = -0.65, p < 0.05$ ). Repetitive periods of voucher campaign appear to overwhelm customer helping behavior, and as the campaign accumulates, customer helping behavior decreases.

Despite the confirmation of the assumption of donor fatigue syndrome, we sought to examine whether the other assumptions tested in studies 1 and 2 also influence consumer helping behavior over time. Specifically, we first evaluated which of the reciprocity appeal scenarios (direct vs. indirect) attenuate the effect of fatigue over time (H3). The results show that the willingness to pay for the voucher decreases more slowly in indirect than direct reciprocity ( $b_{12} = 0.24, p < 0.05$ , Figure 3, Panel A). Next, we evaluate how brand-consumer social distance performs over time. The results show that close customers are more willing than distant customers to continue buying the voucher over time ( $b_{13} = -0.47, p < 0.05$ , Figure 3, Panel B).

**Table 1.**  
Effect of cumulative voucher campaign, reciprocity appeal and brand-customer social distance on customer helping behavior over time

Level 2 predictors	Level 1 predictors		Cumulative voucher campaign (CVC)	
	Intercept		Covariate only	Full model
	Covariate only	Full model		
<i>Intercept</i>	3.54(3.77)**	8.85(2.21)*	-0.73(-2.03)*	-0.65(2.87)*
Prosocial behavior intentions scale	0.54(2.50)*	0.86(2.23)*	0.02(0.57)	-0.02(-0.27)
Reciprocity appeals (1 = indirect reciprocity)		-0.42(-1.44)		0.24(2.12)*
Brand-consumer social distance (1 = distant)		-0.32(-2.55)*		0.47(2.98)*
Reciprocity appeals x Brand-consumer social distance		0.80(2.05)*		-0.73(-2.79)*
-2 log likelihood	3,761.78	2,875.30		
$\Delta$ Chi-square		808.48(25)**		
<b>Note(s):</b> <i>p</i> value at significance tests is in brackets. † <i>p</i> < 0.10; * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01				
<b>Source(s):</b> Table by authors				

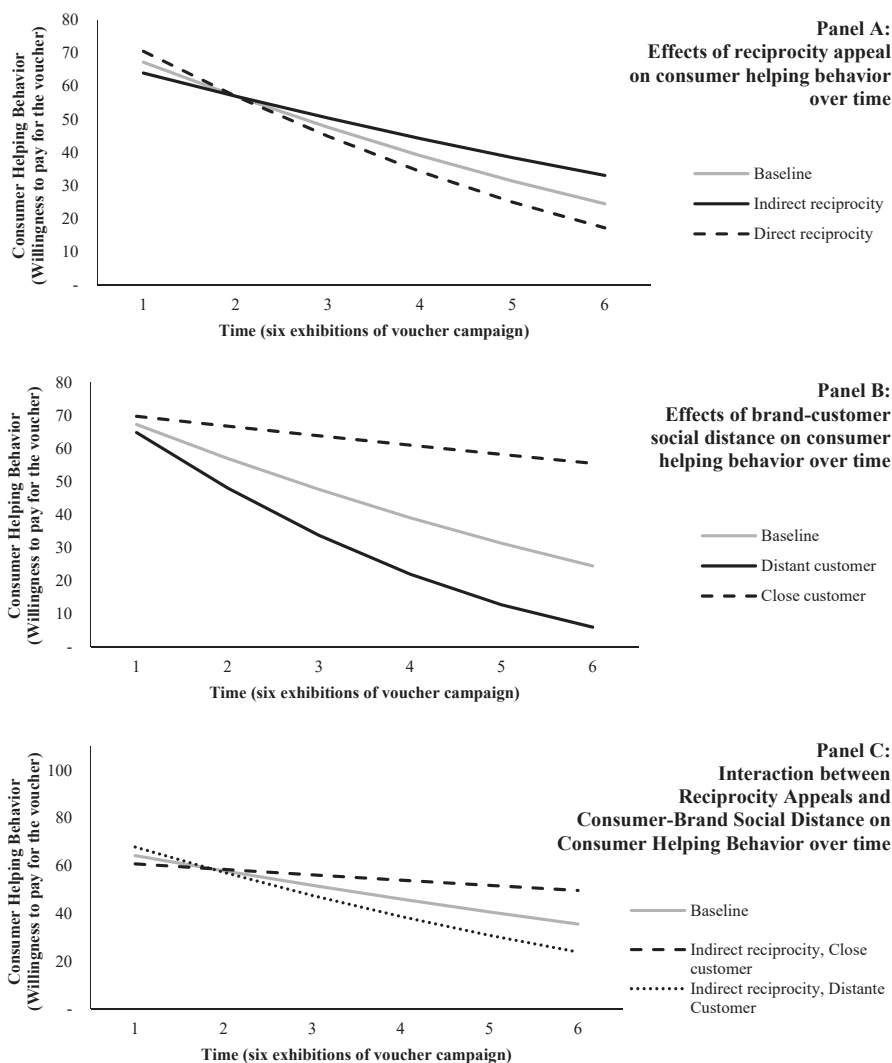
Lastly, we tested the interaction between scenarios. Surprisingly, the results show that indirect reciprocity appeal is better than direct reciprocity for attenuating the negative effect of cumulative exhibition to close customers ( $b_{14} = -0.73, p < 0.05$ , Figure 3, Panel C). This result suggests that companies can align communication with their close customers for initial voucher campaigns by emphasizing direct reciprocity. But this result is supported only when the company seeks to make unique campaigns. If the intention is to carry out several campaigns over time, it is recommended that campaigns with indirect reciprocity appeals be carried out.

## 6. Discussion

This research supports the idea that companies can use direct reciprocity campaigns during times of crisis to encourage customers to directly help them through difficulties (H1). It also demonstrates that help-call campaigns must be tailored to different audiences. When customers are close to the company (i.e., loyal customers), the company should explicitly show that it needs help to overcome difficulties. However, while it is good news that distant customers are also willing to help companies in times of crisis, our results reveal that for this audience, it is better for campaigns to ask for help emphasizing indirect reciprocity, that is, how support for the company can help other people or companies (H2). Given that periods of crisis are unpredictable, companies may also pursue multiple overtime campaigns. Our results also address this issue. Specifically, they show that campaigns asking for help suffer from a fatigue effect, and consumer helping behavior declines over time (H3). As expected, loyal customers (close) are more willing to keep the aid in cumulative campaigns, but in this case, companies must make it clear that the beneficiary of the help is another indirect entity linked to it (indirect reciprocity).

### 6.1 Theoretical implications

Our research advances extant research on consumer helping behavior in two important ways. First, we provide evidence that companies can utilize direct reciprocity toward customers in times of crisis. Literature on reciprocity argues that the norm of reciprocity weakens in companies as the organizational environment encourages self-interest rather than cooperation (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2015). The consumer helping behavior literature challenges



Source(s): Figure by authors

**Figure 3.**  
Effects on consumer  
helping behavior  
over time

this assumption by showing that indirect reciprocity is how organizations strengthen rather than weaken the norm of reciprocity. We have advanced along this path by showing that direct reciprocity is also possible when companies experience difficulties in times of crisis.

Second, in an unprecedented way, our study shows how different types of reciprocity appeals work overtime. Fatigue syndrome is a challenge for professionals and researchers involved in donation research. We contribute to this discussion by showing that some types of campaigns are more effective over time, provided they are targeted to specific groups of individuals. Specifically, we highlight that frequent exposure to reciprocity appeals can lead to cognitive overload, resulting in fatigue and a decreased willingness to help. However, fatigue can be mitigated if appeals for indirect reciprocity are directed towards close

customers. Thus, our findings enhance understanding of the factors influencing consumer helping behavior, providing valuable insights for theory and practice related to reciprocity.

### 6.2 Managerial implications

Our study provides three insights for companies in times of crisis. First, launching voucher campaigns to encourage consumer helping behavior toward a company is a viable alternative and is accepted by the consumer.

Second, we recommend these voucher campaigns to be segmented so that communication is more accurate with each customer profile. For close customers, a company may be more explicit and objective in requesting help. For distant customers, a broad and unknown audience, companies should highlight how it indirectly impacts other targets that are relevant for those customers. Third, we recommend that use is not indiscriminate: repetition of campaigns generates fatigue in customers. If it is necessary to repeat campaigns, companies must change the form of communication, focusing on indirect entities that will be helped through the campaign.

In summary, reciprocity appeals, such as vouchers for future consumption, should be used by managers to save companies in times of crisis. However, managers should be extra cautious concerning how consumers perceive the reciprocity appeals and the frequency to perform them, since it may negatively affect consumers helping behavior.

### 6.3 Limitations and future studies

The first limitation is related to companies' reputation, which may also influence the effectiveness of campaigns. Although periods of crisis inflict difficulty on everyone, consumers may judge a company's request for help as a demerit, as companies in difficulty may not be able to honor the in the future. Second, surveys can better investigate the lag time endured by customers. Yi and Gong (2008) show that customers are tolerant (i.e., flexible) when the service delivery does not meet the customer's expectations of adequate service, as in the case of delays or equipment shortages. Our experiment could not show a significant effect of predictor variables on delay tolerance. Future research should address this issue.

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### Further reading

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Direct reciprocity condition



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SUA AJUDA PERMITE QUE NOSSA EMPRESA POSSA SOBREVIVER NO MERCADO DURANTE ESSE PERÍODO TURBULENTO E MANTER A TRADIÇÃO DE SERVIR ALIMENTOS DE QUALIDADE.



Indirect reciprocity condition



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SUA AJUDA PERMITE QUE NOSSA EMPRESA MANTENHA VINTE EMPREGOS DIRETOS E CENTENAS DE EMPREGOS INDIRETOS, AJUDANDO A ECONOMIA DE NOSSA CIDADE.



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