The Diverging Effects of Cuteness on Risk Preference: Moderating Role of Gender

Yuan Li, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA
Dengfeng Yan, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Four studies examine how cuteness influences consumer’s risk preference. We found that exposure to cuteness decreases men’s risk perception, which in turn increases their risk-seeking tendency. In contrast, exposure to cute stimuli increases women’s risk perception, which leads them to be more risk-averse.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023801/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This research examines how exposure to cuteness influences consumer risk preference. Intriguingly, extant work implies seemingly contradicting predictions. One line suggests that cuteness may increase risk-seeking tendency through display of aggression (Aragon, Clark, Dyer and Bargh 2015; Figueredo and Jacobs 2011). The other line implies that exposure to cuteness should lead individuals to be more risk averse (Nittono et al. 2012; Sherman, Haidt, and Coan 2009). In this work, we reconcile these possibilities by suggesting gender as a moderator. Specifically, we propose that exposure to cuteness decreases men’s risk perception, which in turn increases their risk-seeking tendency. In contrast, exposure to cute stimuli increases women’s risk perception, which leads them to be more risk-averse.

The present conceptualization stems from the notion that cuteness is often associated with vulnerability. For example, the word cute is often used to describe small living entities such as babies and baby animals, which usually are physically weak. In addition, past research also suggests that cuteness is linked to cognitive vulnerability. Cuteness has a cognitive connotation of weak, vulnerable, submissive, and powerless (Goldhill 2015; Hellen and Sääksjärvi 2013). These properties of cuteness are related to affects such as helplessness, pitifulness, and despondency (Goldhill 2015).

We then turn to the question of how the vulnerability of cuteness can affect consumer risk preference. On one hand, exposure to vulnerable cute objects creates an illusory sense of control, which in turn leads to lower perceived risk and greater risk-seeking propensity. People’s self-perception is malleable, depending on the context or reference point (Aaker 1999; Mandel 2003). For example, Kim and McGill (2011) found people were more willing to play the slot game when their sense of control changed at the anthropomorphized slot machine. By the same logic, we suggest that cuteness, via the vulnerability connotation, will enhance individuals’ sense of control and make them more risk-seeking. On the other hand, exposure to cuteness has also been found in prior literature to trigger protective, caretaking, attentive and careful behavior (Lorenz 1943; Nittono et al. 2012; Sherman, Haidt, and Coan 2009; Sherman et al. 2013).

The effect of cuteness on careful behavior is proposed to stem from evolution. Drawn from motivated cognition that individuals inflate their perception to better perform the task (Nicholls 1984), we suggest people may inflate their risk perception in the environment to increases the infant’s chance of survival. For example, in one study, participants performed tasks more attentively after viewing unrelated cute images (Nittono et al. 2012). In line with this, we propose this evolutionary tendency would lead people to be more risk averse in general.

The most critical question then becomes under which condition each of these opposing predictions is more likely to manifest. To this end, we draw on prior work on gender difference to suggest gender as a moderator. The most relevant finding is the distinction between agency and communion (Bakan 1966). Agency goals are related to male characteristics such as self-focused, active, decisive, self-confident, and competitive; while communion goals are related to female characteristics such as caring for others. These differences imply that males are more likely to treat vulnerable cute objects as a reference point, leading to lower perceived risk and stronger risk-taking propensity. In contrast, females are more likely to feel empathy for the cute objects, leading to higher perceived risk and less risk-taking tendency.

Four studies were designed to test our proposition. Study 1A was a between subject design with 192 undergraduate students. They were presented with images of puppy and kitten (cute condition) or images of adult dog, lion, and tiger (control condition) (Sherman, Haidt, and Coan 2009). Then they were asked to indicate their preference between two options following previous literature (Duclos, Wang, and Jiang 2013). In line with our prediction, male participants in the cute condition indicated stronger preference for the riskier option than those in the control condition. The pattern was reversed for female participants.

Study 1B was to test the robustness of Study 1A by using different kinds of cuteness manipulation and different option choices. 237 mTurkers participated in a between-subject repeated measure online experiment. Option choices were presented either in a cute or neutral font. Consistent with our prediction, male participants in the cute condition demonstrated stronger preference for the riskier option than their counterparts in the control condition. In contrast, female participants’ risk-seeking tendency was lowered in the cute than that in the control condition.

The aim of Study 2 was to explore the underlying process. 271 undergraduate students participated in an experiment. They were randomly assigned to view either a cute computer or a normal computer. Later they were asked to indicate their perceived risk of computer without warranty. As predicted, male’s risk perception was lower in the cute condition than that in the control condition. For females, their risk perception was higher in the cute condition than that in the control condition though it didn’t reach significance.

The main objective of Study 3 was to test the mediation role of risk perception. 251 participants were randomly assigned to view either a cute or neutral slot game webpage and asked about their risk perception and willingness to play the game. The results replicated the same pattern as previous studies. More importantly, we found support for our proposed underlying process that risk perception mediated the effect of gender and cuteness on people’s risk preference.

The present research contributes to our understanding of consumer behavior along a few directions. Foremost, this research introduces gender into the cuteness theoretical framework and offers a nuanced understanding of how cuteness influences perception and decisions. It also adds to the increasing literature on how gender affects consumers’ preference and behavior by showing that cuteness amplifies risk preference between men and women. Furthermore, this research contributes to the risk taking literature by adding one potential antecedent.

REFERENCES


