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LIFE AFTER DEATH:  
A FIELD EXPERIMENT WITH SMALL BUSINESSES  
ON INFORMATION FRICTIONS, STIGMA, AND BANKRUPTCY

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Life After Death: A Field Experiment with Small Businesses on Information Frictions, Stigma,  
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**ABSTRACT**

In an RCT with US small businesses, we document that a large share of firms are not well-informed about bankruptcy. Many assume that bankruptcy necessarily entails the death of a business and do not know about Chapter 11, where debts are renegotiated so that the business can continue operating. Firms also exhibit bankruptcy-related stigma, believing that bankruptcy is embarrassing, a sign of failure, and a negative signal to employees and customers. Short educational videos that address information or stigma increase knowledge and decrease stigma, both immediately and durably over 4 months. Videos increase reported interest in using Chapter 11 bankruptcy and increase intended debt and investment. However, we do not observe long-term real effects. A survey of bankruptcy attorneys and judges points to entrepreneurs' overconfidence and, to a lesser extent, excessive perceived legal fees as first-order frictions explaining the limited real impact of treatments that only address information and stigma.

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# 1 Introduction

Corporate bankruptcy is a cornerstone of modern financial markets. Worldwide, the efficiency of bankruptcy is correlated with debt market development and per capita income (Djankov et al., 2007, 2008). Without corporate bankruptcy, financial distress could lead to the unnecessary dissolution of many firms, and entrepreneurs and capital providers may be unwilling to take risks and make important investments in the first place (Haselmann et al., 2010). In this sense, corporate bankruptcy can be thought of as part of the social safety net, providing some insurance against negative outcomes. While large firms often view bankruptcy as a strategic option when facing distress, small firms use bankruptcy much more sparingly, leading policy-makers to argue that the bankruptcy system is underutilized by a large part of the economy.<sup>1</sup>

Academic research on corporate bankruptcy typically assumes that firms are fully informed about the costs and benefits of bankruptcy and, hence, that direct and indirect costs of bankruptcy are the main barriers to its optimal use. While this may be a reasonable benchmark for large, sophisticated firms, small business owners may face additional frictions that reduce their usage of the bankruptcy system when in financial distress. One such friction is lack of information. In everyday speech, people often use the phrase “going bankrupt” as synonymous with shutting down one’s business. While lawyers at United Airlines certainly know the differences between Chapter 7 (liquidation) and Chapter 11 (reorganization) bankruptcy, it is possible that many small and medium-sized firms may not even be aware that there is a possibility for a business to continue after bankruptcy, which can be used as protection while negotiating with creditors.<sup>2</sup> Despite its implications for the effectiveness of major bankruptcy policies—such as the Small Business Reorganization Act (SBRA) passed by the US Congress in February 2020 in an effort to make bankruptcy more accessible and less costly for small businesses—little is known regarding small firms’ knowledge about bankruptcy.

One additional explanation for small firms’ limited use of bankruptcy protection is stigma. Researchers have considered the possibility that households may attach a significant stigma to going bankrupt (Fay et al., 2002; Gross and Souleles, 2002; Dick et al., 2008; Efrat, 2005), but most academic work on corporate bankruptcy assumes that firms view bankruptcy

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the COVID-19 pandemic created large disruptions for many small firms, forcing many to close their doors, but bankruptcy remained rare (Wang et al., 2021). Even during normal times, Greenwood et al. (2020) estimate that less than 10% of all firm closures occur within bankruptcy.

<sup>2</sup>On the other hand, we would expect firms to be relatively well-informed about bankruptcy given the high rate of firm failure, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics Business Employment Dynamics data showing that 20% of small businesses fail within one year of founding. Indeed, recent research suggests that firms have significantly lower information frictions than households (Link et al., 2021; Mikosch et al., 2021).

as a strategic option with no negative stigma (see, for example, [Bulow and Shoven \(1978\)](#); [Gertner and Scharfstein \(1991\)](#) and [White \(1989\)](#)). If households believe that going bankrupt is embarrassing or shameful, it is possible that small firms would also exhibit stigma ([Sutton and Callahan, 1987](#)). This would be consistent with a growing literature showing that behavioral factors affect firms' strategic choices ([Goldfarb and Xiao, 2011](#); [DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2019](#); [Hortaçsu et al., 2019](#)). Yet, due to difficulties in measuring it empirically, little is known about small businesses' (as well as household) stigma against bankruptcy.

This paper addresses three questions. First, do small businesses exhibit lack of information and stigma about bankruptcy? Second, if so, is it possible to reduce the lack of information and stigma, both immediately and in the long run? Third, what are the implications for firms of reducing information unawareness and stigma? To do so, we conduct a large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT) with US small businesses. To our knowledge, ours is the first RCT on how firms form beliefs and make decisions related to bankruptcy.

Our main partner in the RCT is SCORE, the leading US organization dedicated to mentoring small businesses. As such, it has a large network of small business owners at different stages of firm development, across a wide range of industries, which broadly mirrors the overall US population of small businesses. In the fall of 2020, 1,386 firms participated in a survey we developed jointly with SCORE. A few minutes into the survey, after responding to various questions about business details, firms are shown different professionally developed animated videos. In the Control group, as part of an introduction to what the survey is about, firms watch a one-minute video about a hypothetical small business owner who is struggling with financial issues, and a few options for the owner are mentioned. In the Information only treatment, firms are shown a video that is initially identical to the Control group video, but that contains an additional one-and-a-half minutes with information about bankruptcy protection, covering differences between Chapter 7 and Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and explaining the new Small Business Reorganization Act (SBRA). In the Information + Stigma treatment, firms watch a video that is identical to the Information treatment, but that contains an additional minute of content that tries to address stigma related to bankruptcy. The video highlights all the large, successful US corporations that have used bankruptcy as an avenue to restructure. It also highlights that bankruptcy protection is fundamental to US law and is part of the US Constitution, while also stressing the challenges posed by current business conditions.

After the videos, firms are asked various questions to evaluate their knowledge about bankruptcy and their attitudes toward it. They are then asked about their interest in bankruptcy, intended risk-taking, intended investment, and other financial expectations. Four months later, firms answer an additional survey collecting information on knowledge

of the bankruptcy system, stigma surrounding bankruptcy, as well actual financial outcomes during the last 4 months.

We document that small business owners have very little knowledge about bankruptcy. Among respondents in the Control group, 42% of firms are unaware that it is possible for a firm to continue operations after filing for bankruptcy. Only 34% are familiar with the differences between Chapter 7 and Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and only 11% are aware that the SBRA (which was passed 9 months prior to our survey and was highly publicized) made it easier for small businesses to file for bankruptcy. The lack of even basic information about the bankruptcy system is stark given the high failure rates among small businesses. This is especially true given that the survey was administered in November 2020, in the midst of intense economic uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, we do not find higher knowledge among small business owners with a higher incentive to learn about bankruptcy—i.e., firms with more debt or those in which the owner has a personal guarantee.

We also find widespread negative stigma surrounding bankruptcy. 70% of respondents in the Control group believe that business owners who file for bankruptcy are viewed as failures. Almost two-thirds of respondents feel that friends and family will look down on a business owner who files for bankruptcy, and over half of the entrepreneurs agree that clients and employees will be less willing to work with a business owner who has filed for bankruptcy. Stigma about bankruptcy appears to be mostly outward-focused instead of inward-focused. Specifically, firms in the Control group are least concerned with whether declaring bankruptcy is unethical, and are most concerned with how bankruptcy will reflect on them or their business. Clearly, lack of information and widespread stigma may prevent small businesses from utilizing the bankruptcy system regardless of the benefits of doing so.

Our information treatments vastly reduce information unawareness. While only 58% of firms in the control group know that firms can continue operating after bankruptcy, the information treatment increases the share of firms recognizing the possibility of “life after death” by 25 percentage points (hereafter, “pp”), strongly reducing information unawareness by over half. The information treatment roughly doubles knowledge about different basic aspects of Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Moreover, the information treatment increases the share of firms that are aware of the SBRA by 65pp. Importantly, these effects remain strong even 4 months later, although there is some reduction in magnitudes. For example, 4 months after treatment, the impact on knowledge about “life after death” is 15pp instead of 25pp.

We similarly find that viewing the Stigma video has large and durable treatment effects. Compared to firms in the Control group, firms in the Information+Stigma group have their stigma reduced by about one-third of a standard deviation ((hereafter, “ $\sigma$ ”) overall, with significant effects on all stigma categories except on whether bankruptcy is ethical, the

category which indicated low stigma to start with. The treatment has a long-lasting effect on stigma. Four months later, the overall impact on stigma is  $-0.26\sigma$ , and we cannot reject that these longer-run effects are identical to the initial effect. Importantly, across both surveys, there is little difference between the Information and Control groups in terms of stigma, indicating that it is the specific content of the Information+Stigma video that is reducing stigma.

Our results show that small businesses exhibit significant unawareness of bankruptcy and a strong stigma against considering it as an option. However, these frictions can be reduced durably even with just a short video treatment. We then move to the analysis of business outcomes. Information and stigma frictions likely make the process of dealing with financial distress appear more uncertain and costly to firms, which should affect their investment and risk-taking. We test this by evaluating if the Information and Information+Stigma treatments have an impact on firms' stated intentions. The two treatments led firms to increase their immediate willingness to consider bankruptcy, intended investment, and intended risk-taking. On immediate effects, the Information treatment increases firms' stated willingness to consider Chapter 11 bankruptcy by 25pp, and the Information+Stigma treatment increases it by an additional 6pp. Likewise, firms in the Information treatment state that they are 11pp more likely to intend to increase their investment over the next 12 months, and the Information+Stigma boosted this by an additional 3pp. Treated firms were also more likely to state they intend to increase debt financing over the next 12 months. Overall, the Information treatment increased the composite score of firms' riskiness by  $0.14\sigma$  and the Information+Stigma increased it by  $0.21\sigma$ .

Our short-term results indicate that information and stigma are each separately contributing to firms' intended riskiness, and are consistent with the idea that reducing information unawareness and stigma makes firms more likely to consider bankruptcy, which in turn makes firms more willing to consider making greater investments and taking greater risks.

Turning to actual longer-run outcomes, however, we find mostly no statistically significant effects of our video treatments. Firms in the treatment groups were no more likely to report having considered bankruptcy over the previous 4 months or to actually have filed for bankruptcy. In addition, while firms in the Information group increased their debt, firms in the Information+Stigma group did not. We also find no effect of our treatments on firm survival, as proxied by various measures of online presence, including almost 2.5 years after treatment. These longer-run results, therefore, paint a picture in which information and stigma frictions can meaningfully and durably be reduced, but where the alleviation of these constraints does not have detectable effects on firms' use of bankruptcy or on other related

real business outcomes.

We discuss several possible mechanisms for our set of results. One obvious explanation is that bankruptcy is extremely rare, especially during the period we study (Wang et al., 2021). As a result, we might not have enough statistical power to detect such real effects. On the other hand, we do have more power to detect changes in investment and debt, and yet we find largely zero effects across those outcomes as well. This suggests one alternative explanation in which information and stigma might play a role, but where other factors still prevent small businesses from using bankruptcy. In particular, given how strongly reluctant small firms seem to be to consider bankruptcy—even post-SBRA when bankruptcy is a lower-cost option—it might be the case that changing information and stigma is important only to the extent that other frictions are also alleviated.

We provide additional, largely descriptive evidence on potential complementary frictions contributing to firms' unwillingness to consider bankruptcy by conducting a new survey of bankruptcy attorneys and judges. We conducted this survey in collaboration with the American Bankruptcy Institute, and we surveyed a total of 129 respondents. After explaining the details of our study, we ask respondents to evaluate potential mechanisms behind our mixed empirical findings. A significant majority of attorneys and judges point to another behavioral factor as the leading mechanism behind the limited real effects of reducing information and stigma: overconfidence of small business owners. To a lesser extent, respondents also indicate that bankruptcy might still be considered too costly by many small firms. To conclude, we further ask respondents if they feel that bankruptcy is over or under-utilized by small businesses given its costs and benefits. The vast majority feel that bankruptcy is under-utilized by small businesses, indicating they agree that there are significant non-monetary frictions that prevent entrepreneurs from turning to bankruptcy protection.

This paper contributes to two primary strands of literature, the most important one being the literature on business bankruptcy. The literature on business bankruptcy has generally focused on the costs and consequences of different bankruptcy regimes (Hart, 2000; Bris et al., 2006; Davydenko and Franks, 2008; Bernstein et al., 2019a,b; Ma et al., 2022) and, as discussed above, has largely considered the problem of bankruptcy choice in terms of objective costs and benefits assuming that firms are rational and fully informed about the various costs and benefits (Bulow and Shoven, 1978; Bolton and Scharfstein, 1996; Gennaioli and Rossi, 2010; Dou et al., 2021). Such an approach is perhaps warranted when considering large, public firms, which are more likely to be informed. These large firms have been the focus of the majority of academic interest in bankruptcy. Instead, we approach the issue of firm bankruptcy from a different angle, focusing on the role of information unawareness and

stigma, which are likely to play a significant role in small business decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

In consumer bankruptcy, several papers have examined the role that peers play in potentially reducing stigma or providing information about bankruptcy (Dick et al., 2008; Fisher, 2020; Kalda, 2020; Agarwal et al., 2020; Keys et al., 2020). These papers consistently show that peers can influence the personal bankruptcy decision, but the evidence is mixed on whether spillovers derive from information transfer, stigma, or other possible mechanisms.

A related body of work has focused particularly on personal bankruptcy stigma, with some papers arguing that stigma has decreased over time (Fay et al., 1998; Gross and Souleles, 2002; Jones and Zywicki, 1999) while others argue that stigma persists or has even increased (Sousa, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2006). While nearly all of this literature acknowledges that stigma may play a role in the bankruptcy decision, we add to this literature by making use of an RCT to explicitly distinguish between the information and stigma channels. Meanwhile, the role of stigma and information friction in affecting business bankruptcy has mostly been ignored in the academic literature. One recent exception to this is Gotberg (2021b), who presents qualitative evidence that a sample of small business owners express significant reluctance to consider bankruptcy.

We find substantial information unawareness and stigma among firms, but also that both can be reduced. This is extremely important for public policy. Even if good laws are passed that make bankruptcy more economically valuable, firms may not be able to take advantage of the laws if they lack knowledge about bankruptcy or if bankruptcy is stigmatized. Indeed, information and stigma barriers may interact to mutually reinforce each other. Stigma against bankruptcy could prevent firms from obtaining information, and a lack of information could lead them to assume that their biases against bankruptcy are likely true. While the video treatments in the RCT were carefully created using professional videographers, they are designed to be highly scalable. Our evidence of limited long-term real effects of information and stigma frictions highlights however the presence of other frictions affecting firms' bankruptcy decisions and points to the importance of future work that could leverage large-scale natural experiments and stronger interventions that also address other simultaneous behavioral factors, such as owners' overconfidence.

The second main literature we contribute to is the one on behavioral firms. Empirical behavioral economics has frequently considered the possibility that consumers or employees are behavioral, analyzing how firms react. A small but growing literature on firms takes an alternative perspective that firms themselves may exhibit deviations from “full optimality.”

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<sup>3</sup>There is also work on how consumers respond to perceptions of firm bankruptcy risk (Hortaçsu et al., 2011; Birge et al., 2017; Antill and Hunter, 2021). In addition, research considers whether there are bankruptcy spillovers between firms (Benmelech et al., 2019; Bernstein et al., 2019b).



For example, [Malmendier and Tate \(2015\)](#) review the literature on behavioral CEOs and their effects on firms. A recent example is [Gertler et al. \(2022\)](#), who show how small businesses in Mexico fail to adopt profitable opportunities due to various behavioral frictions. Similarly, [DellaVigna and Gentzkow \(2019\)](#) show that retail chains forego sizeable increases in annual profits due in large part to managerial inertia. Other papers highlight that firms face puzzling information frictions ([Bloom et al., 2013, 2014, 2019](#); [McKenzie and Woodruff, 2014](#)), while recent work in behavioral economics shows that memories and salience have important effects on how information gets processed ([Gennaioli and Shleifer, 2010](#); [Bordalo et al., 2012, 2017, 2022](#)). We show that firms exhibit both substantial information unawareness and substantial stigma in the important yet understudied setting of bankruptcy. Our use of simple and scalable surveys embedded within an RCT provides a methodological tool that other researchers can use while studying behavioral frictions among small businesses. We refer to [Haaland et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Capozza et al. \(2021\)](#) for comprehensive reviews of information experiments that share a similar experimental design to ours.

Our paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly introduces the institutional context regarding small business bankruptcy. Section 3 discusses the experimental design. Section 4 provides a descriptive analysis of our data, analyzing information awareness and stigma using small businesses in the control. Section 5 reports the results from our RCT and the qualitative surveys of bankruptcy professionals. Section 6 concludes.

## 2 Bankruptcy Background

Small businesses in the US have two bankruptcy options when faced with financial distress. Under Chapter 7 bankruptcy, the assets of the firm are turned over to a trustee, who sells the assets and liquidates the firm, returning the proceeds to pay off creditors as much as possible. Firms that file for Chapter 7 constitute about 65% of all business bankruptcy filings according to US court filing statistics.

Alternatively, a firm may file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which is a bargaining process that aims to restructure the firm and allow it to survive if possible. While reorganization is the goal, many firms that file for Chapter 11 end up being liquidated, either by conversion to Chapter 7, the sale of all assets during the Chapter 11 process, or dismissal from court. This is especially the case for smaller firms. [Greenwood et al. \(2020\)](#) estimate that 86% of firms with over \$500 million in assets that file for Chapter 11 successfully reorganize, while only 33% of firms that enter Chapter 11 with less than \$50 million in assets avoid liquidation.

Chapter 11 can be a difficult process for smaller firms due to extensive reporting requirements and lengthy negotiations with creditors, both of which create large legal fees. Partially

due to these costs, distressed small firms have predominantly either filed for Chapter 7 or avoided bankruptcy altogether ([Greenwood et al., 2020](#)). However, in February 2020—just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—the Small Business Reorganization Act (SBRA) came into effect. The SBRA created a new bankruptcy option for small businesses, known as subchapter V of Chapter 11. Under subchapter V, businesses with less than \$7.5 million in liabilities can enter a significantly streamlined Chapter 11 process. One key feature of subchapter V is that small business debtors no longer need to confirm a reorganization plan with consent from their creditors. Instead, the small business works with an assigned trustee to create a plan that allows the firm to continue to operate while repaying creditors as much as possible over the next three to five years. Subchapter V also adjusts the Chapter 11 process to allow the entrepreneur to retain ownership of the firm even if creditors are not repaid in full. In subchapter V, the bankrupt firm is required to repay its creditors for a 3-5 year repayment period according to a plan that is approved by a judge and trustee, but then after that period any remaining unpaid debts are discharged and the small business owner retains control and ownership of the firm. Finally, deadlines for creating the plan are significantly accelerated under subchapter V, which significantly reduces the procedural costs of bankruptcy for small businesses.<sup>4</sup>

The SBRA was passed in August 2019, 15 months prior to our RCT, and went into effect in February 2020. The changes in the SBRA were widely expected to reduce the monetary costs of bankruptcy for small businesses and provide a higher chance at successful reorganization.<sup>5</sup> Initial data on bankruptcy filings soon after the SBRA went into effect suggest that these expectations were met, with the director of the Executive Office for U.S. Trustees stating in 2021, “We can say—without a doubt—that subchapter V has proven to be popular and is showing signs of success” ([White III, 2021](#)). In particular, [White III \(2021\)](#) finds that the vast majority of small businesses choose to use subchapter V rather than traditional Chapter 11, and that businesses in subchapter V appear to be at least six times as likely to successfully emerge from bankruptcy than similar firms in a traditional Chapter 11. Finally, [White III \(2021\)](#) finds that there are fewer disputes in subchapter V that lead to litigation, which should lower costs substantially for bankrupt firms.

While the SBRA makes bankruptcy a much more palatable option for many small businesses, if entrepreneurs do not know of the law change or have strong stigma against

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<sup>4</sup>We only highlight these three important changes affected by the SBRA. See [Gotberg \(2021a\)](#) for a full description of the SBRA and how it is viewed by small business owners.

<sup>5</sup>At the time of its passage, the American Bar Association (ABA) and several bankruptcy courts published summaries of the law, and disseminated information through a large network of law offices across the country. Essentially all these articles state an expectation of lower costs, e.g., an article published by the ABA states “[SBRA] lowers costs and streamlines the plan confirmation process to better enable small businesses to survive bankruptcy and retain control of its operations” ([Wang-Ekval and Evanston, 2020](#)).

using bankruptcy then it does not matter how well the law functions. Firms must have a knowledge of the law and be willing to use it for it to have any effect. Our RCT helps demonstrate that knowledge is lacking and stigma is high, but that both of these barriers to using bankruptcy can potentially be reduced.

### 3 Experimental Design

In this section, we describe our empirical methodology. We focus our attention on the specific details of our data collection in Section 3.1, with Section 3.2 providing more information on the structure of the survey and the specific questions we ask. Section 3.3 details the experimental variation we introduce by means of animated videos. In Section 3.4 we briefly outline additional features of the survey that ensure the reliability of the data we collect.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

We conducted our experimental survey in November 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis when multiple small businesses were struggling to stay afloat. We discuss the issue of external validity related to the timing of the survey in Section 5.5.

We designed the surveys using the Qualtrics online platform, and the survey links were then distributed by our research partner SCORE to their proprietary sample of US small businesses. SCORE is supported by the US Small Business Administration and is the largest small business volunteer mentor program in the US. We collected a total of 1,386 survey responses. The median time for completion of the survey was 20.25 minutes. To test the persistence of the effects, we also conducted a follow-up survey four months after the original survey, where we were able to reach approximately 36% of the sample for a total of 505 follow-up survey responses.

In Table 1 we report summary statistics of the main characteristics of all the surveyed firms and the socioeconomic background of their owners, with each column focusing on a specific subset of the respondents. Going from top to bottom of the table and focusing on the full sample (last column), we can see that 33% of the respondent firms are less than 3 years old. Half of the firms have some sort of debt, with almost one-quarter of these firms having more than \$100,000 in debt. While roughly half of the sample reports no official debt, over 85% of the sample has some type of financial obligation. The most common financial obligations are business credit cards or other business loans (25%), with rent or mortgage being the second largest (also 25%). Business owners have personally guaranteed the business debts in 27% of firms, creating personal liability for a significant portion of the

sample. Meanwhile, 10% of business owners think their firms are unlikely to remain open in the next 12 months. In terms of personal characteristics of the business owners, 63% of the sample are female and a large share (69%) has at least a college degree. The next panel shows that most respondents are between 45 and 64 years old. Finally, slightly more than half the respondents are white, 19% are Black, 9% are Hispanic, 6% are Asian American, and 2% are Native American or First Nation (the remaining respondents prefer not to answer).

## 3.2 Survey Structure and Measurement

We now provide a brief description of the survey, the structure of which is visually illustrated in Figure 1. After a brief introduction and consent form, the survey asks about basic business characteristics, then displays the animated videos, and then asks questions regarding knowledge of bankruptcy options, stigma regarding business bankruptcy, the main outcome variables, and finally the demographic characteristics of the firm’s owners. We discuss each section of the survey in more detail below.

### 3.2.1 Basic Business Characteristics

The first section asks about the basic business characteristics of the firms we surveyed. We collect information on age, outstanding debt, financial obligations, nature of debt guarantees, number of workers, and the likelihood of the business remaining operational in the future.

### 3.2.2 Informational Videos

The second section of the survey consists of professionally animated videos, which we created to generate specific sources of experimental variation. The animated videos are discussed in detail in Section 3.3 and screenshots from the videos are displayed in Appendix Figures A1, A2, and A3.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2.3 Bankruptcy Knowledge

A central part of our study consists of measuring small firms’ perceptions and awareness of bankruptcy options. In particular, we measure how much small business owners in the US know about bankruptcy protection. We measure whether small business owners correctly believe that filing for bankruptcy can be a means to keep the business afloat during times of financial difficulties or whether they incorrectly believe that declaring bankruptcy necessarily entails the death of a firm, i.e., shutting down permanently. We also measure

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<sup>6</sup>See <http://emanuelecolonnelli.com> for links to the videos.

whether businesses are aware of the difference between Chapter 7 (liquidation) and Chapter 11 (reorganization). Finally, we measure awareness of the policy and legal framework, by asking whether respondents are aware that the recent Small Business Reorganization Act (SBRA) makes it easier for small businesses to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. We discuss the questions we ask on bankruptcy knowledge and responses among the control group in detail in Section 4.

### 3.2.4 Bankruptcy Stigma

Another central part of the study is to measure the extent to which small businesses in the US perceive the presence of a negative stigma against bankruptcy. To measure stigma, we ask respondents how much they agree with the following statements: *“It is embarrassing for a business owner to file for bankruptcy.”*; *“People will think that a business owner who files for bankruptcy is a failure.”*; *“People will think that a business owner who files for bankruptcy is unethical.”*; *“Clients will be less willing to buy from a business owner who filed for bankruptcy.”*; *“Employees will be less willing to work for a business owner who filed for bankruptcy.”*; and *“Friends and family may look down on a business owner who files for bankruptcy.”* We discuss the responses to these questions in detail in Section 4.

### 3.2.5 Outcome Variables

We measure outcomes in multiple ways. First, we ask to what extent firms would consider bankruptcy as an option to deal with financial difficulties in the future. We then measure firms’ willingness to take on risk, intended future investment plans, and intended plans to take on more debt.

More specifically, our first outcome variable measures the likelihood that the respondent considers filing for bankruptcy in the next 12 months. We ask *“What is the likelihood that you will consider filing for bankruptcy in the next 12 months?”*, with answer options being: *“Definitely will not file; Moderately unlikely; Slightly unlikely; Neither likely nor unlikely; Slightly likely”*.

A second dependent variable captures business owners’ willingness to consider bankruptcy conditional on being in financial distress. We ask the extent to which they agree with the following statement: *“If I am unable to pay my debt, I will consider filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy”*, measured on the following 5-point scale: *“Strongly disagree; Somewhat disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat agree; Strongly agree”*.

The next outcome variable measures the likelihood of renegotiating debt in the next 12 months. That is, we ask business owners: *“What is the likelihood that you will con-*

sider renegotiating your debt and/or other payment obligations (such as rent) in the next 12 months?”, which they can answer with: “*Extremely unlikely; Somewhat unlikely; Neither likely nor unlikely; Somewhat likely; Extremely likely*”.

The fourth outcome variable measures risk tolerance. To do so we ask: “*How much "risk" do you think that you will take in the next 12 months? By risk, we mean risks that your business may take (not risks from the external environment), like introducing a new product or expanding to a new location.*” The answer options are: “*Less than typical amount of risk.; Typical amount of risk.; More than typical amount of risk.*”

The fifth outcome variable aims to measure intended changes in firms’ investment plans. Specifically, we ask “*Small businesses frequently need to make decisions about investment, such as whether to buy a new piece of equipment or a new facility. Over the next 12 months, how much investment do you intend to make relative to a typical year? More than usual, about the same as usual, or less than usual?*” Respondents have the five following options to choose from “*Much more than usual level of investment; Somewhat more than usual level of investment; About the same as the usual level of investment; Somewhat less than usual level of investment; Much less than usual level of investment*”.

Our last outcome variable measures the amount of debt business owners are willing to take. We ask “*Having taken the survey, do you think you may consider changing the amount of debt your business holds?*” Respondents can indicate if they will increase or decrease their amount of debt by choosing one of the following options: “*Will consider increasing the amount of debt; Will consider decreasing the amount of debt; No; I don’t have any debt.*”

### **3.2.6 Demographic Characteristics**

The last section asks about the demographic background of the firm’s owners. We collect information on gender, education, age, race, and ethnicity.

## **3.3 Experimental Variation**

We introduce one main layer of randomization into our survey, aimed at inducing experimental variation in knowledge and stigma regarding small business bankruptcy. To do so, we generate two treatment groups—aimed at varying knowledge and/or stigma—and one control group. The set of questions asked is the same for all respondents. After randomly assigning respondents to one of the three groups (control, information, or information and stigma), we obtain variation by exposing respondents to different videos after the first section on basic business characteristics. We illustrate the experimental design, as well as the total number of observations in each treatment and control group, in Figure 1.

A key assumption for our experimental design to be valid is that there is no statistical difference between treatment and control groups. A quick comparison of the first three columns of Table 1 shows that the composition of the different treatment groups is rather similar, both in terms of firm-level and individual-level characteristics. We further test for balance more directly in Table 2, where we aggregate some of the variables into coarser categories. In columns 1 and 2, we report the results from univariate regressions of an indicator variable for each treatment group on the main characteristics of interest. In columns 3 and 4 we conduct a similar analysis where the characteristics of interest are included together in the same regression. The results in the table display the randomization was effective, as there is only one coefficient that is statistically significant (at the 10% level), and because all the coefficients are small in magnitude across all specifications.

### 3.3.1 The Animated Videos

The experimental variation is introduced by means of animated videos. All videos have been professionally scripted and developed, and they are similar to the animated videos seen in a variety of contexts, including some of SCORE’s instructional videos. The full scripts of all videos are reported in A.2.

The first video is a *control video*, which consists of a brief one-minute animation about a hypothetical small business owner who is struggling with financial issues. The video is pitched as a way to explain the main topics we ask about in the survey. No further information about bankruptcy filings or SBRA is shown in the control video, which is intentionally designed so that respondents answer the subsequent questions with their own prior beliefs and knowledge about bankruptcy.

In designing the treatment videos, there are a few relevant considerations to notice. First, the treatment videos should ideally move all respondents’ perceptions monotonically in the same direction. Second, the treatment should be truthful and not provide any incorrect information. With these goals in mind, we opted to treat respondents by means of qualitative statements, an approach similar in nature to Alesina et al. (2018) and Colonnelli et al. (2022) in the contexts of intergenerational mobility and corporate responsibility, respectively.

Our first treatment video—*Information*—aims at providing information about bankruptcy protection, covering basic differences between Chapter 7 and Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and explaining the SBRA.<sup>7</sup> It is shown that firms that file for bankruptcy do not necessarily go out of business. Indeed, the video indicates that filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy can be a way for struggling businesses to find the means to stay operational. For example, the video says: “Many people think that bankruptcy means shutting down your business, this is called

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<sup>7</sup>The first part of the video is identical to the *Control* video.

*Chapter 7 bankruptcy. But there is another kind that helps you stay in business, Chapter 11. Chapter 11 is designed to protect the business until you can get back on your feet.*” The information in the video is correct and shines a light on the possible uses of bankruptcy.

Our second treatment video—*Information and Stigma*—aims not only to provide basic information about business bankruptcy but also to reduce small business owners’ stigma regarding bankruptcy. Specifically, in addition to the same *Information* video discussed above, respondents watch an additional minute aimed at reducing stigma. The video shows that filing for bankruptcy is lawful and even part of the constitution and that many successful US corporations have relied on the bankruptcy system and managed to remain profitable even after filing for bankruptcy. It contains statements such as: “*You didn’t fail, business conditions changed.*”, “*It’s a tool that responsible people use to save their business after a setback.*”, and “*Bankruptcy is a lot more common than you think. Big businesses have been using Chapter 11 for decades.*”

### **3.4 Ensuring High Quality Data**

The survey itself is designed to ensure the answers are reliable, with all videos intentionally set up to be easy to understand in terms of language. We make sure respondents pay attention to the informational videos by embedding forced stops into the videos when respondents change or minimize tabs on the web browser or move to another screen, program, or application. Also, respondents are unable to mute the audio and the fast-forward option is removed. We also track the time spent by each respondent on the survey, and we find that only 2.16% of the respondents completed the survey in less than 10 minutes. Respondents cannot skip questions, must actively click on the option to respond to each given question, and questions that require numeric entries cannot be answered with non-numerical characters. Furthermore, after asking for basic business but before we show the video, we ask respondents to confirm they have devoted full attention to the study. As discussed by [Meade and Craig \(2012\)](#), these questions aim to ensure the respondents pay attention to the subsequent questions, and they are effective independent of whether the respondents answer honestly. Almost all respondents (99.64%) explicitly state they devoted full attention to the survey. Before concluding, in one of the last questions, we ask respondents how much effort they have put forth and we find that 89.67% of the respondents state they put forth quite a bit or a lot of effort towards the study.



## 4 Descriptive Analysis

Little is known about what small business owners know about bankruptcy or their views on the process.<sup>8</sup> Before discussing the impact of our treatments, in this section, we discuss some descriptive statistics that shed light on how small business owners in our sample view bankruptcy. We focus on the control group of our sample in order to ensure that the descriptive facts are not contaminated by our information and stigma treatments.

### 4.1 Bankruptcy Knowledge

Small businesses fail at relatively high rates. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Business Employment Dynamics show that roughly 20 percent of new business establishments fail within their first year, and less than 50 percent survive through five years. Given the relatively high possibility of facing financial and economic difficulties, one might expect that it would be valuable for small business owners to have at least some familiarity with the basics of bankruptcy as an option to deal with a struggling business.

However, summary statistics in Table 3 paint a different picture. Only 35 percent of respondents self-report that they have a good understanding of the bankruptcy system. This lack of understanding is borne out in responses to three basic true/false questions, where 35, 44, and 47 percent of respondents report that they don't know the answer to each question, respectively. For example, nearly half of the small business owners do not know that debts can be renegotiated with creditors in Chapter 11. Perhaps most strikingly, 42 percent of respondents either get the answer wrong or don't know the answer to the "life after death" question of whether bankruptcy necessarily forces a small business to cease operations. This means that a significant portion of small business owners may not view bankruptcy as an option to restructure and continue operating their firms.

Table 3 also shows that nearly all small business owners are unaware of the SBRA, with 88 percent reporting that they don't know if the SBRA makes it easier or harder for a small business to file for Ch. 11 bankruptcy. This is an important finding given the widespread financial difficulties small firms were facing at the time of our survey, and because for laws such as these to be effective it is important that those who might be affected by the law are made aware of it.

In Figure 3, we display how basic knowledge about bankruptcy varies across various socio-demographic and business characteristics. In these figures, we code "don't know" responses as "incorrect," and then plot the average and 95% confidence intervals for various

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<sup>8</sup>One exception is [Gotberg \(2021b\)](#), who provides qualitative interviews of 43 small business owners in Columbia, Missouri, discussing both information and stigma among this group.

subsets of the data. Several consistent patterns emerge from this descriptive analysis. First, both owner and firm age are strongly related to having more knowledge of bankruptcy. On average, older business owners as well as owners of older businesses score significantly higher on all basic knowledge questions. Similarly, business owners that have finished college score significantly higher on most questions. We also observe differences by gender, with male business owners scoring higher than female business owners. On the other hand, we do not observe significant differences between white and non-white business owners.<sup>9</sup>

Businesses must have debt to file for bankruptcy, and so one might expect that business owners with debt would be more informed about bankruptcy. However, we find that business owners with debt get a similar percentage of knowledge questions correct. Similarly, business owners that have personally guaranteed their business loans do not display greater knowledge of bankruptcy.

## 4.2 Bankruptcy Stigma

Control group responses also give a unique insight into the stigma that business owners have against bankruptcy. Panel D of Table 3 shows that stigma is large across five of the six dimensions of stigma we asked about. We find the strongest response when respondents are asked if bankruptcy is viewed as a failure, with 70% agreeing with this statement. Between 53% and 64% of respondents agree that bankruptcy is embarrassing and that it will make it harder to work with clients or employees. 62% feel that friends and family will look down on a business owner who files for bankruptcy. All of these suggest that business owners expect quite a lot of social stigma from a bankruptcy filing.

On the other hand, only a quarter of respondents agree that it is unethical to file for bankruptcy. While 25% is still a significant portion of respondents, this is far lower than figures for other stigma questions and suggests that many business owners do not personally view bankruptcy as unethical but still worry about how a bankruptcy will reflect on their reputation and ability to run a business.

Figure 4 shows that there is significant heterogeneity in how various socio-demographic groups view small business bankruptcy. In particular, non-white owners are much less likely to agree that bankruptcy is embarrassing or a failure than white owners. They are also significantly less likely to agree that bankruptcy will damage relationships with clients, employees, or friends and family. We also see differences by gender, with male business owners displaying more stigma than female business owners across most questions.

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<sup>9</sup>We see no differences in knowledge about SBRA, as all subsets of the data are largely uninformed about the new law.

Finally, we examine the differences between businesses with and without debt and those with and without personal guarantees. Ex ante, one might expect that business owners with more stigma against bankruptcy would avoid taking on debt or providing personal guarantees, so as to avoid bankruptcy. Instead, we observe the opposite of this relationship, finding that businesses with debt have more stigma against bankruptcy than those without debt. Similarly, business owners with personal guarantees exhibit more stigma than those without personal guarantees. Given that these are purely descriptive correlations, we cannot pin down exactly why business owners with debt and personal guarantees display more stigma against bankruptcy. One possibility is that having debt and personal guarantees makes them more averse to bankruptcy. Alternatively, it is possible that business owners with a strong stigma regarding bankruptcy think it is unlikely they will ever get into financial difficulties and thus do not expect to file for bankruptcy, leading them to be more willing to take on debt.

To summarize, three points stick out from the descriptive analysis. First, most business owners know very little about bankruptcy despite high failure rates. Second, stigma appears to be quite high, with a majority of business owners labeling bankruptcy as embarrassing, a failure and expecting bankruptcy to damage their relationships with others. Third, both information and stigma vary substantially across the sociodemographic spectrum, with older and college-educated business owners having more knowledge, while white and male business owners display the most stigma against bankruptcy.

## 5 Results

In this section, we describe the results of our information and stigma video experiments. We first report the results on small business owners' knowledge of bankruptcy in Section 5.1. In Section 5.2 we study the effects on stigma. In Section 5.3 we discuss the analysis of firm-intended and real outcomes. In Section 5.4 with evidence from a new qualitative survey of bankruptcy attorneys and judges. We conclude with Section 5.5 with a brief mention of validity threats to our experimental setting.

Our econometric specification is a regression of various outcomes on indicator variables for the two treatment groups, controlling for several pre-RCT characteristics of firms.<sup>10</sup> We focus on results with robust standard errors in parentheses since the randomization is at the level of the firm. A concern in nearly all RCTs, as well as observational studies, is multiple hypothesis testing: could our results be driven by the fact that we examine many hypotheses? We assuage such concerns by creating and closely following our AEA RCT pre-registration,

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<sup>10</sup>Results are nearly identical with no control variables, as discussed in Section 5.5.

which specifies the outcomes that we test. In addition, our tables present Westfall-Young family-wise error rate adjusted p-values (following our pre-analysis plan) in square brackets. These p-values account for multiple hypothesis testing and all of our main conclusions are robust to these tests.

## 5.1 Impacts on Knowledge

Panel A of Table 4 shows that the information treatment had a large immediate effect on knowledge. As seen in column 2, the two information treatments increase the share of firms who know that bankruptcy allows for “life after death” by roughly 25pp each, raising knowledge of the truth from 58% to over 80% of firms. The treatments raise the share of True/False correct answers by 35pp. The treatments massively increase knowledge regarding Chapter 11 bankruptcy, almost doubling the share of firms knowing that business assets are protected in Chapter 11 (column 6) and more than doubling the share knowing that Chapter 11 allows firms to reorganize (column 8). Finally, the treatments boost knowledge that the SBRA makes bankruptcy easier by roughly 65pp, increasing knowledge from 11% in the control group to 75-80% in the treatment groups.

In all information RCTs, a fundamental issue is whether changes in knowledge or beliefs are transitory. One reason this is important is experimenter-demand effects, i.e., a concern that people may change their minds to please the experimenter. Another reason is simply to assess whether changes in knowledge or beliefs are durable, since more durable changes in belief may be necessary to affect longer-run outcomes.

Panel B of Table 4 shows that there are persistent improvements in knowledge about bankruptcy after 4 months. Some of the treatment effects are partially muted, e.g., the impacts on life after death shrink from 25pp to 15pp. However, the effects remain economically sizable.

As seen in Table 4, the impact of the information-only treatment and the information+stigma treatment are similar. This is unsurprising given that the key difference between the two treatments concerns stigma instead of information. Reassuringly, these results suggest that it is the informational component of the video that is providing information about bankruptcy to subjects, as opposed to subjects engaging in general information acquisition in response to more video content.

Given that the sample after 4 months is considerably smaller, an important issue is whether such changes in beliefs reflect actual changes in beliefs versus sample attrition. Appendix Table A1 presents the impacts on immediate changes in information for firms that remain in the sample throughout the RCT. As seen in Panel A, the immediate information

treatment effects among firms in the sample for the entire time period are similar to the immediate effects among all firms. This suggests that attrition bias is unlikely to be a main driver of the results in Panel B of Table 4.

Improvements to information about bankruptcy are observed across a wide range of firm and owner characteristics. As shown in Figure 3, Control group respondents of all types have little knowledge of the bankruptcy system, with average T/F scores ranging between 57% and 65% for all subgroups. Appendix Table A3 shows that the informational video improved knowledge for small and large firms, firms with debt and without debt, young and old owners, and owners with a college education and those without. We examine these subgroups because we observe the largest differences in baseline knowledge and stigma in the Control group along these dimensions (see Figure 3). In the case of bankruptcy knowledge, younger business owners and those without a college education score worse on basic knowledge questions. However, Appendix Table A3 shows that there are not consistent differences in response to treatment for any of these subgroups. Meanwhile, the main treatment effect remains large and significant across all sample splits. Overall, the treatments had large impacts across all respondents without much heterogeneity in response.

## 5.2 Impacts on Stigma

Panel A of Table 5 shows that the stigma treatment has a substantial negative effect on stigma regarding bankruptcy, both economically and statistically. For all but one variable, we see reductions in the stigma of roughly  $0.2\sigma$  to  $0.35\sigma$ , as well as a reduction in the combined stigma of  $0.29\sigma$ . The one instance where the stigma treatment fails to reduce stigma is whether subjects regard bankruptcy as unethical. This is unsurprising given that this is the one question where subjects show low stigma in the control group.

Panel B of Table 5 shows that the effects are highly persistent after 4 months. Unlike knowledge, the effects on stigma show relatively little attenuation. The combined stigma effect after 4 months is  $0.26\sigma$ .<sup>11</sup>

We believe that this finding is important as it shows that the stigma about bankruptcy may be partially addressed using relatively low-cost interventions. While one might imagine that experimenter-demand effects might cause businesses to reduce stigma immediately after treatment, it is unlikely that such effects would cause stigma to be reduced 4 months after treatment, as also discussed in Haaland et al. (2023).

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<sup>11</sup>A caveat is that we did not ask the stigma question about whether bankruptcy was unethical in the 4-month follow-up, due to limits on survey length for the follow-up. Still, even if we create a combined measure of immediate stigma reduction using only the same questions that were asked in the 4-month followup, the patterns are broadly similar.

We consistently see that the information+stigma treatment significantly reduces stigma, whereas the information-only treatment fails to significantly reduce stigma. For example, while the information+stigma treatment reduces immediate stigma by  $0.29\sigma$ , the information-only treatment reduces stigma by only  $0.05\sigma$ . Again reassuringly, this suggests that it is the stigma-related content of the videos that is reducing stigma as opposed to the general experience of viewing a video, as intended.

What type of firms exhibit stigma and respond to the treatment? The answer on both accounts is a broad range of firms. As discussed in Section 4 above, for example, businesses with debt have more stigma than those without, and white business owners also display an especially high stigma against bankruptcy. Despite this heterogeneity, all groups exhibit a sizeable degree of negative stigma. For example, 70% of respondents with debt agree or strongly agree that bankruptcy is embarrassing while the similar figure for respondents without debt is 60%. Stigma is observed in firms of different sizes and operating in different industries, and firms of all types respond to our interventions and demonstrate persistence. In Appendix Table A4, we test whether certain types of firms and owners respond more strongly to the stigma intervention. Similar to our tests of heterogeneity in response to the knowledge treatment, we find very little heterogeneity in response across the different firm and owner characteristics, with no statistically significant differences by firm size, owner age, owner education, or firm debt levels. Instead, we find that all firm types respond significantly to the stigma treatment.

**Magnitudes.** To benchmark our  $0.29\sigma$  reduction in stigma, we compare our magnitudes with those in research on stigma reduction in other contexts. [Broockman and Kalla \(2016\)](#) is an influential recent RCT on reducing stigma and prejudice toward transgender people using a brief canvassing intervention.<sup>12</sup> Their intervention improves transgender tolerance by strikingly similar magnitudes to ours ( $0.29\sigma$  after 3 days,  $0.34\sigma$  after 3 months). [Broockman and Kalla \(2016\)](#) refer to their effect size as “substantial” and their intervention as “broadly successful”, especially relative to other behavioral interventions aimed at reducing stigma and prejudice (see [Paluck et al. \(2021\)](#) for a review).

### 5.3 Firm Outcomes

Our results show that small businesses exhibit significant unawareness of bankruptcy and a strong stigma against considering it as an option. We now analyze firm outcomes.

**Intended Outcomes Immediately Following Treatment.** Panel A of Table 6

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<sup>12</sup>Stigma related to bankruptcy may seem quite different from stigma related to transgender people. However, as noted above, we are not aware of other RCTs on reducing firms’ stigma toward bankruptcy.

shows that the treatments had sizable effects on many intended outcomes. Effects are generally larger for the information+stigma treatment than the information treatment, though the difference is generally not large enough to reject that the coefficients are the same.

Columns 1-2 show that the treatments make firms more willing to consider bankruptcy, especially in the case of the information+stigma treatment. In column 1, the information+stigma treatment increases firms' willingness to consider bankruptcy by  $0.13\sigma$ , which seems moderate in size. In column 2, the information treatment makes firms  $0.25\sigma$  more willing to use Chapter 11 bankruptcy conditional on not being able to repay, and the effect from the information+stigma treatment is  $0.31\sigma$ .

Interestingly, the treatments made firms less likely to intend to renegotiate their debts, by  $0.10\sigma$  for the information treatment and  $0.18\sigma$  for the information+stigma treatment. A simple explanation is that when bankruptcy becomes more attractive in the mind of a business owner, there is less need to want to renegotiate debts with creditors, as such debts can be reduced via bankruptcy.

Columns 4-6 consider risk-taking and investment. Column 4 shows that the treatments did not have statistically significant effects on intended self-defined risk-taking, though the effects are in the positive direction. Columns 5-6 show that the treatments increase firms' intention to increase debt and investment. For each outcome (debt or investment), firms are asked whether they intend to increase the level over the next 6 months, keep the level the same, or decrease it. Thus, column 5 shows that the treatments increase the share of firms intending to increase debt by  $0.11\sigma$  to  $0.15\sigma$  and increase the share of firms intending to increase investment by  $0.11\sigma$  to  $0.14\sigma$ .

Finally, column 7 considers a risk composite score, comprised of the average of normalized values for columns 1-6. The information treatment increases the risk composite score by  $0.14\sigma$ , while the information+stigma treatment increases the risk composite score by  $0.21\sigma$ . We cannot reject that the two treatments have the same effect ( $p = 0.29$ ).

**Actual Outcomes Months After Treatment.** Despite the large effects on immediate outcomes, limited effects are observed on self-reported past outcomes, which we observe as part of our 4-month follow-up. We report these results in Panel B of Table 6. Treatment firms were no more likely to have reported considering using bankruptcy in the past 4 months. There are also no consistent effects on self-reported changes in investment during the last 4 months, changes in debt during the last 4 months, or debt renegotiation during the last 4 months.<sup>13</sup> The null effects are reasonably precise, e.g., we can rule out with 95% confidence that the information and information+stigma treatments increase consideration

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<sup>13</sup>The information only treatment has a positive effect on whether a firm increases debt, but the information+stigma treatment has no such effect.

of bankruptcy by 6pp and 3pp, respectively.

These results warrant the strong caveat that there is sizable sample attrition, as only 505 firms respond to our follow-up survey. Still, recall from above that the impacts on information awareness and stigma were similar for the firms who stayed in the sample throughout the whole period. This suggests that sample attrition is unlikely to be a main driver.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to intended outcomes after 4 months, we also collected data on whether a firm was still in operation, for the full set of firms in our baseline survey. We do this by manually checking to see if the firm has an active website or if we can find other active presence of the firm on the internet, such as any LinkedIn or Facebook page activity. For most of the firms in our sample, there is enough information in the data to examine whether or not the firm has continued to maintain a website, and we use this as our measure of firm survival. This was done separately 7-8 months after treatment (2021/06 and 2021/07), 15 months after treatment (2022/02), and 29 months after treatment (2023/04). The number of observations for our firm survival outcomes is roughly 850 firms, reflecting that, for the remaining firms (about 39% of our sample), we lack full information on firm name and/or location to confidently assess whether the firm is still in operation.

As seen in columns 5-7 of Panel B of Table 6 shows, there is no apparent impact of the treatment on firm survival. The null effects are reasonably precisely estimated. For firm survival in June-July 2021, we can rule out effects greater than 6 percentage points in either direction. For firm survival in April 2023, about 2.5 years after treatment, the coefficient is slightly negative, and we can rule out a positive effect for the information treatment of more than 4 percentage points (e.g., we can rule out that the treatments boost firm survival from 80% to 84%). This means we can rule out effects on survival that are a modest fraction of those that have been detected for small firms in other contexts. For example, in a business plan competition, McKenzie (2017) finds that financial grants boost survival of existing firms 3 years after treatment by 20pp (i.e., from 76% survival in the control group to 96% in the treatment group) and survival of new firms by 37pp (i.e., from 54% to 91%).

Finally, we also checked bankruptcy filings by manually searching public court records on PACER ([www.pacer.gov](http://www.pacer.gov)) to see if there were effects on actual bankruptcy filings. However, we found out that none of the small businesses in our sample had filed for bankruptcy by April 2023.<sup>15</sup> As a result, we do not include a column for bankruptcy filings in Table 6.

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<sup>14</sup>In Appendix Table A2, we also regress an indicator variable for whether a firm does not respond to the follow-up survey on various predictors. The only significant predictor of sample attrition is business owner race.

<sup>15</sup>While it may seem surprising that zero firms in our RCT entered bankruptcy, bankruptcy rates fell to record-low levels during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2021). This was on top of generally low levels of bankruptcy usage by small businesses (Greenwood et al., 2020).



In sum, our longer-run results paint a picture in which information and stigma frictions can meaningfully and durably be reduced, but where the alleviation of these constraints does not have detectable effects on firms’ use of bankruptcy or on other related real business outcomes. We discuss potential explanations in the next subsection.

## 5.4 Discussion: A New Survey of Bankruptcy Attorneys and Judges

Overall, we observe no effect of our treatments on longer-run firm outcomes. Thus, while addressing information and stigma related to bankruptcy affects firms’ shorter-run outcomes, there may be other long-run impediments to bankruptcy. To investigate this possibility, we conducted a survey of bankruptcy attorneys and judges through the American Bankruptcy Institute (ABI)—the largest network of bankruptcy professionals in the US—where we ask respondents to evaluate potential mechanisms behind our mixed empirical findings.

In the survey, we lay out the results of the experiment, explaining that the treatments have strong effects on information and stigma even four months after viewing the videos but that we do not see persistent changes in actual outcomes four months later. We then ask the respondents why they think the results do not persist, giving them several options as well as a free response “Other” category. We received 129 responses to the survey, which was emailed out by ABI to all members on our behalf.

Table 7 summarizes the results. By far the strongest response was that entrepreneurs are overconfident in their ability to avoid financial distress, with 56% of respondents marking this as a likely reason there were no long-run real effects.<sup>16</sup> Overconfident entrepreneurs in treatment groups could have stigma reduced and information increased, but still not change actual business practices because they feel that the probability of distress is too low to warrant any changes. To the extent that this occurs, it would contribute to a “double behavioral” mechanism in which lack of information and stigma are important barriers to small businesses using bankruptcy, but overconfidence is also a significant friction.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to overconfidence, 35% of bankruptcy professionals also report that the perceived costs of filing for bankruptcy are a significant friction for small businesses. As shown in Gross et al. (2014), consumers in financial distress face liquidity constraints that prevent them from entering bankruptcy even when it is valuable to do so.<sup>18</sup> This same

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<sup>16</sup>Survey respondents were allowed to mark up to two options, so the percentages in Table 7 do not add to 100%. Also, the options were presented in random order so that no option received extra attention.

<sup>17</sup>An important issue, which we view as mostly beyond the scope of the current paper, is what is the mechanism by which overconfidence would make our treatments have a limited effect on longer-run outcomes. One story is that overconfidence makes firms less likely to think they need to use bankruptcy in the future, and that this overconfidence was temporarily overcome by making bankruptcy salient (Bordalo et al., 2012).

<sup>18</sup>Bruhn et al. (2018) find a similar role of fixed costs in the presence of liquidity constraints as leading to lack of adoption of profitable opportunities by small businesses in Mexico.

intuition appears to be true for small businesses as well. There are few academic studies that have explored the costs of bankruptcy for small businesses, but the available evidence suggests that these costs could be prohibitive for many small firms. [Lawless et al. \(1994\)](#) estimate that professional fees account for 20% of total firm value in small business Chapter 11 cases. Similarly, [Bris et al. \(2006\)](#) estimate that bankruptcy fees are equivalent to 23% of firm value for the median small business. Clearly, it would be hard for a small business that is already in financial distress to find a quarter of its value in cash or new borrowing to hire an attorney. Thus, it seems plausible that even if our treatment fully eliminated information and stigma frictions, some small businesses would be unable to enter bankruptcy due to liquidity constraints.

We note, however, that while this may have been true prior to the SBRA, the passage of this law appears to have reduced professional fees and made bankruptcy significantly more attractive for many small businesses. Using data collected around the same time as our experiment, [Harner et al. \(2021\)](#) estimate more than 50% of subchapter V cases had confirmed a reorganization plan within six months of entering bankruptcy. Prior to the SBRA, data from the Federal Judicial Center show that only 33% of small business Chapter 11 cases were able to reorganize at all, let alone within a six-month timeframe. Further, many small businesses did not even attempt to reorganize prior to the SBRA. As [Harner et al. \(2021\)](#) conclude, "small businesses appear now to have a restructuring tool that is both affordable and effective for addressing their financial needs."

Other possible explanations for the drop-off in long-run effects, such as bankruptcy being too complicated or time-consuming or that small businesses do not benefit from bankruptcy, have far less support in the survey. Overall, most professionals feel that over-confidence and the monetary costs of bankruptcy are the leading impediments to distressed small businesses filing.

In addition to asking bankruptcy professionals why we do not observe long-run effects, we also asked respondents whether they feel that small businesses over- or under-utilize the bankruptcy system. The purpose of this question is to get a sense of whether there are *any* frictions that prevent small businesses from using bankruptcy or if, instead, professionals feel that the system is over-used by small business owners and bankruptcy is not costly enough. If bankruptcy is over-used, then it could be that information and stigma are not large impediments and this would explain the lack of long-run effects. We do not find this to be the opinion of bankruptcy professionals. Overall, 64.5% of respondents feel that too few small businesses use bankruptcy given its current costs and benefits. Meanwhile, 26.6% feel that small businesses use it about the right amount, and only 8.9% feel that it is over-used by small businesses. These results are largely consistent with ample anecdotal evidence and

the broader policy debate regarding how to guide small businesses as well as individuals through the potential benefits of bankruptcy protection regimes.

In addition, we note two other possible explanations for the lack of long-term effects. First, it is possible that we do not have enough statistical power to detect long-run effects, especially considering the much smaller sample size in our 4-month follow-up. Given the infrequent nature of bankruptcy filings and firm failure, this is likely true for these two outcomes and further work at a much larger scale would be needed to detect meaningful long-term effects. On the other hand, we have more statistical power to detect changes in debt or investment levels. For example, we would detect an effect with 80% power if the treatment moved the share of respondents who increased investment from 8pp to 18pp. Similarly, we would detect an effect with 80% power if the treatment induced at least 7% of respondents to increase their debt.

Finally, it is possible that the video treatments were not large enough to induce a change in firm behavior. While this is a possibility, it is important to keep in mind that the treatments significantly affected both knowledge and stigma at the four-month horizon. Further, there was not much depreciation in the effects on knowledge and stigma over the four months after viewing the videos, and the treatment did affect small business owners willingness to consider bankruptcy and investment plans at the time of the original survey (Panel A of Table 6). If the treatment was large enough to affect information and stigma with little depreciation over time, it seems unlikely that the effect of the treatment on other outcomes would depreciate significantly more unless some other factor was also affecting entrepreneurs' willingness to consider bankruptcy.

Regardless, it is important to note that there are likely interactions between knowledge gaps, stigma, and other frictions to small business bankruptcy. For example, a small business owner with a strongly negative view of bankruptcy is unlikely to spend time obtaining information about the bankruptcy process. Then, if this entrepreneur encounters financial difficulties, their lack of information and stigma could lead them to wait far too long to even consider bankruptcy as an option. When they finally do consider it, it may be too late to be able to obtain the funds needed to hire an attorney or pay filing fees, resulting in the firm shutting down rather than reorganizing. In this example, liquidity constraints were the immediate impediment to the firm entering bankruptcy, but the stigma against bankruptcy was the fundamental friction that led to the liquidity constraint binding. The knowledge deficiencies and strong stigma against bankruptcy that we have shown in this study suggest that these two frictions are likely important impediments to small businesses using bankruptcy. Other frictions such as overconfidence and liquidity constraints may interact with these to result in low usage of the bankruptcy system.

## 5.5 Other Threats to Validity

**Hawthorne Effects.** A common concern for RCTs is Hawthorne effects, where subjects change their answer or behavior so as to please the experimenter, even though the underlying answer or behavior is unchanged. Our treatments led to increased knowledge and decreased stigma, both immediately after treatment and durably after four months. While it is possible that an immediate post-treatment in stigma could be driven by stigma, this is far less plausible for questions asked after four months. It is also far less clear how Hawthorne Effects could be responsible for subjects becoming more informed about bankruptcy, both immediately and after four months.<sup>19</sup>

We also find that the treatments led to sizable increases in the intended use of bankruptcy and risk-taking behavior, but not over the longer run. It is possible that Hawthorne Effects could play a role in explaining this pattern of behavior. However, such a role of Hawthorne Effects would be fully consistent with our main argument, namely that firms exhibit clear behavioral tendencies in terms of knowledge and stigma on bankruptcy, but these tendencies are not enough to durably affect interest in bankruptcy.

**Econometric Specifications.** Recent work by [Goldsmith-Pinkham et al. \(2022\)](#) argues that adding covariates in regressions for RCTs can lead to contamination bias in terms of estimating average treatment effects. All our main results are robust to not including covariates in regressions, suggesting that contamination bias does not drive our results.

**External Validity OF SCORE sample.** Our sample of firms is those who are involved with SCORE. SCORE is one of the largest small business networks in the US. Appendix Table A6 provides a comparison of SCORE firms to a broader population of small businesses in the US, namely, the firms in the Kauffman Survey, showing that they are broadly similar.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that our results are likely to have applicability to a broader population of small businesses, though we would certainly not claim that they would extend to large firms, who are likely to be much more informed about bankruptcy options and to face less stigma regarding using bankruptcy.

**COVID-19 Pandemic.** It was natural to conduct the RCT in November 2020 given the recent passage of the SBRA and the concern that small businesses were not exploiting the new law, perhaps due to unawareness and stigma. Still, one may ask if our results are likely to be driven by the timing of the RCT during the pandemic? We do not see a clear reason why

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<sup>19</sup>Hawthorne Effects are often thought to be driven by social pressure ([Levitt and List, 2011](#)), and it is not clear how social pressure would make someone more informed.

<sup>20</sup>One industry where they differ is “Technical & Scientific Services,” though this difference likely reflects at least in part that the Kauffman survey category is “Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services” and thus includes professionals.

the COVID context would drive our results. For example, concerns about business failure were more salient than usual during the pandemic, but that would seem to work against our finding of limited bankruptcy knowledge (i.e., firms might be more informed than usual).<sup>21</sup> To shed light on the issue quantitatively, we exploit the fact that pandemic conditions varied widely across the US in November 2020. Some states had much higher cumulative covid exposure rates than others. We correlated covid exposure rates to (i) Levels of knowledge and stigma, (ii) Treatment effects on knowledge and stigma, and (iii) Treatment effects on business activity (intended and actual), and we found no systematic patterns.

**Relevance Beyond the US.** While our results are specific to the US, the decision about liquidation vs. reorganization is common in many countries (Djankov et al., 2008). We suspect that information deficits and stigma could play an important role in other countries too. In response to the COVID pandemic, many countries made reforms to make bankruptcy easier and more debtor-friendly, including Germany, UK, and Singapore (Djankov, 2021). The impact of such laws depends on what firms know and believe about bankruptcy.

## 6 Conclusion

Using a large-scale survey experiment with a broadly representative sample of US small businesses, we first document that the vast majority of firms are not well-informed about bankruptcy options. In addition, many firms exhibit stigma about bankruptcy, showing for example special concerns that workers may not be willing to work with firms that file for bankruptcy, as well as concerns that customers will not want to do business with them. The first contribution of our paper is therefore to establish these new facts regarding bankruptcy and to show that both informational frictions and stigma are pervasive across industries and types of firms.

Second, we design short and scalable educational videos that address information or stigma gaps and show that access to these videos leads to increased firm knowledge about bankruptcy and decreased perceptions of stigma, both immediately and durably over four months. Furthermore, these experimental treatments led to sizable effects on firms' intended behavior, such as whether firms intended to increase risk-taking and increase investment, and whether firms reported interest in using Chapter 11 bankruptcy. However, we do not see longer-run real outcomes from our treatments, and strikingly we do not observe any firm in our sample actually filing for bankruptcy. While part of the reason is likely a lack of statistical power to detect effects on bankruptcy outcomes, we rely on a new qualitative

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<sup>21</sup>Likewise, if anything, one might imagine that there would be less stigma than normal against bankruptcy, running at odds with our finding of significant stigma.

survey of bankruptcy attorneys and judges to investigate other potential reasons why firms might not change real outcomes despite better information and a reduction in stigma. In particular, we discuss the behavioral role of entrepreneurs' overconfidence and, to a lesser extent, excessive perceived legal fees as first-order frictions likely explaining the limited real impact of treatments that only address information and stigma.

Taken together, our findings highlight a stark reluctance by small businesses to take advantage of the bankruptcy protection system. Our treatments inform potential designs for policies that attempt to further increase the use of the bankruptcy system by small businesses.

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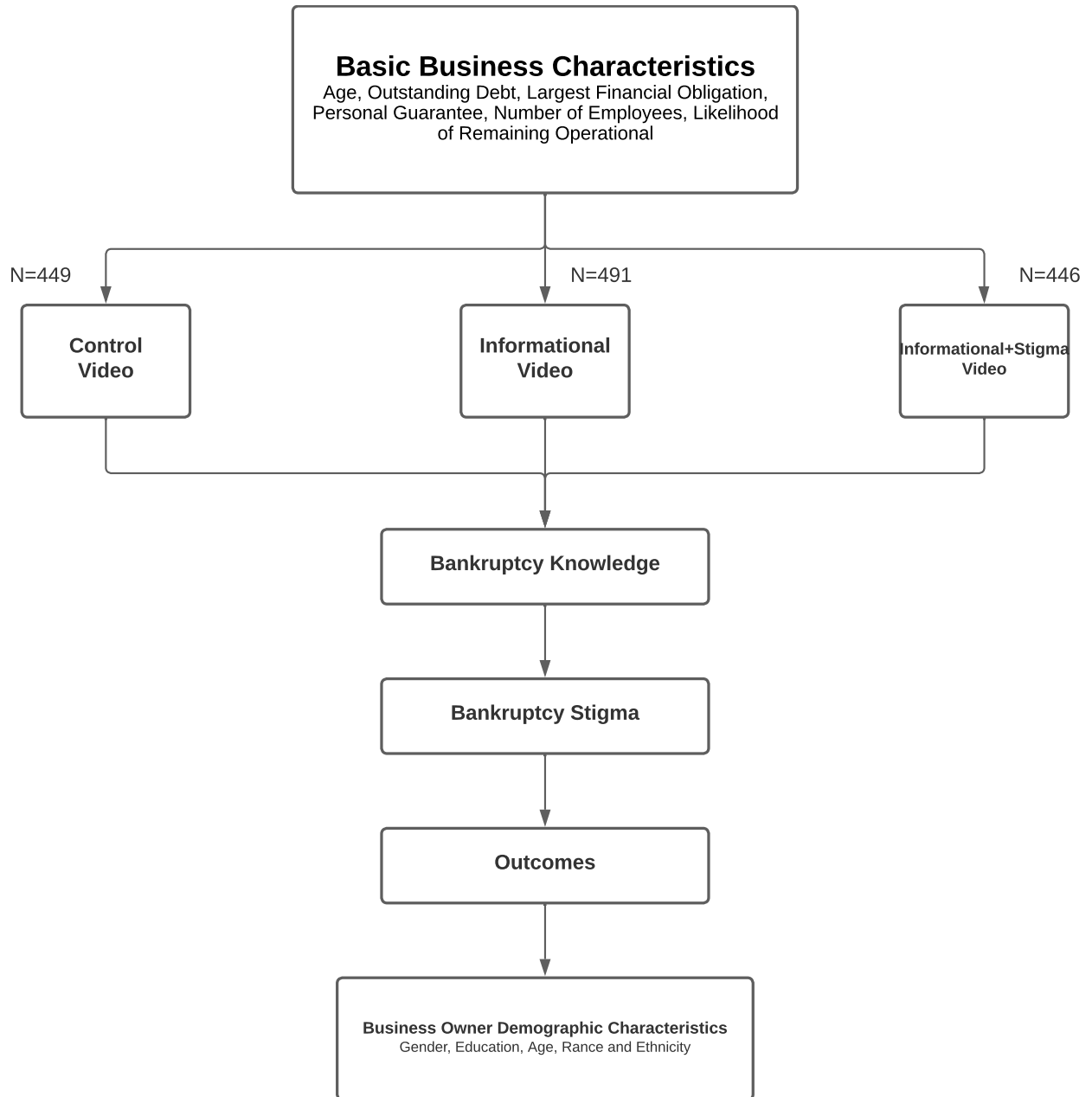
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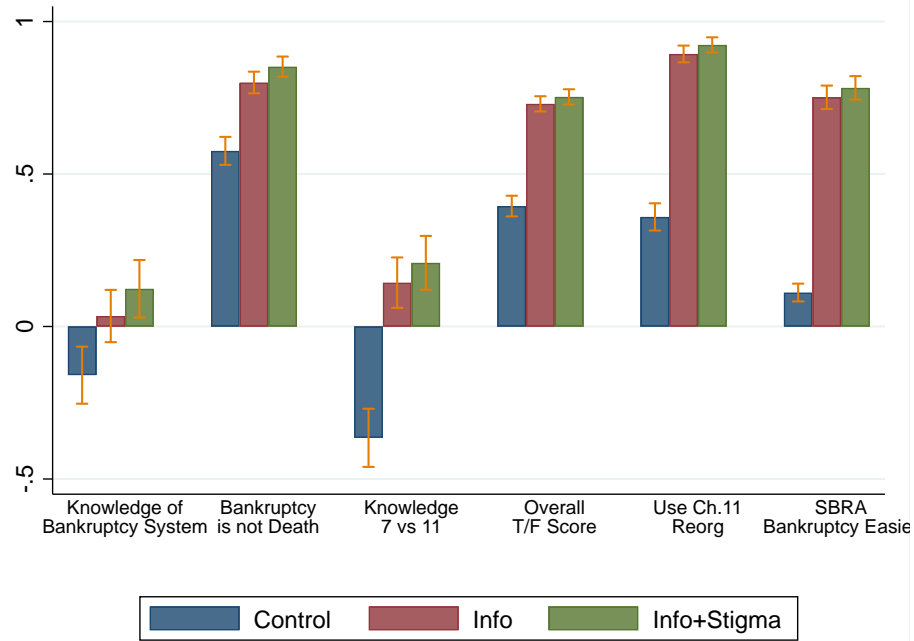
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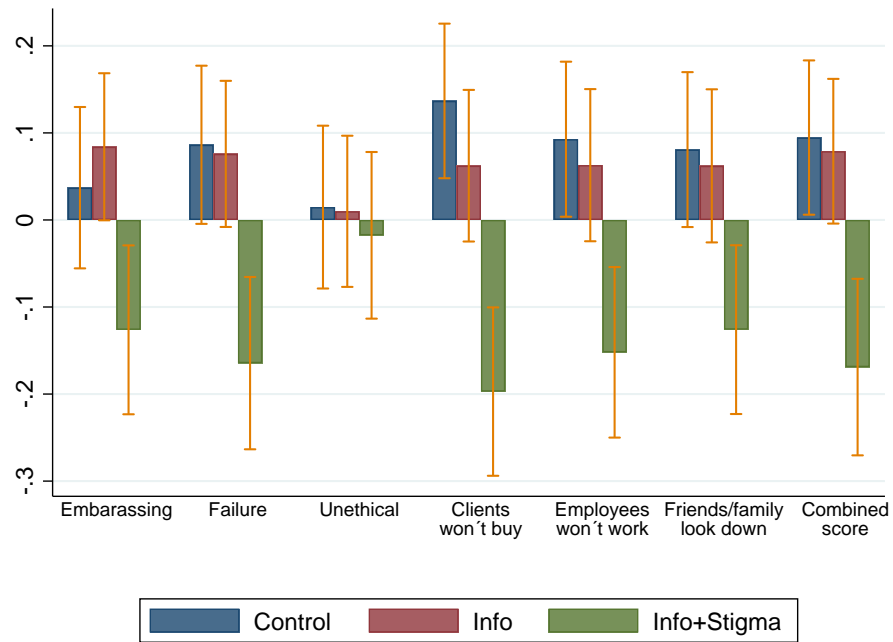


**Figure 1:** Experimental Design

**Notes:** This figure illustrates our experimental design, including the randomization layers and the sample sizes associated with each treatment and control group. The details of the design are discussed in Section 3.3.



**A. Knowledge**



**B. Stigma**

**Figure 2: Summary Statistics for Knowledge and Stigma**

**Notes:** Sub-figure A shows the average and the 95% confidence interval for our main knowledge measures per treatment group; all variables are defined in Section 3.2.3. Sub-figure B shows the average and the 95% confidence interval for our main stigma measures per treatment group; all variables are defined in Section 3.2.4

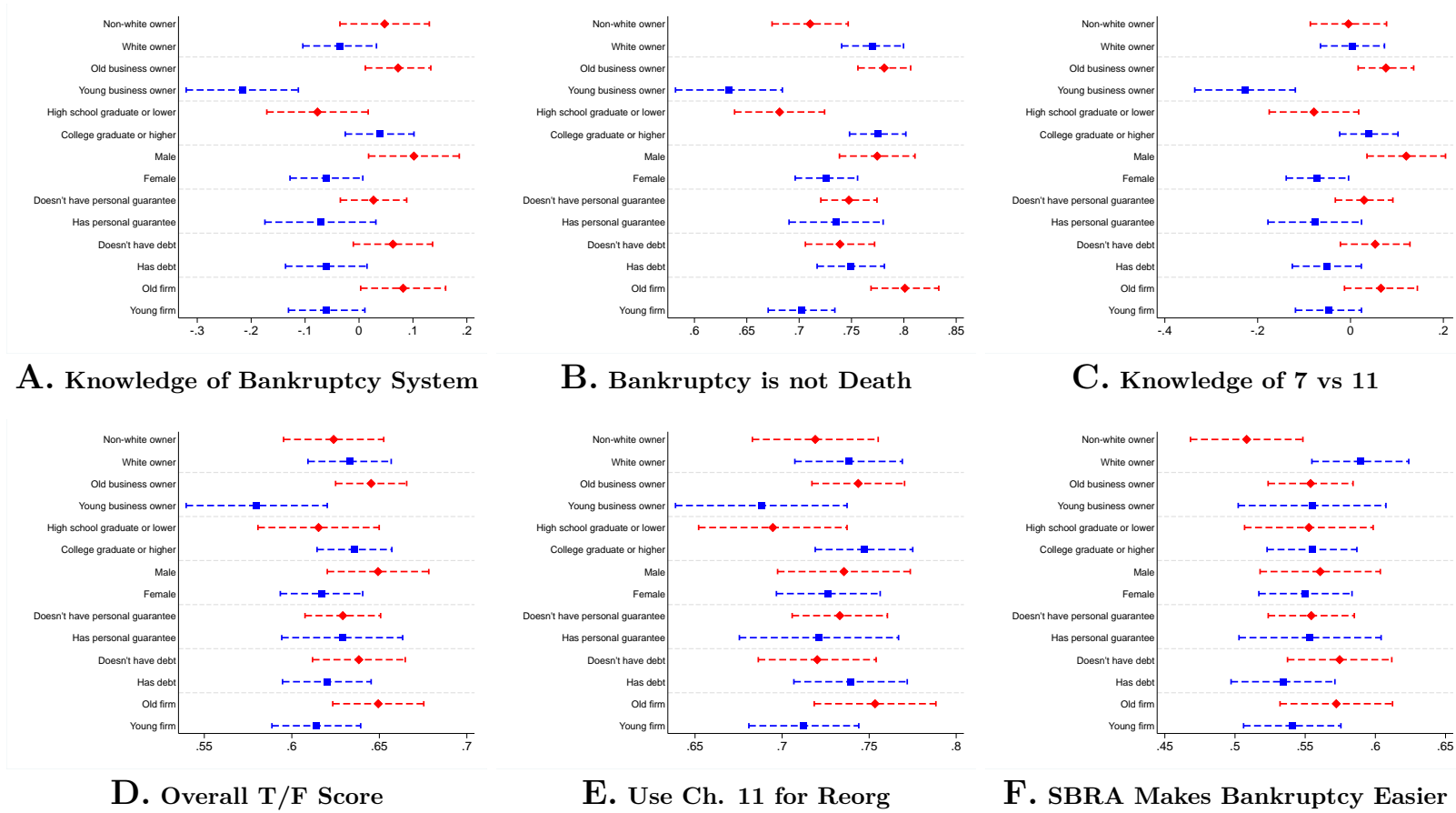


Figure 3: Heterogeneity: Knowledge

**Notes:** This figure shows how our measure of bankruptcy knowledge varies across the socio-demographic and business characteristics of the respondents. The sample consists of respondents in the Control video group. See Table 2 for a definition of each specific socio-demographic and business characteristics indicator variable. The sub-figures display the average and the 95% confidence interval.

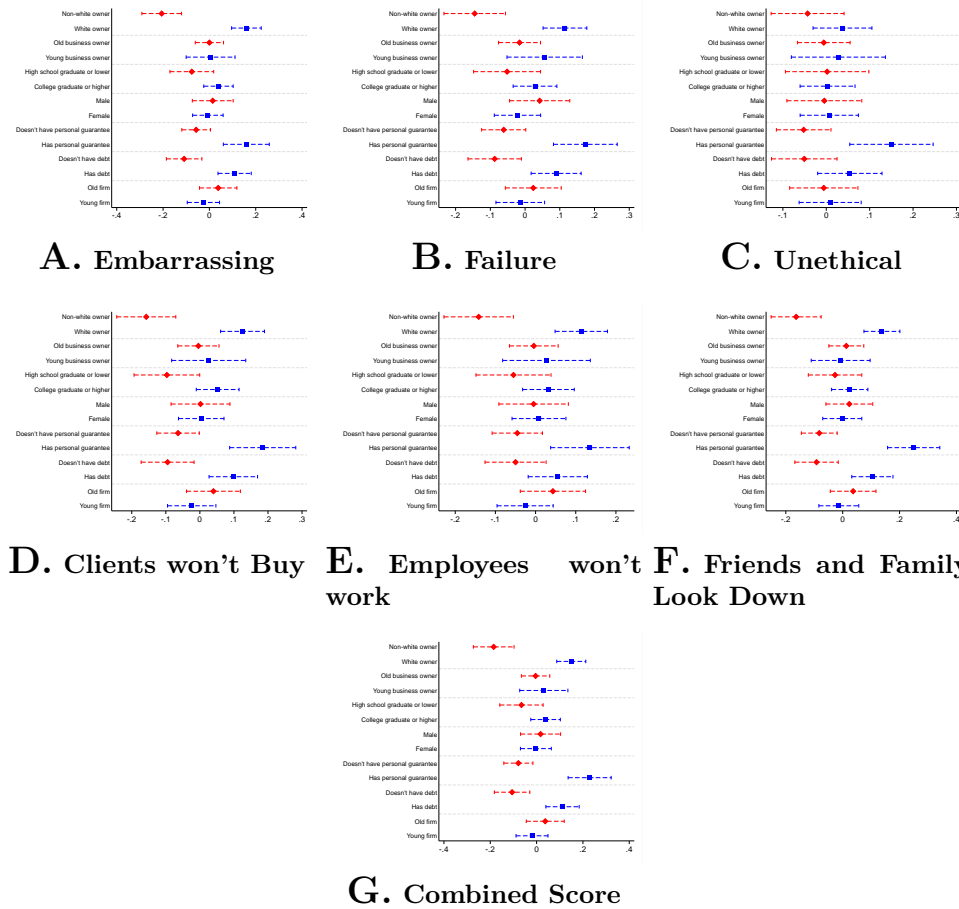


Figure 4: Heterogeneity: Stigma

**Notes:** This figure shows how our measure of bankruptcy stigma varies across the socio-demographic and business characteristics of the respondents. The sample consists of respondents in the Control video group. See Table 2 for a definition of each specific socio-demographic and business characteristics indicator variable. The sub-figures display the average and the 95% confidence interval.

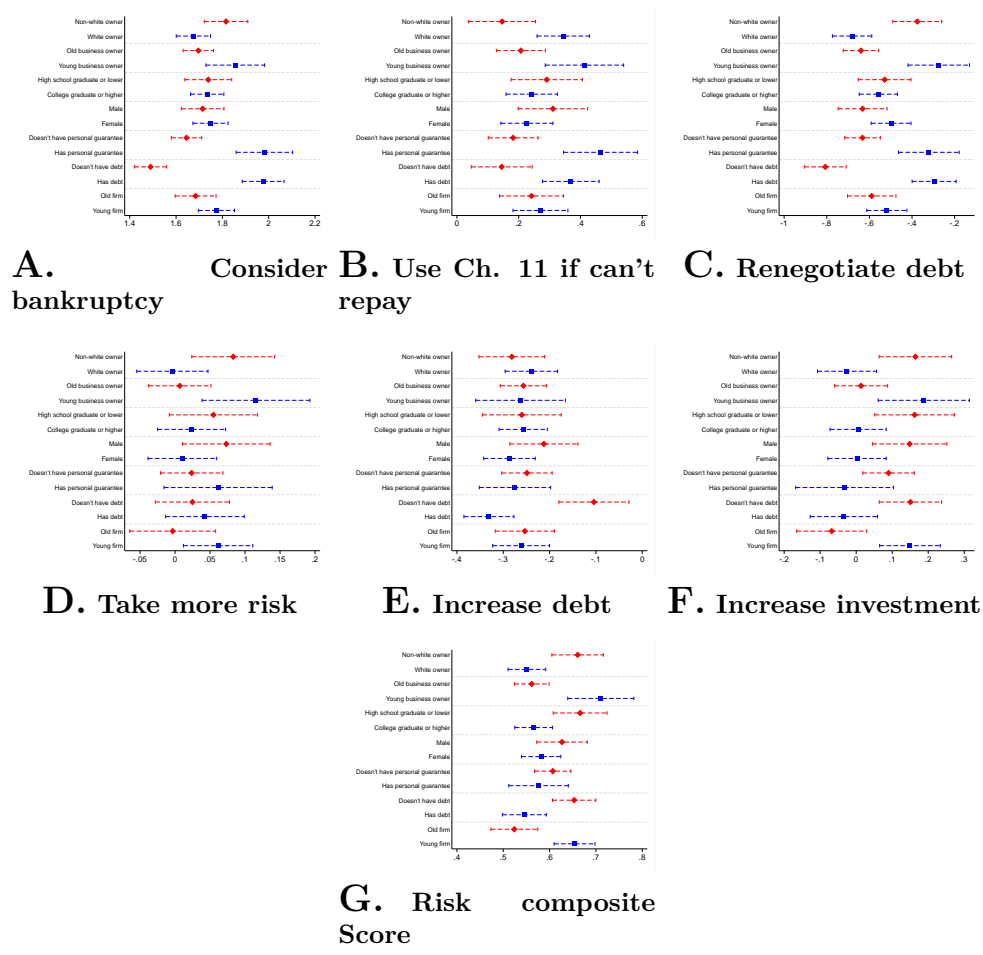


Figure 5: Heterogeneity: Outcomes

**Notes:** This figure shows how our measure of experimental outcome varies across the socio-demographic and business characteristics of the respondents. The sample consists of respondents in the Control video group. See Table 2 for a definition of each specific socio-demographic and business characteristics indicator variable. The sub-figures display the average and the 95% confidence interval.

**Table 1: Summary Statistics: Firm Characteristics**

	Control	Information	Information + Stigma	Full
<b>Obs</b>	449	491	446	1386
<b>Firm Age</b>				
< 1 year	15%	15%	13%	15%
1-2 years	19%	17%	20%	18%
3-5 years	26%	23%	25%	25%
6-10 years	15%	20%	13%	16%
11+ years	24%	26%	29%	26%
<b>Has Any Debt</b>	50%	52%	50%	51%
<b>Total Debt (conditional on having debt)</b>				
< \$1,000	3.65%	4%	1%	3%
\$1,001 - \$5,000	13%	15%	14%	14%
\$5,001 - \$10,000	19%	15%	17%	17%
\$10,001 - \$25,000	16%	15%	14%	15%
\$25,001 - \$50,000	11%	14%	16%	14%
\$50,001 - \$100,000	14%	13%	13%	13%
> \$100,000	24%	24%	25%	25%
<b>Largest financial obligation</b>				
Business Credit Card / Other business loan	25%	22%	28%	25%
Rent / Mortgage for business location	24%	25%	24%	25%
Payments to vendors for goods bought on credit	11%	16%	16%	14%
Equipment leases	2%	3%	1%	2%
Other	19%	20%	18%	19%
No obligations	18%	14%	13%	15%
<b>Has Personal Guarantee</b>	26%	27%	29%	27%
<b>Extremely or somewhat unlikely to remain open in 12 months</b>	11%	10%	9%	10%
<b>Female</b>	62%	62%	64%	63%
<b>College Graduate or higher</b>	70%	67%	69%	69%
<b>Business Owner Age</b>				
18-34	7%	7%	5%	6%
35-44	20%	18%	19%	19%
45-54	30%	31%	30%	30%
55-64	30%	33%	35%	33%
65+	14%	11%	12%	12%
<b>Race</b>				
White (non-Hispanic)	56%	56%	59%	55%
Black/African American	24%	24%	20%	19%
Hispanic	8%	8%	7%	9%
Asian American	2%	2%	3%	6%
Native American or First Nation	2%	1%	2%	2%
Prefer not to answer	9%	9%	9%	11%

**Notes:** This table provides summary statistics on the firm and firm owner characteristics of our sample per treatment group.

**Table 2: Balance**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	<i>Univariate Balance</i>		<i>Joint Balance</i>	
	Information Treatment	Information + Stigma Treatment	Information Treatment	Information + Stigma Treatment
Young	-0.063* (0.055)	-0.028 (0.406)	-0.066 (0.122)	-0.019 (0.662)
Has debt	0.021 (0.527)	0.008 (0.815)	0.009 (0.800)	-0.014 (0.708)
Has personal guarantee	0.016 (0.659)	0.036 (0.336)	0.002 (0.962)	0.045 (0.286)
Respondent is female	-0.004 (0.898)	0.026 (0.451)	0.003 (0.930)	0.034 (0.331)
College graduate or higher	0.031 (0.371)	0.023 (0.525)	-0.016 (0.712)	0.007 (0.872)
Young business owner	-0.022 (0.562)	-0.039 (0.307)	-0.004 (0.915)	-0.039 (0.335)
White owner	0.035 (0.295)	-0.010 (0.771)	0.022 (0.526)	-0.020 (0.565)
Observations	940	895	940	895
Joint significance: p-value	–	–	0.793	0.827

**Notes:** We check for balance in two ways: (i) through univariate regressions of an indicator variable equal to 1 if the individual is subject to a given treatment on each demographic characteristic separately (columns 1-2), and (ii) through multivariate regressions of an indicator variable equal to 1 if the individual is subject to a given treatment on all demographic characteristics jointly (columns 3-4). The sample for each column consists of all individuals in the specific treatment group and all individuals in the control group. *Young firm* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for firms that are 5 years old or younger. *Has debt* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of firms with a positive amount of debt. *Has personal guarantee* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of owners that have personally guarantee at least a portion of their business debt. *Respondent is female* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of individuals who are females. *College graduate or higher* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of individuals who have a college degree or higher. *Young business owner* indicates owners who are 45 years old or younger. *White owner* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of individuals who are white. P-value in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.



**Table 3:** Summary Statistics: Knowledge and Stigma About Bankruptcy

<b>Statement/Question</b>			
<b>Panel A: Knowledge About Bankruptcy (Agree/Disagree)</b>			
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>
I have a good understanding of the bankruptcy system, its advantages and disadvantages.	35%	43%	21%
I am familiar with the differences between Ch. 7 Bankruptcy and Ch. 11 Bankruptcy.	34%	50%	15%
<b>Panel B: Knowledge About Bankruptcy (True/False)</b>			
	<b>True</b>	<b>False</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
Soon after declaring bankruptcy, a small business must cease operations.	7%	58%	35%
What happens in a small business Ch. 11 bankruptcy? Debts can be renegotiated with creditors.	54%	2%	44%
What happens in a small business Ch. 11 bankruptcy? Business assets are protected while a reorganization plan is created.	48%	5%	47%
What happens in a small business Ch. 11 bankruptcy? Under the SBRA, lenders get paid based on the profits of the company.	16%	7%	77%
<b>Panel C: Knowledge About Bankruptcy (Correct/Incorrect)</b>			
	<b>Correct answer</b>	<b>Wrong answer</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
If you wanted your business to continue to operate after bankruptcy, which chapter of bankruptcy would you use?	36%	7%	57%
Did SBRA make it easier or harder for a small business to file for Ch. 11 bankruptcy?	11%	1%	88%
<b>Panel D: Bankruptcy Stigma</b>			
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>
It is embarrassing for a business owner to file for bankruptcy.	64%	17%	19%
People will think that a business owner who files for bankruptcy is a failure.	70%	14%	15%
People will think that a business owner who files for bankruptcy is unethical.	24%	45%	30%
Clients will be less willing to buy from a business owner who filed for bankruptcy.	53%	19%	29%
Employees will be less willing to work for a business owner who filed for bankruptcy.	56%	16%	27%
Friends and family may look down on a business owner who files for bankruptcy.	62%	16%	23%

**Notes:** This table reports the answers to survey questions that assess the control group's knowledge and stigma on bankruptcy (sample size of 449 observations). **Panel A** reports the share of respondents in the control group that agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with statements on knowledge about bankruptcy. **Panel B** reports the shares of respondents who answered "true", "false", or "I don't know" on statements regarding bankruptcy policies. **Panel C** reports the percentages of respondents that answer correctly, incorrectly, or "I don't know" on questions about bankruptcy. Finally, **Panel D** reports the shares of respondents that agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with statements regarding bankruptcy stigma.

**Table 4:** Effects on Knowledge About Bankruptcy

Variables	(1) Knowledge of Bankruptcy System (Std 0-1)	(2) Bankruptcy is not Death (Binary)	(3) Knowledge 7 vs 11 (Std 0-1)	(4) Overall T/F Score –	(5) Can Renegotiate Debt in Ch. 11 (Binary)	(6) Business Assets Protected in Ch. 11 (Binary)	(7) Knowledge of SBRA (Binary)	(8) Use Ch. 11 Reorg (Binary)	(9) SBRA Bankruptcy Easier (Binary)
<b>Panel A: Immediate Effects</b>									
Info only treatment	0.192*** (0.064) [0.003]	0.225*** (0.030) [0.000]	0.523*** (0.064) [0.000]	0.336*** (0.021)	0.350*** (0.028) [0.000]	0.374*** (0.028) [0.000]	0.281*** (0.029) [0.000]	0.535*** (0.027) [0.000]	0.638*** (0.025) [0.000]
Info+Stigma treatment	0.277*** (0.068) [0.000]	0.278*** (0.029) [0.000]	0.565*** (0.065) [0.000]	0.356*** (0.021)	0.363*** (0.027) [0.000]	0.402*** (0.028) [0.000]	0.299*** (0.030) [0.000]	0.570*** (0.026) [0.000]	0.668*** (0.025) [0.000]
Observations	1,386	1,384	1,381	1,382	1,380	1,378	1,371	1,381	1,386
Mean D.V Control	-0.223	0.576	-0.417	0.395	0.541	0.479	0.163	0.359	0.111
<b>Panel B: 4-month Follow-up</b>									
Info only treatment	0.255** (0.116) [0.029]	0.147*** (0.043) [0.003]			0.132*** (0.051) [0.027]			0.184*** (0.055) [0.005]	0.142*** (0.053) [0.027]
Info+Stigma treatment	0.296** (0.117) [0.026]	0.149*** (0.043) [0.003]			0.112** (0.052) [0.032]			0.217*** (0.055) [0.001]	0.184*** (0.055) [0.003]
Observations	505	506			506			505	505
Mean D.V Control	-0.123	0.747			0.624			0.473	0.266

**Notes:** All dependent variables are defined in Section 3.2.3. For both panels we show robust standard errors in parentheses, and the Westfall-Young p-values generated with 5,000 simulations in square brackets. For Westfall-Young, we divide the hypotheses in two families: one on immediate effects and one on 4-month follow-up. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Panel A** of this table shows the treatment effects of our experiments on bankruptcy knowledge measures. The specification is  $Y_i = \alpha + \sum_{j=1}^{j=2} \beta^j T_i^j + Controls + FE + \nu_i$ . *Knowledge bankruptcy system* represents self-assessed understanding of the U.S. bankruptcy system, and the variable is standardized to have mean 0 and standard deviation 1. *Bankruptcy is not death* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who know that a business does not necessarily cease operations after declaring bankruptcy. *Knowledge 7 v 11* represents self-assessed familiarity with the differences between Ch. 7 and Ch. 11 bankruptcy, and the variable is standardized to have mean 0 and standard deviation 1. *Overall T/F score* is the share of correct answers to the columns (5) to (7). *Can renegotiate debt in Ch. 11* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who know that a business can renegotiate its debt after declaring Ch. 11 bankruptcy. *Business assets protected in Ch. 11* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who know that business assets are protected from lenders like banks and suppliers while a reorganization plan is created. *Knowledge of SBRA* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who know that under the SBRA lenders get paid based on the profits of the company. *Use Ch. 11 reorg* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals know that a business must use Ch. 11 bankruptcy to continue to operate after bankruptcy. *SBRA bankruptcy easier* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who know that the SBRA makes it easier for small business to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. All dependent variables are defined in Section 3.2.3. We display coefficients on the two key independent variables, *Info only treatment* and *Info+Stigma treatment* which are equal to 1 for respondents in each treatment group. All specifications also include as control variables *Has debt*, *Has personal guarantee*, and *Respondent is female*, which are described in Table 2. Additionally, each specification also includes fixed effects for 19 industry categories, 5 firm age bins, 5 bins for the number of employees at the firm, the educational attainment of the owner, 5 owner age bins, and the owner’s race are included in all regressions.

**Panel B** shows impacts on our bankruptcy knowledge measures in the 4 months follow up survey. In the follow-up survey we only ask questions about dependent variables in columns (1), (2), (5), (8), and (9). The specifications are identical to those in Panel A, except that outcomes are measured 4 months after the initial treatment.

**Table 5: Effects on Bankruptcy Stigma**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Embarrassing (Std 0-1)	Failure (Std 0-1)	Unethical (Std 0-1)	Clients won't buy (Std 0-1)	Employees won't work (Std 0-1)	Friends/family look down (Std 0-1)	Combined score (Std 0-1)
<b>Panel A: Immediate Effects</b>							
Info only treatment	0.020 (0.063) [0.944]	-0.041 (0.063) [0.944]	-0.032 (0.065) [0.944]	-0.093 (0.062) [0.490]	-0.043 (0.063) [0.944]	-0.038 (0.063) [0.944]	-0.046 (0.060)
Info+Stigma treatment	-0.187*** (0.066) [0.009]	-0.262*** (0.068) [0.001]	-0.051 (0.069) [0.462]	-0.366*** (0.066) [0.000]	-0.268*** (0.068) [0.001]	-0.233*** (0.066) [0.002]	-0.293*** (0.067)
Observations	1,384	1,374	1,378	1,378	1,378	1,377	1,384
Mean D.V Control	0.695	0.778	-0.357	0.425	0.518	0.606	0.0711
<b>Panel B: 4-month Follow-up</b>							
Info only treatment		-0.112 (0.105) [0.625]		-0.075 (0.103) [0.784]	-0.041 (0.103) [0.784]	-0.077 (0.108) [0.784]	-0.089 (0.103)
Info+Stigma treatment		-0.267** (0.117) [0.063]		-0.208* (0.115) [0.111]	-0.242** (0.114) [0.077]	-0.170 (0.117) [0.136]	-0.257** (0.117)
Observations		505		506	505	505	506
Mean D.V Control		0.657		0.553	0.671	0.612	0.0701

**Notes:** All dependent variables are defined in Section 3.2.4. For both panels we show robust standard errors in parentheses, and the Westfall-Young p-values generated with 5,000 simulations in square brackets, we divide the hypotheses in two families: one on immediate effects and one on 4-month follow-up.\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Panel A** of this table shows the treatment effects of our experiments on our bankruptcy stigma measures. The specification is  $Y_i = \alpha + \sum_{j=1}^{j=2} \beta^j T_i^j + Controls + FE + \nu_i$ . The dependent variable in each column codes whether the respondent strongly disagrees, disagrees, is neutral, agrees, or strongly agrees with each statement. All dependent variables are standardized to have mean 0 and standard deviation 1. *Embarrassing* represents how much individuals believe it is embarrassing for a business owner to file for bankruptcy. *Failure* represents how much individuals believe people will think that a business owner who files for bankruptcy is a failure. *Unethical* represents how much individuals believe people will think that a business owner who files for bankruptcy is unethical. *Clients won't buy* represents how much individuals believe clients will be less willing to buy from a business owner who filed for bankruptcy. *Employees won't work* represents how much individuals believe employees will be less willing to work for a business owner who filed for bankruptcy. *Friends/family look down* represents how much individuals believe friends and family may look down on a business owner who files for bankruptcy. *Combined score* is the mean score across all 6 question in columns (1) to (6). All dependent variables are defined in Section 3.2.4. All specifications also include as control variables *Has debt*, *Has personal guarantee*, and *Respondent is female*, which are described in Table 2. Additionally, each specification also includes fixed effects for 19 industry categories, 5 firm age bins, 5 bins for the number of employees at the firm, the educational attainment of the owner, 5 owner age bins, and the owner's race are included in all regressions.

**Panel B** of this table shows the treatment effects of our experiments on our bankruptcy stigma measures in the 4 months follow up survey. In the follow-up survey we only ask questions about dependent variables in columns (2), (4), (5), (6), and (7). The specification, dependent variables, and independent variables are all identical to those in Panel A, except that the dependent variables are measured 4 months after the initial treatment.

**Table 6:** Effects on Business Outcomes and Real Activity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<i>Panel A: Immediate effects</i>	Consider Bankruptcy (Std 0-1)	Use Ch. 11 if can't repay (Std 0-1)	Renegotiate Debt (Std 0-1)	Take More Risk (Std 0-1)	Increase Debt (Std 0-1)	Increase Investment (Std 0-1)	Risk Composite Score (Std 0-1)
Info only treatment	0.062 (0.061) [0.311]	0.254*** (0.064) [0.000]	-0.101 (0.064) [0.214]	0.005 (0.065) [0.940]	0.113 (0.078) [0.270]	0.113* (0.065) [0.215]	0.144** (0.065)
Info+Stigma treatment	0.132** (0.066) [0.047]	0.310*** (0.066) [0.000]	-0.179*** (0.064) [0.011]	0.070 (0.066) [0.293]	0.151* (0.078) [0.104]	0.144** (0.066) [0.083]	0.213*** (0.065)
Observations	1,386	1,383	1,386	1,386	1,012	1,386	1,386
Mean D.V Control	1.666	0.011	-0.414	0.0223	-0.327	-0.0334	0.530

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<i>Panel B: 4-month Follow-up</i>	Have considered bankruptcy (Binary)	Have renegotiated (Binary)	Increased debt (-1 to +1 scale)	Increased Investment (-1 to +1 scale)	Business open with website in:		
					June 2021 (Binary)	February 2022 (Binary)	April 2023 (Binary)
Info only treatment	-0.006 (0.034) [0.980]	-0.004 (0.035) [0.980]	0.163** (0.074) [0.055]	-0.045 (0.089) [0.607]	-0.005 (0.030) [0.857]	-0.025 (0.032) [0.733]	-0.027 (0.034) [0.733]
Info+Stigma treatment	-0.034 (0.033) [0.529]	-0.022 (0.037) [0.560]	-0.047 (0.075) [0.519]	0.091 (0.085) [0.480]	0.008 (0.031) [0.867]	0.023 (0.033) [0.798]	-0.016 (0.035) [0.867]
Observations	506	506	506	503	854	851	847
Mean D.V Control	0.094	0.135	0.088	0.077	0.846	0.823	0.803

**Notes:** All dependent variables are defined in Section 3.2.4. For both panels we show robust standard errors in parentheses, and the Westfall-Young p-values generated with 5,000 simulations in squared brackets, we divide the hypotheses in four families; two on the bankruptcy and risk-investment of the immediate effects and two on the bankruptcy and risk-investment of the 4-month follow-up. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Panel A** of this table shows the treatment effects of our experiments on respondents' attitudes towards bankruptcy and firms' stated intentions. The specification is  $Y_i = \alpha + \sum_{j=1}^{j=2} \beta^j T_i^j + Controls + FE + \nu_i$ . All the dependent variables are standardized to have mean 0 and standard deviation 1. *Consider bankruptcy* represents the likelihood that the respondent will consider filing for bankruptcy in the next 12 months, with higher numbers representing higher likelihoods. *Use Ch. 11 if can't repay* represents how much individuals agree with the following statement: "If I am unable to pay my debt, I will consider filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy". *Renegotiate debt* represents the likelihood that individuals will consider renegotiating their debt and/or other payment obligations (such as rent) in the next 12 months. *Take more risk* is a variable which indicates the amount of risk the individual will take in the next 12 months. *Increase debt* is a variable which indicates if the respondent may consider changing their amount of debt after taking the survey. *Increase investment* how much investment individuals intend to make relative to a typical year in the next 12 months. *Risk composite score* is the average of *Consider bankruptcy*, *Increase debt*, and *Increase investment*. All dependent variables are defined in Section 3.2.5. All specifications also include as control variables *Has debt*, *Has personal guarantee*, and *Respondent is female*, which are described in Table 2. Additionally, each specification also includes fixed effects for 19 industry categories, 5 firm age bins, 5 bins for the number of employees at the firm, the educational attainment of the owner, 5 owner age bins, and the owner's race are included in all regressions.

**Panel B** of this table shows the treatment effects of our experiments on our bankruptcy outcome measures in the 4 months follow up survey (columns 1-4) or on measures of firm survival (columns 5-7). The specification is identical to that in Panel A except the dependent variables measure realized outcomes rather than expectations. Specifically, *Have considered bankruptcy* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of individuals who have considered or actually filed for bankruptcy in the previous 4 months. *Have renegotiated* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of individuals who have renegotiated their debt in the previous 4 months. *Increased debt* is a variable that indicates if individuals have changed their amount of debt in the past 4 months; the variable codes whether the respondent "Kept the amount of debt the same", "Increased the amount of debt", or "Decreased the amount of debt". *Increased investment* is a variable that indicates if individuals have changed their amount of investment in the past 4 months; the variable codes whether the respondent "Kept investment the same", "Increased investment", or "Decreased investment". *Business open with website in June 2021* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the sample of firms that have an functioning website as of June 2021 or July 2021.

**Table 7:** Why Don't Our Treatments Lead to Persistent Effects on Actual Outcomes?  
Survey of Bankruptcy Attorneys and Judges

	(1)
Entrepreneurs are overconfident	56%
Bankruptcy is too expensive	35%
Most small businesses are unlikely to benefit from bankruptcy	18%
Bankruptcy is too complicated or will take too much time	14%
Doubt conclusions of the study	5%
Other	23%
Observations	129

**Notes:** This table presents the results of our survey of bankruptcy attorneys and judges that we conducted in collaboration with the American Bankruptcy Institute (ABI). In the survey, we asked respondents why they think that information and stigma treatments don't have long-lasting effects on most firm outcomes, as shown in Table 6. The survey briefly described the RCT and its results, and then asked respondents: "As an expert in bankruptcy, what do you think are the main reasons that, 4+ months after viewing the videos, small business owners do not actually change their actions in response to the videos—or even change their stated willingness to consider using bankruptcy—even though their information and stigma about bankruptcy were still improved at the 4-month check-in?" The full statement for each option was: (1) "Entrepreneurs are overconfident about future prospects for their businesses, and this makes it hard for instructional videos to have durable effects."; (2) "Bankruptcy is too expensive for small businesses; they can't afford the monetary costs."; (3) "Most small businesses are unlikely to benefit from bankruptcy, as their business is just not viable or the debt reduction is not meaningful enough."; (4) "The bankruptcy process takes too much time from the business owner, or is too confusing."; (5) "I doubt the conclusions of the study. I believe that improving information and reducing stigma would cause small business owners to be more likely to consider and use bankruptcy."; (6) "Other." Options were presented in random order to respondents, and each respondent could select up to two items on the list.