Side Effects From Fear: the Automatic Inhibition of Threat-Relevant Brand Advertising

Jesper Nielsen, University of Arizona, USA
Stewart Shapiro, University of Delaware, USA

Fear appeal communications are widely used as a tool to help influence intentions, attitudes and behavior in the context of maladaptive consumption behavior. Through two experiments we demonstrate that fear appeals may furthermore result in automatic suppression of stimuli related to the threat. We demonstrate that exposing consumers to a fear-based “don’t drink and drive” public service announcement decreases performance on a reaction time task featuring drinking-related stimulus words (study 1) and reduces the likelihood that consumers process drinking-related brand advertising in a consumer magazine (study 2).

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SIDE EFFECTS FROM FEAR: THE AUTOMATIC INHIBITION OF THREAT-RELEVANT BRAND ADVERTISING

Jesper Nielsen, University of Arizona, USA
Stewart Shapiro, University of Delaware, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to broaden our understanding of the impact of fear appeals. Specifically, we investigate whether, and under what conditions, the processing of fear appeals automatically suppresses the activation of concepts that are semantically associated with the threat and in turn decreases attention to threat-relevant brand advertising.

Social marketers have widely used fear appeals as a persuasive communication strategy, with the underlying assumption that threatening messages reduce maladaptive behaviors and/or encourage adaptive behaviors. To this end, fear appeals have been studied in the context of reducing unhealthful behaviors, such as smoking (Keller and Block 1996; Pechmann et al. 2003), drug use (Brown, D’Emidio-Caston, and Pollard 1997), the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (LaTour and Pitts 1989; Tanner, Hunt, and Eppright 1991), aggressive and inattentive driving (Mowen, Harris, and Bone 2004), and alcohol abuse (Mider 1984; Moscato et al. 2001).

Fear appeals have also been studied in the context of promoting appropriate behavior, such as practicing good oral hygiene (Janis and Feshbach 1953), obtaining vaccinations (Dillard and Anderson 2004), and using sunscreen (McMath and Prentice-Dunn 2005).

We seek to add to this literature by exploring another theoretically driven consequence of using fear appeal communications that is also of importance but has not yet received attention in the literature; that is, we investigate the ability of fear communications to automatically inhibit the processing of stimuli that are semantically associated with, but not explicitly linked to, the threat. An example of such stimuli is threat-relevant brand advertising. We define “threat-relevant brand advertising” as industry advertising that promotes a product that could be instrumental in causing the very behavior the fear appeal is attempting to prevent. For example, an advertisement that promotes Budweiser or Absolut Vodka would be considered threat-relevant brand advertising for a fear appeal message that focuses on the dangers of drinking and driving. Although Budweiser and Absolut Vodka are not the focal elements of the threat or explicitly mentioned in the threat, they are relevant to an anti-drinking-and-driving fear appeal message because they are specific brands of alcohol that can be consumed before driving.

Various theories have been proposed to account for peoples’ reactions to fear appeal messages. Some of these theories, including Sutton’s (1982) expectancy value model and Rogers’s (1975, 1983) protection motivation model, assume an effortful, cognitive process. However, other theories exist that allow for a more automatic route to persuasion. For example, Ray and Wilkie’s (1970) parallel process model and Witte’s (1992) extended parallel process model assume that exposure to a fear appeal message engages two processes: a danger-control process and a fear-control process. The danger-control process is a deliberative, cognitive process that includes thoughts of how to avoid the threat (e.g., don’t drive after drinking, use a designated driver). In contrast, the fear-control process is believed to be automatic and involuntary and, potentially, to occur outside conscious awareness. This process is viewed as being maladaptive (Ruiter et al. 2001; Witte 1992) in that fear control aims to eliminate the unpleasant feeling elicited by a threatening message through denial (“I won’t get hurt if I drink and drive”), reactance (“This message can’t stop me from drinking and driving, and in fact, I bet I am a better driver after I’ve had a few drinks”), or defensive avoidance (“this is too scary to think about”; Witte and Morrison 2000). It is through the fear-control process that we propose that suppression of semantic associates occurs. Thus, in this sense, we view the fear-control process as being beneficial rather than maladaptive, as others have argued.

The results of Study 1 provide the initial support for our hypotheses that exposure to a fear appeal message leads to the suppression of other concepts semantically related to the threat. Specifically, after reading an anti-drinking and driving fear appeal PSA, participants performed worse in a reaction time task featuring words semantically related to the threat of drinking and driving (bottle, beer, party, alcohol).

Study 2 provided us with two important results. First, based on a surprise recall task, study 2 confirms the findings of study 1 that fear appeals can lead to the automatic suppression of threat-related stimuli. Second, study 2 adds the dimension of testing these hypotheses in an environment of more direct relevance to marketers and consumer advocates. Participants who were exposed to an anti drinking and driving PSA were less likely to notice alcohol ads surrounding magazine articles of interest than were participants who were exposed to the control fear appeal PSA.

In addition, study 2 included a measure of cognitive avoidance, an individual-level variable predicted to impact the likelihood of a participant relying on fear-control processes. This variable was shown to significantly moderate the effect of fear-appeal PSAs on the suppression of threat-related ads.

REFERENCES


