The Appeal of Others: How to Avoid the Self-Positivity Bias

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Recent work on the self-positivity bias has explored how the compatibility between self vs. other-related emotions of the audience and the referent in the message influences perceptions of risk (Agarwal, Menon and Aaker 2006). However, the influence of the referent (self vs. other) in the message on perceptions of the reader is yet to be explored. The current research attempts to fill this gap. We expect that a self-referent message will result in the self-positivity bias whereas an other-referent message will not. Results are consistent with expectations and demonstrate that other-referent messages lead to higher risk perceptions and behavioral intentions than self-referent messages.

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Nearly 50 years of research and numerous articles on fear appeals have attempted to illustrate the behavioral motivation such appeals may generate (Witte and Allen 2000). The logical reasoning of using fear appeals in persuasion links back to the “drive-reduction model” (Hovland, Jains and Kelley 1953). The model suggests that a message becomes successful in persuasion only when it is sufficiently intense to create a drive and present recommendations capable of mitigating the fear (Keller 1999). Keller (1999) found that people engaging in risky behavior were persuaded more by lower fear appeals than those who were already adhering to healthier lifestyle/avoiding those risky behaviors. Such findings can be explained by the fact that people who practice risky behavior become more defensive in response to high fear appeals as they find themselves more vulnerable when exposed to such fear inducing messages. This is consistent with defense motivated processing, which is a fairly close-minded form, that leads to individuals’ desire to hold attitudes or beliefs congruent with positive self-concept (Chen and Chaiken 1999). Perceptions of risk for certain health conditions are not congruent with this desire to maintain a positive self-concept. This defensiveness leads to a lower capacity to process the recommendations presented in the message and thereby a higher inclination to discount the message all together with no appreciable influence on risk perceptions (Kunda 1990, Keller and Block 1997, Keller 1999).

This literature demonstrates the importance of understanding how health communications involving fear appeals may or may not influence consumer perceptions. Ideally, health messages should arouse fear only to the extent that the audience perceives increased risk for themselves leading them to adhere to the prescribed behavior. One critical concern of health communications relates to the “self-positivity bias” of the target audience. This bias demonstrates that people have a general tendency to assume themselves as impervious to the threat of being exposed to diseases (Raghubir and Menon 1998) and they do not feel the need or urgency to adhere to the preventative behaviors presented. This self-positivity bias leads people to discount health related messages in order to maintain their self-esteem (Taylor and Brown 1988). This bias does not occur when people are asked to estimate the risk of unpleasant things happening to another person (Perloff and Fetzer 1986, Raghubir and Menon 1998). This opens a new frontier of research studying how self vs. other related appeals can impact on subsequent persuasion.

Recent work on the self-positivity bias has explored how the compatibility between self vs. other-related emotions of the audience and the referent in the message influences perceptions of risk (Agarwal, Menon and Aaker 2006). However, it is yet to be explored how the referent (self vs. other) in a fear appeal message would influence perceptions of risk and behavioral intentions. The current research attempts to fill this gap by manipulating the referent (self vs. other) in the message using a fear appeal and exploring how the perceptions of risk and intention to adopt the recommended behavior changes accordingly. In this case, we anticipate that when a message is self-referent, it will generate more defensive processing and result in self-positivity bias (i.e. lower perceptions of risk). On the contrary, when the referent is someone else, it is not expected to generate the same defensiveness, and the result will be higher perceptions of risk for themselves.

A one-way ANOVA was designed to manipulate the message referent (self vs. other) and measure subsequent influence on risk perceptions and behavioral intentions. A print advertisement for skin cancer was developed for the study. All groups were exposed to the same advertisement that listed the factors leading to skin cancer and preventative steps that could be taken. The only difference in the ads was the first line, which prompted respondents to think of either themselves or someone else while they read the ad. In total, 57 undergraduate business students at a large eastern university participated in exchange for partial course credit. Post exposure measures on risk perceptions and behavioral intentions were collected. Risk perceptions were measured with a single item asking participants if they felt they were at risk for skin cancer and behavioral intentions were measured with 2 items that were mentioned in the advertisements as ways to avoid getting skin cancer (e.g. how likely are you to wear sunscreen and how likely are you to have a doctor check your skin for damage, \(r_{\text{.50}}, p<.001\)).

Results of the one-way ANOVA showed a significant influence on perceptions of risk (\(F(1,55)=5.99, p<.01\)). A comparison of the means indicated that the other-referent message generated higher perceptions of risk among the respondents (\(M=4.43\)) as opposed to the
self-referent message ($M=3.28$). The behavioral intentions measure demonstrated the same pattern of results ($F(1,55)=7.31, p<.01$) where those reviewing other referent measure had greater behavioral intentions ($M=4.07$) than those reviewing self-referent message ($M=2.91$).

As expected, results demonstrated the effectiveness of other-referent messages in avoiding the self-positivity bias. Participants who reviewed the other-referent messages were significantly more likely to have higher perceptions of risk for themselves of developing skin cancer. Further, these participants were also more likely to indicate intentions to follow the advice from the advertisement regarding wearing sunscreen and seeing a doctor to avoid the disease. Future research will need to explore more fully/comprehensively the processing involved in risk perceptions to determine the exact influence of defensive response and its role in the self-positivity bias.

References

The Effect of Discounting the Influence of Sources of Information on Choice and Product Perceptions
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Extended Abstract
In this research, we examine the effect of the source of the influence (e.g., salesperson or friend) and consumers’ ability to correct for the source’s influence on their product evaluations. Consumer’s perceptions of the source of a persuasive attempt have been found to influence the effectiveness of persuasive attempts in previous research (for a review, see Wilson and Sherrell 1993). People may react negatively when they believe a salesperson has an ulterior motive for persuasion (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), yet yield to a recognized persuasion attempt by a friend (Hamilton 2003).

Wegener and Petty’s (1995, 1997, 1998) Flexible Correction Model postulates that individuals correct for perceived bias when they are motivated and able to adjust their judgments, and that they make these adjustments based on their naïve theories about how a given source influences their judgments. We propose that the manner in which consumers correct for a perceived influence on their judgments is influenced by the perceived source of the influence. If people hold different beliefs about how strong an influence a source might have on their judgments, they may account for that influence differently.

Consumers may think that a salesperson is trying to persuade them (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Stafford, Leigh and Martin 1995), but may not perceive a friend’s attempt to influence their judgments in the same way. As a result, they may react differently to the same persuasive message depending on whether a salesperson or a friend delivers it. For example, Hamilton (2003) found that under some conditions, consumers were more likely to comply and choose the “suggested” alternative when a friend (rather than a stranger) was trying to influence them, even though the influence attempt was the same. Therefore, we propose that consumers will be more likely to resist the persuasion of a salesperson than the persuasion of a friend.

However, when consumers are instructed to correct their judgments (e.g., if they are told to avoid letting the salesperson or friend influence their judgments), we expect the pattern to reverse. Because consumers naturally resist the influence of a salesperson, they may overcorrect for the influence of the salesperson, resulting in enhanced effectiveness of the persuasive message rather than reduced effectiveness. In contrast, because consumers do not naturally resist the influence of a friend, an instruction to correct may reduce the effectiveness of the persuasion attempt.
We designed an experiment to test these predictions. The study employs a 2 (salesperson vs. friend) x 2 (no-instruction vs. instruction to correct) between-subjects design. The dependent variables were choice and willingness to purchase the product. Measures regarding persuasion knowledge and ulterior motives were also included.

Participants (N=71) read a written scenario (adapted from Campbell and Kirmani 2000) describing a situation in which they imagined they were looking for a jacket. In the salesperson condition, the salesperson makes a comment about one of the two jackets the participant imagines trying on (the target jacket); in the friend condition, the participant’s friend makes the same comment. In the no-instruction condition, participants answered the questions immediately after reading the scenario; in the instruction condition, participants were told to “try their best not to let the salesperson’s (the friend’s) opinion influence their own opinion.” Participants then chose between the non-target and the target jacket and completed the other measures.

As predicted, the salesperson was perceived as more persuasive than the friend (M_F=6.21, M_s=4.58), indicating a main effect of source (F (1, 67)=22.13, p<.001). Participants also perceived the salesperson as being more manipulative (F (1, 67)=11.79, p<.001), less trustworthy (F (1, 67)=54.57, p<.001), and less sincere than the friend (F (1, 67)=16.94, p<.001). Consistent with their desire to resist the salesperson’s influence, we found that in the salesperson condition participants chose the jacket that had not been recommended by the salesperson (the non-target jacket) marginally more often (15% of the time) than in the friend condition (7% of the time) (χ²=3.127, p<.07).

In the no-instruction condition, participants indicated that they tried harder to resist the salesperson’s influence than the friend’s influence (M_F=4.5, M_s=2.83). However, when they were instructed to correct, they tended to resist the salesperson’s influence less and the friend’s influence more (M_F=3.71, M_s=3.77), resulting in a significant interaction (F (1, 67)=4.6, p<.05).

Consistent with participants’ perceptions of their resistance, participants in the salesperson condition tended to prefer the non-target jacket relative to the target jacket in the no-instruction condition. However, when they were instructed to correct, there was no difference in their willingness to purchase the two jackets. The opposite pattern was observed in the friend condition, resulting in a significant three-way interaction (F (1, 67)=4.23, p<.05). Participants in the friend condition were more willing to purchase the recommended jacket in the no-instruction condition; the difference was not significant in the instruction condition.

Our findings show that when they are not instructed to correct their judgments, participants tend to comply with their friends and resist the salesperson’s influence, choosing the recommended jacket more when it was recommended by the friend than when it was recommended by the salesperson. Instruction to correct decreased choice of the recommended jacket in the friend condition and increased choice of the recommended jacket in the salesperson condition, making the proportion of choice equal.

This research builds on earlier research on source effects and on correction by showing that providing instructions to correct can moderate source effects. Notably, when people attempt to correct for a source’s influence the persuasiveness of a less trusted source such as a salesperson can actually increase. Despite the advantages of a friend in perceived trustworthiness, manipulativeness and sincerity, a simple reminder to a consumer to avoid being influenced by a third party can make a salesperson just as effective as a friend.

References

Mental Visual Imagery, Authenticity and Consumers’ Attitude Formation towards Licensed Brands
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Many researchers (e.g. Holt 2002; Koizimets 2002; Thompson et al. 2006) have noted that brand licensing undermines the value of the brands. However some examples suggest differently. Haier, a global brand in home electronics began its ascent in China by licensing refrigerator technology and the brand from German Liebherr Corp. Sanyo Fashion House Inc. obtained license to manufacture and distribute “blue label” Burberry products in Japan. Despite their licensee image, they have both achieved strong brand value internationally.

In this paper, we ask the question “when and how licensed brands achieve the same or even higher value than original brands?” and we reason that consumers’ assessment of authenticity may hold the key to this question. Most researchers agree that authenticity is not