The Influence of Self-Regulatory Focus and Context in the Effectiveness of Emotional Health Campaigns

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We examined the validity of the regulatory relevancy principle in the domain of emotional health ads by matching the emotional tone of sun protection campaigns to the chronic self-regulatory focus of the audience. We also investigated whether the context further moderated potential emotion-congruence effects on persuasion. Stronger emotion-congruence effects emerged when promotion people considered affect to be highly versus little relevant due to a stronger activated focus. Prevention people generally rely less on affect and thus, an equivocal pattern of results was expected. Here, persuasion effects of emotional stimuli mainly appeared in more divergent, clear-cut situations.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14145/la/v2_pdf/LA-02

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In health campaigns, a fear-relief appeal is often used. This message starts with focusing on negative consequences of a risk behavior and ends with offering a solution via behavioral recommendations (Hale and Dillard 1995). However, due to mixed results, there is a lot of discussion about its overall effectiveness (Witte and Allen 2000). It is often suggested that a valuable contribution could result from adopting a segmentation approach in which individual differences are taken into account. However, meta-analyses concluded that no true valuable moderator is identified yet (Witte and Allen 2000). We would like to contribute to this field by investigating the role of people’s goals and motives for health message design.

According to a recent motivation theory, the self-regulatory focus theory of Higgins (1997), there are two different basic motivational systems that regulate human behavior, namely (1) a promotion focus and (2) a prevention focus. These two foci have a significant impact on the type of goals that we pursue, the typical strategies that we follow and specific emotional vulnerabilities (Higgins 1997; Higgins, Shah, and Friedman 1997). Studies building further on this theory have also found evidence for a matching principle in the evaluation of stimuli (Pham and Higgins 2005). Specifically, in case of a match versus a mismatch between a stimulus and a recipient in terms of the self-regulatory focus (SRF), the stimulus will be evaluated as more valuable, a principle referred to as regulatory relevancy (Higgins 2002).

In consumer settings, compatible stimuli have been mainly developed in terms of verbal, objective product information (e.g., descriptions of luxurious versus reliable products (Safer 1998)). Knowing that consumers’ affective considerations could also be important for decision-making, such as in the health domain (Lawton, Conner, and Parker 2007) and that a strong link between the SRF and specific emotional vulnerabilities exists (Higgins et al. 1997), we would like to examine the validity of the regulatory relevancy principle further by matching the emotional tone of health messages to the motivational profile of the audience. Now, Pham and Avnet (2004) have also shown that promotion people have the tendency to rely more on affect than prevention people, but we expected that by including emotions compatible with the prevention focus in the stimuli, which has not been done before, affect could work for prevention people as well. Specifically, we expected that promotion people would consider dejection-cheerfulness ads to be more valuable than agitation-quescence ads, whereas the reverse would be true for prevention people.

However, when studying the effectiveness of emotional stimuli, it is also crucial to consider the other main variables determining reliance on affect. So, in our study, we also took into account the perceived relevance of affect for the topic at hand to examine when the hypothesized emotion-congruence effects in both foci could be found (Pham 1998). Considering interaction effects between traits and situational factors is an issue under investigation in different domains (Rusting 1998). Overall, previous studies have shown that while the activation of related constructs produces additive and stronger effects, unstable results are obtained when the activated constructs are opposing each other (Bargh et al. 1986). Therefore, we expected that stronger emotion-congruence effects in promotion people would be obtained when the topic was perceived as highly versus little affect-relevant, and this due to a stronger activated focus in the first context (Zhou and Pham 2004). For prevention people, we could only hypothesize the absence of emotion-congruence effects in case of a little affect-relevant context. In a highly affective context, unstable effects of emotional tone in prevention people were anticipated.

Via a between-subjects design, for which sun protection campaigns were developed, we examined the role of the chronic SRF and of the type of context (i.e., perceived affect relevance) in the effectiveness of different emotional tones for health campaigns (dejection-cheerfulness vs. agitation-quescence). A pretest with 153 females confirmed that the stimuli reflected the intended emotional tone. To run the experiment, we set up an online survey. Via an appeal to participate on two websites of a media concern, we obtained data from 1386 women between the age of 24 and 38 years old. We first asked about tanning activities and then randomly assigned respondents to one of the health campaigns. A control group was included. Questions about attitudes and behavioral intentions followed. Finally, perceived affect relevance, the chronic SRF and socio demographics were measured.

As expected, we found that when promotion people considered affect to be highly versus little relevant in processing the sun protection ad, their focus was more strongly activated and stronger emotion-congruence effects emerged. In particular, promotion people were more persuaded by health ads with a dejection-cheerfulness tone than by the ones with an agitation-quescence tone. Although results for prevention people were not in contrast to the proposed hypothesis, we also did not firmly hypothesize them. Specifically, emotion-incongruence effects on relevancy measures emerged: prevention people scored the incongruent dejection-cheerfulness higher than the congruent agitation-quescence appeals. Other types of processing, such as heuristic (e.g., an incongruent versus a congruent ad is more “catchy” (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) or motivated processing (e.g., a typical versus atypical ad is more obviously trying to persuade and is, therefore, less credible (Friestad and Wright 1994)) could be responsible, but validation is needed. In case of a highly affective context, we did not find emotion-congruence effects in prevention such as in promotion people. However, in a more ego-involving situation, reflected in a highly frequent use of sun beds, an emotion-congruency trend appeared. This indicates that emotional appeals could also be used as relevant information by prevention people, but only in situations where affective involvement is also real and highly personal.

In sum, our findings complement those of Pham and Avnet (2004) in that prevention people generally less on affect than promotion people, but that this should not always be the case, especially not in “extreme” contexts. Also, health practitioners could use these results when designing campaigns for specific health topics (especially highly affective ones) and/or for specific audiences defined in terms of their SRF.

References


