The Role of Regret Under Task Difficulty: a Boomerang Effect

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We replicate Passyn and Sujan’s (2006) finding that regret relative to fear messages enhance behavioral intentions and extend these findings to difficult tasks. As previously predicted, increasing task difficulty decreased perceptions of self-efficacy and self-protection behaviors under fear. However, we find that regret motivates self-protection behaviors in both high and low difficulty tasks and further there is a boomerang effect. That is self-efficacy and self-protection behaviors are strongest in the regret high task difficulty condition. Thus in contrast to fear, regret results in a boomerang effect enhancing self-efficacy and self-protection intentions for high difficulty tasks relative to low difficulty tasks.

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as the naming strategy (combined vs. separate) affect consumers’ perceptions of M&As. Choosing the less favorable naming strategy may harm both consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions. Thus, managers should first understand how consumers think of the two corporate images, and choose the naming strategy accordingly.

References

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Previous research has documented the advantages of high self-accountability emotions, such as guilt and regret, over low self-accountability emotions, such as fear, in motivating self-protection behaviors, such as wearing sunscreen or eating high fiber foods (Passyn and Sujan, 2005). In accord with functional theories of emotion (Frijda 1986, Lazarus 1981), this research supports the idea that high self-accountability emotions motivate and drive self-protection behaviors. However, these findings are limited to simple domains where perceptions of self-efficacy are high.

Thus, previous research has only shown the ability of emotions to impact behaviors that participants feel capable of engaging in. This raises the questions as to the impact of high-self accountability emotions in more complex and demanding domains, for example, resisting peer pressure. When you heighten task difficulty, creating more uncertainty of ones ability to perform the task, Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) would predict a decline in self protection behavior (Rogers 1983). Thus, when a person feels incapable of performing the task they are less likely to do so.

The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of high self-accountability emotions under conditions of high task difficulty. We tested our hypotheses in the context of condom usage. Outwardly, most people perceive condoms usage as an efficacious behavior, they are readily available and easy to use. However, actual rates of condom usage are low because in the heat of the moment the task of actually stopping, finding, and using a condom is difficult (Bradford and Beck 1991). In a pretest we assessed participants’ perceptions of condom usage difficulty and self-efficacy. Participants were either exposed to an in the moment message describing the difficulty of actually stopping and asking to use a condom or not exposed to any message. As predicted the results indicated when simply asked about condom usage participants report low task difficulty (M=2.8) and strong levels of self-efficacy, (M=3.78). However, when they were exposed to the manipulation perceptions of task difficulty increased significantly (M=4.2) and self-efficacy dropped significantly (M=2.73)*. In conclusion, our pretest demonstrates that while college students believe that condom usage is easy, reminding them of the urgency of the moment significantly increases perceptions of the real difficulty of using condoms.

Our study was a 2(task difficulty: present vs. absent) X 2(emotion: fear vs. regret) design. Task difficulty was manipulated using the manipulation described above. Emotions were manipulated using either a fear/low self-accountability message or a regret/high self-accountability message that discussed the threat of Chlamydia. Both messages concluded with a tagline to use condoms. Manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the fear (regret) conditions felt significantly more fear (regret) than participants in the other conditions. Additionally, the self-efficacy manipulation did not impact the intensity of the felt emotions, so there was no difference among the fear(regret) conditions. Furthermore, the task difficulty measure indicated significantly higher perceptions of task difficulty when participants were exposed to the “in the moment” message. Thus the manipulations were effective.

In support of our study, research the regret conditions combined resulted in significantly stronger behavioral intentions than the fear conditions combined (M=7.5 vs. 4.8, respectively). Among the fear conditions, as predicted by PMT, task difficulty significant decreased perceptions of self-efficacy (M=3.7 vs. 2.7) and intentions to use condoms (M=5.5 vs. 4.1). However, and in conflict with PMT, among the regret conditions there is a boomerang effect increasing task difficulty significantly increases perceptions of self-efficacy (M=3.7 vs. 4.3) and boosts behavioral intentions ( M=6.9 vs. 8.1). Thus in the process of motivating difficult behaviors regret actually erases self-efficacy doubts.