A Meta-Analytic Review of Fear Appeals: a Terror Management Perspective

David M. Hunt, University of Wyoming, USA
Stephanie Geiger-Oneto, University of Wyoming, USA
Omar Shehryar, Montana State University, USA

The dominant paradigm guiding fear appeal research asserts that differences in level of fear lead to differences in the persuasiveness of a message. However, Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests that fear appeals that make mortality salient may result in rejection of messages inconsistent with recipients’ cultural worldviews. As such, approaches grounded in the level-of-fear paradigm may under-predict the conditions under which fear appeals will be rejected. Drawing on TMT, this meta-analysis tests the hypothesis that when messages conflict with cultural worldviews, fear appeals that threaten death will be negatively related to message acceptance and positively related to message rejection.

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David M. Hunt, University of Wyoming, USA
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Fear appeals–persuasive messages designed to scare people into complying with a message by threatening negative consequences of non-compliance (Witte 1992)—are used in a broad range of social marketing contexts including drinking and driving, smoking cessation and prevention, domestic violence, food safety, and HIV/AIDS prevention. Scholarly interest in fear-based communications has been maintained for over fifty years. Three theories, drive theory (Janis & Feshbach, 1953), protection motivation theory (PMT; Rogers, 1983), and the parallel response theory (PRT; Tanner, Hunt, & Empright, 1991) have guided much of the extant research on the efficacy of fear appeals. This body of research has demonstrated weak, but reliable effects of fear upon attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Boster and Mongeau 1984; Mongeau 1998; Witte 2000). Relatively weak associations between fear and outcome variables has led to calls for research to identify plausible moderators between fear and persuasive outcomes (Witte 2000).

Across all three major theoretical approaches to fear appeal research, the dominant paradigm asserts that differences in the level of fear lead to differences in the persuasiveness of a message (Keller and Block 1996; Rogers 1985; Witte 1994). However, this approach overlooks the potential influence of the qualitative nature of the threatened consequence. Fear appeal messages vary not only in terms of the level of fear, but also in terms of the qualitative nature of the threatened consequence. For instance some consequences pose social threats, some pose threats of injury, and some pose threats of death. Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon 1986) suggests that messages threatening death produce responses to fear appeal messages that differ from responses to social threats or to threats of injury (Shehryar and Hunt 2005). Specifically, TMT suggests that fear appeals that make mortality salient may result in rejection of messages inconsistent with the cultural worldviews of message recipients. This suggests that extant theoretical approaches grounded in the level-of-fear paradigm under-predict the conditions under which fear-based messages will be rejected.

Terror Management Theory posits that even subtle reminders of mortality increase the need to defend and strengthen one’s cultural worldview. Treatments considered equally noxious, such as threatening someone with serious injury, intense pain, or social embarrassment do not evoke mortality salience and do not lead to a defense of cultural worldviews (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). The distinction between responses to the fear of death versus responses to other noxious consequences has important implications for fear appeal research. Specifically, when individuals highly committed to a worldview are exposed to a death-threat-based message that conflicts with that worldview, they will reject the message’s recommendation.

We hypothesize that when messages conflict with recipients’ cultural worldviews, the qualitative nature of the threatened consequence will moderate the relationship between commitment to that worldview and persuasiveness of the message such that:

Hypothesis 1: When messages conflict with the cultural worldview of recipients, fear appeals that threaten death as a consequence will be negatively related to message acceptance and positively related to message rejection.