The Role of Cultural Identity and Personal Relevance on Risk Perception and Avoidance

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We examine the cultural-similarity effect on consumers’ perception of risk when faced with a health threat. In Study 1, we find that cultural similarity increases people’s risk perceptions when risk is highly likely to occur, but does not have an effect on people’s risk perceptions when the event is less likely to happen. In Studies 2 and 3, we extend our findings to examine how personal relevance moderates these effects by generating defensive message processing. More specifically, we are able to illustrate that the presence of a more personally relevant aspect of one’s identity reverses the effects of cultural similarity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14749/volumes/v36/NA-36

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the globalized world that we now live, the media keeps warning us about health threats such as the avian flu, mad cow disease, E. coli, etc. from different countries. It is generally assumed that perception of risk among citizens depends largely on the perceived likelihood of occurrence of the threat (Luce and Kahn 1999; Menon, Block, and Ramanathan 2002). However, little is known on whether risk perception depends on how culturally similar the origin of the threat is to one’s own? For instance, would Californians feel more at risk if the health threat originated in England versus in Japan, although both countries are advanced and at almost the same distance? This paper attempts to answer these important questions.

Scholars investigating the psychological closeness phenomenon suggest that people are more likely to assimilate self-evaluation to the standard if they feel psychologically closer to him or her (Brown et al. 1992). Along similar lines, Teigen’s (2005) proximity heuristic theory in judgment of risk suggests that perceptions of proximity influence people’s perceptions of their own and other people’s risk. He exemplifies this proximity phenomenon by saying that the death of a close relative is more threatening than the death of a distant one, even when genetics is not the cause of death. A somewhat opposing view to the heuristic proximity theory is the one on defensive processing of threatening messages. Liberman and Chaiken (1992) suggest that threatening messages that are personally relevant may lead people to engage in defensive and biased processing in an attempt to reduce the threat. In this case, we can expect that health risky situations that are perceived to be highly personally relevant may lead to message avoidance or denial of susceptibility and hence reduce the perception of risk.

It is common knowledge that people feel psychologically closer to culturally similar groups. We propose that this feeling of closeness with the origin of a threat increases one’s perception of risk and behavioral intentions. However, when personal relevance is increased, it can lead to a rejection of the risk.

In this research, using a context of people being affected by contaminated beef and dairy products, we conducted three studies to examine consumers’ perception of risk from potentially consuming the contaminated food and their consequent willingness to engage in behaviors to avoid the risk. We demonstrate that when the risk is highly likely to occur, perceived risk and behavioral intentions are high only when the threat originates in a culturally similar country. However, when risk is less likely to happen, perceived risk and behavioral intentions are unaffected by the cultural similarity with the originating country. Furthermore, we show that even in the case of a culturally-dissimilar country, perceived risk and behavioral intentions can be high when the threat is high, provided that personal relevance is also high. In the case of the culturally-similar country, when personal relevance is high, it lowers their perception of risk and behavioral intentions.

Participants in studies 1 and 2 were given a fictitious news article that reported a food contamination in a foreign country and some citizens in that country being affected as a result. Likelihood of threat occurrence was communicated by manipulating the strength of the warning issued by local (Canadian) health officials about the possibility of food imported from that country being contaminated. In study 1, our data show that when the contaminated food was said to be imported from a culturally similar country (UK), consumers perceive a greater risk and behavioral intentions when the likelihood of threat occurrence is high and a lower risk when the likelihood of threat occurrence is low. However, when the contaminated food was said to be imported from a culturally dissimilar country (France), risk perception and behavioral intentions were low regardless of the likelihood of occurrence of the threat. These results indicate that the likelihood of threat occurrence impacts risk perceptions and behavioral intentions only when the threat originates in a culturally similar context. When the origin of the threat is seen as culturally distant, consumers underestimate the risk and are less willing to engage in behaviors to avoid the risk even when the risk is highly likely to occur.

In study 2, we manipulated personal relevance by the news article specifying that the persons affected by the contaminated food were students (high personal relevance) or not specifying (low personal relevance). We demonstrate that when the origin of the threat is a culturally-dissimilar country, perceived risk and behavioral intentions are high when the likelihood of threat occurrence is high only in the highly personally relevant condition. Interestingly, in the case of the culturally-similar country (UK), when the victims were reported to be students, perception of risk and behavioral intentions drop in the case of high likelihood of threat occurrence. We argue that this happens because consumers activate a defensive mechanism (Liberman and Chaiken 1992) that makes them reject the threat as not being credible. The results of study 2 mirror study 1 when the victims were said to be just people.

In study 3, using Germany as our culturally similar condition and Spain as our culturally dissimilar condition, we were able to replicate the findings from studies 1 and 2. This was done to eliminate any potential dissociative biases arising from English Canadians’ perceptions of France.

This paper makes two important contributions. First, it demonstrates the moderating role of cultural similarity in perception of risk and behavioral intentions to avoid the risk in the face of an external threat. Second, it shows that when the message concerns a possible negative outcome, increasing the personal relevance of the threat results in rejecting the risk, counter to common knowledge that communications need to help the consumer relate to them in order to be effective.

REFERENCES

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