I'm Afraid, But Am I Persuaded? How to Make Fear Appeals More Effective

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Though appealing to fear is a commonly used persuasive tactic, both practitioners and academic researchers remain divided on whether fear appeals are an effective means of conveying a message or not. While the success of some real world fear appeal campaigns suggests that fear has a positive influence on persuasion, the results of other ad campaigns indicate that fear may actually hamper message acceptance (e.g., Prevention First, 2008; Rhodes, Wolitski and Arguelles, 1989). Similarly, over fifty years of academic research on fear appeals yields mixed evidence as to how persuasive fear appeals really are, with the results of some studies showing a positive relationship between fear and persuasion and others indicating a lack of or even a negative relationship (Janis and Terrillinger, 1962; Witte and Allen, 2000). The three papers in this session all focus on exploring when fear appeals are effective and why. More specifically, each of the three papers examines a different type of factor that may influence whether consumers are persuaded by a given fear appeal or not. Broadly construed, this symposium aims to shed some light on the debate surrounding a classic persuasion technique.

To offer a fuller understanding of when fear appeals are effective and why, each paper examines a distinct factor that may influence fear appeal persuasion and offers a unique perspective. First, Morales, Fitzsimons and Wu (2009) examine how features of the appeal itself, specifically the presence or absence of a disgust-eliciting element, might influence how persuasive consumers find a given fear appeal to be. Second, Agrawal and Menon (2009) explore how factors incidental to the appeal might carry over to influence message acceptance. In particular, they investigate how incidental discrete emotions differentially determine fear appeal effectiveness. Finally, Lau, Williams and Drolet (2009) focus on how individual difference factors can moderate fear appeal persuasion. Specifically, they examine how differences in empathy neglect might impact consumer responsiveness to ads that evoke their fear of embarrassment. Together, these papers suggest that appealing to fear can be an effective persuasive technique but that there are limits and boundary conditions that may hinder persuasion.

Fear appeals have been commonly used to address a wide range of the most urgent social and public health issues ranging from domestic violence and driving while under the influence to AIDS prevention and teenage pregnancy. Given the frequency with which fear appeals are used and the significance of the messages they are attempting to convey, it becomes that much more important for marketers to understand how these appeals work, when they will get the message across and when they will backfire. This symposium aims to contribute to consumer research by providing a nuanced and detailed view of some of the factors that determine whether fear appeals will be persuasive or not.

We hope that this symposium will attract a wide ACR audience, from researchers interested in fear appeals specifically to the broad range of researchers who examine the role of emotion in consumer psychology. This symposium is also relevant for marketers interested in persuasion and emotional coping. Of note, these papers are all in advanced stages of completion. As such, we expect this symposium to stimulate much discussion. For this reason, we hope to save 20 minutes following the presentations for Lauren Block to discuss the presentations and to receive questions from the audience.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“That’s So Disgusting–I’ll Take Two!: How Disgust Enhances the Effectiveness of Fear Appeals”

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Fear appeals have been used to promote a wide variety of consumer products and services and to address a broad range of pressing public health issues including AIDS prevention and drug use (e.g., Freimuth, Hammond, Edgar and Monahan, 1990). Despite the frequency with which fear appeals are used, practitioners and academics remain divided over whether fear appeals are an effective means of persuasion or not (e.g., National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1997; Prevention First, 2008; Beck, 1984; Rogers and Mewborn, 1976).

Research has identified a number of message features and individual difference variables that influence the effectiveness of fear appeals (e.g., Keller and Block, 1996; Rogers, 1983). We propose a previously unexamined factor that may affect fear appeal persuasiveness: the presence or absence of a disgust-eliciting element. Studies have suggested that fear appeals may evoke other emotions in addition to fear (e.g., Dabbs and Leventhal, 1966) and that these emotions may affect persuasion (Passyn and Sujan, 2006). In the current work, we focus on the role of disgust in increasing the persuasiveness of fear appeals. We focus on disgust because its role in persuasion is little understood and because many existing fear appeals seem to also include a disgusting element.

Though both fear and disgust are negative emotions, the distinct properties of each emotion should lead to divergent effects on persuasion. In terms of appraisal pattern differences, fear is characterized by maximal uncertainty whereas disgust is described by a relatively high degree of certainty. When individuals are threatened, feelings of certainty or uncertainty help determine how they will respond. Feelings of uncertainty cause individuals to question their ability to avoid an unpleasant outcome whereas feelings of certainty lead individuals to feel that they can deal with the problem. This suggests that when individuals experience fear in response to a fear (without disgust) appeal, their sense of uncertainty should make message compliance less likely, as they will be unsure whether they can actually do anything to avoid the unpleasant outcome. When individuals experience both disgust and fear in response to a disgust-eliciting fear appeal however, the sense of certainty associated with disgust (that is absent in the case of a fear-without-disgust-appeal) should lead to increased message persuasion and a higher likelihood of compliance with the message’s recommendations.

Similarly, the unique action tendencies that describe fear and disgust should also lead to disparate effects on persuasion. Most fear appeals are future-oriented (e.g., you will develop skin cancer if you do not use sunscreen) rather than present-oriented (e.g., you are developing skin cancer right now) so that the threat is not imminent. This characteristic of fear appeals should interact with the action tendencies of fear and disgust to influence persuasion. The action tendency in fear is avoidance or escape (Lazarus, 1991) but interestingly, fear often results in freezing or “deer in head-lights” behavior. Rosen and Schilkin (1998) suggest that the fear reaction occur in two stages: threat causes individuals to freeze up...
initially and then to actively avoid or escape only when the danger becomes imminent. Consistent with this, consumers have been found to “seize and freeze” in response to health-related or threatening messages in fear appeals, thereby hindering persuasion (Block and Williams 2002). In contrast, disgust is characterized by a strong and pronounced impulse to move away from disgust-eliciting object in an immediate and certain manner (Lazarus, 1991). Given that fear causes individuals to freeze if the danger is not looming and that disgust causes individuals to act immediately, we expect that individuals should respond more strongly to fear appeals that also co-activate disgust relative to fear appeals that do not.

In study 1, we first explore the distinct effect that disgust has on persuasion. Though disgust’s expelling properties suggest that disgusting ads may repel consumers away from the suggested behavior and advertised brand, we propose that disgust can lead to increases in persuasion if the frame of the ad fits with disgust’s expelling action tendency. We test this idea in a 2 (disgust level: low vs. high) by 2 (frame: approach vs. avoid) experiment. Results reveal that participants in the high disgust/avoidance frame condition were the most persuaded relative to participants in all other conditions.

In study 2, we begin to examine how disgust might affect fear appeal effectiveness. To tease out disgust’s influence on fear appeals, we pit a fear appeal that does not elicit disgust, a neutral appeal and an appeal in which disgust and fear are co-activated against each other and measure their respective effects on persuasion. Specifically, we use advertisements that attempt to persuade consumers not to use drugs. Study results show that participants were the least likely to use illegal drugs in the disgust and fear co-activation condition.

Studies 3 through 5 build on the results of study 2 and continue to examine how disgust might influence fear appeal persuasiveness. In study 3, we demonstrate that the persuasive effects of disgust-inducing fear appeals generalize across appeals that elicit disgust both through images and through ad copy. In study 4, we would like to draw on our study 1 findings and show that disgust-inducing fear appeals should be particularly effective in the context of an avoidance frame, given the fit between avoidance and how consumers naturally respond to disgust. This is exactly what we find. In study 5, we turn to the appraisal differences between disgust and fear to further examine the distinctions between disgust-inducing fear appeals and fear appeals that do not elicit disgust. Results reveal that the presence or absence of a disgust-eliciting element has a significant effect on persuasion but only for individuals who are motivated to seek a sense of certainty. For individuals who are not motivated to seek certainty, the presence or absence of disgust has little effect on persuasion.

In sum, we find that including disgust-eliciting elements in fear appeals can augment persuasion. An examination of some of the most highly cited fear appeals articles and of real world advertising campaigns suggests that many of these appeals inadvertently elicited disgust in addition to fear. Thus, disgust may be a key moderator of fear appeal effectiveness and may be able to resolve some of the controversy over them. More generally, our findings suggest that future research should examine the role of specific emotions in persuasion appeals, as discrete emotions can have unique effects on persuasion.

References
Prevention First (2008), Ineffectiveness of Fear Appeals in Youth Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) Prevention, Springfield, IL: Prevention First.

“Harboring Hope and Avoiding Anxiety: The Role of Emotions in Determining the Effectiveness of Fear Appeals”
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Health messages frequently try to convince consumers that they are at high risk of contracting a disease by presenting an array of risk factors and consequences that resonate with the consumers. Such messages intended to promote safe, precautionary and preventative behaviors in the context of health by creating a fear of having a disease. Such fear appeals that highlight risk factors and consequences are inherently threatening. A growing stream of research on health seeks to understand the factors that affect how people respond to fear appeals. The question that this research has
asked is: When, why and how are such fear appeals effective in convincing people of their vulnerability?

Existing research has suggested that people have two responses to fear appeals: fear control or danger control. Fear control encourages people to cope with the emotion itself and process information in a way that reduces their fear. Fear control hurts the processing of fear appeals and renders them ineffective. The other response of danger control encourages people to manage the threat that lead to fear. This response encourages them to process health information and focus on actions that might help control the source of the fear (Leventhal 1971; Witte 1994). Health research has examined conditions that encourage a fear control or danger control response. Most of this past work has examined the role of message factors in determining the effectiveness of fear appeals. In this paper, we focus on role of the broader emotional context in which the appeal is presented in determining the effectiveness of the appeal. Specifically, we suggest that participants’ incidental emotions, specifically those varying on valence and uncertainty (e.g., happiness, sadness, hopefulness, anxiety) will determine whether they respond to fear appeal by trying to control the fear or the danger.

To understand how incidental emotions might affect responses to fear appeals, we draw on a significant stream of research that has examined the role of specific emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, peacefulness) in processing information and forming judgments (Lerner and Keltner 2000). This literature argues that individuals’ responses to given emotions are directed by the underlying appraisals (e.g., valence, uncertainty) associated with those emotions. For example, anxiety is a negatively valenced emotion with a high uncertainty appraisal whereas sadness is a negatively valenced emotion with a low uncertainty appraisal. In another contrast, hope has a high uncertainty appraisal like anxiety but is positively valenced. These distinctions in valence and uncertainty are likely to drive the systematic variations in responses across these emotions. We propose that primed emotions would only influence responses to fear appeals when they are seen as applicable or relevant to the appeal (Agrawal, Menon, and Aaker 2007). Uncertain emotions would be more applicable and hence more likely to influence the processing of uncertainty-inducing fear appeals. Certain emotions would be less applicable and hence less likely to influence the processing of fear appeals. Then, to understand how two uncertain emotions varying in valence might influence individuals’ response to fear appeals, we draw on the literature on valenced affective states. We propose that positively valenced emotions would lead to a danger control response that would enhance the effectiveness of fear appeals. In contrast, negative valence would lead to an emotion-repair focused fear control response which would hinder the effectiveness of fear appeals (Ragunathan and Trope 2002). Hence, we predict that valence and uncertainty appraisals will interactively determine individual’s response to fear appeals.

In all three experiments, participants are primed with one of four emotional states (i.e., happiness, hopefulness, anxiety, or sadness). Then they are exposed to a fear appeal and measures of risk perception (study 1), message processing (study 1), and health behaviors (study 2) are collected. In Experiment 1, participants experiencing anxiety exhibited a fear control response, manifesting as lower risk estimates and defensive processing of the message relative to those experiencing sadness. Those experiencing hopefulness showed a danger control response manifesting in greater risk perceptions and objective processing of the message relative to happy individuals. These findings supported our predicted interaction between valence and uncertainty. Experiment 2 followed the same paradigm but collected measures of subsequent processing of health related information. In experiment three, participants primed with one of the four emotions were shown either a high or low fear appeal. Our effects held only for high fear appeal. The processing of the low fear appeal did not vary by valence and uncertainty of the incidental emotion.

These findings add to the literature on the processing of fear appeals as well as advance our understanding of how primed emotional states might affect the processing of emotionally aversive information. These findings have implications for designing health communications as well as broader contexts in which health communications are offered.

References

“Why People Fear Embarrassment: The Role of Empathy Neglect”

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People will go to great lengths to avoid feeling embarrassed. They will sacrifice their own health (Helwig-Larsen and Collins 1994) and financial gain (Corley and Rinker 1990) to evade embarrassment. They will not help others in need if such acts prove too embarrassing (Foss and Crenshaw 1978). They will behave in many ways indicative of an underlying deep fear of embarrassment. Embarrassment is indeed a strong motivating force affecting many decisions in life. This research examines factors that determine consumers’ underlying fear of embarrassment and identifies ways to manage embarrassment-avoidant behavior through persuasive ads.

The threat to the self due to embarrassing mishaps in front of others appears more imaginary than real. Recent research reveals that embarrassing pratfalls often go unnoticed and are not judged as harshly by others as expected (Gilovich, Medvec and Savitsky 2000). This suggests that actual or expected feelings of embarrassment typically prove unwarranted, for people tend to overestimate the impressions they make upon others and believe the impressions formed will be negative. Moreover, the inaccuracy of others’ judgments can be attributed at least in part to empathy neglect, the tendency not to consider others’ empathic orientation (Epley, Savitsky and Gilovich 2002).

The present research explores the possibility that empathy neglect may underlie embarrassment-avoidant behavior. People may steer clear from potentially embarrassing activities because of their misjudgments about others’ judgments of their own actions; they assume others not only will take note of their embarrassing missteps but also will evaluate them negatively as a result of it. We
examine the nuances of empathy neglect by investigating how it corresponds to people’s chronic levels of public self consciousness (PUBSC). People characterized by increased levels of PUBSC tend to believe they are being noticed and negatively evaluated by others more so than people with decreased levels of PUBSC (Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss 1975). Lau-Gesk and Drolet (2008) recently showed that heightened levels of PUBSC led to increased purchase intentions for embarrassing-to-buy products designed to help fend off greater future embarrassment once consumed. This is because the more elevated in PUBSC, the more people expect to be embarrassed. However, once convinced that future embarrassment is likely for them, purchase intentions for embarrassment-prevention products tend to be elevated regardless of PUBSC levels.

The present research builds on this initial work by investigating more closely which of the two components of empathy neglect underlie these differences in expectations to feel and motivation to take notice, these others tend to make less harsh judgments when empathic to the embarrassing episode can explain embarrassment-avoidant behavior.

In the first two experiments, we test our theory by examining the role of PUBSC in people’s responses to real ads for an embarrassing research assistantship. The job is advertised as requiring the participants to walk around campus with toilet paper stuck in the zipper of their pants and count number of people who inform them of it. In experiment 1, the ads for the embarrassing research assistantship job either reminds potential applicants of the possible scrutiny of others or does not. We expected and found the latter ad to produce embarrassment-avoidant behavior as evidenced through lower intentions to apply for the job regardless of PUBSC. The control ad also generated the expected pattern of results. Increased PUBSC led to lower job application intentions. Results from the first experiment help to establish the basic idea that higher levels of PUBSC correspond to higher expectations for negative social evaluations of others.

Experiment 2 attempts to disentangle whether the effects are due to a failure to realize others do not take much notice of embarrassing outcomes versus due to the failure to realize others have empathy and won’t judge embarrassing outcomes harshly. Though the control ad remained the same, two new ads were created. Specifically, one ad cautioned potential applicants that people definitely would notice and remember seeing the toilet paper person walking around campus. Note that, unlike in the first experiment, this ad did not explicitly state that onlookers would cast unfavorable judgments. The other new ad reminded potential applicants that observers would have empathy and thus not judge as harshly as they expect. Findings indicate that people with increased PUBSC automatically assume others will notice their embarrassing pratfalls. They believe themselves the focus of attention. People with lower levels of PUBSC do not appear to assume this. However, once they believe others will take notice of embarrassing social blunders, they also tend to suffer from empathy neglect as well by not taking into account others’ empathic nature. Regardless of PUBSC levels, people assume others judge embarrassing outcomes harshly. The final experiment explores the possible ways to undo empathy neglect.

Experiment 3 explores whether perspective-taking can help undo empathy neglect among individuals with heightened PUBSC. These individuals should correspondently have greater empathy towards others who suffer from embarrassment. Results support this proposition. Heightened PUBSC is associated with greater empathy displayed towards an individual featured in an ad who committed an embarrassing pratfall (i.e., accidental flatulence in front of his crush), thereby producing more favorable attitudes toward him and lowering purchasing intent for a gas prevention product designed to help people avoid future embarrassment. Findings across these three experiments are discussed in light of the emerging view about the importance of understanding the interaction between individual difference and situational variables as well as that among multiple emotions including fear, embarrassment and empathy.

References