Two-Sided Messages For Health Risk Prevention: the Role of Argument Type, Refutation and Issue Ambivalence

Erlinde Cornelis, Ghent University, Belgium
Veroline Cauberghe, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick De Pelsmacker, Ghent University, Belgium

The present experimental research extends message sidedness literature to a health prevention context. Second, it addresses not only rational, but also affective two-sided messages. Third, this research explains a gap in message sidedness literature by addressing the impact of issue ambivalence on the effectiveness of refutational versus non-refutational two-sided messages.

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Erlinde Cornelis, Ghent University, Belgium
Veroline Cauberghe, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick De Pelsmacker, University of Antwerp, Belgium

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
A variety of studies suggests that commercial advertising can include some negative information along with the positive product information, and still be more effective than when only positive information is provided (Crowley and Hoyer 1994; Pechmann 1992). For instance, when selling a product, it might pay off to also mention a few shortcomings (Eisend 2006). Such two-sided messages are found to generate attitudinal resistance to counter-persuasion (Kamins and Assael 1987).

However, the two-sided message strategy has not been tested in a reversed way (e.g., to prevent unhealthy behavior) (Eisend 2006). What if health prevention campaigns not only emphasize the negative aspects of, for instance, binge drinking, but also mention the perceived benefits of that behavior? Two experimental studies were set up to address this research gap. The effectiveness of two-sided anti binge drinking and anti marijuana messages was investigated in relation to argument type, refutation, and issue ambivalence.

Study 1 serves as a baseline study in which the principle of message sidedness (one- versus two-sided) is tested in combination with argument type (rational versus affective). Previous message sidedness literature mainly focused on rational arguments (Eisend 2007), neglecting the role of affective arguments, despite the importance of affect in consumer persuasion processes (Ray and Batra 1983; Pham 1998). Affective arguments are especially relevant for health issues, as affect plays a crucial role in health-related decisions (Agrawal, Menon, and Aaker 2007). The results of study 1 show that two-sided messages have superior effects on attitude toward the ad over one-sided messages, but only when the argument is affective (see figure 1). The reason is that affective arguments are more issue-relevant for consummatory motivated behavior (such as binge drinking) than rational arguments (Pham 1998; Ricciardelli, Williams, and Finemore 2001).

Figure 1: The Interaction Effect Between Message Sidedness and Argument Type on Attitude Toward the Message

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE AD

ARGUMENT TYPE

- - - AFFECTIVE

RATIONAL

MESSAGE SIZEDNESS

Study 2 therefore builds on the results of the first study by focusing solely on affective two-sided messages. In order to investigate two-sided messages more profoundly, a distinction is made between two different subtypes of two-sided messages: a refutational versus a non-refutational two-sided message. In a non-refutational two-sided message, advertisers simply present positive and negative information. In a refutational two-sided (commercial) message, advertisers subsequently refute or discount the negative information in an attempt to ‘inoculate’ the audience against possible counterclaims by competitors afterwards (Eisend 2007). In our study of binge drinking prevention, a two-sided refutational message would refute the positive argument (instead of the negative one), in order to bolster teenagers’ attitudes when they are subsequently exposed to peer pressure. After receiving one of the two stimuli (a refutational or a non-refutational two-sided message), the participants were exposed to peer pressure. Peer pressure was conceptualized as a printed online chat conversation between two peers who explicitly promoted binge drinking.

Using a physiological analogy, inoculation theory (McGuire 1961) states that offering mild counterarguments in a message and afterwards refuting them enhances attitudes in the preferred direction (Eisend 2007). In immunology, to build resistance to a disease, people are often injected with a solution that contains a mild form of the disease itself (Etgar and Goodwin 1982). One of the main tenets of inoculation theory is the need for including a refutation of the counterargument(s) within the message (Crowley and Hoyer 1994). However, many researchers also found beneficial effects for two-sided advertising without refutation (Crowley and Hoyer 1994; Golden and Alpert 1987; Kamins and Assael 1987). These mixed findings indicate that refutation is not always necessary, but rather depends on certain moderating variables.

Study 2 explains the inconsistent findings of previous literature concerning the effectiveness of refutational versus non-refutational two-sided messages by including a moderating variable: issue ambivalence. The reason why some previous studies report no different effect for a refutational versus non-refutational two-sided message, could be due to the nature of the issue itself. For instance, the issue we used in study 1 (i.e., binge drinking) is not a very ambivalent issue in that most people would consider it as undesirable behavior. Binge drinking is characterized by strong contra-arguments and (relatively) weak pro-arguments, making it easy for individuals to mentally refute the pro-argument themselves. So, in the case of a unambivalent issue, refutation of the (weak) pro-argument within the message would offer little added value, as refutation can easily be done by the consumers themselves. Conversely, for a more ambivalent issue, characterized by relatively stronger pro-arguments besides the contra-arguments, it might be more difficult for consumers to mentally refute the pro-argument themselves. Consumers in an ambivalent condition need a stronger direction in the message (e.g., a refutational statement) in order to resolve the ambivalence (Zemborain and Johar 2007). Hence, in this case, refutation of the pro-argument within the message might be more necessary. We therefore expected to find a positive persuasive effect of refutational over the non-refutational two-sided message only when the topic is more ambivalent. Based on the results of a pretest, in which seventeen differ-
ent issues were questioned within-subjects among 20 respondents, we selected marijuana use as an ambivalent issue and binge drinking as a unambivalent issue.

The results of study 2 reveal that for the ambivalent issue (marijuana use), refutation of the positive argument within the two-sided message is more effective than when the argument is not refuted. In other words, for an ambivalent issue, teenagers’ attitudes toward the issue are significantly more negative when they were inoculated by a two-sided refutational message prior to exposure to peer pressure, than when they had received a two-sided non-refutational message before. In the case of the unambivalent issue (binge drinking), however, the results show that refutation is not necessary, hence, no different effect between the refutational and the non-refutational two-sided message was found for a unambivalent issue (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The Interaction Effect Between Refutation and Issue Ambivalence on Attitude Toward the Issue After Exposure to Peer Pressure

The theoretical added value of this research is threefold. First, it extends message sidedness literature to a health prevention context. Second, our study addresses not only rational, but also affective two-sided messages. Third, our research explains a gap in message sidedness literature by addressing the effect of a crucial moderator, namely issue ambivalence, on the impact of refutational versus non-refutational two-sided messages.

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