Who Is the Person in Need? Combining Message Framing and Social Distance to Promote Pro-Social Health Behaviors

Laurie Balbo, Montpellier Business School, France
Florence Jeannot, INSEEC Business School, France
Justine Estarague, Montpellier Business School, France

Relying on Construal Level Theory, two experiments show that matching message framing (gains vs. losses) with social distance (proximal vs. distal) leverages intention towards two pro-social health behaviors (study 1: blood donation; study 2: organs donation). Study 2 also indicates that consumers’ comparative optimism (a self-positivity bias) moderates this match-based effect.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Message framing, a technique well-known by both marketing researchers and practitioners, consists of evoking either the positive consequences (or gains) associated with engaging in a particular behavior (e.g., Use of sunscreen reduces the risk of having skin cancer) or the negative consequences (or losses) associated with failing to engage in the same behavior (e.g., Not using sunscreen increases the risk of skin cancer). Indeed, some works conclude that messages evoking gains are more efficient (e.g., Lee and Aaker 2004), while other works show that messages stressing losses are more influential (e.g., Keller et al. 2003).

Based on construal level theory (Liberman and Trope 1998), we propose that the influence of message framing differs according to the social distance perceived by consumers between themselves and the individuals used in the message to which they are exposed (e.g., the testimony of a person in a specific health domain). In particular, we show that a loss-framed message is more persuasive when paired with a socially proximal person. Indeed, a loss-framed message incites consumers to implement concrete actions to avoid the undesirable consequences presented in the message. These actions would fit the lower construal level induced by a proximal social distance (Liviatan et al. 2008). Conversely, a gain-framed message encourages the adoption of a higher construal level (i.e., the benefits of a specific behavior) which matches the construal induced by a distal social distance (Liviatan et al. 2008). Importantly, we examine a boundary condition of this match-based effect and we propose that comparative optimism (CO), the tendency to believe that negative events are more likely to occur to others than oneself (Smits and Hoorens 2005), moderates the interplay between message framing and social distance.

Experiment 1
99 undergraduate students participated in a 2 (message framing: gains vs. losses) × 2 (social distance: proximal vs. distal) between-subjects experiment (Mage = 20.60; SDage = 2.38; 43.4 % male). All messages were equal in the length and contained the same arguments. In the gain-framed condition, the message stated the positive consequences of giving blood (e.g., Giving blood does save lives), while in the loss-framed condition, the message mentioned the negative consequences of not giving blood (e.g., Not giving blood does not save lives). The social distance was manipulated by presenting a testimonial from someone who had received blood; this testimonial came from either someone who fit the age range of the participant (proximal source) or someone who did not (distal source). The stimuli were declined across gender (male vs. female).

The message framing and social distance did not have a significant main effect but the predicted interaction between message framing and social distance was significant (F(1,95) = 18.33, p < .001). Follow-up tests indicated that in the proximal condition, message framing had a significant effect on intention to give blood (t(48) = 2.82, p < 0.005). Participants who read the loss-framed message reported greater intention to give their blood than participants who read the loss-framed message (Mgains = 4.26; Mlosses = 3.25).

Experiment 2
177 participants (Mage = 29.40; SDage = 10.57; 43.5% male) took part in this online experiment designed as a 2 (message framing: gains vs. losses) × 2 (social distance: proximal vs. distal) between-subjects design with two levels of CO (high vs. low) used as a measured independent variable. The participants first answered some questions measuring their CO. Similar to those in Experiment 1, the manipulation of message framing either highlighted a gained-framed (“We all gain by donating organs”) or a loss-framed (“We all lose by not donating organs”) message. Social distance was manipulated by changing the tagline in the message. In the proximal condition, the message read, “You may need an organ donation someday”, while in the distal condition, it read, “Someone may need an organ donation someday”.

We calculated participants’ CO score by subtracting their ratings of another person’s probability of being affected by five health situations from their ratings of their own probability. A 2 (message framing: gains vs. losses) × 2 (social distance: proximal vs. distal) × 2 (CO: low vs. high) ANOVA demonstrated a significant three-way interaction (F(1,176) = 3.79; p = .053). For participants with a low CO, a 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed no significant main effect, but the predicted two-way interaction between message framing and social distance was found (F(1,89) = 3.98; p < .05). In the proximal condition, participants exposed to the loss-framed message reported significantly greater intentions to donate their organs than those exposed to the gain-framed message (F(1,33) = 4.66; p < .05; Mlowers = 4.13; Mgains = 3.50). Message framing had no effect in the distal condition (F(1,55) = 0.85; p = NS; Mlowers = 3.71; Mgains = 4.00). For participants with a high CO, a 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of message framing (F(1,86) = 4.48; p < .05; Mlowers = 4.05; Mgains = 3.49) and the significant predicted two-way interaction (F(1,86) = 18.34; p = .000). In the distal condition, intention to donate organs was significantly higher when the participants read a gain-framed message than when they read a loss-framed message (F(1,27) = 16.31; p = .000; Mgains = 4.40; Mlosses = 2.69). Message framing had no effect on intention to donate organs in the proximal condition (F(1,58) = 3.46; p = NS; Mlowers = 4.29; Mgains = 3.71).

REFERENCES