Increasing Psa Effectiveness: Two Routes From Self-Threat to Message Acceptance

Jingjing Ma, Peking University, China
Kent Grayson, Northwestern University, USA
David Gal, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

To increase acceptance of threatening messages, specially threatening public service announcements, past research has attempted either to reduce individuals' experience of threat through self-affirmation or to elevate individuals’ mood. Through three lab studies and one field study, we identify conditions under which each is more effective and explore the mechanism.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023670/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Increasing PSA Effectiveness: Two Routes from Self-Threat to Message Acceptance

Jingjing Ma, Peking University, China
Kent Grayson, Northwestern University, USA
David Gal, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The typical goal of a public service announcement (PSA) is to prompt viewers to behave in a more socially responsible way. Interestingly, many PSAs use shocking stories or visuals to illustrate the irresponsibility of viewers’ current behaviors. However, by illustrating how a viewer may be acting in a socially irresponsible way, such messages are likely to create an identity threat and thus may lead to defensive reactions rather than to more responsible behaviors.

To increase acceptance of threatening messages, past research has attempted either (1) to reduce individuals’ experience of threat through self-affirmation (Sherman and Cohen 2006; Sherman, Nelson, and Steele 2000; Steele 1988) or (2) to elevate individuals’ mood (Raghunathan and Trope 2002). In this research, we highlight the relationship between these two solutions, we identify conditions under which each is more or less effective at reducing resistance to counter-attitudinal messages, and we explore the mechanism for their influence on message acceptance. More specifically, we propose that the more important a threatened identity domain is to an individual, the more seriously a person’s identity will feel threatened, and the less effective cross-domain self-affirmations are therefore likely to be. As suggested by Tetlock et al. (2000), sacred or important values are harder to compensate or trade-off (Tetlock et al. 2000). If and when a self-affirmation does not reduce an identity threat, any effect on message acceptance might be credited to mood.

In study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: threat-only, threat-compensation, and no-threat. Participants in both the threat-only and threat-compensation conditions engaged in a procedure that threatened their moral identity (i.e., admitting to online piracy behavior). Later, participants in the threat-compensation condition were asked to write an essay to self-affirm their competence. Lastly, all participants evaluated advertisements and expressed their agreement to anti-piracy messages. Results showed that participants in the threat-only condition showed greater preference for moral advertisements than those in the no-threat condition (p < 0.05), which was consistent with past research on within-domain compensation. Contrary to what previous self-affirmation research might predict, the preference for moral advertisements for those in the threat-compensation condition was not significantly different from that in the threat-only condition (p = 0.81). This result indicated that participants’ threatened moral identity was not effectively compensated by cross-domain self-affirmation. However, relative to participants in the threat-only condition, participants were more willing to accept threatening messages in the no-threat condition (5.6 vs. 4.57; t(92) = 3.02, p < .005) and in the threat-compensation condition (5.56 vs. 4.57; t(87) = 2.67, p < .01). This result raises a paradox that why individuals become more accepting of threatening messages when they still have discrepancy in their threatened identity.

Study 2 investigated the underlying mechanism for this increased message acceptance. In this study, we replicated our finding that cross-domain compensation increased willingness to accept threatening messages, but did not reduce self-discrepancy. We also showed that cross-domain compensation improved respondents’ mood, which mediated the effect of cross-domain compensation on message acceptance. Further supporting our claim that improved mood can enhance message acceptance, we showed in this study that simply thinking about a sunny day (which is not related to self-affirmation or compensation) also enhanced message acceptance.

In Study 3, we demonstrated conditions under which cross-domain compensation was effective vs. ineffective in reducing self-discrepancy. Moreover, we showed that even when cross-domain compensation was ineffective, it could still increase message acceptance. Specifically, participants received a threat to one of five life values (family, honesty/kindness, competency, spontaneity, and physical attractiveness), then they received an essay writing task designed to self-affirm one of those five life values. We found that the cross-domain compensation effectively reduced self-discrepancy only when the threat was to the least important value and the compensation was to the most important value. However, even when the cross-domain compensation did not effectively reduce discrepancy, it still increased participants’ mood which, in turn increased their message acceptance.

Last study, we applied our findings in a filed study to show the role of mood in improving the effectiveness of PSA. 70 male workers (generally heavy smokers) working at a construction site in China were randomly assigned to one of three conditions by receiving three different types of PSA messages in print: control condition (no PSA), threat condition (a threatening PSA featuring pictures of the deadly consequences of smoking), and mood elevation condition (a PSA featuring pictures of healthy looking families living happily). Then they were asked to answer five questions regarding anti-smoking messages, gender (70 males), age (mean=38), and how many cigarettes they smoke each day (mean=19).

Results showed message acceptance in the mood elevation condition was significantly higher than in the control condition (4.08 vs. 3.49; t(44) = 3.24, p < .005) and the threat condition (4.08 vs. 3.39; t(44) = 2.47, p < .05); mood in the mood elevation condition was significantly higher than that in the control condition (4.80 vs. 3.10; t(44) = 7.83, p < .001) and the threat condition (4.80 vs. 1.83; t(44) = 12.33, p < .001). A mediation analysis showed that mood mediated the influence of different PSAs on message acceptance, the mean indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis is also significant (a×b = .18), with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.0384 to .3765).

This research contributes to literature on self-affirmation and persuasion and have practical implications in improving the effectiveness of PSAs.

REFERENCE
