The Power of Negative Visualizations: When Fear Appeals Motivate Consumer Behavior

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The authors employ the technique of visualization to understand instances when fear appeals are, and are not, efficient at motivating behavior. Results reveal that processing style is a key determinant of the visualization’s motivational outcome, and that affect is an important driving force behind the effects of fear visualizations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Fear appeals are a common marketing tactic that intend to persuade consumers to buy products and services that aim to help avoid an undesirable outcome. It is proposed that the main mechanism involved is the arousal of fear or anxiety, a potent source of energy that propels people into action (Hull 1943). It is assumed that scare tactics should modify behavior when the undesirable outcome is perceived as severe, probable, yet surmountable (Rogers 1975). However, empirical evidence reveals that fear appeals are not always efficient despite meeting these criteria (e.g., Morales et al. 2012; Passyn and Sujan 2006). Various variables were examined to explain the inconsistencies in past findings (e.g., Manyiwa and Brennan 2012; Smith and Stuts 2003), focusing primarily on moderators relating to types of fear appeal, emotions and individual differences.

The present paper employs the technique of visualization to further understand instances when fear appeals are, and are not, efficient at motivating behavior. Work on negative visualizations is limited and generally affirms that mental imagery of feared self-states encourage consumers to engage in behaviors that will distance them from the undesirable outcome (Hoyle and Sherrill 2006). However, we propose that negative visualizations are not all equally efficient, and that processing style (abstract versus concrete) is a key determinant of the fear appeal’s persuasiveness. More specifically, abstract imagery of the feared self should increase motivation to avoid the undesirable outcome, while concrete visualizations do not produce such motivational tendencies.

These propositions are based on past research which affirms that abstract processing reduces perceived boundaries between an individual’s various self-concepts, while concrete processing heightens self-concept distinctions (Forster et al. 2008; Wakslak et al. 2008). This theorizing suggests that mentally simulating one’s feared self-state in abstract terms should evoke perceptions of assimilation to the imagined feared self, which is likely to evoke sufficient anxiety required to drive motivated behavior. Conversely, visualizations processed in a concrete fashion heighten perceptions of self-discrepancy, thereby reassuring individuals that the feared self is distant from their present state and hence, that no action is required. In sum, we propose that fear appeals have the potential to motivate consumer behavior, but only when they instigate abstract (not concrete) visualizations. Further, we also show that this effect is driven by feelings of anxiety.

Study 1

To verify whether abstract visualizations enhance motivation, we examine whether they increase people’s tendency to engage in goal shielding – i.e., a tendency to inhibit other goals from diverting attention from a focal goal (Shah et al. 2002). 128 participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (visualization task: feared self, control) by 2 (processing style: abstract, concrete) between-subject design. 12 participants (9%) were dropped for failing to complete the manipulation task. In the feared self condition, participants either visualized having achieved their feared body appearance in a general sense (i.e., abstract processing), or first specified important attributes associated with their feared body image (e.g., gain 20 pounds, cellulite) and then visualized having achieved these concrete attributes (i.e., concrete processing). In the control condition, participants visualized their daily routine in a general sense (i.e., abstract) or specifically visualized their morning routine (i.e., concrete). In a seemingly unrelated study participants were asked to write down their new year’s resolutions. Answers were coded for how many unrelated goals were reported (dependent variable). If the avoidance goal (i.e., feared body appearance) was still activated, participants should engage in goal shielding and list less goals unrelated to health and fitness. An ANOVA and simple contrasts verified that abstract fear visualizations motivated goal shielding tendencies more so than the other types of visualizations ($M_{\text{viz,abstract}}=.85$, $M_{\text{viz,concrete}}=1.57$, $M_{\text{control,abstract}}=1.79$, $M_{\text{control,concrete}}=1.33$).

Study 2

The main objective of study 2 was to confirm that abstract visualizations of the feared self motivate goal-congruent choices. 194 undergraduate students participated in a 2 (visualization task: feared self, control) x 2 (processing style: abstract, concrete) between-subject design. 12 participants (6%) were dropped for failing to complete the imagery task. Participants first completed the same visualization task as in study 1. After a short filler task, subjects were presented with a list of 20 consumer goods, and rated how likely they were to purchase each item (7-point scale). Included in the list were 6 health-related items (e.g., running shoes, smoothie maker). The mean score served as the dependent variable. An ANOVA and simple contrasts verified that abstract visualizations of the feared self motivated higher intent to purchase healthy goods, compared to the other visualizations ($M_{\text{viz,abstract}}=5.12$, $M_{\text{viz,concrete}}=4.55$, $M_{\text{control,abstract}}=4.65$, $M_{\text{control,concrete}}=4.61$).

Study 3

The objective of Study 3 was to provide evidence for the proposed affect-based mechanism, namely that abstract imagery evokes feelings of anxiety, and that these feelings prompt motivated behavior. 215 participants were randomly assigned to the abstract fear and routine visualization conditions (the concrete conditions were removed). They then reported their feelings, and completed the same consumer survey as in the previous study, measuring their level of interest in health-related products. A mediational analysis using model 4 of Hayes’s PROCESS macro indicated a partial mediation (5000 samples, 95% CI, 0.4-13) (figure 1). The indirect effect of abstract fear visualizations on healthy behaviors through anxiety was positive, however, anxiety only partially mediates this relationship since the direct effect of abstract fear visualizations on healthy behaviors, after the path through anxiety was accounted for, was still significant.

General Discussion

The present findings show when and how visualizations of the feared self motivate people to make goal-relevant consumer choices and engage in goal-congruent behaviors, as well as provide preliminary evidence for the mediating role of affect in this relationship. The present paper contributes to the literature in at least three ways. First, we are the first to employ the visualization technique when examining the effects of fear appeals in consumer research. Second, we are the first to examine the role of processing style as a moderator in the mental imagery literature. Third, we provide empirical evidence...
that negative mental imagery motivates consumer behavior via emotional arousal (not only cognitive processes).

REFERENCES


