

Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

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### ***Introduction***

Many advertisements attempt to scare consumers into doing a recommended action. Most people are familiar with graphic health care videos trying to dissuade them from partaking in unhealthy behaviors. These messages are known as fear appeals, which have an underlying idea that planting a certain level of apprehension into people will cause them to follow the behavioral suggestion of the message. When executed correctly, fear appeal advertisements result in the intended behavioral change; however, there is debate over whether these ads are ethical or the most effective means for achieving desired results. People have varying responses to different types of messages, such as fear versus humor. These levels are known as sensation seeking. This study aims to test the effect of the Dove advertisement Lovely Girl and predicts that (1) people high in sensation seeking will have a greater liking and greater likelihood of being persuaded by the humorous message and (2) people low in sensation seeking will have a greater liking and greater likelihood of being persuaded by the fear-appeal message, Lovely Girl.

### ***Fear Appeals***

Fear appeals are used as the underlying concept in many communication theories and models. Fear messages require two core concepts: threat appraisal and efficacy appraisal. Threat appraisal is both the perceived severity of the risk the message conveys and how susceptible a consumer believes they are to that risk. Efficacy appraisal has two subcategories: response-efficacy and self-efficacy. In response-efficacy, the consumer decides if the recommended action is likely to reduce the threat; while self-efficacy determines if you as a consumer have the ability to follow the recommended action to reduce the perceived risk. The extended parallel processing model focuses on threat and efficacy appraisal and suggests that the combination of perceived threat and efficacy are the determinants of whether or not the

## Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

suggested action will be followed. If the balance between threat and efficacy is not even, the message will be unsuccessful (Wallington & Blake, 2009). In other words, the person must feel at risk but not overly frightened, and he or she must believe there is a way to combat the risk affects, for message effectiveness. Similarly, the drive model conceptualizes fear as a drive state that motivates people to follow the recommended actions in order to alleviate a distressing position (Nabi, 2009). Additionally, the theory fallacy of ignoring the past is an assumption researchers make that subjects were exposed to the fear appeal for the first time during the study (Yanovitzky & Greene, 2009). Essentially, there is no way of determining whether a participant has already seen a fear appeal message on the subject being tested or has other personal ties to the subject prior to the experiment. The fallacy of ignoring the future follows this same logic and says that media can have a delayed effect and research focuses on the immediate effects (Yanovitzky & Greene, 2009); meaning messages can impact people farther into the future than the researches study, creating long-term anxiety and potential ethical concerns.

### *Review of the Literature*

The use of fear appeals in social marketing raises ethical concerns. Gerard Hastings, Martine Stead, and John Webb examined this issue in their study, *Fear appeals in social marketing: Strategic and ethical reasons for concern*. Previous literature does not investigate long-term effects of fear appeal based advertisements associated with the Fallacy of Ignoring the Future. While being exposed to a message once may just result in a consumer taking the recommended action, repeated exposure to these messages is not as static, and “it is more likely that attitudes are formed, re-evaluated, and updated in a dynamic process over the duration of a campaign” (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004, p. 966). As these attitudes are re-evaluated, consumers can become increasingly frightened and potentially convince themselves of their

## Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

inability to avoid the risk, even with the efficacy appraisal. Consumers may also become irritated by repeated exposure to the advertisement, leading to “an increased tendency...to tune [it] out” (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004, p. 966). According to the study, appeals based on strong positive emotions (such as love) can be equally as effective as fear-based appeals, and recent antismoking and antidrug media campaigns have employed humor, irony, and supportive messages, which have produced favorable results in terms of awareness, liking, attitude change, and attempts to quit.

The idea of people liking different types of media messages is due to consumers having varying levels of sensation seeking, a personality trait in which people high in it enjoy more risqué or “exciting” material while people who test lower enjoy more relaxed media such as humor. Moon Lee and Mija Shin’s study, *Fear vs. Humor: The Impact of Sensation Seeking on Physiological, Cognitive, and Emotional Responses to Antialcohol Abuse Messages* aims to answer what effect messages have on people with different levels of sensation seeking (Lee & Shin, 2011). In this study, Lee and Shin “defined fear messages as message, in general, that present realistic portrayals of the negative consequences of taking a risk...eliciting a negative affect; and humor messages as messages that use humor to attract the target public’s to elicit positive effect.” (Lee & Shin, 2011, p. 77). They hypothesized that participants high in sensation seeking would respond positively to the humorous message, while people low in sensation seeking would have a negative reaction and therefore positive response to the fear appeal message. They measured participants’ arousal response, emotional experience, interest in the ad, liking to the ad, perceived danger of drinking, and intention to change behavior. To determine whether people understood the intended fear or humor in the ad, participants graded it on a Likert scale, indicating how fearful or how funny they found the message. Lee and Shin found

## Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

that people high in sensation seeking responded better to humorous advertisements while those low in sensation seeking found fear appeals more persuasive.

A third article focused on AIDS prevention using the extended parallel processing model to determine which efficacy response (self or response) is a greater factor in condom use for participants (Casey, Timmerman, Krahn, & Turkiewicz, 2009). The results of the meta-analysis indicated a positive correlation between both response-efficacy and self-efficacy and condom use, which was expected given that “people are more likely to engage in...practices they believe to be effective” (Casey, Timmerman, Krahn, & Turkiewicz, 2009, p.64). The analysis depended on many variables, such as gender, HIV status, and sexual practices of the person. Interestingly, the study does not cite whether or not a difference was found in responses of men versus women.

These studies all involve different aspects of fear appeals. Where they fall short is in determining whether the messages worked, in that participants were persuaded to change their behaviors to the recommended action. Each article focuses on a single aspect of fear appeals. While this is useful for the theory of fear-appeals, my study focuses on combining the idea of sensation seeking, fear versus humor messages, and ethical concerns as inter-related topics. The Dove advertisement Lovely Girl Forever features a young girl being bombarded by graphic displays of female over-sexuality and beauty campaigns. The ending line reads “talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does”. The graphic message is designed to provoke fear in viewers; however, not all media consumers have the same response to fear messages. Depending on the level of sensation seeking in consumers, humorous advertisements may be more effective for the Dove campaign.

### ***Methods***

#### *Population*

## Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

The participants in the study are parents with daughters' ages 5 to 9 years old. The reasons these years were selected is (1) girls at this age are highly impressionable, (2) the girl depicted in the Lovely Girl Forever advertisement is within this age range, and (3) parents will feel they still time do complete the efficacy appraisal "talk to you daughter before the media industry does" whereas older girls will already have been impacted.

### *Variables*

The independent variables are type of message shown to the participants (control, Lovely Girl Forever, and humorous advertisement) and the level of sensation seeking the participant shows. The level of sensation seeking and the advertisement clip watched should both impact the persuasiveness of the message. The dependent variable is effectiveness of the message on participants. The outcome of the experiment is determined by message effectiveness. All other factors will influence this result.

### *Hypotheses*

The three hypotheses we tested aimed to capture how differing levels of sensation seeking affect appeal and persuasiveness of advertising campaigns. People high in sensation seeking have a greater affiliation for scary or violent media; however, Lovely Girl Forever is not overly graphic. Such participants will not fear it; rather, they should find it unappealing and mundane due to its lack of violence or gore. I predict this lack of interest will also result in lack of persuasive power of the message on high sensation seekers. Humorous advertisements will draw their attention more, since rather than being particularly stimulating, it is different and informative. The same logic is used for participants low in sensation seeking. Since these people do not care for frightening media, they will be frightened more easily and convinced of the message Lovely Girl is portraying. H1: People high in sensation seeking will have a greater

## Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

liking and greater likelihood of being persuaded by the humorous message. H2: People low in sensation seeking will have a greater liking and greater likelihood of being persuaded by the fear-appeal message, Lovely Girl Forever. H3: People in the control group will not be affected by the dish soap advertisement and will respond to the post-survey questions with the same answers as in the pre-survey questions.

### *Procedure*

All participants are given a pre-viewing survey in which they are asked (1) to agree or disagree on a scale from 1-5 -- 1 indicating extreme disagreement and 5 showing extreme agreement -- with the following statements: I like horror movies, I like to watch/participate in high impact sports, and I like to listen to rock music, (2) rate on a Likert scale the extent to which they agree with the following statements: I believe the media/beauty industry impacts young girls, I have spoken to or plan to speak with my daughter about the beauty/media industry, and (3) to indicate their gender, male or female. The first set of questions is aimed to determine participants' levels of sensation seeking; while the second will be used for comparison with post-test questions, and the third to indicate if there is a difference between a mother and father's responses.

Prior to viewing, the participants will be randomly split into 3 groups. The first group will be a control; they will view an advertisement for dish soap that is completely unrelated to the beauty industry or body image and the media. Fear group (test group 1) will view the fear appeal advertisement, Lovely Girl Forever, and Humor Group (test group 2) will view a humorous clip about the beauty and media industry's impact on young girls.

After viewing, participants will complete a post-viewing survey. They will be asked to (1) rate the film clip they saw on a scale from 1 to 5 -- with 1 being fearful and 5 being humorous

## Effects of Sensation Seeking on Fear Appeal vs. Humor Appeal Messages

and (2) to rate on a Likert scale the same questions asked in the pre-test: I believe the media/beauty industry impacts young girls, I have spoken to or plan to speak with my daughter about the beauty/media industry.

*Discussion (note: this assumes my hypotheses were correct)*

I found the results of my study to be very applicable to the advertising industry. First, according to H1, people high in sensation seeking are more likely to respond positively to a humorous message rather than a fear appeal one. Likewise, H2 found that those low in sensation seeking had a greater affiliation for Lovely Girl Forever. This information is in keeping with previous literature. The control group had consistent views throughout the study, demonstrating that the effect from the advertisements was truly do to exposure and not a lurking variable. Additionally, on the pre-test survey I ask participants to specify their gender. It is likely that men and women have differing views on the beauty industry and the media. However, I did not include this in my hypotheses because it is more of an interesting anecdote. My study was designed to find the effects of differing message types on people with varying levels of sensation seeking, and finding conclusions on gender differences based on this study alone would not have sufficient data. In further studies research into this difference and phenomenon can be analyzed. The Dove advertisement Lovely Girl Forever is only capturing some of the population with its fear appeal. A more humorous approach would be more effective for other audiences.

The long-term effects from fear group may be considered unethical. Exposure to Lovely Girl could cause these parents extended worry. Although they may have elected to take the efficacy appraisal Dove provided, they may begin to feel that was not enough. People are constantly influenced and impacted by media advertisements, and understanding them may be one thing, but nobody can be completely immune to their effects. If this study were to actually



take place, the participants would need to be debriefed to ensure to long-term consequences were caused.

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