

A Terror Management Perspective on the Persuasiveness of Fear Appeals

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We use terror management theory (TMT) to show that the nature of the threatening consequences included in fear-appeal communications influences the responses to the messages promoted in such communications. On the basis of differences between death-related consequences and non-death-related consequences, they provide an explanation for maladaptive responses to fear appeals. Results from 2 experiments indicate that participants who were highly committed to a worldview of drinking alcohol rejected socially acceptable attitudes toward drinking and driving when the message containing such attitudes was accompanied by a fear appeal that contained death as a consequence, but not when fear appeals contained the fear of arrest or serious injury. Participants perceived their level of experienced fear to be the same across the experimental conditions. The results have implications for considering the qualitative nature of the threatening consequence in fear-appeal research and for using TMT to understand maladaptive responses to fear-appeal communications.

The dominant paradigm in fear-appeal research asserts that differences in level of fear lead to differences in the persuasiveness of the communication (Keller & Block, 1996; Rogers, 1985; Witte, 1994). However, researchers have raised concerns about using level of fear as a stand-alone measure of the efficacy of fear-appeal communications (LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997). Results observed in high-fear conditions in past studies complicate the debate on the level-of-fear construct. Specifically, reacting to a high-fear-arousing communication, some message recipients exhibit increased levels of risky behavior, a response opposite to the intent of the message (Rippetoe & Rogers, 1987; Rogers, 1983; Witte, 1994). Evidence that high-fear messages can result in increased risky behavior poses a serious threat to the efficacy of fear-appeal communications. Unfortunately, such maladaptive responses have not generated sufficient research. Pechmann, Zhao, Goldberg, and Reibling (2003) acknowledged that researchers have focused on factors that strengthen intentions to refrain from risky behavior at the expense of understanding when fear-arousing communication

fails. Witte (1992) suggested that a thorough understanding of fear appeals can be achieved only by studying cases in which fear appeals work as well as cases in which fear appeals do not achieve their desired objectives.

In this research, we address the concern over the unexpected failure of high-fear appeals. We draw on terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) to propose that the qualitative nature of a perceived threat influences the elicited response to the advocated message accompanying the threat. We distinguish messages that use death as a threatening consequence from messages that use threats of nonfatal consequences. We use this distinction to explain and predict increases in maladaptive responses to fear-appeal communications. We suggest that a TMT perspective allows for a meaningful comparison of fear-appeal efficacy on a dimension other than level of fear. Moreover, a TMT approach augments our current understanding of maladaptive responses to fear-appeal communications. Based on theoretical distinctions between the psychodynamics evoked by a fear of death versus those evoked by non-death-related fears, a TMT perspective helps explain and predict maladaptive responses to fear appeals.

Our approach to differentiate fear appeals on the basis of the nature of the threatening consequence deviates from the

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dominant paradigm that differentiates fear appeals on the basis of the level of evoked fear (Block & Keller, 1998; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Rogers, 1983; Witte, 1992). However, we demonstrate that this alternative theoretical perspective has the potential to supplement existing theory and provide a new direction for research on fear appeals.

BACKGROUND

Fear-appeal communications are predominantly used to curb undesirable social behaviors such as smoking, drug use, and drinking and driving. Recently, fear appeals have also been used to sell insurance, safety devices, over-the-counter diet programs, and prescription drugs, to name just a few examples. The sustained interest in the use of fear as a persuasive tool has fueled substantial research in the area of fear-appeal communication. Three theories—(a) drive theory (Janis & Feshbach, 1953), (b) protection motivation theory (PMT; Rogers, 1983), and (c) parallel response theory (Tanner, Hunt, & Eppright, 1991)—have guided much of the extant research on fear appeals. More recently, fear-appeal researchers have favored PMT because of its comprehensive nature (Pechmann et al., 2003), and in some cases researchers have extended PMT to improve its explanatory power (Block & Keller, 1998; Rogers, 1983; Tanner et al., 1991; Witte, 1994; Witte & Allen, 2000).

Despite these theoretical advances, the extant research has been criticized for its inability to explain or predict when fear appeals will not work (Witte, 1994; Witte & Allen, 2000). In some fear-appeal studies, message recipients who were exposed to high-fear-arousing messages exhibited more favorable attitudes toward the undesirable behaviors, a response that is opposite to the intent of the message (Arnett, 2000). Keller (1999) and Keller and Block (1996) suggested that high-fear messages are more likely to be resisted because of motivated reasoning and message discounting. Although this explanation accounts for the avoidance of a message, it remains unclear why resistance to high-fear messages is sometimes followed by greater affinity for the behavior that the message intends to curb. A discussion of TMT offers insight into this issue.

TMT

TMT is based on the notion that human beings' understanding of their impending death combined with the instinctive drive for self-preservation engenders a tremendous potential for terror. Without a mechanism to cognitively manage the understanding of our own mortality, the resulting terror can be debilitating. The theory posits that cultural worldviews are effective in protecting an individual from existential terror evoked by awareness of one's finitude (Greenberg et al., 1986). Cultural worldviews are "humanly created and trans-

mitted beliefs about the nature of reality shared by groups of individuals" (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997, p. 65).

One important function of cultural worldviews is to contribute to self-esteem by providing the satisfaction of adhering to and upholding the shared values of one's society. In this manner, cultural worldviews act as anxiety buffers by weaving a web of order and meaning, by providing standards of value, and by offering symbolic death transcendence to those who strive to meet these standards (Greenberg et al., 1997). Cultural worldviews vary across cultures and individuals and may include religious and social values, political and nationalistic beliefs, and moral codes (Greenberg et al., 1997). However, worldviews are not restricted to these major life domains. Mundane tasks such as evaluating a work of art or playing a game of tennis do not necessarily constitute worldviews. However, if a person derives self-esteem from the belief that he or she is a connoisseur of art or a skilled tennis player, then such beliefs do constitute worldviews.

TMT posits that reminders of mortality increase the need to defend and strengthen one's worldview to sustain its anxiety-buffering function. Support for this hypothesis exists in more than 175 empirical studies (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004). Findings show that belief in one's worldviews is stronger following mortality-salient manipulations than following non-mortality-salient manipulations (Pyszczynski et al., 1996; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Treatments considered equally noxious, such as threatening someone with serious injury, or intense pain, do not evoke mortality salience and do not lead to a defense of cultural worldviews (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). Moreover, the salience of dental pain, a common threat used in fear-appeal research, does not replicate the results obtained from the salience of mortality (McGregor et al., 1998).

TERROR MANAGEMENT AND FEAR APPEALS

The distinction between individuals' response to the fear of death versus their response to other noxious outcomes has important implications for fear-appeal research. If fear-appeal communications that threaten audiences with death make mortality salient, then it is likely that message recipients will invest in their worldviews to assuage the fear aroused by a reminder of their mortality. Past research has found that the specific worldview used to buffer the fear of death is the worldview made salient by the context (Wischusen, Nelson, & Pollini, 2003). According to TMT, following mortality salience, if a message's advocated worldview admonishes the worldview held by a message recipient, the message recipient will reject the advocated worldview and defend the preexisting worldview relevant to the context. Moreover, a message recipient is likely to defend

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