

Regulatory Focus, Feature Positive Effect, and Message Framing

Guangzhi Zhao, University of Kansas
Connie Pechmann, University of California, Irvine

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Message framing effects have been widely documented in numerous research areas. Most extant work on message framing distinguishes message frames predominantly along the outcome valence dimension and has studied positive vs. negative frame. Positive messages highlight positive consequences (i.e., gains) of complying with the ad advocacy, for example, "Don't smoke. Quitting smoking reduces your chances of having a heart attack." In contrast, negative messages highlight negative consequences (i.e., losses) of not complying with the ad advocacy, for example, "Don't smoke. Smoking increases your chances of having a heart attack."

Unfortunately, empirical evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of positive vs. negative message frame is mixed. The research efforts seeking to define the boundary conditions for the relative persuasiveness of positive vs. negative messages have largely been unsuccessful so far as well. Given the robustness of message framing effects yet the mixed empirical evidence, we speculate that (1) the framework that distinguishes only between positive and negative messages might have been limited; and (2) message framing effects might be governed by fundamental factors that go beyond information processing motive factors such as issue involvement.

We note that a crucial qualitative difference between message frames has largely been ignored, specifically, behavior outcome type (benefit vs. cost). Message frames with the same valence are not necessarily being equal, but can call attention to quite different behavior outcome types. Research has shown that individuals have markedly different sensitivity to different behavior outcome types (benefits vs. costs). Surprisingly, behavior outcome type as a primary dimension for theorizing has mostly been neglected in message framing research.

In this research, we introduced this key parameter into message framing research and made refined distinction between message frames. Specifically, we distinguished message frames along the dimension of outcome type (benefits vs. costs) in addition to the dimension of outcome valence (positive vs. negative) and studied the relative persuasiveness of four distinct message frames, namely, (1) a benefit-positive frame, which emphasizes the attainment of benefits because of complying with the message advocacy, for example, "Don't smoke. Have a good time." (2) a benefit-negative frame, which emphasizes forgoing benefits because of failing to comply with the message advocacy, for example, "Don't smoke. Smoking spoils a good time." (3) a cost-positive frame, which emphasizes the avoidance of costs because of complying with the message advocacy, for example, "Don't smoke. Avoid being annoying." and (4) a cost-negative frame, which emphasizes the incurring of costs because of failing to comply with the message advocacy, for example, "Don't smoke. Smoking is annoying."

In search for fundamental factors that govern message framing effects, we examined the role of two factors. The first factor is Feature Positive Effect, that is, individuals find it easier to mentally represent a perceptual input when it is depicted as the presence of features rather than as the absence of features. This effect has been repeatedly demonstrated in numerous areas of research with animals and humans, but has never been studied in persuasion contexts before. A second factor is consumer regulatory focus. According to Regulatory Focus Theory, at any moment in time, an individual is guided primarily by one of two regulatory foci: a promotion focus

and a prevention focus. Regulatory focus is theorized to be a goal orientation and is at a relatively higher level in goal hierarchy than specific information processing motive factors such as issue involvement. Activation of a specific regulatory focus in individuals has been shown to significantly impact their affects, cognitions, and behavior.

We conducted two experimental studies with a total of 1,162 high school students in the context of antismoking TV ads targeted at youths. A total of 719 ninth graders from three local high schools participated in Study 1. The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects randomized factorial. Control groups who watched ads of non-smoking-related public service announcements were included to serve as benchmarks. Subjects were primed to activate either a promotion focus or a prevention focus using a standard procedure from the literature. Results from this experiment supported the predicted Feature Positive Effect, that is, message frames emphasizing the presence of behavior outcomes (namely, a benefit-positive frame and a cost-negative frame) were more persuasive than message frames emphasizing the absence of behavior outcomes (namely, a benefit-negative frame and a cost-positive frame) and a control group.

In addition, consistent with Regulatory Focus Theory, it was found that, for promotion-focused youths, a benefit-positive antismoking message emphasizing the attainment of benefits because of refraining from smoking cigarettes was the most persuasive among the four frames and a control group; while for prevention-focused youths, a cost-negative antismoking message emphasizing the incurring of costs because of failing to refrain from smoking cigarettes was the most persuasive among the four frames and a control group. The increased persuasion was attributed to heightened perceived diagnosticity of information matching to youths' regulatory focus.

Study 2 sought to replicate and extend the findings from Study 1 using a different method. Rather than manipulating regulatory focus, subjects' chronic regulatory focus was measured using an established scale from the literature. Study 1's manipulation of regulatory focus represented a clean approach to study the impact of this variable. As suggested in Regulatory Focus Theory, regulatory focus tends to be a quite stable individual difference factor. Thus, in Study 2, regulatory focus was measured, in order to examine how such a dispositional trait might moderate the persuasiveness of differently framed antismoking TV ads. Subjects were 443 students from another two local high schools. Results from Study 2 were virtually identical to those in Study 1 and provided convergent evidence supporting our main propositions about message framing effects.