

Fear Appeals

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Fear appeals have been predominantly studied in the context of education, marketing, and health awareness campaigns, with the intent to alter intentions and motivate individuals to act on a message. Much of the research has been directed at establishing the relevant variables in both the target of the message, as well as the message itself. Over the years, several models of the influence of fear appeals on persuasion, have been proposed. These include Drive Theory, Protection Motivation Theory, Subjective Expected Utility Theory, the Parallel Process Model, and the Extended Parallel Process Model.

Definition

A "Fear Appeal" is a message designed to elicit fear in an attempt to persuade an individual to pursue some predefined course of action.

Components

Researchers have examined several variables that have been thought, at one time or another, to influence the persuasive effect of fear appeals. These are the perceived threat, the strength of the fear elicited, perceived efficacy, individual characteristics, and defense mechanisms. The results of the research have frequently been conflicting and teasing apart the influences of each has required the incorporation of elements of several of the models available. Nevertheless, many key insights have been achieved through careful integration of the theories and have shed light on the process of fear elicited persuasion.

Perceived Threat

Perceived threat is thought to be an important moderator in the process of fear evoked persuasion. It consists of both the perceived severity of the threat and the perceived susceptibility to it.

Perceived susceptibility, sometimes referred to as perceived vulnerability, is thought to be key in motivating an individual to act in response to a fear appeal. It is the perception of the probability and extent to which they might experience the threat. Perceived severity, however, is the degree to which the person believes that they will be harmed if the threat is experienced. These threat components form the perceptual trigger for the fear reaction. Higher levels of perceived susceptibility have been found to increase the degree to which people are critical of the message. However, subjects report more positive thoughts about the recommendation and negative emotions associated with the threat when susceptibility is high. Higher levels of perceived susceptibility are associated with greater intention to change behavior in the manner recommended in the fear appeal message, and are a strong determinant of intentions and behavior, even in the face of weak arguments. It is thought that when perceived susceptibility is

high, defense motivations prevent even poor information or weak arguments from detracting from the message's impact on intention. As influential as it appears to be, susceptibility has still been found in some cases to have a much less direct effect on motivation to act on the message than, for instance, self efficacy beliefs or response efficacy.

Perceived Severity, the extent to which the individual believes they will be adversely affected by the threat has a significant effect on persuasion. Though, in some cases, persuasion has been found to be aided by lowering severity, the majority of the fear appeal research has found just the opposite. However, it is important to distinguish perceived severity of the threat from the actual fear elicited. The former is considered to be an entirely cognitive process, while the latter is an emotional process. Some have even argued that cognitive processes in the context of fear appeals are more important than emotional ones. Research has found that the effect of fear on intentions is mediated by the perceived severity. That is, fear does not act directly on intentions, but increases the level of perceived severity, which in turn raises intentions to act on the message. Indeed, the strength of the fear appeal has been found to be positively correlated with the perceived severity of the threat. Severity seems to produce the strongest effects on perceptions.

Models

Over the last half century, a tremendous amount of research has been done on the influence of fear on persuasion. A multitude of theories and models have been derived from this research with significant overlap between them. The attempt with each of these has been to conceptualize the influence of fear on persuasion so as to better understand how to employ it in addressing the public on a number of social issues.

The Parallel Process Model

Suggests that the primary variable relevant to fear appeal induced persuasion is not the experience of fear, itself, but the threat. The experience of fear and the perceptions of threat are distinguished in that the former is considered an emotional reaction and the latter a set of cognitions. Parallel process model proposes that it is the attempt to control these cognitions that is the basis of the fear appeal persuasion process.

The Extended Parallel Process Model

The newest of the fear appeal models, EPPM brings together many variables that are well established in the literature. Expanding on the parallel process model's perspective of threat being the primary motivator, EPPM incorporates the drive model's defensive, or fear control motivation and PMT's danger control response. In EPPM, a threat is evaluated and the ability to deal with the

threat is as well. As a consequence, one of two reactions is possible; a defensive one in which fear is controlled at the expense of any further action, or a danger control reaction in which behavior is changed in order to reduce the fear aroused by the threat. In addition to these, it is considered possible that there is no response at all. In EPPM, it is critical that the individual considers the action to be taken as being able to prevent the threat from occurring and that they believe they are capable of performing the actions necessary to accomplishing this.

Drive theory

Asserts that the fear elicited by the message produces an internal drive to reduce the experience of fear. In doing so, the individual may attempt to reduce the fear by changing their behavior according to the recommended course of action. This theory is similar to learning theory in that it proposes that the fear reducing behavior reinforces itself.

Subjective Expected Utility Theory

SEU has been widely disregarded since its addition to the fear appeal models, it being an entirely cognitive process which neglects any role of fear in the process of persuasion. This theory incorporates evaluations of the various responses that can be chosen in order to achieve one's motivations and goals. Subsequent research has not found this to be the case.