



Interaction between message framing and consumers' prior subjective knowledge regarding food safety issues



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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the interaction between message frames and recipients' prior knowledge. The hypothesis is that less prior consumer knowledge will result in a larger framing effect. That is, if the subjective knowledge of the public is low, then the controversy created by mass media regarding a specific food-related event will be larger. Empirical results show that message frame has an influence on college students' purchasing intentions. College students showed distinct responses in purchasing intention based on different headlines and different amounts of information within articles. The results further suggest that the framing effect depends not only on message frames, but also on the prior knowledge of the message recipient. Those who have less knowledge have larger variation in their purchase intention when responding to different message frames. This suggests that people with less knowledge are more likely to panic due to mass media reports regarding a food hazard issue. More informed consumers have less dramatic responses to food safety issues compared to less informed people.

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Introduction

There is a gap between scientific risk as recognized by experts and perceived risk of the public (Hansen et al., 2003; Houghton et al., 2008; Lewis and Tyshenko, 2009). Consumers are limited in acquiring relevant, timely information regarding food hazards and are sometimes unable to fully comprehend the information. In this sense, information tends to be asymmetric. This suggests that information conveyed by the government and media, as well as the expert opinions of scientists, are important when considering food safety issues. Some studies have shown that consumer responses to food safety issue may vary according to acquired information (Lusk et al., 2004; Rousu et al., 2007). That is, an administrative announcement and/or news conveyed by the mass media, as well as scientists' opinions, play crucial roles when a food safety issue becomes a social problem (Beck, 1998; Fleming et al., 2006).

Consumers solve the asymmetric problem by acquiring information and opinions primarily through the media (Lupton, 2004). Accordingly, the media as well as the public are influential actors in the way food risks are managed. Information provided by the media pertaining to food safety and health concerns has previously been shown to affect consumer demand (Dahlgran and Fairchild, 1987; Smith et al., 1988; van Ravenswaay and Hoehn, 1991). This

illustrates the important role and responsibility of the media regarding food safety issues.

Given the importance of news media in conveying information, previous studies have analyzed the content and nuances of news coverage regarding public health issues (Dorfman, 2003). Iyengar (1994) argued that the specific frames used in media coverage can play a significant role in public response to and support of policies. This suggests that consumer response and behavior may differ according to the frames of information conveyed by the media.

The purpose of this study was to identify how consumer purchasing intention varies with different message frames and how the framing effect interacts with prior consumer knowledge. Therefore, a 2 × 2 factorial design was created, with one axis representing message frames and the other axis representing the degree of prior knowledge. This study was based on a group survey conducted in a classroom, during which news regarding food hazards was manipulated in order to determine how it impacted participant response. Participant response was measured based on intention to purchase the products mentioned in the news.

The findings show that message frames have an influence on respondents' purchasing intentions. Different headlines and different amounts of information within the articles elicited different purchasing intentions. The results further suggest that the framing effect depends not only on the message frames, but also on the prior knowledge of the message recipients. The results extend the literature on message framing by showing that responses to framed food safety communications vary as a function of recipient prior knowledge level.

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The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The Message framing explains the framing effect and describes previous studies that have focused on food safety issues. The Prior knowledge discusses the role of prior knowledge. The Research design briefly reviews experimental methods and design. The next section presents the empirical results. The final section includes the summary and conclusion.

Message framing

Message frames

The principle premise of the “message framing effect” is that an event can be interpreted differently by individuals depending on the rhetoric surrounding the issue. Goffman (1974) argued that people may perceive a social phenomenon arbitrarily and therefore, the meaning of an issue can be interpreted differently depending on the frame through which a person acquires relevant information.

Kahneman and Tversky (1984) demonstrated how the framing effect works by choosing, omitting, and stressing a certain characteristic of a social phenomenon. Entman (1993) also held that communicators make conscious or unconscious framing judgments in deciding what to say, guided by frames (often called schemata) that organize their belief systems. Moreover, every text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences, that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.

The framing effect is theoretically based on the prospect theory developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). They suggested that the value function in consumer decision-making is categorized as either a gain or a loss, which are symmetrical from the reference point. A convex function represents a loss and a concave function represents a gain. This implies risk-aversion behavior for gains and risk-seeking behavior for losses (McElroy and Seta, 2003).

This is the theoretical basis of the framing effect, as consumer preference may differ according to negative or positive framing. The relative effects of framing between gain- and loss-message frames have been widely applied to many different fields, including marketing, politics, finance, and law.

Previous studies have examined how messages containing health information influence consumer behavior. Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) reviewed existing research and concluded that the findings regarding the message framing effect on health behavior are inconsistent since they vary depending on the issues and how gains and losses are specified. O’Keefe and Jensen (2007) also addressed the issue by performing a meta-analytic review of 93 studies that examined the effects of framing on consumer disease-prevention behavior. They reported that the two types of messages made no significant difference on respondents’ preventive behaviors associated with gain- and loss-framed messages, with the exception of dental hygiene behaviors.

Although most previous studies regarding framing effect have focused on gain vs. loss framing, this study instead uses frames with different amounts of information and headlines to investigate the role of prior knowledge on the framing effect.

Media framing

News acts as a window for recipients to see the world and for people to learn about their surrounding social environments. Media framing can be defined as a pattern delivered by the media for interpreting a social phenomenon, presenting a cause and effect, and suggesting a solution. Framing may delineate an event based on a specific viewpoint (Song et al., 2005). Thus, message

framing in the media does not simply reflect reality but proposes a composed reality. Price and Tewksbury (1997) defined framing as a way to influence audience understanding and showed that the format of news stories influences perception, and different message framing may thus encourage consumers to think differently.

Radley (1994) showed that consumer cognition is affected by media expression, and Dorfman (2003) and Cohen et al. (2008) contended that, by selecting the agenda and framing the issues, media has an effect on public attitude, behavior, and policy in the realm of health issues. Further, Yanovitzky and Blitz (2000) discovered that the effects of media framing differ by demographic characteristics. The media has a greater impact on certain demographics, such as individuals who do not have medical insurance, who have a low-income, or who are elderly or in the racial minority.

The impact of media framing may also vary according to media type such as TV, newspaper, or radio. As far as we know, no previous studies have been conducted with regard to the interaction between framing effect and media type, although some studies such as Meyrowitz (1985) and Pfau and Wan (2006) have tried to analyze dissimilar consumer reactions according to media type. Coombs and Holladay (2009) evaluated the effects of different media channels on respondents exposed to a crisis and reported no statistically significant difference between the use of video and print. They concluded that media framing effects do not change qualitatively according to media type, although further research is needed.

Prior knowledge

Role of prior knowledge

Prior knowledge can be defined as stored information in an individual’s memory (Flynn and Goldsmith, 1999). It typically includes familiarity and expertise (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). Familiarity is interpreted as the number of product-related experiences¹ that have been accumulated by the consumer, and expertise is defined as the ability to successfully perform product-related tasks (Jacoby et al., 1986).

Previous studies, such as Bettman and Park (1980) and Brucks (1985), have maintained that prior consumer knowledge is a crucial factor in the decision-making process. Accordingly, the role of prior consumer knowledge in various aspects of consumer behavior has been studied, and it has been shown that a consumer’s prior knowledge affects his/her information processing procedure, acquisition of new information and use of existing information (Hayes-Roth, 1977; Marks and Olson, 1981; Park and Lessig, 1981; Brucks, 1985; Chen and Li, 2007; Lobb et al., 2007; Lusk and Rozan, 2008; Magistris and Gracia, 2008; Costa-Font and Gil, 2009).

Subjective knowledge

Prior knowledge can be differentiated into objective knowledge and subjective knowledge (Park and Lessig, 1981; Brucks, 1985; Flynn and Goldsmith, 1999). Objective knowledge is defined as accurate information regarding the product class stored in long-term memory,² while subjective knowledge is an individual’s perceptions of what or how much he or she knows about a product class, also known as self-assessed knowledge (Park et al., 1994). According to Flynn and Goldsmith (1999), although a strong correlation exists between these two concepts, they are still different in important ways.

¹ Product-related experience is the memory of relationships between the self and the product in terms of information search, product usage, and purchase experience.

² Product-class information is semantic memory about product class including product attributes, features, usage procedures and brand names.

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