



The impact of communicating conflicting risk and benefit messages: An experimental study on red meat information



Áine Regan^{a,*}, Áine McConnon^a, Margôt Kuttschreuter^b, Pieter Rutsaert^{c,d}, Liran Shan^a, Zuzanna Pieniak^c, Julie Barnett^e, Wim Verbeke^c, Patrick Wall^a

^a School of Public Health, Physiotherapy, & Population Science, University College Dublin, Ireland

^b Department Psychology of Conflict, Risk and Safety, University of Twente, The Netherlands

^c Department of Agricultural Economics, Ghent University, Belgium

^d International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines

^e Department of Information Systems and Computing, Brunel University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 December 2013

Received in revised form 28 April 2014

Accepted 31 May 2014

Available online 11 June 2014

Keywords:

Benefits

Communication

Conflicting information

Red meat

Risks

ABSTRACT

Health risk and benefit messages that pertain to the same food may leave consumers unsure about the health consequences and advisability of consuming the food where conflict is inferred between the risk and benefit messages. A 2×2 between-subjects vignette study was carried out to investigate how food consumers from eight European countries ($N = 803$) appraised conflicting risk and benefit messages and whether the trustworthiness of a third-party communicator through which a conflicting message is received moderated appraisals of this information. We also investigated whether appraisals were subject to cross-cultural variation based on cultural levels of uncertainty avoidance. Communication of a conflicting message outlining the benefits of red meat led to decreased credibility being attributed to the original risk message compared to when a second confirmatory risk message was communicated. Evaluation of the new information was not impacted by any apparent conflict with the original risk message; however, the third-party communicating the new message did impact the credibility of this new information. These effects were not subject to cultural variation. Further understanding on the strategies employed by consumers to evaluate conflicting food-related risk and benefit messages is discussed.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Consumers often encounter situations where a single behaviour (e.g. eating red meat) can produce two distinct outcomes (health *benefits* e.g. relating to protein, mineral and vitamin intake and health *risks* e.g. increased risk of heart disease and cancer). In such situations, consumers may receive information on both the risks and the benefits within the same or different messages. The public may be unable to reconcile such messages which may appear to offer opposing advice; they may infer the presence of conflict and experience uncertainty about the health consequences of engaging in that behaviour (Nagler, 2014). Conflicting food risk and benefit information presents a significant communication challenge to those charged with ensuring consumers are fully informed when it comes to making decisions relating to their dietary health. The primary goal of this study was to understand how

consumers react to food-related risk and benefit communications which they perceive to be conflicting. Conflicting messages become a particularly salient issue with the involvement of numerous communicators. An additional goal of this study was to assess how the involvement of third-party communicators may impact consumer responses. A number of foods have received heightened attention within the public domain for their links with both negative and positive health consequences, with oily fish as a primary example thus far. As a food which remains a staple part of many European diets, the recent focus on the health consequences and positioning of red meat in our diet (Perez-Cueto & Verbeke, 2012) has been widely reported on by mainstream journalists and within online discussion forums (Spiegelhalter, 2012). Red meat represents a timely and topical case study to investigate how consumers may react to conflicting risk and benefit information.

The effects of perceiving conflicting risk–benefit information

Research has investigated the impact that simultaneous communication of risk and benefit information may have on individual

* Corresponding author. Address: School of Public Health, Physiotherapy & Population Science, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland. Tel.: +353 (0)1 716 3435; fax: +353 (0)1 716 3421.

E-mail address: aine.regan@ucd.ie (Á. Regan).

consumers' risk and benefit perceptions, attitudes towards the food and behavioural intentions (Fischer & Frewer, 2009; Van Dijk, Fischer, & Frewer, 2011; Verbeke et al., 2008). Few studies in the area of dietary communication specifically have investigated what impact perceived conflicting risk and benefit messages relating to the same food may have on credibility of the information and trust in the information source. However, there is qualitative evidence which suggests that when presented with conflicting advice on whether a food is healthy or unhealthy, consumers become suspicious and doubt the credibility of messages, as well as those communicating them (Lupton & Chapman, 1995; O'Key and Hugh-Jones, 2010; Vardeman & Aldoor, 2008). Studies in the wider risk communication literature have shown that receiving conflicting information about the probability of a risk leads to lowered credibility of the information (Breakwell & Barnett, 2003; Dean & Shepherd, 2007; Smithson, 1999). It may be that when uncertainty about risk information is inferred rather than explicitly stated, doubts over the information are raised as recipients may perceive that the full story has been intentionally concealed (Breakwell & Barnett, 2003). Within the decision-making literature, Smithson (1999) argued that when exposed to conflicting pieces of information from different sources, there will be a heuristic assumption that all evidence relating to the topic in question will have been equally distributed amongst unbiased and trusted sources; when conflicting messages appear to be based on two different sets of evidence or alternative ways of interpreting the evidence, then suspicions will arise as to the quality of the information. Informed by closely-related work in the risk communication domain (Breakwell & Barnett, 2003; Dean & Shepherd, 2007; Smithson, 1999) and building on the qualitative work already carried out in the area of conflicting food and nutrition communications (Lupton & Chapman, 1995; O'Key & Hugh-Jones, 2010; Vardeman & Aldoor, 2008), we undertook a quantitative approach in the current study, proposing the following hypothesis:

H1. The credibility of two (conflicting) risk and benefit messages will be perceived as lower than two (consistent) risk messages.

Mixed evidence exists as to whether trust in a communicator is influenced by the presence of conflicting information. Within the risk communication domain, conflicting risk information has been found to negatively impact source trust (Breakwell & Barnett, 2003; Smithson, 1999). Other research found that communicating risk information related to GM foods amidst conflicting messages did not decrease trust in a government agency, in fact, giving out risk information amidst communications of other stakeholders (whether in consensus or in conflict) appeared to enhance the image of the government agency as less self-interested (Dean & Shepherd, 2007). It could be argued that government agencies in this case were viewed as working with other actors, regardless of interests. The situation may be different when thinking about the impact of conflicting risk and benefit communications; trust in a communicator may be impacted more by the perception of expertise and competency than the potential for self-interest. No quantitative investigation has been carried out on the impact of communicating risk and benefit messages relating to the same food on trust in communicator. However, there is qualitative evidence to suggest that consumers are increasingly doubtful of those organisations and agencies which are involved in the communication of conflicting dietary advice (Lupton & Chapman, 1995; O'Key & Hugh-Jones, 2010; Vardeman & Aldoor, 2008). A recent qualitative study found that participants were confused about the healthfulness of foods because of conflicting opinions and changing recommendations in relation to risks and benefits of a food, and

that ultimately this was leading them to distrust the information source (Van Dijk, Van Kleef, Owen, & Frewer, 2012). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2. The communicator of a risk message that is followed by a benefit message will be perceived as less trustworthy than when the risk message is followed by another risk message.

The involvement of third-party communicators

Third-party communicators are ubiquitous in the new media communication era; journalists, bloggers, social networks, and organisation websites are just a few of the many online avenues through which an official communication can be picked up and spread throughout a community (Rutsaert, Pieniak, Regan, McConnon, & Verbeke, 2013). For those charged with an official remit for communicating about food risks or benefits to the public (e.g. national food safety authorities), collaborations with other trusted groups may increase the credibility of their message (Dean & Shepherd, 2007). However, depending on the trustworthiness of the third-party communicator and the message they are communicating, their involvement may present a significant challenge to the official communicator's goals. The involvement of a low-trust third-party communicator may influence consumers to judge the message as less credible (Dean & Shepherd, 2007). Credibility of the information may be impacted, even when it is made clear that the information originated from an official source. This is because third-party communicators may be viewed as playing a gatekeeping role, judged as equally active in the development and/or selection and interpretation of the risk or benefit information that they are disseminating to the public (Hu & Sundar, 2010). The perceived trustworthiness of the communicator is a commonly-employed heuristic for consumers when judging the soundness of a food risk or benefit message (Verbeke, 2005). With these considerations in mind, we suggest that there is potential for the credibility of an official communicator's message to be judged based on the perceived trustworthiness of the third-party communicator through which the message is received.

H3. A message received through a low-trust third-party communicator will be judged as less credible compared to when the same message is received from a high-trust third-party communicator.

The presence of a third-party in the communication process between official communicator and recipient becomes particularly relevant when the question of conflicting messages arises. When faced with conflicting risk and benefit messages on a food, consumers may rely on the trust heuristic to evaluate the soundness of the opposing messages. When processing information from multiple sources, as more pieces of advice are available, the complexity of the integration increases and task complexity generally leads people to rely on heuristics (Yaniv & Milyavsky, 2007). Thus, when consumers are presented with multiple pieces of information, they may be inclined to turn to heuristics, such as the perceived trustworthiness of the communicators, to reduce the amount of information to be considered (Payne, 1976). Thus, when a conflicting message is communicated through a low-trust or potentially biased third-party communicator, there may be greater reason to dismiss this message as non-credible and thus, conflict is less likely to be a problem as it is easier to deal with the conflicting message; by judging it simply as non-credible. We hypothesize the following interaction effect to occur:

H4. The credibility of a benefit message that follows a risk message will be adjudged as lower when it is disseminated by a low-trust third-party communicator.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6261434>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6261434>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)