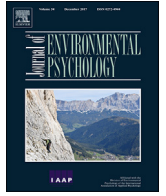




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Empirical Note

Changing farmers' behavior intention with a hint of wit: The moderating influence of humor on message sidedness

Fiona Vande Velde^{a, b, *}, Liselot Hudders^b, Verolien Cauberghe^b, Edwin Claerebout^a^a Department of Virology, Parasitology and Immunology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Ghent University, Salisburylaan 133, 9820 Merelbeke, Belgium^b Department of Communication Studies, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Ghent University, Korte Meer 7 – 11, 9000 Gent, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how to change farmers' unsustainable use of anthelmintic drugs. More specifically, it focuses on discouraging this behavior by using message sidedness in a humorous advertisement. The effects of the message on intentions to change behavior were measured through a cognitive and affective route of persuasion. Using a 2 (message sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided) x 2 (humor: humorous vs. non-humorous message framing) between-subjects design (N=167), we tested the persuasiveness of the advertisement. Results show that a two-sided message without humor evoked more negative cognitive responses (e.g. negative thoughts), than a one-sided message, leading to fewer changes in behavioral intention. However, a two-sided message resulted in increased pro-environmental behavioral intention compared to a one-sided message when humor was used as a frame in the advertisement.

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1. Introduction

Environmental problems are often rooted in aspects of traditional agricultural production, more specifically livestock farming (Islam, Barnes, & Toma, 2013). Therefore, alternative, pro-environmental approaches have been developed to mitigate biodiversity loss, dry-land salinity, and water conservation, to name but a few. Still, uptake has been insufficient and adoption of these practices rather disappointing (Price & Leviston, 2014). Many agricultural studies have focused on farmers' environmental behavior (Borges & Oude Lansink, 2016; Burton, 2014; Yazdanpanah, Hayati, Hochrainer-Stigler, & Zamani, 2014), however, less research has been conducted on the topic of changing this behavior. One way to change behavior is by using effective communication, although communication strategies should be well investigated before implementing them as social marketing approaches.

This study will investigate the effectiveness of two-sided message strategies in a social marketing campaign. This is a persuasion

strategy in which the advertiser takes both sides of an issue into account. In this case, discouraging the unsustainable behavior but also including a minor positive argument for this behavior. However, processing two-types of arguments will require more cognitive elaboration for the message. Humor is known to draw attention and create arousal (Cline & Kellaris, 2007). Therefore, this study will include humor in the message to facilitate message processing and eventually lead to increased pro-environmental behavior. The results presented here will be a contribution of suitable communication strategies for social marketing purposes.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Message sidedness in social marketing

The use of two-sided argumentation in a message is a strategy derived from commercial product advertising, and research has mainly been limited to this field (Cornelis, Cauberghe, & Pels, 2015; Eisend, 2007). It provides both positive and negative arguments

* Corresponding author. Department of Virology, Parasitology and Immunology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Ghent University, Salisburylaan 133, 9820 Merelbeke, Belgium.

E-mail address: fiona.vandavelde@ugent.be (F.V. Velde).

related to the product, but the positive arguments outweigh the negative ones (Allen, 1991).

In social marketing the aim is not to promote a product, but to promote desired behavior and/or discourage undesired behavior. Accordingly, different mechanisms are at stake here (Pope, Isely, & Asamoah-Tutu, 2009). By discouraging people's undesired behavior through a message, one can induce negative feelings (Witte, 1992). By including a minor positive argument to the message, one acknowledges that all behaviors come with advantages and disadvantages, which makes the message less aggressive and more humane. Perceived negativity can include negative cognitive and affective reactions towards the message, which might mediate the effect on behavioral change. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: A two-sided message will lead to increased intention to change behavior compared to a one-sided message due to a decrease in (H1a) negative affective responses and (H1b) negative cognitive responses.

2.2. The moderating role of humor

In light of the growing role of humor in social marketing, the current article tests the moderating impact of humor on the effects of message sidedness. Humor is known to intrigue and increase arousal, therefore it facilitates elaboration (Speck, 1991). Following the mechanism of the optimal arousal theory (Berlyne, 1971), humor is perceived as novel, surprising, and complex, and leads to enhanced attention and acceptance of an advertising message (Cline & Kellaris, 2007). However, arousal has its limits and follows an inverted U-shaped curve (Attardo, 2014). Too little or too much stimulation is regarded as unpleasant, while moderate stimulation builds just enough tension to be resolved, generating a pleasant feeling (Rothbart, 1973).

Hence, following the curvilinear theory of optimal arousal, we expect that the effect of humor will depend on the sidedness of the message. Message sidedness differs in the amount of informative value; a two-sided message contains more informative value compared to a one-sided message. Therefore, the tension created in a one-sided message should be resolved to a lesser extent due to limited informative value in the message. Moreover, humor will draw too much attention to the one-sided message containing only a negative argument discouraging certain behavior. Consequently, both cognitive and affective negative responses should increase due to excessive arousal and provoked negativity. A two-sided message provides more balanced and nuanced arguments. Therefore, the informative value of the message increases. Including humor in a two-sided message with higher informative value creates optimal arousal, which divides comprehension for both humor and message arguments. Hence, a two-sided message should be more positive in persuading behavior change than a one-sided message, and humor as moderator should strengthen this effect. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The positive effect of a two-sided (vs. one-sided) message on behavioral intention through decreased negative affective (H2a) and cognitive responses (H2b) will be stronger when the ad portrays humor than when it does not.

3. Method

3.1. Study design and participants

A 2 (message sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided) x 2 (humor: humorous vs. non-humorous message framing) between-subjects

design was employed in which participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Six hundred dairy farmers received an invitation by email to participate in a survey set up to improve communication to farmers. The real nature of the experiment was not revealed to prevent bias and socially desirable responses. To increase the response rate, an incentive (lottery) was provided in which the participants could win an I-Pad and 20 duo film-tickets. A total of 167 farmers participated in the study, and were randomly exposed to one of four versions of the advertising message. After watching the advertisement, respondents had to complete a questionnaire measuring the manipulation checks, followed by the thought-listing task, the dependent variables and a demographic inquiry. The used stimuli are presented in Appendix A.

3.2. Measures

An overview of all measures used in the study can be found in Appendix B.

Perceived humor (3 items: "Not funny/Funny, Not amusing/Amusing, Not humorous/Humorous", $\alpha = 0.92$) and *message sidedness* (1 item: "This message only presents negative arguments of preventive use of anthelmintics/This message presents both negative and positive arguments of preventive use of anthelmintics") were measured as manipulation checks by means of semantic differentials.

Negative cognitive responses were measured through a thought-listing exercise (Cacioppo, von Hippel, & Ernst, 1997). Participants recorded their thoughts that came to mind after they read the message, with a maximum of restriction to 6 thoughts. Each thought was coded by two independent coders on two categories: irrelevant/relevant and negative/positive. Thoughts were considered relevant if those addressed particular features of the advertisement, the message, or the behavior itself. Cohens' Kappa was run to determine if there was agreement between the two coders. There was very good agreement on the relevance/irrelevance of the thoughts, $\kappa = 0.93$, $p < 0.001$. Irrelevant cognitions were eliminated from the analysis to reduce the level of noise in the data (e.g., "I hope I win the lottery", "I was thinking about the upcoming questions in the survey, "No thoughts"). Afterwards, a variable was created with the amount of identified negative thoughts given by each separate respondent. The variable is continuous as this is a numeric sum of the negative thoughts provided by each respondent. Negative responses were considered for the analysis ($M = 0.71$, $SD = 1.19$) if those were perceived relevant and negative by the coders (e.g., "Shows little knowledge of the advertisers", "Again new costs?!", "Advertisement makes it look like we are deworming without thinking") there was a good agreement between the two coders $\kappa = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$.

Negative affective responses were measured using four items indicating the feelings they had after seeing the advertisement: fear and worry (anticipatory emotions), and guilt and shame (anticipated emotions) ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.15$, $\alpha = 0.86$).

Farmers' intention to change behavior was measured using 6 items ($\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.05$).

3.3. Analyses

First, to explore the data the inter-correlations of the variables of interest were tested. Second, a mediation and moderated mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) was used to test the hypothesized models. The independent variable, sidedness of the message, was dummy coded so that 0 equaled the one-sided threat-only argument and 1 equaled the two-sided argumentation. The moderating variable, humor, was also dichotomous

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