

Executive Summary

The Effects of Message Framing and Ad Credibility on Health Risk Perception

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Everyday consumers need to make decisions about their health, and this health behaviour is significantly influenced by health risk perception, health attitude and health condition. Health risk perception was found to have a particularly powerful impact on behavioural intentions. Publishers of health advertisements (ads) need to be knowledgeable about effective methods to increase health perception if they want to induce stronger health behaviour intentions. Message framing and higher perceived advertisement credibility are two methods to achieve this. Message framing is the presentation of objectively equivalent information about consequences using semantically different options, presenting the consequences either as gains (beneficial consequences of healthy behaviour) or losses (detrimental consequences of unhealthy behaviour). Scholars have intensively analysed the antecedents and effects of message framing on health behaviour but have seldom analysed message framing's effects on health risk perception. However, the recommendations of existing research and practice concerning message framing are inconsistent. The question emerges of how message framing and ad credibility influence health risk perception and thereby health behaviour intentions.

Message framing and ad credibility are very important contextual antecedents of health risk perception. Publishers of health ads have the ability to directly impact these contextual antecedents with their health ad designs. There are no studies that combine the contextual effects of message framing and ad credibility on health risk perception. To contribute new insights to this issue, this study examines the effects of message framing and ad credibility on health risk perception and analyses the practical evidence concerning the effects of trustmarks and argumentation style on ad credibility with regard to the health risks of alcohol consumption and unhealthy nutrition. Five hypotheses – concerning the interaction of the constructs, their influence on consumers' health risk perception, and the resulting impact on health behaviour intentions – are tested based on three online experimental studies.

The results of our three studies indicate that message framing does not increase health risk perception when only health arguments are used in the health advertisement. Health arguments are far more effective for health-motivated consumers compared to appearance-motivated consumers. Our findings indicate that higher ad credibility can increase health risk perception. Furthermore, health advertisements with source-based trustmarks – trustmarks verifying core quality indicators of the source of the ad – increase health risk perception. Therefore, publishers of health ads should take advantage of source-based trustmarks. Regarding argumentation style, there are no differences between one- or two-sided argumentation. Our three studies underline the importance of health risk perception and its impact on health behaviour intentions such as awareness, interest and word-of-mouth sharing of advertisements in the contexts of alcohol consumption and unhealthy nutrition.

Publishers of health ads need to be aware of the effects and conditions of message framing on health perception and use source-based trustmarks to increase ad credibility. They should keep in mind that the arguments of message framing need to fit consumers' motivational foci

and should take advantage of source-based trustmarks. They need to use these strategies to heighten health risk perception and promote the benefits of healthier behavioural intentions.