In Search of Moderators of the Effect of Message Framing on Persuasion

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This manuscript presents a theoretical framework on the effect of message framing on persuasion in order to resolve inconsistencies in previous studies. This framework acknowledges that two distinct types of positive and negative frames exist because either desirable or undesirable end-states can be used as the anchor. I propose that the effect of message framing on persuasion is determined by the type of motivations that are salient during the processing of messages, which is in turn determined by two moderators: the degree of issue relevance and the end-state used to anchor the message. A meta-analysis of empirical studies generally supports the validity of the proposed framework.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13828/eacr/vol7/E-07

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this manuscript, I propose a theoretical framework for explaining the effect of message framing on persuasion in order to resolve inconsistencies in previous studies. Unlike previous studies on message framing, the current framework acknowledges that either desirable or undesirable end-states can be used as the anchor in order to construct a positive frame and a negative frame. Specifically, a positive frame may emphasize either obtaining desirable end-states due to compliance (i.e., presence of gain: P/G) or avoiding undesirable end-states due to non-compliance (i.e., absence of loss: A/L). Likewise, a negative frame may emphasize either suffering undesirable end-states due to non-compliance (i.e., the presence of loss: P/L) or forgoing desirable end-states due to non-compliance (i.e., the absence of gain: A/G). A content analysis shows that previous empirical studies of message framing have used different combinations of positive vs. negative frames: P/G vs. A/G, A/L vs. P/L, etc.

The current framework proposes that the effect of message framing on persuasion is determined by the type of motivations that are salient during the processing of messages. Following the multimotive Heuristic-Systematic Model (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1997), it is likely that not only accuracy seeking motivation but also defense motivation may be salient when consumers process framed messages. The current framework argues that factually equivalent message frames may elicit different processing motives depending on the degree of issue relevance and the end-state used to anchor the message.

Furthermore, the present framework acknowledges that two motivationally distinct categories of target issues may be used to construct persuasive messages: advancement concerns and security concerns. According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998), advancement concerns are better sustained by strategic eagerness, whereas security concerns are better sustained by strategic vigilance. Since the majority of previous studies of persuasive message framing used security concerns, only the security concern portion of the framework is presented in this manuscript. Based on this framework, I propose three main hypotheses.

First, when a persuasive message is anchored on desirable end-states (e.g., safety or survival), accuracy motivation is dominant among individuals with high issue involvement. This is likely because issue-involvement tends to increase the motivation to approach desirable end-states by engaging in even-handed, extensive processing. In contrast, defense motivation is likely to be minimal because the possibility of obtaining or forgoing future gains does not violate consumers’ vested interests. Because security concerns are better sustained by strategic vigilance than by strategic eagerness under accuracy motivation, I hypothesize that an A/G frame is more persuasive than a factually equivalent P/G frame.

Second, when a persuasive message is anchored on an undesirable end-state (e.g., danger or death), consumers may hold defense motivation as well as accuracy motivation. Defense motivation is likely to be highly salient in the presence of loss frame because its emphasis on suffering a negative end-state as a result of non-compliance is viewed as inconsistent with high issue-involved consumers’ vested interests and hence threatening. This leads to biased systematic processing, such as counter-argumentation and discounting of the validity of the negatively valenced message. In contrast, defense motivation is not likely to be highly salient in the A/L frame because its emphasis on avoiding losses as a result of compliance is perceived as congenial to a preferred belief that one’s future is relatively free of negative events. In this case, a P/L frame is less persuasive than a factually equivalent A/L frame.

Lastly, when the focal issue has low relevance for consumers, both accuracy motivation and defense motivation are low for individuals, resulting in a low desired judgmental confidence. This leads to a reduced effortful scrutiny of message arguments and increased use of simple inferences derived from heuristic information found in the message. In this case, a positive frame is more persuasive than a negative frame regardless of the end-state used to anchor the message.

A meta-analysis of empirical studies was conducted in order to test the three hypotheses. This meta-analysis included 25 studies with independent samples reported in 12 published articles. I sequentially introduced two hypothesized moderators (i.e., the level of personal relevance of the issue and the end-state used as the anchor of the message) when effect sizes of individual studies included in the meta-analysis were deemed heterogeneous.

As expected, when all the effect sizes of available empirical studies were cumulated, the effect of goal framing on intention to comply was not only close to zero but also not homogeneous. A subgroup analysis for low issue relevance studies found that the effect size is not homogeneous. This was not consistent with Hypothesis 3. A subgroup analysis for the high issue relevance, P/G vs. A/G message group found that a negative frame led to greater behavioral intentions than a positive frame when desirable end-states were used to anchor the message. In contrast, a subgroup analysis for the high issue relevance, A/L vs. P/L message group found that a negative frame was less persuasive than a positive frame when undesirable end-states were used to anchor the message. These results clearly support Hypotheses 1 and 2. Furthermore, the significance testing analysis confirmed that the effect of message framing on persuasion significantly differed between the high issue relevance P/G vs. A/G group and the high issue relevance A/L vs. P/L group. Therefore, the results of the meta-analysis generally support the validity of the proposed framework.

REFERENCES
