

Do Scare Tactics Work? A Meta-Analytic Test of Fear Appeal Theories

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Melanie B. Tannenbaum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, presents her research “Do Scare Tactics Work? A Meta-Analytic Test of Fear Appeal Theories,” at the 25th APS Annual Convention in Washington, DC.

Fear appeals evoke a polarizing reaction; proponents are confident in its efficacy, whereas opponents assert that ‘scare tactics’ often backfire. Several recent meta-analyses have found a positive effect of fear on intentions and behavior, particularly in combination with efficacy messages, while others have found null or even negative effects. Yet prior meta-analyses on the topic have been limited in scope, either due to few included papers or a limited range of examined empirical theories. In the meta-analysis discussed in this video, we rigorously tested a comprehensive set of relevant theories and moderators, addressing research questions that have thus far been unexamined in the literature.

An exhaustive search yielded 245 potential articles, which were then screened for inclusion. Papers included in this meta-analysis had to include a fear treatment group, a no/low/moderate fear control group, a standardized intervention, and adequate statistics to calculate effect sizes. The final meta-analysis included 132 papers (11 percent unpublished), which yielded 278 independent samples (Total N = 29,966). The studies included in this analysis cover 13 distinct behavioral domains, including oral health/dental hygiene (e.g., encouraging proper tooth brushing/flossing), HIV/AIDS prevention (e.g., encouraging condom use), smoking cessation/prevention, and drug/alcohol abuse prevention.

We found a positive, linear effect of fear on overall intentions/behavior and a positive effect of including an efficacy message. Fear appeals are also more effective for one-time-only behaviors (e.g., screenings) vs. repeated behaviors (e.g., dieting), and for detection behaviors (e.g., screenings) vs. prevention/promotion behaviors (e.g., vaccines), as predicted by Rothman and Salovey’s theory of gain- and loss-framed messages. Finally, as predicted based on Regulatory Focus Theory, fear was more effective in prevention-focused populations. Fear was significantly more effective in East Asian (vs. Western) countries, in all-female (vs. all-male) samples, and in samples with higher proportions of Asian or female participants.

Melanie Tannenbaum

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign