Improving fear appeal ethics

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ABSTRACT

Fear appeals are commonly used in many types of marketing communications, e.g., the marketing of products, services, social causes, and ideas. Also, they are frequently used to get people to help themselves, and generally are effective in increasing ad interest, involvement, recall, and persuasiveness. The literature conventionally agrees that more effective fear appeals result from a higher fear arousal followed by consequences and recommendations to reduce the negativity. However, fear appeals have been criticized as being unethical, manipulative, exploitative, eliciting negative and unhealthy responses from viewers, and exposing viewers to offensive images against their will. Based on this criticism, the ethical use of a fear appeal needs to be improved. The purpose of this article is to review and examine the ethical use of fear appeals with the aim of making suggestions on how to improve the ethics of fear appeals. In particular, this paper includes the following sections: introduction, brief review of fear appeals, the ethics of fear appeals, fourteen specific ways to improve the ethical use and effects of fear appeals, and summary.

Keywords: Fear appeal, fear appeal ethics, and marketing communications

INTRODUCTION

The use of fear appeals in advertising is not universally accepted and can backfire or have unintended negative ethical effects on consumers (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996). An appeal is the motive to which an ad is directed. Its purpose is to move the audience toward a goal set by the advertiser. Fear appeals are commonly used in many types of marketing communications, e.g., the marketing of products, services, social causes, and ideas. The basic message is "if you don't do this (buy, vote, believe, support, learn, etc.), some particular dire consequences will occur" (Glascoff, 2000, 35). That is, advertisers invoke fear by identifying the negative results of not using the product or the negative results of engaging in unsafe behavior. However, fear appeals are effective in increasing ad interest, involvement, recall, and persuasiveness (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996). "Fear appeals are one of the most frequently used motivators to get people to help themselves" (Bagozzi and Moore, 1994, 56). In fact, fear appeals have grown in popularity because advertisers have found them to increase ad interest and persuasiveness (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996). Evidence also suggests that individuals "better remember and more frequently recall ads that portray fear than they do warm or upbeat ads or ads with no emotional content" (Snipes, LaTour, and Bliss, 1999, 273). However, appeals using emotion or fear rather than logic are often viewed as not being in society's best interest (Olson, 1995). That is, fear appeals have been criticized as being unethical, manipulative, exploitative, eliciting negative and unhealthy responses from viewers, and exposing viewers to offensive images against their will. As such, the ethical use of a fear appeal can and should be improved. The purpose of this article is to review and examine the ethical use of fear appeals with the aim of making suggestions on how to improve the ethics of fear appeals. In particular, this paper will include the following sections: introduction, brief review of fear appeals, the ethics of fear appeals, fourteen specific ways to improve the ethical use and effects of fear appeals, and summary.

BRIEF REVIEW OF FEAR APPEALS

Fear appeals are built upon fear. Fear is "an unpleasant emotional state characterized by anticipation of pain or great distress and accompanied by heightened autonomic activity especially involving the nervous system…the state or habit of feeling agitation or dismay…something that is the object of apprehension or alarm" (Merriam-Webster, 2002). Fear has evolved as a mechanism to protect humans from life-threatening situations. As such, nothing is more important than survival and the evolutionary primacy of the brain's fear circuitry. Due to this intricate and effective circuitry, it seems that fear is more powerful than reason. That is, fear can be easily and untruthfully sparked in such a way that is irrational and not subject to reason. (Begley, et al., 2007; Maren, 2008) There is no agreement regarding what causes a message to be categorized as a fear appeal (Witte, 1993). In general, however, a fear appeal posits the risks of using and not using a specific product, service, or idea. Fear appeals are defined by Kim Witte (1992, 1994), a prominent author in this area, as "persuasive messages that arouse fear by depicting a personally relevant and significant threat, followed by a description of feasible recommendations for deterring the threat" (Gore, Madhavan, Curry, McClurg et al., 1998, 34).

How does a fear appeal work? The premise is that fear appeals rely on a threat to an individual's well-being which motivates him or her toward action; e.g., increasing control over a

situation or preventing an unwanted outcome. A fear appeal is composed of three main concepts: fear, threat, and perceived efficacy. "Fear is a negatively valenced emotion that is usually accompanied by heightened physiological arousal. Threat is an external stimulus that creates a perception in message receivers that they are susceptible to some negative situation or outcome. And, perceived efficacy is a person's belief that message recommendations can be implemented and will effectively reduce the threat depicted in the message." (Gore et al., 1998, 36) Witte and Allen (2000) have concluded that fear appeals are most effective when they contain both high levels of threat and high levels of efficacy. That is, the message needs to contain (1) a meaningful threat or important problem and (2) the specific directed actions that an individual can take to reduce the threat or problem. The individual needs to perceive that there is a way to address the threat and that he or she is capable of performing that behavior. (Eckart, 2011; Jones, 2010; Lennon and Rentfro, 2010) Three additional factors contribute to success: (1) design ads which motivate changes in individual behavior, (2) distribute the ads to the appropriate target audience, and (3) use a sustained communication effort to bring about change (Abernethy and Wicks, 1998).

How are fear appeals used? Fear appeals have been used for many products, services, ideas, and causes including smoking, safe driving practices, insurance, financial security, social embarrassment, anti-drug abuse, cell phones, and regular health exams. Fear appeals impact end-user behavior but not uniformly as perceptions of self-efficacy, response efficacy, threat severity, and social influence also impact end users. (Johnston and Warkentin, 2010; Elliott, 2003; Eadie, MacKintosh, and MacAskill, 2009) Fear can be an effective motivator. Stronger fear appeals bring about greater attitude, intention, and behavior changes. That is, stronger fear appeals are more effective than weak fear appeals (Higbee, 1969). In addition, fear appeals are most effective when they provide (1) high levels of a meaningful threat or important problem and (2) high levels of efficacy or the belief that an individual's change of behavior will reduce the threat or problem. That is, fear appeals work when you make the customer very afraid and then show him or her how to reduce the fear by doing what you recommend. (Witte and Allen, 2000) Weak fear appeals may not attract enough attention but strong fear appeals may cause an individual to avoid or ignore a message by employing defense mechanisms. Importantly, extreme fear appeals generally are unsuccessful in bringing about enduring attitude change. (Ray and Wilkie, 1970)

Based on over 50 years of fear appeal research, Nabi, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Carpentier (2008, 191) state that a "fear appeal should contain threat and efficacy information sufficient to both evoke fear and inform about adaptive behavioral responses." The literature seems to support the current practice of using high levels of fear in social advertising. High fear should be the most effective providing that the proposed coping response to the threat is feasible and within the consumer's ability. However, because of ethical concerns regarding the use of fear appeals, alternatives also have been suggested that can be used in lieu of fear appeals, i.e., positive reinforcement appeals aimed at the good behavior, the use of humor, and the use of post-modern irony for the younger audience. (Leventhal, 1970; Mongeau, 1998; Witte, 1992; Myers, 2011)

THE ETHICS OF FEAR APPEALS

In general, individuals differ in their attitudes toward advertising and an ad's perceived ethicality. However, attitudes toward advertising and its ethicality seem to be declining as a whole. The challenge is to create advertising communications that increase ad persuasiveness

while not engendering perceptions or attitudes that are negative or unethical, e.g., overly dramatic and graphic, lacks social responsibility, exploitative, stimulates unneeded demand, and involves inappropriate manipulative techniques. (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996) This balance of persuasiveness and ethics is important because individuals who dislike an ad are likely to resist its efforts to increase the favorability of their attitudes toward the product itself (Aaker and Stayman, 1990). Treise, Weigold, Conna, and Garrison, (1994, 59) note "consumer opinion that a specific advertising practice is unethical or immoral can lead to a number of unwanted outcomes, ranging from consumer indifference toward the advertised product to more serious actions such as boycotts or demand for government regulation." In addition, "perceived ethical problems with a controversial ad stimulus negatively impacts attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand as well as purchase intention" (Henthorne and LaTour, 1995, 561). Unethical fear appeals also can damage the credibility of advertisers and create unfounded fears and worries among audience members (Hyman and Tansey, 1990). As such, unethical ads can have very negative short and long-term effects. (Thompson, Barnett, and Pearce, 2009; Eckart, 2011; Palmer-Mehta, 2009)

In order to create more ethically sound advertising and fear appeals, an understanding of ethics in general is needed. Snipes, LaTour, and Bliss (1999, 274) have noted "ethics generally focuses on whether the conduct of an individual, group, or marketer is deemed as morally 'right' or 'wrong,' as determined primarily by the stable inner values of an individual. The individual's unwavering response to situations over time is based on his/her moral philosophy, which is determined, to a great degree, by an individual's social background and life experiences." Taylor (1975, 1) has defined ethics as "injury into the nature and grounds of morality where the term morality is taken to mean judgments, standards and rules of conduct." Gaski (1999) suggests that ethics is primarily what is consistent with the law and/or self-interest.

According to Malhotra and Miller (1996), there are four classes of philosophical theories of ethics: teleology, deontology, hybrid approaches, and objectivism. From the teleology point-of-view, ethicality depends on the outcomes or actions that result from the decision or ad, i.e., the end justifies the means. As such, the moral weight of a judgment is determined by the degree to which the result is the best result for all affected parties. Deontology focuses on the means, methods, intentions, and humaneness used to pursue a particular alternative rather than the results of a decision. In this ethical approach, preservation of individual rights at any cost is of paramount importance. (Duke, Pickett, Carlson, and Grove, 1993) The hybrid theory encompasses both of the first two approaches, i.e., a dual focus occurs wherein both the means and the end determine the ethicality of a decision. Objectivism is based on what is happening in the real world at the moment, i.e., one deals with the unethical behaviors that exist rather than worrying about what ought to be. Collins (2000, 10) has noted "a general conclusion is that many factors impact a person's ethical sensitivities. Giving credit to any one factor is too simplistic. On the other hand, giving credit to all of the factors is meaningless from a practical perspective." (Pfau, 2007)

How are these ethical theories made practical? Coutinho de Arruda and Leme de Arruda (1999, 166) note that "ethical limits seem to be restricted to the codes of ethics, to the legislation of each country, or to the habits and customers detected by research or sensibility. Little or no attention seems to be given to the natural law, to the people's values and beliefs, mainly when dealing with the consumer market." Dunfee, Smith, and Ross (1999) discuss Integrative Social Contracts Theory (ISCT) as a coherent framework for resolving ethical issues that arise among different communities, e.g., boundary-spanning relationships and cross-cultural activities. That

is, ISCT provides a systematic way to encourage a decision maker to consider all possible groups/stakeholders who may have an interest in the decision.

Within the discipline of marketing, the American Marketing Association (AMA) has adopted general guidelines or a Code of Ethics for ethical marketing behavior. It addresses these fundamental areas: basic responsibilities of the marketer, honesty and fairness, rights and duties of parties in the exchange process, and organizational relationships. This includes not knowingly doing harm and avoiding false and misleading advertising. It is important to note that Ferrell and Skinner (1988, 107) have stated that the "existence and enforcement of codes of ethics are associated with higher levels of ethical behavior." In addition, Robin and Reidenbach (1987) note that ethics needs to be incorporated into the strategic marketing process. The authors offer as a guideline, "make and market products you would feel comfortable and safe having your own family use" (44). Smith (1995) offers the consumer sovereignty test (CST) as an ethical guideline in evaluating marketing decisions, i.e., is the consumer's interest promoted and is the consumer capable of exercising informed choice. In addition, Brenkert (1998, 15) adds the boundary, "marketers may not target those who are especially vulnerable in ways such that their marketing campaign depends upon the vulnerabilities of that specially vulnerable group." (Schlegelmilch and Oberseder, 2010)

Laczniak and Murphy (1993) propose that the following questions should be used to evaluate the ethics of marketing practices:

1. Does the contemplated action violate the law? (legal test)
2. Is this action contrary to widely accepted moral obligations? (duties test)
3. Does the proposed action violate any other special obligations that stem from the type of marketing organization at focus? (special obligations test)
4. Is the intent of the contemplated action harmful? (motives test)
5. Is it likely that any major damages to people or organizations will result from the contemplated action? (consequences test)
6. Is there a satisfactory alternative action that produces equal or greater benefits to the parties affected than the proposed action? (utilitarian test)
7. Does the contemplated action infringe on property rights, privacy rights, or the inalienable rights of the consumer? (rights test)
8. Does the proposed action leave another person or group less well off? Is this person or group already a member of a relatively underprivileged class? (justice test)

If the answer is "yes" to any of these questions, then the marketer's decision is probably unethical and should be reconsidered. This approach suggests that the assessment of marketing ethics should be norm focused (as in the above eight questions) rather than issue focused (Dunfee, Smith, and Ross, 1999).

What determines whether or not advertising is ethical? Hyman and Tansey (1990, 1994) have argued that fear appeals are unethical when they expose a person against his will to harmful or seriously offensive images. Other authors have noted that because advertising contributes to the development of social norms via "social statements," it has an obligation to better society. As such, fear appeals are unethical when they are intended to elicit negative and possibly even unhealthy responses in consumers. (Duke et al., 1993) Bush and Bush (1994, 31) state, "the advertising community is still producing ads that certain segments of our society are questioning, perhaps because there is a perceived need to take risks in creating attention-grabbing and innovative advertisements." Accordingly, ad creators need to be acutely aware of the positive and negative reactions of their target audience to the use of fear appeals. In so doing, advertisers

must keep in mind that "ethics is an orientation, that is, a way of thinking about and acting on ethical dilemmas. Moral reasoning cannot be reduced to a formulaic process of applying abstract principles that guarantee moral outcomes." (Thompson, 1995, 187) Thompson (1995) also notes that ethics in advertising should reflect a desire to be responsive to the interests of those likely to be affected.

While fear appeals generally increase ad effectiveness, little attention has been given to their ethicality in particular (Snipes, LaTour, and Bliss, 1999). To a large extent, the ethical assessment of fear appeals has been based on intuition with little structured guidance available to aid in developing reactions from varied audiences (Duke et al., 1993). As a consequence, Duke et al. (1993) have developed a proactive structural framework for evaluating the ethical consequences of fear appeals, i.e., the ethical effects reasoning matrix (ERM). The ERM uses multiple interest groups or stakeholders (macro social system level, institutional/organizational level, and individual level) and multiple ethical reasoning perspectives (utilitarian cost/benefit, Golden Rule, Kantian rights analysis, and enlightened self-interest wherein the individual tries to maximize net benefits for self in a way that minimizes detriment to others). The matrix helps to visualize and evaluate a fear appeal without ignoring a particular consequence, stakeholder, or ethical reasoning approach. As such, the matrix can help to isolate and identify conflicts that may arise among various ethical perspectives involving many interested publics.

Snipes, LaTour, and Bliss (1999, 280) have found that "the use of strong fear appeals may not be perceived as unethical if consumers feel self efficacious regarding the ad's recommended coping response. In other words, if the consumer feels he/she can use the product to effectively eliminate the threat posed by the ad, the ad is more likely to be perceived as ethical." Also, Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1998) have examined the ethical dimensions of advertising executions, specifically focusing on disguised (e.g., hidden or masked fear appeal, product placement in movies) and obtrusive advertising (e.g., very strong fear appeal, billboards in sports arenas when games are broadcast), advertising deception, and advertising content. They have found that

> "as the degree of disguise increases, consumers are less able to apply defense mechanisms against the ad and therefore their motivation to attend to the ad increases. Moreover, the use of affect-laden executional cues, rather than strong message arguments in disguised ads may be effective in producing brand attitudes…Most advertising messages are designed so that the intended audience perceives them at the conscious level. However, we have shown that high obtrusive advertising messages may be perceived at unconscious or subattentive levels. Therefore, like the case of disguise, as the degree of advertising obtrusiveness increases, consumers increasingly attend to the ads at the subconscious level." (813)

But, all-in-all, fear appeals easily can raise ethical issues. In particular, Hastings, Stead, and Webb (2004) suggest that fear appeals can have many negative effects in that they:

1. Use the force of fear to try to manipulate human behavior.
2. Deliberately foster anxiety.
3. Can cause their targeted audience to see the brand or cause negatively.
4. Can diminish free choice by compromising the individual's ability to make a rational choice.
5. Can exploit particular individuals with vulnerabilities such as the young, ill, or addicted.
6. Expose audiences unwillingly to graphically upsetting images.

7. Often reach and annoy unintended audiences.
8. Demonize the featured subgroups and scare parents into a too-protective mode of parenting.
9. Can evoke maladaptive responses that end up not controlling or removing the danger addressed in the ad.
10. Can cause the targeted audience to avoid, tune out, blunt, suppress, or counter-argue the intended message.
11. May lead consumers to miss important health information or to process information in a biased manner and draw erroneous conclusions about the relative risks of different behaviors.
12. May evoke existential dread of one's own death.
13. Tend to intrude on people's lives without permission.
14. May cause an individual to cope with an unpleasant message by denying its personal relevance.
15. May encourage health fatalism – "there's nothing I can do about it."
16. May trigger the very behavior that the ad is designed to deter.
17. May make psychologically and socially less-resourced individuals feel worse via anger, defensiveness, and encouraging maladaptive responses.
18. May engender absolute harm (further distress to the most vulnerable) and relative harm (encouraging highly equipped individuals which, in turn, can make the most vulnerable feel even worse). This creates an inequality that violates the principle of equal justice.

IMPROVING THE ETHICAL USE AND EFFECTS OF FEAR APPEALS

The modal finding of 50 years research is that fear appeals are generally effective (Cox and Cox, 2001). However, fear appeals have been criticized as being unethical, manipulative, exploitative, eliciting negative and unhealthy responses from viewers, and exposing viewers to offensive images against their will (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996). As such, the ethical use of a fear appeal can and should be improved. Listed below are various techniques and/or understandings that may improve the advertisers' persuasive yet ethical effect when using a fear appeal.

1. Know your target audience's reaction to a fear appeal
   Advertisers should be aware of positive and negative reactions from their target audience toward the use of potentially controversial and unethical ad stimuli. The literature conventionally agrees that more effective fear appeals result from a higher fear arousal followed by consequences and recommendations to reduce the negativity. However, Keller (1999) has found that this finding needs to be modified by the characteristics of the participants. That is, this ordering is effective for those who are already following the advocated recommendations but not for the unconverted. Lowering the level of fear arousal and reversing the order of the consequences and recommendations more effectively convert the unconverted. As noted by Keller (1999, 403), "unconverted participants who received either a low fear appeal or recommendations preceding consequences perceived themselves to be more susceptible, perceived the consequences as more severe, regarded the

recommendations as more efficacious, believed they were more able to follow the recommendations, and were less likely to refute the message claims."

It also should be noted that differences among fear appeal research results often can be attributed to individual differences in thought processes. That is, fear may be idiosyncratic or unique to the individual (Rotfeld, 1989). For example, Peracchio and Luna (1998) have found that child-directed ads should be pretested so that children can comprehend the ad. Also, the authors note that nonsmoking ads should be directed to children 12 and under who have not begun to make decisions about smoking. Keller and Block (1996) have stated,

> "results indicate that teenage smokers do not have concrete internal images of the negative health effects of smoking, but nonsmokers do seem to have such images. If attempts to communicate the long-term negative health effects of smoking are to influence potential future smokers, they must portray those effects in a way to which children can relate. Care should be taken, however, to ensure that ads do not provoke high levels of arousal or anxiety, which may have a negative effect on persuasion." (Peracchio and Luna, 1998, 55)

A person's appraisal of a fear appeal is a function of both severity of the threat and individual vulnerability (Rindfleisch and Crockett, 1999). For example, more educated consumers were influenced more by positively framed messages (half full) while less educated consumers were influenced more by negatively framed messages (half empty) (Smith and Petty, 1996). Also, Schneider et al. (2001) found that

> "gain-framed messages about smoking in visual and auditory modalities shifted smoking-related beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in the direction of avoidance and cessation. Health-communication experts, when promoting prevention behaviors like smoking avoidance or cessation, may wish to diverge from the tradition of using loss-framed messages and fear appeals in this domain, and instead consider using gain-framed appeals that present the advantages of not smoking." (Schneider et al., 2001, 667)

Additionally, Robberson and Rogers (1988) have found that a negative appeal was more persuasive than a positive appeal; however, a positive appeal was superior to a negative appeal for building self-esteem. As such, it is imperative to know one's target market and their reaction to a fear appeal in order to create effective and ethical fear appeals. (Jones and Owen, 2006)

In an additional study about communicating healthy eating to adolescents, Chan, Prendergast, Gronhoj, and Bech-Larsen (2009, 2011) have found that

> "a balanced diet and eating at regular time intervals were perceived as healthy by respondents. In other words, the contents of the diet and the frequency of food consumption matters most to the respondents. Respondents reported that they frequently consume unhealthy foods in social and festive contexts. Our sample perceived that parents and the Government were communicating frequently to them about healthy eating. However, the perceived effectiveness of parents was higher than that of the Government. Respondents were asked to evaluate five print advertisements about consuming less soft drink. Respondents were more receptive to advertisements using news and fear appeals than love, popularity, and achievement appeals." (2009, 11)

In another age-related study by Benet, Pitts, and LaTour (1993), elderly individuals were not found to be particularly vulnerable. While the elderly may be more dogmatic and perhaps view outcomes from the perspective of their age, there is no indication that their fear-appeal responses differ significantly from younger consumers. As such, it is important to understand the specific target audience. This understanding can be used as the basis for developing more effective and ethical communications targeted towards adolescents.

Another example of understanding the unique target audience focuses on direct to consumer (DTC) pharmaceutical ads. These ads try to primarily focus on a positive light, displaying healthy and satisfied consumers. However, pharmaceutical companies are required to include potential health risks of the drugs and this then adds a fear appeal aspect to the ad. In general, a successful drug ad communicates the risk but places most of the emphasis on the benefits so that the consumer ends up with a positive impression of the ad. In studying drug appeals, Kavadas, Katsanis, and LeBel (2007) have found that addressing an audience as high versus low involvement is a more effective fear appeal approach than viewing the audience as sufferer and non-sufferer, for example, a sufferer may not display high advertisement involvement, but the sufferer's spouse might. As such, an individual's advertisement involvement is an important construct to include in understanding risk information processing with its subtle use of fear appeals. The authors conclude that in future DTC advertising, studies may want to include individuals suffering from the advertised ailment and then subdivide these two groups into high and low involved consumers.

In another study examining cultural orientations in fear appeals, Murray-Johnson, Witte, Liu, and Hubbell (2001) have studied the effect of fear appeals on individualist and collectivist cultures. Individualistic cultures focus on self-needs above group concerns while collectivist cultures place group needs over individual concerns. Most fear appeal research has focused on individualistic cultures and has found that fear appeals threatening the individual are powerful persuasive devices. The results indicate that cultural orientation is an important variable to consider when analyzing the fear appeal effectiveness.

Block (2005) has studied the effect of self- vs. other-referencing on the persuasiveness of fear and guilt appeals to reduce the incidence of drinking and driving. She has found that for people who hold a predominantly independent self-view, superiority of self- vs. other-referencing holds for guilt appeals but not for fear appeals, that is, these fear appeals work better for other-referencing individuals. For individuals who hold a predominantly interdependent self-view, other-referenced and self-referenced messages are equally recalled and equally favorable for both fear and guilt appeals. So, to make a fear appeal more effective and ethical, it is important to know your target audience's reaction to that fear appeal and to adjust as needed.

2. Understand the boomerang effect

Wolburg (2006) has studied the effects of an anti-smoking campaign aimed at college students. She has found that college students' reaction was anger and defiance, that is, while the ad reinforced the nonsmokers' decision, the smokers in the study wanted a cigarette after viewing the ad. It may be that when individuals are faced with the necessity to change their behavior, they often feel that their personal

freedom is threatened. Wechsler, et al. (2003) have found that in social marketing campaigns to reduce heavy college drinking, a pattern of increased drinking emerged. It is as if the old celebrity PR adage "any publicity is good publicity" also may apply in that what is remembered is the topic and the actual direction of positive or negative is lost.

Lennon, Rentfro, and O'Leary (2010) have studied this boomerang effect in terms of young adults' distracted driving behavior. They have tested PSAs portraying distracted driving behavior including talking on a cell phone, texting, eating, and playing music while driving. The ads prompt young adults to see the behaviors depicted in the video as more distracting than they previously believed. Yet, there is insufficient evidence to predict how the PSAs would affect their intentions to engage in the behaviors in the future. The authors' overall finding is that fear appeal PSAs may cause young adults to behave in the opposite way rather than what is advocated in the message. Even though young adults recognize that these behaviors are distracting, they still frequently talk on their cell phones and play music while driving. Also, they text and eat while driving on a fairly regular basis.

Lennon and Renfro (2010) have continued in this vein of research and added that effective PSAs aimed at young adults need to incorporate strong rather than mild to moderate fear appeals. In general, males feel that using legal means (e.g., tickets and arrests) is a more effective deterrent. On the other hand, females were more receptive to PSAs especially if the PSAs employed interviews by individuals affected by distracted driving accidents. (Lennon, Renfro, and O'Leary, 2010)

A substantial amount of research has shown that emotional messages, negative messages, and arousing messages are more effective than non-emotional messages. Claim strength increases message effectiveness when messages are either positively or negatively arousing. When messages are calm, claim strength seems to have little effect on positive messages and a quadratic effect on negative messages. The worst combination is to produce arousing messages with weak claims. (Lang and Yegiyan, 2008)

3. Know that individuals in different stages of change respond differently to fear appeals

Fear appeals constitute an important element in risk communication, e.g., protect against the sun, smoking, condom use, and so forth. That is, fear appeals often present the consequences that individuals will experience unless they stop risky behavior or start preventive behavior. However, behavior change is a long-term process involving multiple discrete stages in which individuals exhibit different behavioral and psychological characteristics and needs. Hence, the effects of a fear appeal in a risk campaign could differ from stage to stage. Fear appeals could help individuals move through the steps of the process by solidifying their intentions to engage in preventive behavior. Cho and Salmon (2006) have examined intended and unintended effects from fear appeals during the stages of change. They base their research on Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross's (1992) Transtheoretical Model of the Stages of Change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. The results indicate that stages of change can be a useful audience segmentation variable for risk campaigns. In particular, messages could be tailored to fit with the intended audience's stages of change. For example, promoting strong efficacy perceptions would be more useful for individuals in the earlier stages of

change such as precontemplators. Individuals needing behavior changes most may be least receptive to fear appeals. (Cho and Salmon, 2006; Diehr et al., 2011)

4. Understand the target audience's beliefs and prior experience

A target audience's beliefs and prior experiences can predispose its ethical assessment of and response to a fear appeal. Huang (1995, 1730) has found that "(1) the more extreme the prior product evaluations and familiarity, the simpler and more compartmentalized the product categories; (2) the simpler and more compartmentalized the categories, the more extreme the affective and evaluative reactions toward ads; and (3) the stronger negative affect experienced, the more extreme the evaluative reactions toward ads." Kruglanski and Webster (1996) suggest that people engage in motivated reasoning when their prior beliefs are incompatible with stimulus information. Motivated reasoning describes a reasoning process that is biased by the desire to hold on to prior beliefs. Motivated reasoning brings about discounting of the source, message information, and message relevance. (Kunda, 1990) Keller (1999) has found evidence that an individual's prior behavior determines the extent to which he will discount the message as well as the strategies he will use in doing so.

> "When the unconverted are confronted with a conventional fear appeal format that is incompatible with their prior behavior, they will question their susceptibility, the severity of the consequences, and the efficacy of the message recommendations and will be more likely to refute the message [and] inclination to discount the message by the unconverted increases and persuasion decreases with an increase in the level of fear arousal…The findings also indicate that conventional wisdom for designing fear-arousing messages are more effective for those who are already persuaded, the adherent, than those such messages are typically targeted toward, the unconverted. That is, in contrast to the unconverted, when confronted with a message that is compatible with prior behavior, the adherents do not lower their intentions to follow the recommendations in response to a more fear-arousing message or a message in which the consequences precede the recommendations." (Keller, 1999, 412)

On the other hand, Ragsdale and Durham (1986) have found that a religious message using high fear appeals is evaluated more favorably than one using low fear appeals. It seems that the stronger the listener's religious beliefs, the more likely this is. In particular, women listeners retain more information from a high fear message than from a low fear one.

Smerecnik and Ruiter (2010) have studied the role of cognitive beliefs (i.e., attitude, subjective norm, anticipated regret, and self-efficacy) in explaining the effects of a fear appeal on behavioral motivation. Their analysis reveals that only anticipated regret qualified as a mediator of the effect of the fear appeal on intention. High coping information was observed to increase anticipated regret, which increased behavioral intention. That is, anticipated regret mediated the coping-intention relationship.

5. Test the arousal effects of fear appeal stimuli

Fear appeal design seeks to energize potential customers to take action. That is, increasing tension generates energy up to a certain threshold; beyond that

threshold, increasing tension arouses anxiety that begins to deplete energy. Fear appeals contain a deliberate and questionably unethical attempt to arouse anxiety. As such, a strong fear appeal may inadvertently and adversely arouse an individual and activate a fear-denial response (LaTour and Pits, 1989). Rather than relying on intuition to establish a fear arousal threshold, the advertiser will need to test fear arousal effects and find the "threshold" within a given target market to gauge effectiveness. (Henthorne, LaTour, and Nataraajan, 1993)

> "We believe that commercials differ in their ability to create an impact and be retained in memory. To plan a media strategy based on 'generalizations' (e.g., burst versus drip), with no feedback from the market, is in our opinion, irresponsible media planning. Commercials should instead be treated as individual entities, with unique response characteristics and decisions relating to continuity versus pulsing, and reach versus frequency should be made on an individual commercial-by-commercial (case study) basis. Post-test measures, such as in-market recall, should then be interpreted relative to the media schedule that preceded the research and then compared against normative data." (Ewing, Napoli, and DuPlessis, 1999, 35)

That is, arousal effects need to be tested in terms of their persuasive effect and ethicality. (Viljoen, Terblanche-Smit, and Terblanche, 2010)

In general, high threat and high efficacy messages produce the most positive impact on behavior. Low threat and low efficacy messages tend to produce the least positive impact on behavior. However, there may be an interaction effect between threat and efficacy on behaviors. Even with good theory, the actual effects need to be tested in real life. (Wong and Cappella, 2009) As a side note, there is little substantive yield in scaring the already scared, and it typically cannot justify the investment of time and money it takes to put together a fear appeal (Muthusamy, Levine, and Weber, 2009).

When testing the arousal effects of fear appeals, it is important to distinguish among type of threat, literal communication stimuli, and the actual fear arousal response or level of fear. Probably much of the ambiguity regarding the effectiveness and ethicality of fear appeals is due to this lack of distinction. In the past, the confounded measurement of a fear appeal may have used one or more of these three distinctions or aspects of fear. In particular, threats are undesirable results from certain behaviors (e.g., injury or illness). As such, threats are appeals to fear. Fear is an emotional response to a threat that can impel changes in attitudes and behaviors. People fear different things and, hence, respond in different ways. (LaTour and Rotfield, 1997)

6. Monitor the level of fear

Increased levels of fear are generally associated with changes in behavior, attitude, and intention (LaTour and Rotfield, 1997). Too much fear can trigger anxiety that causes individuals to avoid the ad. However, for low to moderate levels of fear, a direct relationship exists between fear and attitude enhancement. (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996) In general, it appears that the emotional response of fear and persuasion are related positively and linearly (Boster and Mongeau, 1984). That is, low levels of fear may be ineffective because they contribute to low levels of elaboration of the negative consequences. Moderate levels of fear may elicit higher

levels of elaboration and, hence, be effective. However, very high levels of fear may require too much elaboration of the harmful effects that interfere with the processing of the recommended behavior change. (Keller and Block, 1996; Venkatesan, 2010) Careful field-testing should be employed to verify the audience's specific reactions to various levels of fear as well as their perception of the ad's ethicality. This is important because individuals can acclimate to levels of fear and fear appeals.

7. Balance executional elements with persuasive and ethical elements

Execution is how advertising messages are presented creatively, e.g., picture package, product alone, product in use, product features, comparison, benefits, new/improved product, humor, testimonial, negative appeal, demonstration, testimonial, presenter, slice-of-life, lifestyle, animation, music, factual message, scientific/technical, personality symbol, fantasy, and dramatization. These elements as well as all aspects of the ad need to convey the message and not interfere with the persuasive or ethical elements of a communication. New/improved product was found to be the most effective persuasive elements in :15 and :30-second commercials, with longer ads generally being more persuasive. (Stanton and Burke, 1998)

When balancing the executional, persuasive, and ethical elements of an ad, the fear appeal should not overstate or be misleading. For example, the word "endanger" automatically calls forth attention and a response. If "endanger" overstates the situation, then do not use it as "crying wolf" may lead to resentful listeners and customers. A fear appeal that over-stimulates or over-promises can lead to dissatisfaction. This is particularly the case with some individuals who may be more susceptible to explicit and dramatic fear appeals. Larsen and Diener (1987) examined affect intensity and found that

"certain individuals are predisposed to respond with significantly greater emotional intensity than others when exposed to emotion-eliciting stimuli. As predicted, the results demonstrate that when the ads were emotional, whether positive or negative, individuals who were classified as high AI had stronger emotional reactions than their low AI counterparts. In contrast, no significant differences in the intensity of emotional responses were observed when subjects were exposed to a nonemotional ad. We also found that high AI individuals had stronger positive attitudes toward the ad and greater levels of enjoyment only when exposed to a positive emotional ad and not in response to a negative emotional ad or a nonemotional ad. Interestingly, emotions served as the mechanism through which affect intensity influenced attitude only when subjects were exposed to a positive emotional appeal." (Moore and Harris, 1996, 43)

In addition, television programming context is very important to the processing of a fear appeal. For example, Potter, LaTour, Braun-LaTour, and Reichert (2006) have found that sad programming activates viewers' aversive motivational systems, while comedic programming activates their appetitive motivational systems. They have found that overly arousing material is not necessary to have an impact on the processing of subsequent persuasive messages. Additionally, they note that negative affect and increased behavioral intention were found in response to the negative PSA placed after television programming that

activated the aversive system. The authors continue by suggesting that media-buyers for social-marketing campaigns place fear appeals in programming where even slightly negative content may be expected.

Another study has examined health warnings on cigarette packages, one of the most direct and prominent means of communicating with smokers. Hammond (2011) has found that the impact of health warnings depends upon their size and design. Obscure text-only warnings have little impact while prominent messages or pictorial health warnings that elicit strong emotional reactions are significantly more effective.

8. Use elaboration-enhancing interventions

Keller and Block (1996) have found that the level of fear arousal is positively related to the propensity to elaborate. That is, low fear provides very little motivation to elaborate while high fear motivates subjects to elaborate on the problems and ignore the solution. More specifically, they have found that self-reference (serious or important to the individual) and imagery processing increased the persuasiveness of a low-fear appeal by prompting elaboration. However, the impact of high fear appeals seems to be influenced by defensive behaviors individuals engage in when faced with a threatening message, e.g., will not happen to me, I counteract it, selective attention, discounting the threat, etc. In accordance, Keller and Block (1996) also have found that the use of references to others and objective processing suppressed elaboration of the high fear appeal and increased the persuasiveness by decreasing the extent to which consumers deny harmful consequences. Keller and Block (1996, 449) state that "an appeal generating low levels of fear would benefit by more elaboration on the harmful consequences so that recipients are motivated to seek a solution. By contrast, a message that evokes high levels of fear would benefit from a decrease in elaboration of the harmful consequences and a focus on the solution." An understanding of elaboration enhancement can be used to balance persuasiveness and ethical considerations.

9. Incorporate emotional and cognitive responses

Both emotional and cognitive elements need to be incorporated into ethical fear appeals because these elements of persuasion have an influential role in the persuasion process and are intertwined rather than separate. Studies have debunked the cognitive psychologist's notion that cognition is primary to emotion. In general, emotional appeals are better recalled than rational appeals (Ewing, Napoli, and DuPlessis, 1999).

> "Sensory inputs are transmitted directly to the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain, as well as indirectly from associational areas in the neocortex, where more complex cognition occurs. The pathway directly to the amygdala is shorter and quicker and allows emotional stimuli to be evaluated preconsciously and reacted to before one begins to think about how one feels, if one does at all. Neurophysiologists now believe that mental information processing takes place largely outside of conscious awareness, with only the end products reaching consciousness. Advertising research, however, has often focused on conscious, deliberate, and rational processing of product information, though in actuality the consumer is often unaware of what elements of an ad or attributes of a brand influenced their choice. Most processing of advertising messages is subconscious, implicit, and intuitive.

> Consumers usually do not engage in extensive cognitive and deliberate processing of product information even for expensive purchases or if one is a first-time buyer. The import of these research and marketplace findings is that emotion is a primary motivator of consumption behavior and that the affect attached to the ad or brand may play a more critical role in an ad's effectiveness than the attitude or thoughts about the brand." (Hazlett and Hazlett, 1999, 8)

That is, feelings may affect attitudes, above and beyond the cognitive-based responses. Also, individuals may elicit seemingly contrasting emotions to different elements in an ad. But, the arousal of negative emotions can benefit advertisers in that negative feelings can have a positive effect on attitudes and behavior.

Passyn and Sujan (2006) have examined the critical role of emotion in persuasion, especially for translating action tendencies into action. In particular, they looked at the role of high self-accountability emotions in enhancing compliance with fear appeals. In the context of fear appeals, they demonstrated that the negative emotions of regret and guilt are as effective as the positive emotion of challenge in motivating action and is more effective than the positive emotion of hope. They suggest that their appeals likely followed the problem-solution format in communication with fear being necessary to gain attention and signal a problem and the added emotion directing the solution. Support was found for emotions inducing behavior, even extended behavior. While cognitive appraisals of self-accountability are necessary, they are insufficient alone. That is, emotions have impact over and above the cognitions that accompany them. It appears that emotions spontaneously instantiate the implementation intentions that initiate action. They suggest that problem-focused strategies specifying procedural details such as how and where are important for generating action. In their overall conclusion, they state

> "we find that relative to straight fear appeals (negative) or adding hope (positive), which ascribes low accountability to the self, action-facilitative coping, intentions, and behaviors (using sunscreen, eating high fiber foods) are enhanced by adding guilt, regret (both negative), or challenge (positive), all of which induce feelings of high self-accountability. In addition, we find that cold perceptions of high accountability are necessary but insufficient to influence actual behaviors and that the corresponding emotion is an essential driver of behaviors." (583)

On the other hand, using fear appeals as a tool of fear mongering may be highly hazardous to your brand witness Kleenex's Cold and Flu Tracker and Lifebuoy's Say No to Swine Flu campaigns (Klara, 2009). (Burke and Edell, 1989) Also, the impact of disgust-related images varies depending on the strength of the fear appeal. Specifically, Leshner, Vultee, Bolls, and Moore (2010)

> "tested two types of message attributes commonly used in anti-tobacco television ads - content that focuses on a health threat about tobacco use (fear), and content that contains disgust-related images (disgust) - for how they impact viewers' cognitive processing of the message. The results suggest that the impact of disgust content in anti-tobacco television ads on cognitive resources available for encoding the messages and on recognition memory varies according to whether or not the message is a fear appeal. The presence

of disgust-related images led to slower secondary task reaction times (STRTs) and better audio recognition for low fear messages. The presence of disgust related images did not significantly affect STRTs and led to worse audio recognition for high fear messages." (485)

Consequently, it is important to balance emotional and cognitive elements within an ad. This balance should contribute to the ad's ethical perception.

10. Monitor the long-term effects of fear appeals

The literature does not show much about the long-term effects of exposure to repeated fear appeals. First, it is unlikely that the response to a fear appeal remains static. Responses are more likely to be formed, re-evaluated, and updated during the dynamic process of the campaign. Second, repetition may lead to habituation, annoyance, and an increased tuning out of the message. Third, the long-term use of fear appeals may condition audiences to expect that all advertising on that issue should use fear. Fourth, repeated use of fear appeals may damage the source of the message, that is, the source could become irretrievably connected to the negative and the threatening. (Hastings, Stead, and Webb, 2004) As a result, it is important to monitor the long-term consequences of a fear appeal.

11. Addictive behavior may not respond to fear appeals

Hankin et al. (1993) have found that socially responsible warning labels regarding drinking while pregnant reduced reported consumption by light/nondrinkers. But, it did not influence the risk drinkers' behavior. That is, the negative appeal did not have an impact on the women who needed it the most, the risk drinkers. It seems likely that addictive behavior cannot be outweighed by token efforts. Although most would consider it unethical, marketers can feed into an addictive weakness. Lascu and Zinkhan (1999, 9) note that "sources who are confident or appear to have a greater level of expertise are more successful in inducing conforming behavior" and "conformity messages would be appropriate for purchase decisions that are complex, difficult, or ambiguous." The authors continue by stating that

"conformity-prone consumers are relatively insecure and have a great need to be liked and to belong. Thus, conformity messages may be more successful when aimed at younger audiences, in their teens and twenties. Once again, there are important ethical issues. Advertisers must be cautious to use targeting techniques responsibly, offering products that consumers need, rather than using fear appeals or appealing to consumers' insecurities."

As such, marketers must consider the ethical ramifications of knowingly contributing to or manipulating individuals' vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and addictions.

12. Determine case-by-case whether the use of fear appeals is appropriate

Snipes, LaTour, and Bliss (1999) have found that while stronger fear appeals generated significantly more tension, they had a more positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward the ad and purchase intentions. However, the stronger ad was not perceived as less ethical than a mild fear appeal. So, a strong fear appeal had superior performance and no perceived ethicality problems. As such, Snipes, LaTour, and Bliss (1999) stress the importance of assessing a fear appeal stimulus on a case-by-case basis by empirically testing the ad on representative samples rather than just dismissing the options due to fear of its backfiring. The authors suggest careful field-

testing of performance and perceived ethicality variables. Also, the cumulative effects of fear appeals in today's environment may acclimate the audience to stronger fear stimuli.

"Given the mass of stimuli competing for viewers' attention, the sponsorship of a carefully tested fear appeal ad may indeed be doing the viewership a service in terms of communicating very valuable information concerning personal safety, or in other instances financial security or relief from social embarrassment…Given the intensity of social criticism of fear appeals, advertising agency clients may express reluctance concerning their use. In response to such concerns, advertising executives can use the current study as a mandate for serious, more objective consideration of fear appeals in conjunction with careful empirical assessment." (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss, 1996, 65)

As an example of the measurement process, Laros and Steenkamp (2004) have examined fear in the case of genetically modified food (GMF). They began by developing a scale to measure the fear that consumers may experience for several major categories of food, i.e., functional food, organic food, regular food, and GMF. Fear was defined in terms of six emotion items (afraid, tense, panicky, worried, nervous, and scared) which together formed the uni-dimensional state of fear. The fear associated with each of the four food types was then measured. The fear of GMF was greater among nature lovers and less among tech lovers. The nature of these two groups may give hints about whether or not to use fear appeals and how to put together an effective fear appeal. Since the nature lovers are already afraid of GMFs, fear appeals would not be used here. But, a fear appeal might be used with the tech lovers, e.g., buy and use GMFs so that technology will continue.

13. Consider alternatives to fear appeals

The question is not whether to use fear appeals but rather is the fear appeal or an alternative more successful for a particular use. Brennan and Binney (2010) show that negative appeals are more likely to invoke self-protection and inaction than an active, positive response. That is, appeals can be based on positive emotions such as love, excitement, sex, hope, and humor. For example, the Salvation Army and Red Cross use hope as an ongoing appeal. Positive feelings of interest, cheerfulness, and lack of irritation exert a positive influence on ad and brand recognition (Geuens and Pelsmacker, 1998). While fear appeals may work for some audiences, a reward appeal may work better for other audiences. Instead of doom and gloom, a humorous appeal may be more effective. Or, empathy strategies have been used in road-safety advertising. In addition, recent antismoking and antidrug campaigns have focused on humor, irony, and supportive messages which seem to be producing favorable results in awareness, liking, attitude change, and attempts to quit. Other appeals have included positive role models, empowerment, sexual appeals, and opinion leaders (Beets, Cardinal, and Alderman, 201; Lloyd, 2009; Nisbet, 2010; Valente and Pumpuang, 2007). Lewis, Watson, White, and Tay (2007) have studied the extent to which fear appeals are effective and the potential use of positive emotional appeals and humor. They found that both emotion and the provision of strategies were key components to increase persuasiveness of road safety ads. As such, positive appeals warrant further attention in the role they play in persuasion. Post-modernism is

another non-fear approach that does not try so hard and which is characterized by relativism, irony, surrealism, self-referentiality, and hedonism. These appeals treat the consumer as knowing and worldly wise. Post-modernism seems to be very effective with a younger audience. (Hastings, Stead, and Webb, 2004)

14. Follow the appropriate code of conduct

Codes of conduct can guide the use of fear appeals. For example, advertisements must not, without justifiable reason, play on fear. In religious advertisements, no ad may play on fear or allege consequences for not being religious. In drug ads, no ad may cause unwarranted anxiety for those who see an ad lest they are suffering or may suffer from any disease…or that health could be affected by not taking the product. Also, ads should not lead children to believe that they will be inferior in some way if they do not buy the product. (Hastings, Stead, and Webb, 2004) Obviously, laws need to be honored with regard to fear appeals whereas codes of conduct need to be followed to circumvent the gray areas.

SUMMARY

Fear appeals have been used successfully to increase advertising's effect on consumer interest, recall, persuasiveness, and behavior change. However, the inner workings of a fear appeal have not been fully agreed upon or understood. In addition, the ethicality of fear appeals has been questioned, i.e., too dramatic and graphic, manipulative, creates unneeded demand, and targets vulnerable individuals. In spite of the potential usefulness of a fear appeal, the down side of causing anxiety for the target audience seems inherently unethical, even if the fear appeal is meant to help them. As a result, both commercial and social marketers should exercise caution and discretion over the use of persuasive fear appeals. The purpose of this paper has been to review and examine fear appeals with regard to their ethical ramifications. In particular, information is given to briefly define a fear appeal and its use. In essence, the bottom line of fear appeals is that they work; however, a continued understanding of fear appeals can contribute to more effective advertising practices and more ethical ads. For example, Hastings, Stead, and Webb (2004, 978-979), "call on marketers – and especially social marketers – to reexamine their fondness for fear appeals. There are genuine concerns about the broader marketing implications of fear appeals, and they may breach the Hippocratic injunction of 'First, do no harm'." This paper also explores the ethical approaches to examining fear appeal ads. Thereafter, fourteen suggestions are presented for improving the ethical use and effect of fear appeals. Ultimately, ethics is an orientation consistent with the law, self, stakeholders, and society.

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