Impact of Media on Perceptions of Food Safety Issues

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Thank You!

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JIFSAN Grant: 3-Stage Project

Theoretically driven, multi-methodological examination of how people perceive media portraying terrorist attack on food safety

- Qualitative Focus Groups
- Experimental Design
- In-Depth Interviews
Variables Measured

- Problem recognition/perceived threat
- Level of personal involvement
- Perceived constraints
- Source credibility
- Fear arousal
- Information processing
- Information seeking
Stage 1 Focus Groups

- 6 focus groups of individuals from different backgrounds; total = 62 participants
- Presentation of news scenarios and discussion
Severity and Susceptibility

- “Level” of source used in news
- Geographical proximity
- Severity = risk of death
- Susceptibility =
  - Perceived similarity to victims
  - Shared experience with source of news
Perceived Barriers

- Time
- Lack of access to resources
- Engagement in other activities
- Language
- Perceptions of uncertainty, fear
- Low self-efficacy, fatalistic beliefs
- Cognitive overload of information
- Prioritization of “everyday life” risks
Phase 1 Key Findings

- Sharing experience/risk with source important for problem recognition, personal involvement, info processing and info seeking
- Perceived similarity to victims important
Stage 2 Experiment

- H1: Perceived shared experience with source increases 1) problem recognition; 2) involvement; 3) perceived constraints; 4) info processing; 5) info seeking

- H2: Perceived shared experience with victim increases 1) problem recognition; 2) involvement; 3) perceived constraints; 4) info processing; 5) info seeking
Experimental Design

- Random assignment to four treatment groups (2 by 2)
- Produced simulated print news article
- 2 phases of pre-tests
- Manipulation checks confirmed
- 94 participants, 50% female
Hypotheses Supported

- Perceived shared experience with source significantly increased problem recognition ($F[1,89]=4.62, p < .05$)
- Shared experiences with source and victim also lead to significantly higher problem recognition ($F[1,86]=4.55, p < .05$)
Hypotheses Supported

- Perceived shared experience with source significantly increased males’ information processing ($F[1,86]=4.13, p < .05$)
- Shared experience with source significantly increased females’ level of involvement ($F[1,86]=3.34, p < .05$, one-tailed)
Stage 3 In-depth Interviews

- Interviews with women only, to explore in-depth how media sources can lead to greater personal salience, perceived susceptibility, and other potential outcomes.

- 23 women, variety of states, diversity in ethnic and racial backgrounds, age, and professional experience
Phase 3 Key Findings

- Perceived shared experience with spokesperson affected level of personal salience, and message interpretation
  1. Identity as caregiver, family contexts
  2. Spokesperson’s human vulnerability over expert persona ➔
     - Personal involvement, higher trust
     - Negative reaction, low trust
FDA Funded Study

Specific call to focus:

- Contradictory, sometimes conflicting media messages about safety of eating fish
- Pregnant and nursing women, women of childbearing age, mothers of young children
Focus Groups

- How do women perceive media environment about safety of eating fish?
- What factors impact interpretations of the safety practices requested?
- What constraints prevent the women from understanding safety guidelines as presented in media?
Facts are confusing, doubtful

- Confusion, “cloudy” facts
- Skepticism, doubt
- “Why is it so controversial? Either mercury is okay for you or it’s not. It should be fairly black and white.”
Perceived Barriers

- Availability of realistic, comparable options to eating fish
- Additional, enabling resources to assess facts
- Other health concerns
- Self-efficacy: am I capable of understanding amounts, types, to be safe?
Filtered facts through...

- Eating practices, current behaviors, family traditions
- Comparative food risks
- Social, peer networks and "food rumors"
- Sense of vulnerability as pregnant woman
- Economic livelihood
Responses

- Negotiating the conflicting messages typically led to perceived inability to balance benefits with risk
- Cut out fish from diet altogether
- Ignored, disdained, or resisted risk messages and ate fish as always did.
Theoretical Significance

- Support integration of theories
- Elaborated on dimensions of key variables
- Applicability of theory to areas of media, bioterrorism, and conflicting health info
- Top research paper awards from national communication conference; published in field’s ranked journals
Practical Significance

- Guidance for dissemination of information in time of risk
- Prioritization of factors before communicating to media
- Address constraints in order to increase likelihood of preventive actions
Publications from Research


