

# Role Of Gender In Consumers' Response To Fear Appeal Advertisements

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of attention to fear arousal as a potentially useful variable in persuasive communications. Fear is a dangerous threat facing the individual, which tends to have an important impact on people's behavior. Marketers expect the help of this relationship, in advertisements, threatening or dangerous information to stir emotions of the audience, and thus induce people to like or dislike the products or services. The basic structure of a fear appeal is very simple. The consumer is confronted with a situation in which some type of fear or anxiety is created. Once the scenario is firmly established, the advertising moves onto present the consumer with a solution, usually in the form of a product. Once the product is utilized, the obstacle is removed and the fear no longer exists. Such demands often appear in many products or services (such as to discourage smoking or drinking, etc.) in the advertisements.

Research on fear appeals in advertising has focused on both physical and social threats to the receiver. This study is a 2 X 2 design with the respondent's gender (male vs. female) and type of fear appeal (physical vs. social) as the variables. The fear appeal advertisement focusing on the physical threats had the health effects associated with gingivitis and tooth decay, while fear appeal focusing on social consequence dealt with the effects of bad breath.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the fact that individuals experienced “fear” derived from the long-term knowledge of harmful effects, literature seems to be relatively pessimistic about the long-term effectiveness of fear appeals (Mittelmark, 1978; Evans, 1979; Bandura, 1977). For instance, Pee and Hammond (1997) and Lerman et al. (1997) argued that such fear appeals have long-term detrimental effects based on the concept of escape-avoidance behaviour. It is perceived that with exposure to such fear appeal campaigns, individuals would rather not risk the knowledge of having contracting certain diseases.

Likewise, Rogers (1983) explained the lack of effectiveness in fear aroused messages by relating rewards to perceived severity and susceptibility when analyzing a particular course of action (adaptive/protective or maladaptive). For instance, if the reward (e.g., pleasure, social pleasure) is greater than the perceived consequences, susceptibility and severity of the danger (e.g. Aids kills, smoking causes cancer), individuals will continue to practice maladaptive behaviour (e.g. “unsafe” sex, continue to smoke). As such, we say that the individual is engaged in a “fear control process” to disperse his/her fear rather than the “danger control process” (taking constructive measures). Pratkanis and Aronson (1992) believed that for fear appeal to be effective, the threat must be so strong to “scare the wits” out of people. In this way, it offers a specific remedy (response efficacy) for overcoming the threat. The message recipient must believe that he/she can perform the recommended action (high self-efficacy). The relevance of the message is also important in motivating a person's cognitive processes (Meyrick, 2001).

Several studies examined how individuals react when faced with threatening stimuli (Arthur and Quester, 2004; Roser and Thompson, 1995; Stuteville, 1970). People can respond to this level of threat with either adaptive behavior, or maladaptive behavior. In other words, they either reject the behavior or habit, or reject the message. Stuteville (1970) found three ways to deal with fear. The first is to deny the message. The second is an unconscious response, where people feel that they are not going to experience any adverse effects of the behavior, or that they are the exception to the rule. The third response may be to laugh at the message, thereby diffusing its importance. Despite consideration that fear appeals might backfire, these appeals are frequently used by advertising professionals in public health advertising

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campaigns. One reason for using fear appeal in health campaigns is because the threat of punishment is relied on to control behavior when the behavior is difficult to change (DeJong, 2002). Hale and Dillard's (1995) research supported this notion by indicating that fear and threat are integral to persuasive health messages.

Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) found gender differences in levels of cognitive elaboration. Their research suggested that females have lower elaboration thresholds, whereby they engage in detailed processing more readily than males. Males limit the cognitive effort they expend, and thus use heuristic processing, whereas females prefer more detailed processing. However, these differences disappear when males are sufficiently motivated (Dube & Morgan, 1996; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1991). Amin and Amin (2010) studied the gender differences in the factors influencing motivation of males and females towards online shopping. Their research suggests that males and females have different gender-based perceptions, which can influence their preferences and decisions. Males are comparatively more motivated by functional factors, whereas females are motivated by emotional and social factors.

## **FEAR APPEAL ADVERTISEMENTS: ETHICAL OR UNETHICAL?**

Malhotra and Miller (1996) classified the four philosophical theories of ethics as: teleology, deontology, hybrid approaches, and objectivism. In teleology theory, ethicality depends on the outcomes or actions that result from the decision or the advert, i.e., the end justifies the means. Deontology focuses on the means, methods, and intentions 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) has noted that 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 the factors is meaningless from a practical perspective (Pfau, 2007).

Advertisers rely mainly on the attitude of consumers towards an advert because people who like an ad are likely to have a positive attitude towards the product, and those who dislike an ad are likely to have a negative attitude or would boycott its efforts to increase the favorability of their attitudes towards the product itself. 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.

Although the use of fear appeals is quite popular today, its application in advertising is still not universally accepted. Critics argue that marketers often intentionally use inappropriate manipulative techniques in fear appeals when communicating with target audiences (Duke, Pickett, Carlson, and Grove, 1993). The Image 1 shows an advertisement for safe driving, but uses manipulative techniques when communicating with the target audiences. Additionally, some researchers suggest that improperly used fear appeals damage the credibility of advertisers and create unnecessary fears and worries among audience members (Hyman and Tansey, 1990). The Image 2 shows such an advertisement for

**Image 1: Don't Talk While He Drives - Advertisement For Safe Driving**



**Image 2: Bad Breath - Advertisement For The Use Of Listerine**



Listerine, where it is shown that medical assistants hesitate to attend a patient if his mouth stinks. Other critics feel that advertising contributes to the development of social norms and, therefore, has an obligation to the betterment of society (Duke et al., 1993). The Image 3 shows an anti-smoking advertisement which says, cigarette smoking is dangerous for the passive smoker, especially for the smoker's children. The primary reason for their (fear advertisements) growing popularity is that advertisers have found them to increase the interest and persuasiveness of individual ads (Hyman and Tansey, 1990; Higbee, 1969). In fact, empirical studies indicate that target audience better remember and more frequently recall ads that portray fear, than warm or upbeat ads or, ads with no emotional content. This is particularly important in this age of tremendous "media clutter" – hundreds of TV channels, the internet, and DVDs - where today's advertisers have to work harder for the attention of the viewers.

**Image 3: Passive Smoking Kills – Anti-smoking Advertisement**



## **METHODOLOGY**

This survey was conducted on youth using a structured questionnaire. A total usable sample of 200 was collected over an eight-week period from February to April, 2011. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In the first part, questions were asked about the demographic details like age and gender of the respondent and the respondents' knowledge about gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath. Then the respondents were shown a series of three advertisements. These advertisements depicted gingivitis in the tooth gum area, tooth decay, and bad breath as a result of bad oral care. Then, in the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to respond to a few sets of scales. These scales included perception of seriousness of gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath, and perception towards fear appeal advert content. Two hypotheses were formulated; one to study whether there is any difference in the perception of males and females towards the advertisements, and the other to study whether there is any difference

in the perception of respondents before and after viewing the advertisements.

### Hypothesis 1

❖ **Ho: There is no significant difference between males and females in their perception towards gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath before viewing the advertisements.**

### Hypothesis 2

❖ **Ho: There is no significant difference between males and females in their perception towards gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath after viewing the advertisements.**

### Hypothesis 3

❖ **Ho: There is no significant impact of the advertisements in changing the perception of respondents towards gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath.**

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

58.5% per cent of the respondents were males and 41.5% were females. 76.5% per cent of the respondents were in the age group of less than 21 years, 22% percent of the respondents were in the age group between 21 and 30 years, and 1.5% percent of the respondents were in the age group of above 30 years.

Independent 't' test	Mean		Std. Deviation		't'	df	Sig. (p)
	Male	Female	Male	Female			
Gingivitis Before	2.325	2.626	0.7969	0.6755	-2.807	198	0.006
Tooth decay Before	2.188	2.723	0.9371	0.5698	-4.627	198	0.000
Bad breath Before	2.589	2.819	0.8111	0.5442	-2.244	198	0.026

The Table 1 shows the results of the independent 't' test done to find the perception of male and female respondents towards the seriousness of gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath before viewing the fear appeal advertisements. The results show that the null hypothesis is rejected and it is inferred that before viewing the advertisements, both male and female respondents differed significantly in their perception towards the seriousness of gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath as the significance value ( $p_{gingi} = 0.006 < 0.05$ ,  $p_{td} = 0.000 < 0.05$  and  $p_{bb} = 0.026 < 0.05$  at  $df = 198$ ) is less than the  $\alpha$  value (0.05). Also, as the mean value of perception of females for gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath is greater than that of males, females show more seriousness towards the effects of bad oral care, even before viewing the advertisements. It is because females are generally more conscious about their health and appearance than males. The standard deviation values show that the variation of female respondents' perception towards the consequences of bad oral care is similar, but the variation for the male respondents is dissimilar. The Male respondents belonged to a heterogeneous group, which perceived the consequences of bad oral care to be very serious as well as not so serious.

Independent 't' test	Mean		Std. Deviation		't'	df	Sig. (p)
	Male	Female	Male	Female			
Gingivitis After	2.957	2.952	0.2031	0.2155	0.183	198	0.855
Tooth decay After	2.795	2.916	0.5339	0.2796	-1.885	198	0.061
Bad breath After	2.744	2.904	0.4762	0.2969	-2.709	198	0.007

The Table 2 shows the results of the independent 't' test done to find the perception of male and female respondents

towards the seriousness of gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath after viewing the fear appeal advertisements. It is inferred from the results that after viewing the advertisements, both male and female respondents differed significantly in their perception towards only bad breath, as the significance value ( $p_{bb} = 0.007 < 0.05$  at  $df = 198$ ) is less than the  $\alpha$  value (0.05). But there is no significant difference in the perception of males and females towards gingivitis and tooth decay as the significant value ( $p_{gingi} = 0.855 > 0.05$ ,  $p_{td} = 0.061 > 0.05$ ) is greater than the  $\alpha$  value (0.05). Also, mean values show that females are again more serious than males towards the consequences of tooth decay and bad breath, but for gingivitis, it is the males who show more seriousness. The standard deviation values show that the female respondents belonged to a homogeneous group, whereas the male respondents belonged to a heterogeneous group of individuals perceiving the seriousness of bad oral care to be serious, and not so serious. When the researchers analyzed the mean values of both the tests, the number of male respondents who showed seriousness towards the consequences of bad oral care increased after viewing the advertisements, which shows that only when males are sufficiently motivated, they show the preferred behavior.

Paired 't' test	Mean		Std. Deviation		't'	df	Sig. (p)
	Before	After	Before	After			
Gingivitis Before - Gingivitis After	2.020	2.500	0.890	0.782	-8.234	199	0.000
Tooth decay Before - Tooth decay After	2.155	2.540	0.919	0.701	-7.950	199	0.000
Bad breath Before - Bad Breath After	2.320	2.730	0.781	0.582	-5.970	199	0.000

The Table 3 shows the results of the paired 't' test done on the perception of the respondents before and after viewing the advertisements. It is inferred from the results that the respondents differed significantly in their perception towards gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath before and after viewing the advertisements as the significance value ( $p_{gingi} = 0.000 < 0.05$ ,  $p_{td} = 0.000 < 0.05$  and  $p_{bb} = 0.000 < 0.05$  at  $df = 198$ ) is less than the  $\alpha$  value (0.05). The mean and standard deviation values show that there is an increase in the number of respondents and decrease in the variation of their perception after viewing the advertisements. The respondents who didn't show enough seriousness towards gingivitis, tooth decay, and bad breath before viewing the advertisements changed their perception about the seriousness of these health and social consequences of insufficient oral care. This proves that the advertisements are effective in changing the perception of the respondents after the respondents viewed the advertisements.

However, it cannot be proved through this analysis whether the respondents were more serious towards health consequences messages or social consequences messages, as they showed similar difference in perception to both health related and social related consequences after viewing the advertisements.

## CONCLUSION

These results indicate that fear appeals produce large effects for perceived severity. The limited sample diversity in this study could account for the difference in the findings. The case for using fear appeals may be tentatively proven in the laboratory, but in the real world, marketing questions about the use of fear remain unanswered (and often unexplored). There is a compelling need to examine the effects of fear messages on consumers (in natural settings). Strategic concerns, such as long-term effects and the impact on relationships are important, along with the need to assess the relative effectiveness of fear approaches in all these areas, compared with other creative approaches that have no or fewer harmful side effects.

## NOTES

Sources of The Image 1, Image 2, and Image 3 are as follows :

- ❖ Image 1 : <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2010/dont-talk-while-he-drives/>
- ❖ Image 2 : <http://www.bryanandrewruiz.com/blog/?p=2248>
- ❖ Image 3 : <http://www.circlefarmny.com/health/why-passive-smoking-kills.html>

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