Positively-framed messages and affect in social marketing

Abstract

Fear appeals are widely used in social marketing campaigns, but have drawn criticism based on both research limitations and ethical concerns. This preoccupation with negatively-framed messages and negative affect is echoed in the laboratory-based message framing literature. Firstly, we propose that message framing needs to take account of the nature of the desired behaviour change rather than focusing exclusively on the consequences of compliance or non-compliance with messages’ recommendations. We propose a classification of desired behaviour change and use it to examine the potential for positively-framed social marketing message and positive affect to facilitate desired behaviour. Secondly, we argue that attention needs to be refocused on messages that support people in building resources to facilitate behaviour change through positive affect. We then identify different types of positively-framed social marketing messages that have been used in practice and evaluate their success. Finally, we draw implications for effective and ethical ways of framing messages to facilitate behaviour change to help improve social marketing theory and practice.

Keywords – Message framing, Positive affect, Social Marketing
Introduction

‘Hard-hitting’ public health messages have been commonplace in some Western countries such as Australia (Hastings et al., 2004). The predominant use of fear appeals in social marketing has been criticised on the grounds of both research limitations and ethics. The validity of research claiming the effectiveness of high levels of fear has been called into question owing to its reliance on artificial laboratory studies with students and limited measures (Hastings et al., 2004). Ethical concerns include maladaptive responses such as chronic heightened anxiety to or avoidance of fear appeals by those targeted, complacency by or negative impact on those not targeted, and further social inequality because the most disadvantaged are less likely to respond to fear appeals than the more affluent (Hastings et al., 2004).

Commercial marketing, in contrast, tends to focus on rewards and the potential for a positive emotional state post-purchase (Hastings, 2007). In clinical psychology, positive psychology reacted against the prevailing pathological approach, by looking at what is right rather than wrong with people. Positive psychology suggests that momentary positive emotions create associations that build increased receptiveness to new ideas, possibilities and interpretations (Fitzpatrick & Stalikas, 2008). This implies that positively-framed social marketing messages could harness positive emotion to facilitate desired change by building enduring personal resources. Yet there is a paucity of research evaluating positively-framed messages in social marketing rather than fear appeals. The research aims were:

1. To examine the potential for positively-framed social marketing messages and positive affect.
2. To classify different types of positively-framed social marketing messages that have been used in social marketing contexts and, where possible, evaluate their success.
3. To identify effective and ethical ways of framing messages in facilitating change to help improve social marketing theory and practice.

Methodology

Two literature searches were conducted following the principles of systematic review (Tranfield et al., 2003) as far as practicable. Owing to the limitations of laboratory studies and the challenges of evaluating social marketing campaigns, only articles with irretrievable methodological flaws were excluded. The first search using the broad phrase “message fram*” yielded 227 articles, of which 126 were selected, with a further 64 added from citations in the selected articles. The second search used the phrase “‘social marketing campaign’ AND message” to identify 65 articles that discussed message framing in social marketing campaigns, from which 26 were selected with a further 13 articles added, based on article citations.

A classification of desired behaviour change

Laboratory-based based comparisons of positively and negatively-framed health promotion messages typically focus on the purpose of the desired behaviour change: either detection of a health condition (e.g., in HIV or cancer screening) or prevention of a health condition from developing (e.g., immunization to prevent a disease or quitting smoking to prevent a range of health conditions). Reviews of the laboratory-based literature have generally concluded that gain-framed messages are better suited to preventative behaviours and loss-framed messages to detection behaviours (e.g. Bannon & Schwartz, 2006; Rothman et al., 2006; Rothman & Salovey, 1997). However, the evidence has been mixed, possibly owing to the range of potential moderating variables or the way in which comparable messages have been formulated. Use of the detection/prevention dichotomy may also have masked message framing effects.
The detection/prevention dichotomy is widely used in the literature, but has several limitations. Firstly, it does not allow for the potential multiple conceptualisations that are present in behaviour. For example, physical activity can represent a treatment or an augmentation as well as a prevention behaviour (Berry & Carson, 2010). Secondly, preventative behaviours vary widely in terms of whether they require frequently repeated actions or a one-off action (Gerend et al., 2008). Finally, the detection/prevention dichotomy focuses solely on the purpose of an advocated behaviour change; it does not take account of the behaviour change itself. What social marketing messages actually ask people to do (the means) in order to achieve the detection and prevention outcomes (the ends) is often overlooked. Many people still engage in unhealthy behaviours, in spite of knowing the potential consequences. Even if individuals wish to change their behaviour, it can be hard to do so. A wide range of behaviours that are harmful to health depend to some degree on how they make people feel rather than on reason (Lawton et al., 2009).

One of the key features of social marketing is the principle of exchange (Gordon et al., 2006). If we are asking people to change their behaviour, we must consider the behaviour involved in the exchange, rather than only the consequences. We propose the following classification, based on the nature of the desired behaviour change:
(i) abstinence (e.g. abstaining from taking up smoking, underage sex or trying drugs);
(ii) initiation (e.g. taking an HIV test or having a vaccine);
(iii) substitution (e.g. choosing healthy foods, non-alcoholic drinks when driving);
(iv) maintenance (e.g. adherence to therapies or to quit smoking attempts);
(v) increase (e.g. eating more portions of fruit and vegetables);
(vi) reduction (e.g. of speeding, binge drinking); and
(vii) cessation (e.g. smoking), which may involve tackling an addiction.

This classification does not restrict a context to one category, but instead takes into account the nature of desired behaviour advocated in a message. So for example, rather than classifying physical exercise as a preventative behaviour, it allows an exercise message recommending using the stairs instead of the lift to be classified as a substitution behaviour, taking up a new sport as an initiation behaviour and taking more exercise as an increase in behaviour.

Positively-framed messages in social marketing contexts
We examined the effectiveness of positively-framed social marketing messages to support behaviour change, using our above classification of the nature of the desired behaviour change.

**Abstinence** The number of abstinence studies is too limited to make more than very tentative suggestions about the effectiveness of positively- and negatively-framed messages of persuading people to abstain from an undesirable behaviour. However, taking into account subsequent findings included in the other categories of desired behaviour, we suggest that loss-framed messages that focus on the costs of an undesired behaviour might represent more of a deterrent in cases where the target audience has no prior experience of the undesired behaviour.

**Initiation** Loss-framed messages appeared to be more effective for initiating desired behaviours when people consider themselves at risk as a result of engaging in the discouraged behaviours or for people with high self-efficacy or when people engage in deeper message processing. The few studies that were not consistent with this pattern involved initiation behaviours with substantial barriers (relating to sexually-transmitted disease and testicular examination) or behaviours with which people are likely to have had some familiarity (for example sunscreen use and car safety behaviours). However, research (e.g. Consedine et al., 2007; Goold et al., 2006; Maguire et al., 2010) shows that messages or interventions that provide empowerment or experience can help people overcome barriers to desired behaviours.
Substitution  Gain-framed worded messages have been reported to be effective in promoting recycling (Obermiller, 1995; Loroz, 2007). In a study involving switching to more environmentally friendly energy sources, van den Velde et al. (2010) concluded that messages were more likely to persuade people to engage in the desired behaviours if they present solutions and opportunities, rather than just focusing on the importance and problems relating to an issue. This concurs with our argument that social marketing messages need to focus on supporting the desired behaviour, rather than just discussing the end-state consequences.

Maintenance  Studies addressing maintenance behaviour suggest that messages that support the desired behaviour are likely to be beneficial (e.g. Fucito et al., 2010; Toll et al., 2008). However, research on maintenance behaviours appears to be rather limited.

Increase  Gain-framed messages appear to be more effective in encouraging people to increase a desired behaviour (e.g. Jones et al., 2003; Kees et al., 2010; Sunghwan & Baumgartner, 2009). However, research findings in this category are qualified by the effects of various moderating variables, such as regulatory focus and source credibility.

Reduction  Few studies addressed reduction of an undesirable behaviour. Those that did (e.g. Millar & Millar, 2000) suggest that messages need to encourage the desired change.

Cessation  The few studies that have investigated cessation behaviours suggest that loss-framed messages might be more effective among people already receptive to ceasing an undesired behaviour (e.g. Wong & McMurray, 2002). Interestingly, there was some indication that gain-framed messages build self-efficacy. However, in these studies focused on the costs/benefits, messages designed to support the behaviour change might yield different results.

Summary  Persuading people to change an existing behavior should involve offering them a positive alternative from whatever reward they find in their existing behavior. Persuading people to forgo or initiate a behavior they do not currently engage in may require representing discouraged behaviours as less desirable through negatively-framed messages. Care needs to be taken to support people low in self-efficacy to avoid negative psychological consequences arising from loss-framed messages. These conclusions are consistent Lawton et al. (2009), who concluded that messages and focusing on a discouraged behaviour’s risks might be effective for preventing initiation of that behaviour (i.e. abstinence in our classification), but were unlikely to work for people who had already experienced positive affect from the discouraged behaviour.

Positive affect  Affective attitude has been shown to predict a wide range of both desirable and undesirable behaviours related to health (Lawton et al., 2009). Behaviours that have a more immediate impact on the senses or one’s physiological state, such as smoking, alcohol consumption and exercise, are more strongly influenced by affective attitude than behaviour with less immediate sensory impact, such as self-examination and vitamin ingestion (Lawton et al. 2009). There is a dearth of message framing studies that have examined the role of positive affect in facilitating behaviour change in social marketing contexts. The relatively small number of studies that have examined affect, typically in students, have tended to either focus exclusively on negative affect and/or have artificially induced affect states to assess their effects on messages, rather than examining the effects of message framing on affect (e.g. Agrawal & Duhacheck, 2010; Gerend & Maner, 2011; Keller et al., 2003). Research that included inducing a positive emotion in students (happy, sad or neutral) did not include any message framing (Salovey and Birnbaum, 1989). Even a rare study that included an anti-smoking ad supposed to evoke positive emotion by being ‘funny’ (Biener, 2000) might be construed as mocking if shown to smokers.
In the few studies of positive affect, gain-framed messages are associated with positive affect (e.g. Millar & Millar, 2000; Rothman et al., 1999; Shen & Dillard, 2007). Positive affect has also been reported to mediate findings that gain-framed worded messages improve information acceptance and attitudes in students (van’t Riet et al., 2010).

**Positively-framed social marketing campaigns**

In contrast to the laboratory-based research, real social marketing campaigns usually focus on the desired behaviour, rather than end-state benefits. Table 1 shows the types of positively-framed messages identified in the social marketing campaign literature by the type of desired behaviour.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Desired Behaviour</th>
<th>Knowledge to act</th>
<th>Facilitation</th>
<th>Challenge assumptions/misconceptions</th>
<th>Modelling</th>
<th>Motivational</th>
<th>Tips &amp; Ideas</th>
<th>Monitoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Initiation</td>
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<td>Substitution</td>
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<td>Maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cessation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* The ticks indicate the categories for which campaign examples were found

**Knowledge to act**

Messages that empower receivers to take positive steps to address a health condition may be considered a form of positive framing. Examples were found across a range of types of desired behaviour, including the ‘Truth’ campaign to discourage adolescents from taking up smoking (Hersey et al., 2005) and campaigns to initiate a variety of behaviours such as diagnosing asthma ((Briones et al., 2010), HPV immunization (Cates et al., 2011), boiling milk products to prevent brucellosis (Maxwell and Bill, 2008), prenatal care among low-income women (Alcaley et al., 1993), preventing HIV infection (Gibson et al., 2010) and Chlamydia testing (Wackett, 1998). Reduction (in consumption) and substitution (of consumption for alternative sources of happiness) behaviours have been addressed using knowledge to act news articles messages about sustainable consumption (Kolandai-Matchett, 2009).

**Facilitation**

Ways to facilitate desired behaviour can help people initiate behaviour such as screening, particularly where the health condition has the potential to cause anxiety. Examples include free screening and free hotline numbers for oral cancer (Jedele & Ismail, 2010) and HIV (Olshefsky et al., 2007). Facilitation can also be used to make it easier for people to substitute their behaviour for a desired behaviour, such as discounts on sports to encourage physical activities among kids in the VERB campaign (Brethauer-Mueller et al., 2008) and free condoms to facilitate protection from Chlamydia infection (Wackett, 1998).

**Challenge assumptions/misconceptions**

Challenging people’s assumptions or misconceptions about a desired behaviour may persuade them to change. Examples include addressing misconceptions about prenatal care and foetal risks (Alcaley et al., 1993), assumptions that physical activity means going to a gym or is ‘painful, boring and tedious’ (Peterson et al., 2005, p. 440) and debugging the notion that consumption is a route to happiness to promote sustainable consumption (Kolandai-Matchett, 2009).

**Motivational**

Motivational messages have been effective in persuading people to substitute their current behaviour for a desired behaviour. In the ‘Get up and do something’
physical activity campaign, feedback indicated that the ‘positive, upbeat and energetic’
advertisements motivated people to want to engage in the desired behaviour and were perceived
as ‘motivational’ (Peterson et al., 2005). Similarly, the VERB campaign years reframed physical
activity as ‘fun and exciting’ rather than ‘unpleasant or a chore’ (Bretthauer-Mueller et al., 2008).

**Tips and ideas**

Social marketing campaigns that have included tips and ideas for
facilitating desired behaviour include the ‘Food Friends’ campaign which was designed to
increase children’s food choice and dietary variety. Tips and ideas for overcoming potential
barriers were also addressed in the physical activity and nutrition campaigns ‘Step it Up,
Hawaii!’ and ‘Fruits and Veggies, Good Choice!’ (Maddock et al., 2008). Ideas for alternative
behaviours for deriving happiness were included in the information campaign promoting
sustainable consumption, mentioned above (Kolandai-Matchett, 2009).

**Modelling**

Modelling has been used to overcome potential barriers to desired
behaviour, for example in initiation of prenatal care (Alcaley et al., 1993). Examples of increases
in behaviour achieved through modelling include children’s willingness to try new foods in
‘Food Friends’ (Bellows et al., 2006), physical activity (Step it Up Hawaii!) and nutrition (Fruit
and Veggies, Good Choice!) (Buchthal et al., 2011). Formative research in these campaigns’
development revealed that receivers found the decision point ads empowering (Maddock et al.,
2008). Modelling communication and counselling techniques has helped GPs with chlamydia
screening (Verhoeven et al., 2005) and HIV prevention messages (Fraze et al., 2007).

**Monitoring**

Messages that focus on monitoring the desired behaviour have been
partially successful. For example, the ‘Go for 2&5®’ campaign messages encouraging people to
reflect on the number of fruit and vegetables servings they consumed raised awareness but only
increased consumption slightly (Carter et al., 2011).

**Improving social marketing theory and practice**

Our review of the message framing literature highlighted the potential value of messages that
focus on supporting desired behaviours rather than just listing the costs and/or benefits of
complying with a behavioural recommendation. The desired behaviours advocated in social
marketing campaigns need to be perceived as realistic by their target audience and should offer a
desirable alternative. In the case of forgoing or initiating a behaviour of which the target group
has no prior experience, this may require representing the discouraged behaviour as less desirable
using negatively-framed messages. However, care is needed to support people who have low self-
efficacy to prevent them from experiencing negative psychological consequences through
exposure to negatively-framed messages. Social marketing messages also need to address barriers
to behavior change, for example by providing readily accessible, free services to facilitate
initiation behaviours and opportunities to try out activities (Bretthauer-Mueller et al., 2008).

**Conclusions**

This paper proposes and uses a classification based on types of desired behaviour as an
alternative to the end states detection/prevention dichotomy. In contrast to most of the laboratory-
based message framing research, real social marketing campaigns concentrate on the desired
behaviour change. There is a clear need for future research to examine message framing directed
at supporting desired behaviours. Further research is also needed on the mediating role of
positive affect between message frames and behaviour. We have identified a variety of
positively-framed social marketing campaigns. Future research might identify additional types or
other categories of desired behaviour for which the types are successful.
References


