

RESEARCH PROBLEM



Previous literature shows diverging findings when it comes to the effect message framing has on persuasion (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). Some studies (e.g. Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Levin, 1987) show that positively framed messages are more persuasive than negatively framed messages. Yet, other studies indicate contradictory results (e.g. Meyerowitz & Chaiken, 1987). A possible explanation for this is that variations in people's **involvement with an issue** presented in a message can affect how they process and respond to it (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984; Kardes, 1988).

Most empirical studies investigating message framing focus on hypothetical problems and situations that are **impersonal** and **abstract** (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Block & Keller, 1995). In other words, these problems and situations are not part of the reality of message recipients, which arguably leads to low levels of issue involvement. Persuasion models found in marketing and consumer literature suggest that issue involvement influences the level of detail in which messages are processed (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1983). Moreover, it is expected that issue involvement affects the relative weights consumers place on messages, and thus their relative effectiveness (Kim, 2013; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). One could thus wonder if the findings from earlier studies are indeed **generalizable** to real-life situations, as involvement in these situations is expected to be of a high(er) level.

Based on these sources, there is a **knowledge gap** in message framing literature, illustrated by the contradicting results regarding the effect of positive and negative framing on persuasion. Issue involvement may be the variable that can explain these inconsistencies and that can ultimately fill this knowledge gap.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE



The goal of this research was to explore the moderating effect of issue involvement on the impact different frames have on persuading consumers to purchase less meat. The topic of eating meat was chosen because of its prominence in the media concerning its consequences on people, animals and the environment, which adds to the relevance of this study. The corresponding research question was:

"How does issue involvement influence the effectiveness of positive and negative message framing in persuading consumers to buy less meat?"

METHODOLOGY



This study used a **quasi-experimental approach** with a 2 between-subjects x 3 within-subjects design (2 frames and 3 issues). A total of 250 participants were exposed to three messages aiming to persuade them to buy less meat, each using a different argument relating to a different meat-eating issue (personal health, the environment and (farm) animal well-being). After each message, a set of questions followed to measure their understanding and familiarity of the message, agreement and involvement with the message, as well as the changes in their risk perception, opinion, attitude and behavior towards meat. Participants were randomly assigned either the positively ($n=125$) or the negatively framed ($n=125$) version of the messages. All messages were presented in a **Twitter format** (i.e. as a 'tweet'). However, the choice was made to delete the Twitter username and avatar from the tweet as these could potentially influence a participant's response.

All participants had an omnivore diet at the time of collection, or at least partially. This means so called 'flexitarians' were included in this research, since they still eat (and thus buy) meat, albeit sporadically. Vegetarians and vegans were excluded from this research as they do not consume nor buy meat.

Sample characteristics

Sixtythree percent of the participants was female, and thirtyseven percent was male, with a median and mode for age, education and nationality corresponding to 18 to 24 years old, a Bachelor's degree, and a Dutch nationality, respectively.

THE INFLUENCE OF MESSAGE FRAMING AND ISSUE INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNICATIONS ON PERSUASION: A MEAT-EATING APPLICATION

RESULTS



Using t-tests, significant differences between frames (in terms of changing opinions, attitudes and behavior) were found for only one issue, **the environment**, where the **positive frame** led to more agreement and change in opinion. These results were also supported by correlation and regression analyses. The results of this study also indicate that the effectiveness of message framing in terms of persuasion is **dependent on the issue presented** in the message. Furthermore, the results suggest a **curvilinear relationship** between issue involvement and persuasion, which is visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 plots the degree of change (in opinion, attitude or behavior regarding meat eating) against issue involvement. The three vertical dashed lines each represent one of the three issues as proposed in this study. The six horizontal lines represent opinion, attitude and behavioral change, which is the degree to which a person is persuaded by the message, for both the positive and negative frames. The opinion, attitude and behavior questions together represent persuasion.

Figure 1. A plot of the degree of change (in opinion, attitude or behavior regarding meat eating) against issue involvement.

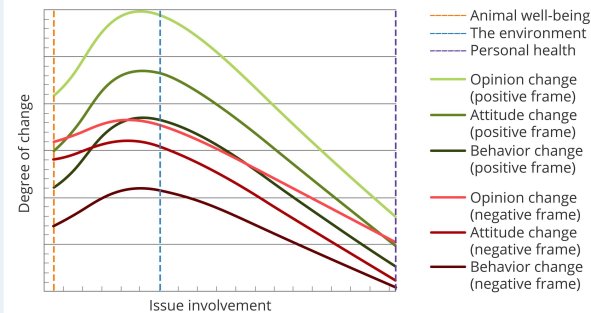


Figure 1 indicates that personal health is the issue with the highest level of involvement, as it is located on the outer right side of the figure. The second most important issue is the environment, which is then followed by (farm) animal well-being. In short, the results indicate that for this sample the message regarding **the environment** influenced a participant's opinion, attitude and meat-eating behavior the most. This is followed by the message regarding animal well-being and the message regarding personal health, where the latter has the least influence on persuasion.

Persuasion predictors

The results from independent samples t-tests indicate that the risk people associate with meat eating in general influences their level of issue involvement. Moreover, risk perception seems to be a predictor of persuasion for all issues. Lastly, the familiarity of and the agreement with all the messages were found to be positively correlated with their persuasiveness.

CONCLUSIONS



- 1 This research supports existing literature as message understanding, agreement, familiarity, involvement and risk perceptions were confirmed to be important **predictors of persuasion**. It was also found that the understanding and familiarity of, and the agreement and involvement with a message influence message persuasiveness through risk perceptions.
- 2 Differences between positive and negative frames in terms of persuasive power **depend on the issue presented** in a message. The message relating to the issue with the second highest level of involvement (the environment) framed positively was the most persuasive. Issues with a too high level of involvement may trigger self-defensive mechanisms, whereas a too low level of involvement might not trigger cognitive processing due to the low level of personal importance.
- 3 A **curvilinear relation** between issue involvement and persuasiveness was found. Professionals are recommended to use medium-involvement issues for maximum persuasion effects.

For some issues, media professionals should not focus too much on what frame they will present their communications in if they want to increase persuasiveness. Instead, they should focus on enhancing message understanding, agreement and familiarity, as in this study these variables predicted persuasion for all issues. In contrast, for other issues such as the environment, framing should be considered by media professionals as this issue was found to positively affect persuasion. As risk perception seems to be a predictor of persuasion for all issues, media professionals could use risk theory in their practice to maximize persuasion. There are also some variables that are only predictive of persuasion for certain issues, which implies that media professionals should investigate what those variables are for their specific issues.

Future research

- Finding the **issue-dependent predictors** of persuasiveness for other issues could be a task for future research. In doing so, it can be assessed whether the predictors that were found in this research hold for other issues, and other predictors that were not included in this research can be found as well.
- As previous studies show divergent findings and the range of issue involvement was limited in this study, the curvilinear relation between issue involvement and persuasion needs further exploration. Future research, investigating more issues with **more variation** in issue involvement could determine the shape of the relationship more exactly.
- This study could also be replicated as a **qualitative study**, in order to understand in more detail why people were (or were not) persuaded by a message.

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