
Towards a Drug Free America: Guilt Processing and Drug Prevention

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ABSTRACT

Developing a greater understanding of how drug prevention public service announcements can help individuals make more informed socially desirable choices is the focus of this work. Specifically, the roles of guilt proneness and anticipated guilt are explored through two different studies. We demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of guilt proneness tend to exhibit greater intended message compliance across a variety of drug prevention message appeals. Additionally, we are able to extend our understanding of anticipated guilt and show that as anticipated guilt is increased, irrespective of guilt-proneness, expected message compliance is also increased. Lastly, we show that compliance is related to risk in that as the perceived risk associated with drug use increases, so does guilt and compliance.

ARTICLE

Introduction

In 2002, the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research announced the first drop in illicit drug use by teens since 1994; while in 2007, it was reported that the number of eighth graders using illicit drugs had been cut in half since 1996 (Serwatch, 2008). These statistics on drug use reduction are mirrored by the Department of Health and Human Services, who note that in 2007 there were 600,000 fewer teens using marijuana and there were significant declines in other drugs including steroids (NIDA, 2008). Although many factors must interact to cause this level of change, one of the key drivers is likely to be the proliferation of drug prevention public service announcements (PSA).

Developing a greater understanding of how public service announcements can help individuals make more informed socially desirable choices is the focus of this work. Specifically, through two studies, we examine the roles of guilt proneness and anticipated guilt in the effectiveness of different types of drug prevention PSAs. Our results suggest that individuals with higher levels of guilt proneness tend to exhibit greater intended message compliance across a variety of message appeals. Additionally, we are able to extend our understanding of anticipated guilt and show that as anticipated guilt is increased, irrespective of guilt proneness, expected message compliance is also increased. Lastly, as the perceived risk associated with drug use increases, so does guilt and compliance.

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Background

According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), a public service announcement is defined as:

Any announcement (including network) for which no charge is made and which promotes programs, activities, or services of federal, state, or local governments or the programs, activities or services of non-profit organizations and other announcements regarded as serving community interests, excluding time signals, routine weather announcements and promotional announcements (Dessart, 2008).

These announcements serve to alter behavior by disseminating valuable information that is both attractive and relevant to targeted audiences, motivating them to take the action prescribed in the given public service announcement. Unlike traditional advertising which often persuades consumers to take actions that will provide immediate gratification or self enhancement (e.g., buy a new car and drive faster, be safer or be admired by your peers), a PSA may require a consumer to stop engaging in some self-gratifying experience (e.g. drinking alcohol to excess or engaging in unprotected sex) or encourage them to engage in a new effortful behavior that does not provide immediate gratification (e.g., recycling trash). The onus of responsibility is thus shifted to the consumer, as they are often required to demonstrate self-control and personal responsibility. In the case of drug abuse, PSAs have provided information to empower consumers to not use drugs as well as information to help others stop using drugs, and even provide information to friends and families on how they might help others with a drug abuse problem. In this work, we look at messages aimed at potential drug users, not messages designed to assist families of drug users or even habitual drug users.

Perhaps some of the most persuasive and effective drug prevention messages come from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America was established to create a national drug-education campaign to boost awareness of the dangers of drug abuse and disseminate information on the consequences of drug abuse and addiction (The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 2008a). Since its inception, The Partnership has evolved from a simple advertising campaign into a drug prevention and treatment resource. The Partnership's mission is to reduce illicit drug use in America by reaching out to those whose lives have been changed by drug abuse and encouraging families to live healthy, drug-free lives. Both extant anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that The Partnership's efforts have been effective in meeting their mission (The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 2008b). Our first study uses all messages by The Partnership, while the second study tests both Partnership PSAs and messages that were self-created.

Study 1 – Exploring Message Style, Guilt Proneness, and Intended Message Compliance

There are a variety of PSA message styles that have gained widespread public use across a myriad of topics (e.g., comedic presentation, positive and negative emotional appeals, and problem solution). For this study we investigate three styles that are commonly used in drug prevention campaigns: positive emotional appeal, negative emotional appeal (e.g., fear), and rational appeal. A review of the previous literature shows no clear pattern as to which message style is most effective in generating intended message compliance.

Method

As noted, this study is designed to examine the response differences between high and low guilt prone individuals to three different drug prevention messages developed by the Partnership for a Drug Free America. The messages were chosen from the online sampling of Partnership messages available at the Partnership website (www.Drugfree.org) and represent the three different executional styles discussed: positive emotional appeal, negative emotional appeal and a rational appeal.

Subjects

A convenience sample of 104 high school and college aged males and females from central New Jersey participated in the study. Fifty-three were 15-18 years of age and were recruited via classes at a local high school. Thirty-eight were 19-21 years of age and 13 were 22-24 years of age, with all of these subjects recruited in the student center at a Northeastern college. This sample parallels the target audience of many drug abuse PSAs (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, and Schulenberg, 2007; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1999). Among the subjects, 43 were male and 61 were female. All participants participated in the study without compensation and were debriefed after the study.

Message style

Three different announcements from the Partnership for a Drug Free America were used in the final testing, with one message representing a positive emotional appeal, one a negative emotional appeal and the other a rational appeal. The positive emotional appeal, *A Long Walk Home*, portrays a young boy taking the long way home from school to avoid being pressured to do drugs. It offers a hopeful alternative to engaging in substance abuse. The negative emotional appeal, *Drowning*, shows a young girl's bedroom filling with water to represent what happens when you use inhalants. She ends up drowning in her own home and floats across the screen, lifeless. Finally, the rational appeal, *Frying Pan*, is the famous PSA featuring actress Rachel Leigh Cook. In this PSA, Rachel states the negative effects of illicit drug use through a visual demonstration.

Participants were told they were participating in a study on message design and were asked to attend to a series of seven PSA messages, three of which were the test stimuli. Participants were first asked to complete the guilt proneness scale; they were then shown a series of seven video PSAs. After the PSAs were shown, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions about the announcements of interest related to the dependent variables. Subjects were cued to the announcement of interest with a descriptive title name (e.g., *Frying Pan*). Lastly, subjects were debriefed.

The four non-test PSAs spanned a variety of topics, including domestic violence, eating disorders, drunk driving and HIV/AIDS. These PSAs also utilized a variety of message appeals, including fear, rational, positive emotional, and humor. The order of presentation to the participants was systematically varied to control for ordering or carry-over effects.

Results

Across all message styles tested, our high guilt prone respondents were more likely to express intended compliance with a PSA as well as believe that others are more willing to comply with PSA messages than the low guilt prone respondents. This is likely to stem from the cognitive activities of high guilt prone individuals who tend to overemphasize consequences and make messages more personal than low guilt prone individuals. As a result, it can be argued that high guilt prone individuals

are more likely to make socially desirable choices in order to not disrupt the status quo and to alleviate their feelings of guilt. In a broader perspective, high guilt prone individuals, may be more likely to follow social norms that have a moral component, thus these particular individuals may find all public service messages to be more effective than their low guilt prone counterparts.

Additionally, high guilt prone respondents were more likely to react positively to both the positive emotional appeal and the factually based message than the negative emotional appeal. In this study we tested only one advertisement of each style, thus our results may be biased by things in the ads other than the message style, such as models, specific message components or other creative tactics. Although not specifically tested in this study, it is reasonable to assume that for high guilt prone individuals, all of the drug prevention messages raised their level of anticipated guilt; thus, in an effort to reduce this guilt they were more likely to express a desire for compliance. Further research is needed to more fully understand the role of anticipated guilt and perceived risk when processing these messages.

Our findings suggest that high guilt prone respondents thought the negative emotional messages were less clear than either the positive or rational messages. However, additional research is warranted to further investigate the role of negative emotional appeals across a larger sampling of drug prevention PSAs. Interestingly, the rational appeal was perceived as having the greatest clarity across all participants regardless of guilt proneness, yet does not necessarily lead to the highest levels of intended compliance. In this case, clarity may be a function of exposure to the ad prior to our study. Several respondents noted that they had seen this advertisement previously. Lastly, our results in this study may be limited in that the PSAs are not all addressing the same type of drug abuse. In study two we address some of these limitations by using a sample of ads to (1) represent different executional styles, (2) attempt to standardize the message, and (3) note specifically whether the PSA is addressing marijuana or prescription drug abuse.

Study 2 – Anticipated Guilt and Compliance

In this study our objectives are threefold: (1) to replicate our findings regarding guilt prone individuals and their response to drug prevention PSAs; (2) to explore the roles of anticipated guilt and risk; and (3) to explore what differences might exist across marijuana and prescription drug use.

Although the results related to guilt proneness are relatively robust, we believe they need to be replicated with a different subset of advertisements and a second sample. Further, as noted, our findings may at least partially be the result of anticipated guilt induced by the PSA, thus in this study we are interested in measuring the level of anticipated guilt after exposure to the PSA. Additionally, our results could be linked to risk perceptions related to the credibility of the expressed consequences in the PSA. If a drug prevention PSA shows one of the risks of using marijuana is death and an individual does not believe that this is a credible consequence, then their perceived risk associated with the expressed consequence is limited. However, if an individual perceives this as a credible consequence, then their perceived risk is likely to increase. Further, we believe that guilt and risk are associated in that as perceived risk increases, so does the likelihood of anticipated guilt. Thus, we also measure credibility of the advertisement and perceived risk of using marijuana and prescription drugs.

Method

Subjects

A convenience sample of 120 high school and college aged males and females from central New Jersey participated in the study. Participants were recruited from two different high school classes and three different college classes. The average age of the sample was 18 and 52% were male. Similar to the first study, this sample parallels the target audience of many drug abuse PSAs. All participants took part in the study without compensation and were debriefed after the study.

Participants were told they were participating in a study on drug prevention message design. Participants were first asked to complete the guilt proneness scale and asked about their perceptions of how risky marijuana use and prescription drug abuse is. They were then shown a series of three video clips of the PSAs of interest. The order of presentation to the participants was systematically varied to control for ordering or carry-over effects. After the PSAs were shown to the participants, they were asked to respond to a series of questions about the ads. The questions included: clarity of message, emotional intensity, believability of information, production quality, willingness to act as advocated for by the ad (compliance), personal relevance of the issue, and ability to alter perceptions of issue for others (perceived effectiveness). These factors align with previous work on PSA effectiveness as well as study one. Lastly, participants were debriefed.

Results

Our results provide a replication of our findings in Study 1 and suggest that an individual's guilt proneness impacts their level of anticipated guilt which then influences message compliance. They show that an emotional arousal (such as guilt) can create increased perceptions of message effectiveness. However, findings from our two studies are inconclusive as to whether negative emotional appeals are best at generating compliance. We are able to show that they are best in terms of perceived effectiveness and engendering anticipated guilt; however, the results on compliance are not as straight forward. For marijuana, the rational appeals are better at generating compliance. This is likely due to the varying levels of perceived risk and the credibility of the expressed consequences for marijuana and prescription drugs. Respondents clearly felt that marijuana was a low risk drug with low risk consequences.

These two studies demonstrate that greater levels of anticipated guilt are more likely to manifest in high guilt prone individuals, leading them to perceive the PSAs to be more effective and express a greater intended compliance. Though actual compliance was not tested, the results are consistent with previous work which suggests that compliance with a given request typically reduces guilt (Boster et al., 1999). This finding is further supported by O'Keefe (2002), who finds that anticipated compliance is enough to motivate individuals to actually comply with the behavioral request.

Lastly, the relationship between perceived risk of drug use, anticipated guilt and compliance does not show a clear pattern across the different message styles. We are able to demonstrate that low guilt respondents perceive less risk with either marijuana or prescription drugs than high guilt respondents, suggesting that high guilt individuals are more likely to act in the manner advocated by the PSA in an effort to reduce risk and not violate social norms. This is further supported in that compliance for high guilt respondents is greater than low guilt respondents. The one area that violates the patterns in terms of risk and anticipated guilt is the rational ad for prescription drugs. Interestingly, in this case we find a relatively strong perception of risk, yet low anticipated guilt and low compliance. Additional research is needed to better understand what other factors might be driving this relationship. It might

be that most respondents had lower knowledge of prescription drug abuse than marijuana use. Most young people are exposed to various drug prevention curricula via school programs, with the focus typically being illegal drugs. It has not been until very recently that prescription drug abuse has been added to the drug prevention school curricula (drugfree.org), thus our participants might simply have greater knowledge and exposure to marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and other illegal drugs, with marijuana being perceived as the lightest and least risky among the list of illegal drugs.

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