

**Protection Motivation theory and Cognitive styles: Exploring the interactions between cognitive styles and individual motivations to attitude change when exposed to a positive/negative message source.**

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## **Introduction**

This study draws a distinction between a negative and positive source with a view to understanding the influence of the message source characteristics on individual attitude change process. Historically research has focussed on the recruitment of a positive source such as the celebrity to introduce change amongst consumers.

The present study however offers an alternative premise to this. Increasingly, shock is being used in mainstream marketing and more specifically in major governmental campaigns to display negative consequences of issues such as smoking and drink-driving to bring about positive changes in consumer attitudes. Advertisements are designed to shock consumers by creating fear in them on the assumption that this would persuade individuals to give up the undesirable behaviour. But as with the positive source, individuals in this context may not want to be associated with the message source. It is therefore possible that they recruit different strategies to arrive at the desired outcome. An examination of advertisements directed towards consumers who smoke or drink excessively highlights a strong focus towards either the content of the communication message i.e. fear/shock or environmental factors such as ban on smoking in public places. Not much thought has been given to individual differences in how messages are perceived, interpreted and subsequently responded to. It is therefore vital to consider the contributory roles of cognitive styles involved in the attitude change process by observing how stylistic differences in problem solving and decision making amongst individuals interact with the message source in inducing the change in an attitude. Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) offers a conceptual framework to understand the significance of cognitive styles and is particularly relevant in this context (1975, 1983). By applying this theory the present study aims to explain how consumers process information when confronted with fear or shock generated by a negative source in particular. It is being proposed that in some instances a negative source will be more effective than the positive source in changing individual attitudes.

## **Methodology**

The current conceptual framework incorporates cognitive style variations to investigate their influence on how individuals evaluate threats and are able to cope with them. It utilises Kirton's Adaption/Innovation scale (KAI) to identify stylistic preferences in problem solving and decision making (1976). Following on from a previous study where consumers hypothetically indicated how they would respond to appeals from a positive and negative source, this study is being conducted in the Primary Health Care and involves patients to obtain a realistic understanding of the process involved in changing attitudes (1999). Patients are being likened to consumers in this context because when considering the option of quitting smoking, they are placed in a market-fashion decision making scenario faced with various behavioural alternatives and consequences.

Patients from General Practices belonging to the following groups will be invited to participate in the study, initially to be a part of a focus group and then to answer two questionnaires relating to their behaviour and the KAI. General Practices are now required to maintain a register of current smokers, ex smokers and non smokers as a part of their Quality

and outcomes Framework. All current smokers receive Smoking advice and if motivated are referred for smoking cessation advice clinics. It is thus possible to obtain information about 1) all Smokers who have received smoking advice, 2) Smokers who have accepted the advice and refer to smoking cessation clinics and 3) Smokers who have refused to accept advice and attend the smoking cessation clinic, 4) smokers who have successfully ceased to smoke in the past but have relapsed and 5) Smokers who have successfully ceased to smoke for at least a year and have maintained their non smoking status. Due to the nature of the study, ethical permission will have to be sought from the Local Ethical Committee.

### **Practical implications**

The knowledge of individualistic variations may offer useful insight into how messages are translated into a response. Policy makers need to incorporate this into their communication whether it is aimed at persuading consumers to acquire products or to quit harmful behaviours.



