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Examining the Protective Effects of Self-Positivity on Information Avoidance

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of Self-Positivity on Information

Avoidance

Honors Thesis

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Department: Psychology

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Abstract

Although information could provide insight, comfort, or opportunity, people are motivated to avoid information that challenges preexisting belief or cause unpleasant emotion. Previous research shows that affirming one's self-worth can reduce information avoidance. The present study measures whether self-enhancement, or exaggerating qualities to maintain a positive sense of self, can also reduce information avoidance. Self-enhancement is associated with positive mental health and reducing physiological stress symptoms if the exaggeration is within the same domain as threatening information. Participants in the self-enhancement category were asked to give examples of how they are better at maintaining social relationships than the average college student. They were then asked if they would like to see results of a personality test that could potentially show them they are not socially successful. The difference in information avoidance did not vary between those in the self-enhancement condition, those in the self-affirmation condition, and those control condition. Self-enhancement as a method of information avoidance could be more effective if the domain was more threatening like health information or career outlook.

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Introduction

The phrase "ignorance is bliss" is an idiom frequently used to explain why people avoid information. While at times it might seem like bypassing available information would help avoid pain or conflict, one is also potentially bypassing insight, comfort, or an opportunity to make a change that would be beneficial in the future. Regardless, people choose to avoid information when they feel the information would demand a change in beliefs or cause unpleasant emotions (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller & Shepperd, 2010).

When establishing attitudes or beliefs, people gravitate towards consistency. However, when one is presented with information that conflicts with their current attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, he/she experiences cognitive dissonance, or psychological discomfort related to holding inconsistent thoughts simultaneously (Festinger, 1962). In order to reduce this discomfort, people are motivated to avoid information that conflicts with preexisting attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller & Shepperd, 2010). People would much rather hear information that validates them rather than information that encourages them to change their opinions (Hart et al., 2009). For example, a study by J. Stacy Adams (1961) asked 100 mothers whether they believed genetics or environment was more important in the development of a child. They then listened to what they believed to be a speech from an expert in the field explaining the opinion contrary to the one the mother just reported. After listening to the speech that blatantly opposed her reported opinion, the mothers were more likely to show interest in attending a talk from a speaker who held the same opinion she did. This information avoidance is even more prevalent if a person believes the conflicting information would be challenging to refute. They would be less likely to dismiss an article countering their opinions if that article came from a tabloid as opposed to a highly-

regarded news source (Lowin, 1969). In general, previous research shows that people are

more interested in protecting themselves from cognitive dissonance than learning

information that could give them a more accurate impression of reality.

In addition to avoiding cognitive dissonance, people avoid information that would

cause unwanted and unpleasant emotions like sadness, fear, guilt, embarrassment, or

shame. Many studies have indicated that a reason for avoiding the results of medical test,

or avoid medical testing altogether, is the psychological impact that comes with a positive

test result (Zapka, Stoddard, Zorn, McCusker & Mayer, 1991; Cutler & Hodgson, 2003;

Thompson et al.,2002). In addition to avoiding health-related information, information

avoidance to deter negative emotions presents itself in commonplace activities as well. A

study of Belgian and Dutch soccer fans were less likely to visit the website of their

favorite soccer team after a loss. They did not like to dwell in their disappointment, so

they avoided reviews and news stories about the unsuccessful game (Boen, Vanbeselaere,

& Feys, 2002).

Previous research has established two major ways to reduce information

avoidance, metacognition and self-affirmation. Metacognition, or the evaluation of one's

own thoughts, causes the brain to switch from quick, intuitive thinking to deliberate,

analytical thinking (Simamura, 2000; Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley, & Eyre, 2007).

Thinking analytically about why a person is choosing to act a certain way helps him/her

move past initial emotions and make an informed decision (Howell & Shepperd, 2012).

In addition to metacognition, previous studies show that self-affirmation can help reduce

information avoidance. Having a person list real-life examples of how he/she is good at a

certain skill or an overall good person increases a person's self-worth. This positive

feeling is used as a distraction and helps a person feel more comfortable hearing

potentially threating or conflicting information (Howell & Shepperd, 2012).

The present research examines whether self-enhancement, or the motivation to

have and maintain a positive sense of self, has an effect on reducing information

avoidance (Taylor & Brown, 1988). When someone self-enhances, they think of

exaggerated examples of how they are better at a specific skill than others or an overall

better person than others. Previous research shows that self-enhancement is helpful in

making people feel good. It is associated with positive mental health, better quality of

interpersonal relationships, and persistence (Taylor & Brown, 1988). It is also associated

with alleviating psychological responses of stressful situations. Previous research shows

that self-enhancing before a threatening situation can reduce heartrates during the

threating situation. However, this is only true if the domain of the treating situation is the

same as the domain of the self-enhancement (Gramzow, Willard, & Mendez, 2008). If

self-enhancement can make people feel positively and less stressed, can it make people

feel comfortable hearing potentially threating information?

In the present study, participants decide whether or not they want to receive

results of a personality test that could reveal their personality makes them vulnerable to

being socially unsuccessful as they age. This domain was chosen because people value

belongingness so greatly. Social attachment, or belongingness, is considered to be a

fundamental human motivation because of the effects is has on a person's emotions and

cognitive processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Experiencing rejection or a weakening

of interpersonal ties can lead to negative feelings such as sadness, loneliness, hurt

feelings, jealousy, embarrassment, and shame (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001).

Overall, rejection make a person less confident on their own self-worth. In other words,

rejection lowers self-esteem (Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998). Since social

rejection would cause a person such unpleasant emotion, it is appropriate to use it as the

domain of threating information.

      Two hypotheses were generated to potentially explain how self-enhancement may

influence information avoidance: Self-enhancement could either act as a buffer or an

exacerbater. If self-enhancement acts as a buffer, then increasing feelings of self-worth

would protect the self from the threat. People would feel comfortable hearing potentially

threating information, as it would have a less harmful impact on feelings of self-worth. If

self-enhancement acts as an exacerbater, then increasing feelings of self-worth would

cause greater information avoidance. People would not want the potentially threating

information to diminish their positive feelings, so they would be more likely to avoid.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and twenty-four undergraduates from the University of Dayton participated in this study. The participants were made up of 54 males and 70 females ranging from 18-22 years old. The average age was 19.03 years old. Participants received course credit for an introduction to psychology course.

Procedure

Participants arrived at the study individually. They were under the impression that the study was examining college students' personalities and their experiences in college. After reviewing and signing an informed consent sheet, the participant was instructed to select one of five folders. In order to increase validity and mask the actual purpose of the study, participants were falsely told that each folder contained a different question about some aspect of college life. In reality, each folder contained the same question, which varied depending on their randomly assigned condition: self-affirmation, self-enhancement, or control. Participants in the self-affirmation condition were asked to identify their most important trait and asked to give examples of how this trait is characteristic of him/her (O'Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, & Liu, 2012). Participants in the self-enhancement condition were asked to describe how he/she is better at maintaining social relationships than other college students. Participants in the control condition were asked to describe his/her typical Tuesday schedule.

The participant was then told he/she was going to complete a series of personality assessments, starting with the Keirsey Temperament Sorter II (Keirsey, Milner, & Wood, 2004). The Keirsey Temperament Sorter II, a commonly used personality assessment,

was taken on traditional UD scantrons to increase the likelihood that participants would

believe their responses could be easily scored. After the Kerisey Temperament Sorter

was completed, the participant was told he/she has the opportunity to have the responses

scored while he/she finishes the study and the results with be handed back at the end of

the study. To provide each participant with a potential threat, the experimenter then

explained that many students have been receiving scores much lower than anticipated in

the social relationships domain, indicating that they will not be very successful with long-

term relationships. The participant then indicated whether he/she would like to see the

results on a sheet of paper. Lastly, the participant answers suspicion and demographic

questions before being debriefed.

Results

Data was collected from 124 participants; however, four participants admitted to

knowing information about the study prior to their participation and their data were

excluded from the analyses. The effective sample size was 120. A logistic regression was

conducted to test whether participants avoided threatening information about the

personality differentially across conditions. Decision to hear results of the personality test

(Yes/No) was regressed onto condition (control, self-affirmation, self-enhancement).

Selecting "no" to the personality test results would indicate a desire to avoid potentially

threatening feedback information. For those in the self-affirmation condition (n = 43),

81.4% of participants chose to see their personality assessment results. For those in the

self-enhancement condition (n = 39), 87.2% of participants chose to see their personality

assessment results. For those in the control condition (n = 38), 89.5% of participants

chose to see their personality assessment results. Accordingly, there was no effect

between conditions, $X^2(2, N = 120) = 0.6085$, $p = .7377$. This suggests that people were

equally likely to see their results regardless of what condition they were assigned to.

Discussion

The present study proposed and tested two hypotheses: self-enhancement as a

buffer or an exacerbater to information avoidance. The findings from the present study

were inconsistent with either hypothesis, finding that overall people were unlikely to

avoid information and information was avoided equally across conditions. In other

words, the results suggest that the information was not threatening to participants as

participants felt comfortable seeing their results regardless of their assigned condition. In

addition to failing to support either hypothesis, this study did not replicate the previously

found notion that self-assessment can deter information avoidance by acting as a

distractor from the threating information (Howell & Shepperd, 2012)

Several possibilities may account for the present findings. One possible reason for

the present findings is that the participants did not view the feedback as potentially

threatening. This could be because of the prevalence of personality assessments on the

Internet. Websites like Facebook.com and Buzzfeed.com are filled with free and fun

personality assessments that people take to fill time or procrastinate from work or school.

Since people are taking these personality assessments so frequently and lightheartedly,

there is a high chance that they have previously received results that were either

unpleasant and they have acclimated to such results. Alternatively, they may have

received positive information prior and anticipated that the results from the present study

would be consistent with their previous, positive results.

A second possible explanation for the findings from the present study, given that

people tend to view themselves positively on socially desirable traits (Edwards, 1953)

and they tend to be unrealistically optimistic about positive events and feedback

happening to themselves (Weinstein, 1980) is that people may have assumed that their

results would be positive. Although participants were presented with information

suggesting that they would be very likely to receive positive results, tendencies toward

unrealistic optimism would prevent them from believe that they would be among the

people who receive negative information.

Finally, several participants recalled during the study that they had previously

taken the Myers-Briggs Personality Assessment in an introductory psychology course

(Briggs & Myers, 1977). If participants had recently taken a test similar to the test used in

the study, they may have been given information that their results were positive, and

therefore had nothing to fear from the results of the study's personality test. Future

studies should provide participants with more objective threating information like

academic performance in a course or health status.

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