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Communicating emerging food risks: the impact of 1- or 2-sidedness, vividly presented information and spatial distance on message credibility

Emerging food safety risks on fresh produce, due to climate change and globalization, represent a new challenge within risk communication. The goal of this study is to investigate how a risk message should be designed to increase message credibility. Defined as 'the perception of the message being credible, clear, understandable and likely', message credibility is an essential variable in risk communication as it is an important prerequisite to message acceptance (Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989; Renn et al., 1991). According to the Extended Parallel Processing Model (Witte 1992), a risk message should evoke a perceived threat and perceived efficacy in order to achieve message acceptance, leading to increased awareness about the risks. Research showed that vividly presented information can increase the perceived threat (e.g., Cauberghe et al., 2009). Furthermore, research indicated that the spatial distance of where the risk could occur, can influence people's reactions to the message (Liberman & Trope, 2008). Moreover, when communicating risks related to food, both the benefits and the risks of eating fresh produce can be presented (2-sided), or only the risks (1-sided). Both strategies can impact message acceptance (Eisend, 2006).

Using a 2 (Picture of grapes and bacteria vs. Picture of grapes) X 2 (Occurrence in Flanders vs. Occurrence worldwide) X 2 (1-sided vs. 2-sided) between subjects factorial design, this study investigated the impact of these manipulations on message credibility. A leaflet was designed for every condition and 390 respondents ($M_{age}=38.54$ years ($SD=14.47$), 46,1% male) were randomly shown one of the eight leaflets, followed by a paper-and-pencil survey. Every leaflet contained the same information about recommended measures that consumers may take and measures that the government is taking.

A significant third-order interaction effect was found using the manipulations as independent variables on message credibility ($F(1,372)=9.501, p=.002$). Simple effects showed that when the risk could occur in Flanders and the risk is very vividly presented, the message credibility is significantly higher when the information is presented 1-sided ($M=6.09, SD=.76$) instead of 2-sided ($M=5.45, SD=1.50$). However, when the risk could occur worldwide and the risk is very vividly presented, then the message credibility is significantly higher when 2-sided information is given ($M=5.92, SD=.76$), than when 1-sided information is presented ($M=5.50, SD=1.17$). These results have important managerial implications for international risk communication, which will be discussed together with more results.