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The Influence of Message Framing and Issue Involvement on Promoting Abandoned Animals Adoption Behaviors

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Abstract

An experiment of 2 (message framing: positive vs. negative) X 2 (issue involvement: high vs. low) factorial design was developed to examine the influence of message framing and issue involvement on the behavioral intentions of adopting abandoned animals. After exposed to either positively framed campaign poster or negatively framed one, 165 participants completed self-administered questionnaires. The results showed that the main effect of issue involvement was significant. However, both positive framing and negative framing have no significantly different effect on the behavioral intentions. As expected, the interaction of message framing and issue involvement were significant. When participants were highly involved with the issue, negative framing was more persuasive than were positive framing.

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1. Research background and purposes

This study examined the influence of message framing and issue involvement on the behavioral intention of participants to adopt abandoned animals. In Korea 100 thousand animals are abandoned annually by their owners and more than 55% of these animals are euthanized by intravenous injections (News1, 2012). Furthermore, it has become a trend in Korea to sell or buy animals, strengthening the idea that animals can be treated as mere commodities and exacerbating the already terrible status quo for animals. The only hope to save the lives of these abandoned animals is promoting adoptions.

On the basis of the literature reviews about prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), psychological effects of message framing, and moderating effects of issue involvement (Rothman, Salovey, Antone, Keough, & Martin, 1993), we are interested in searching for the answers of the following research questions:

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- How should animal rights campaign organizers frame and deliver campaign messages to targeted audiences to promote behavioral intentions of adopting abandoned animals?
- Should we emphasize potential gains resulting from adopting abandoned animals (positive framing) or the negative consequences of not adopting abandoned animals (negative framing)?

2. Research questions - Hypotheses

In our study, we could expect two possible conflicting results. One is that, because adopting abandoned animals is a risk-avoidance behavior, positively framed messages would be more effective [Hypothesis 1]. The other is that, because adopting abandoned animals is mainly mediated by sympathy or pity, negatively framed message would be more effective [Hypothesis 2].

Rothman et al. (1993) have found that framing effects occur only when persons are involved and interested in the issue presented in the message. It is also hypothesized that when participants are highly involved with the issue, negative framing would increase intention to adopt abandoned animals more than would positive framing [Hypothesis 3]. And when participants are under low involvement, positive framing is more persuasive than negative framing [Hypothesis 4].

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedures

The participants were 165 students (80 males and 85 females) recruited from Korean high schools and from undergraduates at large universities. They are recruited on a voluntary basis with no monetary compensation for participating.

An experiment of 2 (message framing: positive vs. negative) X 2 (issue involvement: high vs. low) factorial design with 4 cells, each of which have about 40 participants was developed. Data was collected from self-administered questionnaire survey. The participants were exposed to a campaign poster(see Appendix) emphasizing either the positive result of adopting abandoned animals (“Only your adoption can save the precious lives of abandoned animals from the threat of euthanasia.”) or the negative outcome of not adopting abandoned animals (“Many abandoned animals are being euthanized. Without your adoption, the vicious cycle of euthanasia will continue forever.”). And then they completed questionnaires regarding their demographics (e.g., gender, age, etc), prior experiences of raising animals, attitudes toward the campaign, issue involvement and behavioral intentions of adopting abandoned animal.

In our study, the participant’s issue involvement concerning adopting abandoned animals was measured using three 7-points queried how personally relevant the poster(campaign) was, how interesting he/she was in adopting abandoned animals, and the extent to which the participant was involving animal right campaign. Finally, behavioral intention was assessed on one 2-point scales either 1 (adopting abandoned animals) or 0 (not adopting abandoned animal).

3.2. Results

The three items measuring issue involvement were loaded on single factor and formed reliable scale (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.830). These three items were averaged for analyses and the participants are divided into either high or low issue involvement group based on a median (3.333) split.

We conducted logistic regression analyses to investigate whether the interaction of 2 X 2 (positive framing vs. negative framing X high involvement vs. low involvement) measures could predict the participant’s behavioral

intention of adopting abandoned animal. The results showed that the main effect of message framing was not existent (Wald = 1.221, $p = 0.269 > 0.05$), and hence did not support the message framing Hypotheses 1 & 2. But, the main effect of issue involvement was significant (Wald = 30.196, $p < 0.001$). As expected, a significant message framing X issue involvement interaction was found (Wald = 4.569, $p = 0.033 < 0.05$).

When participants were under high involvement, negative framing (81.59%) was more persuasive than positive framing (61.36%), $p=0.042$. And hence Hypothesis 3 was supported. However, when issue involvement was low, positive framing (23.08%) was marginally greater than negative framing (13.64%), but this difference was not significant, $p=0.276$. Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

4. Findings

The results showed that the main effect of issue involvement was significant. However, the main effect of message framing on the behavioral intention was not existent (Both Hypothesis 1 and 2 were not supported). That is, both positive framing and negative framing have no significantly different effect on the behavioral intention of adopting abandoned animals. A significant number of studies have supported the message framing effect in private affairs where person's risk avoidance is straightforward. For instance, behaviors that increase driving safety are behaviors that reduce risk (e.g., wearing a seat belt or following other vehicles at a proper distance, see Millar & Millar, 2000). Also, there were many studies that have failed to support the framing hypothesis (Wilson, Wallston, & King, 1990).

As expected, the interaction of message framing and issue involvement were significant. When participants were highly involved with the issue, negative framing was more persuasive than were positive framing (Hypothesis 3 were supported). This result was partially consistent with Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy's study (1990). It was determined that negatively framed message is better suited for participants with high issue involvement. However, this effect disappeared as the participants were not as highly involved (Hypothesis 4 was not supported). Although it was not statistically significant, participants under low involvement were more influenced by positive framing.

5. Conclusions

Our findings could afford insights into several important implications. First, they provide animal rights campaign organizers with the framework for a general anticipation of when either positively or negatively framed messages are likely to be more persuasive. Framing hypothesis was not supported in our study, but negative framing would be more effective in general.

Second, they provide the guidelines for designing campaign booklets based on targeted audiences. Our data are consistent with the effects of issue involvement. When issue involvement was high, individuals presumably assigned greater weight on the negatively framed message and were more persuaded by it (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). Campaign organizers might be advised to design and employ negatively framed messages when an audience's involvement with the issue is likely to be high.

Positive framing would be more persuasive with low issue involvement. Our study was consistent with this hypothesis, but it was not significant. One of the possible reasons is that low-issued individuals are less likely process the message in detail (Millar & Millar, 2000) and hence less influenced by the message framing.

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Appendix

Positive Message Framing Poster	Negative Message Framing Poster
Nationwide, many abandoned animals are awaiting warm and loving new homes.	Nationwide, many abandoned animals are being euthanized.
According to statistical reports related to animal protection based on data from 2010, 100 thousand animals are being abandoned annually.	According to statistical reports related to animal protection based on data from 2010, 100 thousand animals are being abandoned annually.
Based on animal protection laws, animals that do not find owners in 10 days after being moved to shelters can be euthanized by veterinarians.	Based on animal protection laws, animals that do not find owners in 10 days after being moved to shelters can be euthanized by veterinarians.
Of the numerous animals in shelters, approximately 10% find their original owners, and around 35% are adopted and find new homes.	In the shelters, 32,000 dogs and 23,000 cats are being euthanized annually. Sometimes, these animals are intentionally left to die in order to cut costs on chemicals needed to euthanize animals.
Only your care and adoption can save the precious lives of abandoned animals from the threat of euthanasia.	Without your adoption, the vicious cycle of euthanasia will continue forever.