

More Than Skin-Deep

Understanding the Motivations Around Sunscreen Use

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Why Wear Sunscreen?

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Just like brushing one's teeth, habitually using sunscreen has proven beneficial for skin health (Reichrath, 2014). However, there are several myths surrounding sunscreen, like the notion that individuals with darker skin do not need sunscreen or that the small amount of sunscreen in moisturizers is enough to protect against UV radiation (Bennett & Khachemoune, 2022). The problem is that it is difficult to get individuals to wear sunscreen (Reichrath, 2014). To improve unhealthy habits, health messaging requires knowledge about the motivations needed to support change (Kelly & Barker, 2016). This paper aims to provide insight into how advertisers can create messaging that promotes sunscreen use.

This topic is important because, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), skin cancer is the leading form of cancer in the US. Specifically, melanoma is the most frequent form of cancer between 15–29-year-olds (Kang & Childers, 2014). Most dermatological cancers are caused by the over-penetration of ultraviolet (UV) light into the skin (Reichrath, 2014). Although the dangers of UV radiation are significant, skin cancer is preventable (Hoffner & Ye, 2009). Sunscreens contain zinc oxide, which creates a barrier between UV rays and the skin (Bennett & Khachemoune, 2022).

When it comes to improving sunscreen usage, there is no universal solution (Allen & Damian, 2022). However, is there a particular message framing that increases the likelihood of wearing sunscreen? Message framing concerns “the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of information over others” (Hoffner & Ye, 2009, p. 189). For example, a gain frame underlines the positives, like wearing sunscreen promotes younger looking skin (Hoffner & Ye, 2009). In contrast, a loss frame accents the negative aspects of sunscreen use, such as wearing sunscreen

enhances the likelihood of skin cancer (Hoffner & Ye, 2009). This focus group seeks to explore who and what motivates individuals to wear sunscreen. Can these findings inform the way that sunscreen advertisements are framed?

Method

Procedure

One online focus group was conducted that lasted 10 minutes. The group moderator was a graduate student in the Communication Management program at Annenberg.

Participants

A total of 4 female participants took part in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years old. Asian, Latino, and White ethnicities were represented in the focus group. Also, participants had varied habits regarding their sunscreen usage.

Focus Group

The focus group discussion consisted of two main questions. The first part focused on sunscreen habits. An example question was, “Is wearing sunscreen a habit for you? If it is not a habit, what reminds you to wear sunscreen?” The second part focused on how participants perceived message strategies in sunscreen advertisements. An example question was “Do you believe fear appeals in sunscreen advertising are effective (e.g., skin cancer threats)?”. The moderator guide can be seen in the Appendix.

Findings

The focus group had four key findings. The first relates to participants’ motivations surrounding sunscreen usage. Participants agreed that they are more motivated to wear sunscreen when they can find products that are effective and easy to use. For instance, one participant said they “don't really like oily texture [sunscreens], so it's better if it moisturizes.” This participant

would rather forgo sunscreen entirely than wear one that did not suit their skin needs. The demand for simple sunscreen products was essential for participants. Even those with healthy sunscreen habits did not want to deal with the hassle of purchasing multiple SPF products. Participants highly valued dual-purpose products. One participant said, “I care about SPF level and then if it's waterproof.” Another participant agreed with this statement and added, “I need it to also be moisturizing.”

Secondly, the focus group provided insight into who motivates participants to wear sunscreen. Pressure to wear sunscreen began with family members but was sustained by advertising messaging. When asked, “Who first told you that wearing sunscreen was important?” three participants responded by saying their parents. Specifically, one participant mentioned, “when I was a kid, when we go out to the beach or something, parents just put it [sunscreen] on for you.” Over time, there was less pressure from their parents to wear sunscreen. Advertisements on social media served as the primary reminder for sunscreen use. For example, one participant said, “as social media picked up, it became more popular,” referring to reminders about wearing sunscreen. This participant described how the rise in social media made information surrounding skin health more accessible. The increase in digestible content was persuasive for her. She added, “as more research came out, I started wearing it every day.” Participants tended to value the research presented in sunscreen messaging seen in social media advertisements.

The second half of the focus group regarded participants' feelings about common themes in sunscreen advertisements. All participants agreed that loss framing through fear appeals was effective. Skin cancer threats were persuasive in getting individuals to wear sunscreen more regularly. Visual cues were specifically helpful, especially in commercials. One participant noted

that visual depictions of individuals with skin cancer “shows what could possibly happen to you.” While all participants felt loss framing was effective, the extent to which it promoted change varied. For example, one participant said that “it kind of just reminds me” when discussing her response to viewing fear appeals. In contrast, another participant explained how loss framing “really encouraged” her to improve her sunscreen habits. She provided a story about a time when she was so impacted by a fear appeal message that she ordered sunscreen immediately.

Although loss framing proved effective in advertising for this focus group, participants would not use the same strategies to persuade others to wear sunscreen. Participants were asked, “How would you convince a friend or family member to wear sunscreen?” The responses underlined gain framing strategies. Words like “healthy” and “young” were repeated among participants. One participant responded to the question by emphasizing that she would tell a friend that “you want to look healthy, you want to feel young” to persuade them to wear sunscreen. Another person said she would focus on how easy it is to incorporate sunscreen into their routine. She would tell a friend that “you can quickly just put it on and walk out the door.” No one addressed skin cancer, UV radiation harm, or poor skin health. Participant responses indicate that the message strategies they found effective in advertisements were not the same strategies they would implement in real-life situations.

Discussion

The emotions evoked in advertisements play a critical role in their effectiveness (Poels & Dewitte, 2019). Within the sunscreen industry, loss framing calls attention to the harmful impacts of UV radiation (Hoffner & Ye, 2009). However, this focus group supports that gain framing can be equally effective as loss framing. Participants described how they would use

positively connotated gain frames to persuade their close friends and family. Research by Gallagher and Updegraff (2012) supports this finding. A content analysis of close to 300 health articles provided evidence supporting that gain frame messages promote prevention behaviors (Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012). A plausible explanation for the preference towards gain frames relates to the abundance of fear appeals that already exist in the news (Tunney et al., 2021). In a global 2019 report, 58% of 75,000 respondents said that the news negatively impacts their mood (Reuters Institute, 2019). News and media consumers are tired of being exposed to fear-based content; the COVID-19 pandemic amplified these feelings (Tunney et al., 2021).

On a practical level, advertisers can use this information to alter the conversation around sunscreen use. Skin cancer prevention is important (Reichrath, 2014), but it does not need to be the driving factor when promoting healthy skin habits. Participants in this study illuminated that both research-driven and non-research-based content is important to them when presented optimistically. For example, an advertisement that discusses statistics on how sunscreen can make the skin look and feel younger would be effective for this group. Similarly, a commercial of a mother telling her son to wear sunscreen if he goes outside would also be persuasive. If advertisers can find novel ways to encourage sunscreen use, this would heighten prevention efforts and implicitly reduce cancer causing behaviors (Allen & Damian, 2022).

This focus group is not without limitations. To fully understand the differences in framings, examples should have been provided to participants through visual aids. Additionally, questions were skewed towards loss frames and fear appeals. Future focus groups on this topic should explore hope frames (Ahmad et al., 2022). Regarding the discussion, the moderator could have utilized more probing questions to avoid group think. If the study were repeated, the

moderator could improve response quality by asking participants why they answered in a particular way.

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Appendix

Focus Group Preparation - Moderator Guide

PROBLEM: Wearing sunscreen is important for skin health but getting people to wear it regularly is difficult.

GOAL: The objective of the focus group is to understand participants' sunscreen/SPF habits. The aim is to learn consumer perspectives on how brands can increase sunscreen usage and product sales through their advertising strategies.

PARTICIPANTS: 18-25-year-old female-identifying participants will be recruited. These participants should represent different racial backgrounds and skin tones. Participants will be recruited outside major retailers that sell sunscreen (e.g. Target, Walmart, CVS). Then, they will fill out a short prescreen survey that asks about their age, gender, race, and knowledge of sun effects on the skin.

REIMBURSEMENT: Each participant will receive light refreshments during the focus group and a \$25 Amazon gift card.

- Warm-up
 - Tell me your name and if you currently own sunscreen/SPF products.
 - How often do you wear sunscreen?
- Sunscreen Habits
 - Who first told you that wearing sunscreen was important?
 - Specific Probe: Was it a Public Service Announcement (PSA)? Product advertisement? Family members?
 - Is wearing sunscreen a habit for you? If it is not a habit, what reminds you to wear sunscreen?
 - On days you wear sunscreen, how many times do you reapply sunscreen per day?
 - General Probe: Why do you reapply sunscreen?
- Choosing Sunscreen
 - Is searching for the right sunscreen confusing?
 - Specific Probe: What makes one sunscreen product better than another?
 - How many sunscreen or SPF products do you own?
 - General Probe: Why is that so?
- Perception of Sunscreen in Advertisements
 - What do you think are the common reasons people are told to wear sunscreen?
 - Specific Probe: Can you think of any other reasons to wear sunscreen that the public might not know?
 - Do you believe fear appeals in sunscreen advertising are effective (e.g., skin cancer threats)?
 - General Probe: Why is that so?
 - What aspects of poor sun protection worry you the most?

- How can advertisers better motivate consumers like yourselves to wear sunscreen?
- Purchase Intention
 - What time of the year do you find yourself purchasing sunscreen the most?
 - Specific Probe: Have you ever purchased sunscreen during cold weather months?
 - How would you convince others to purchase sunscreen?
 - Specific Probe: Would you use fear appeals? Would you talk to them like a friend?
 - How much does the cost of sunscreen affect your decision to buy?
 - General Probe: Can you tell me more?
 - What do you pay attention to the most when you are choosing a sunscreen to purchase?
 - Specific Probe: Do you care about the packaging? The ingredients? The brand?
 - What are the reasons why you would not purchase sunscreen?