

Religious rhetoric not helpful in anti-alcohol messages

April 19 2016

GAIN-FRAMED MESSAGES		LOSS-FRAMED MESSAGES	
<i>without religious rhetoric</i>	<i>with religious rhetoric</i>	<i>without religious rhetoric</i>	<i>with religious rhetoric</i>
<p>"O ye who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter, nor when ye are polluted, save when journeying upon the road, till ye have bathed" (Quran: Surah 4, Verse 43).</p>		<p>"Every intoxicant is forbidden, and every intoxicant is fermented" (Narrated by Ibn' Umar)</p>	

Research by MSU's Saleem Alhabash found that including a religious message in an anti-alcohol PSA did not necessarily urge the viewer not to drink. The research was conducted in Palestine, a Middle Eastern country whose primary religion is Muslim. Above are examples of the PSAs.

Does including a religious message in a public service announcement warning of the dangers of alcohol use make a difference to the viewer, especially if that person lives in a Middle Eastern country in which the predominate religion is Muslim?

While one might think it would help sway an opinion, recent research by a Michigan State University scholar indicates that's not necessarily the case.

Saleem Alhabash, an assistant professor in MSU's Department of Advertising and Public Relations, tested out the theory on a group of students in his native Palestine.

To his surprise, his team found that adding a verse from the Koran to the message did not discourage viewers from drinking, considering drinking or urging others not to drink.

"Contrary to popular or stereotypical belief, adding religious rhetoric to a [health](#) message is not going to work in this particular context," Alhabash said. "One would think that would be the case in this region where people often blindly follow anything religious. But our results show otherwise."

This is how the project worked: Participants were shown two different anti-alcohol PSAs on Facebook, one with a religious message attached, one without. After viewing the messages they were asked if they felt inclined to warn others about the dangers of alcohol or to participate in anti-alcohol campaigns.

"What we found is where there is religious rhetoric, people do not want to do this as much as those who are exposed to the same exact message, only without the religious message," Alhabash said.

Why does this happen? Alhabash said it may have to do with something called psychological reactance. That is, when someone tells you not to do something, it makes you want to do it all the more, as if someone is trying to restrict your freedom.

"Then, when you put a religious spin on it, it becomes too intense to handle," he said. "The viewer may question motives. Is someone doing this for religious reasons or for more civil, altruistic reasons?"

In advertising, and in particular in health communications, there are two kinds of messages - gain-framed and loss-framed.

Gain-framed focuses on what a person will get if he or she adopts the behavior that is being touted. Loss-framed is the opposite - what will you lose if you adopt that behavior?

This research, Alhabash said, reinforces the notion that gain-framed messages tend to work better than loss-framed.

"It is worthwhile for advertisers and marketers in that part of the world, especially in the social and health domains, to realize that gain-framed [messages](#) are more effective," he said.

The research is published in the *Journal of Religion and Health*.

Provided by Michigan State University

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