

Telling sunbathers what they don't want to hear: Tanning is bad

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Credit: Wendy Hero from Pexels

Most young women already know that tanning is dangerous and sunbathe anyway, so a campaign informing them of the risk should take into account their potential resistance to the message, according to a new

study.

Word choice and targeting a specific audience are part of messaging strategy, but there is also psychology at play, researchers say—especially when the message is telling people something they don't really want to hear.

"A lot of thought goes into the content, but possibly less thought goes into the style," said Hillary Shulman, senior author of the study and an assistant professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"That's the argument we're trying to put out there for people to consider."

In the study, participants who read a message that combined the most lay-friendly phrasing with references to the specific audience—young women in college—were the most likely to acknowledge the severity of tanning-related risk for skin cancer and say they would curb their own sunbathing behavior.

And that's because the researchers considered what the young women already thought about soaking in the sun.

"While with communication we're fundamentally interested in the messages themselves, we look at it through the lens of what's going on in people's heads. And if we understand what's going on in people's heads, we can design messages more effectively to match beliefs and attitudes," said Olivia Bullock, a [graduate student](#) in communication at Ohio State and lead author of the paper.

"How can we get people to do the things that they know they should do but don't always do? Tanning is a perfect example of that. Most women know that tanning and sun exposure is not great for you, but we do it

anyway, for a number of reasons."

The research is published online in the journal *Communication Studies*.

This study was both an application and assessment of the framing theory of persuasive communication, which suggests that the experience of consuming a persuasive message involves a pathway toward being convinced or rejecting the notion of a change in thinking or behavior. The pathway has three components: availability, or a fixed belief about the topic; accessibility, considering the message easy to process because it draws upon existing knowledge; and applicability, or perceiving the message as relevant.

"Framing theory says we can target specific attitudes and make them more likely to be drawn upon. And if they're more likely to be drawn upon, then they're more likely to be used in making a decision or forming a judgment," Bullock said.

In health campaigns, there can be a tendency to use technical terms to lend credibility or "heft" to a message, Shulman said.

But that can backfire.

"Some people might strategically try to use medical terminology in recognition of the nuance and precision that certain words offer, which for people who are experts is quite important," Shulman said. "But people have a whole bunch of barriers and resistance in their brains to discount information that they don't want to hear, and one of those is, 'This is hard, and it's not really talking to me.'"

"If you can figure out pretty simple communication strategies that help circumvent those defenses, you might get people to engage, even in the moment, a little more readily."

Bullock composed four messages of identical length with different combinations of language difficulty—related to the accessibility part of the process—and message relevance, the nod to applicability. Relevance was based on the affected parties cited in the messages—either female undergraduates at Ohio State or older adults living in the South.

The low language difficulty messages include the statement "Research shows that Ohio State women who tan raise their risk of deadly skin cancer by 75%." The equivalent line in the high language difficulty message: "Research illustrates that Ohio State women who tan multiply their probability of acquiring melanoma by 75%."

Each of the 529 college students participating in the research was randomly assigned to read a single message. Participants followed by completing a survey assessing how accessible and relevant they thought the message was and gauging their beliefs and future plans related to tanning.

The [young women](#) who read the message with low language difficulty and high relevance were more likely to judge [skin cancer](#) as a severe tanning-associated risk, consider themselves susceptible to cancer, and indicate a behavioral intention not to soak up the rays in the future.

The study also demonstrated through an unexpected result just how important the psychology of message consumption can be: When the language was easy to understand and the message was perceived by the [college students](#) as relevant to them, participants found the information harder to process.

"When we told people something scary could happen to them, they wanted to say, actually, this message isn't about me at all," Bullock said. "You want to discredit the threatening information to make yourself feel better about your life."

Linking message design to psychological states could apply to a variety of public risk topics about which audience members might be inclined to put up a barrier to what they're hearing, the researchers said—for example, climate change or politics.

The key, Shulman said, is to put as much effort into how—and not just what—information is presented.

More information: Olivia M. Bullock et al, Utilizing Framing Theory to Design More Effective Health Messages about Tanning Behavior among College Women, *Communication Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2021.1899007](https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2021.1899007)

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