

People under stress more sensitive to message tone

September 17 2021



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A study involving more than 88,000 people from 47 countries conducted in the early months of the global coronavirus pandemic found people are less willing to take risks than before the pandemic.

The research, which involves The University of Alabama, asked participants the same question framed differently, either highlighting the negative outcomes or the positive outcomes, a classic tactic in [psychological research](#) to gauge whether decisions are influenced by the way the information is presented.

As outlined in a paper recently published in *PLOS ONE*, researchers found the distress of the [pandemic](#) was associated with participants being less risky in their answers and more influenced by a negative framing of the question when compared to a similar group in a [study](#) before the pandemic.

"How the message is framed has become more important during the pandemic," said Dr. Hyemin Han, UA associate professor of educational psychology and co-first author of the paper. "Given the message used in the experiment was about a hypothetical contagious disease, which is directly relevant to the current pandemic, our findings demonstrating the importance of message framing on risk-taking tendency would provide us significant practical implications."

An implication of the study is people under high stress might be more susceptible to subtle changes in the way a message is phrased, but the researchers didn't find the framing of the dilemma posed to participants had a remarkable effect on their compliance with public safety guidelines.

"Findings from our study may inform [policy makers](#) that they need to be cautious while composing a message for persuasion within the context of communication with the public so that people become less hesitant to accept [prevention programs](#) involving potential risks," Han said.

The study, conducted from March through May 2020, asked participants to consider the common research question known as the disease

problem. In this scenario, people are told there is a disease outbreak expected to kill a certain number of people. Participants are asked to choose a public health program framed to save lives or framed to highlight how many will die. The remedy options are the same in both scenarios in terms of lives saved or lost, only couched to be positive or negative.

The main goal was to see if the pandemic affected responses and if the framing effect varied across nations.

"The early months of the pandemic, marked by uncertainty and anxiety, provided a suitable natural context to test how those dominant feelings would affect decision-making under risk," said Dr. Nikolay Rachev, an assistant professor of psychology at Sofia University in Bulgaria, the corresponding author of the paper.

Responses did differ by country, suggesting important societal-level factors might also play a role in the framing effect, Rachev said.

Put alongside similar findings from other studies in the pandemic, it does not appear how a message is framed influences compliance with public health guidelines, although the framing of the message may influence the risks a person is willing to take, according to the research.

"All three aspects of our study—concerning distress, cross-national differences, and compliance—hopefully, add to our understanding of the framing effect and, ultimately, on human behavior," Rachev said.

More information: Nikolay R. Rachev et al, Replicating the Disease framing problem during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic: A study of stress, worry, trust, and choice under risk, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0257151](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257151)

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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