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Social Influence and Information Processing as Moderators of a Narrative Message about Skin Cancer



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Tanning is popular yet has many negative health effects including an increased risk for skin cancer. In this study, we used a narrative message to increase risk perception of skin cancer and change behavior intentions for tanning. Social influence (i.e., social norms and social pressure) and information processing may play a role in how people internalize a narrative message and were therefore examined as moderators.

Ninety-seven participants were told that they were participating in two different studies, but in reality, the studies were connected. First, they were randomly assigned to complete sentence tasks designed to activate a cognitive or experiential processing system. For each sentence scramble task, participants saw 30 sentences. For the experiential task participants saw the words pajamas, her, was, warm, and approach. They were instructed to use four out of the five words in order to form a grammatically correct sentence. In this example the correct sentence is “her approach was warm.” For the cognitive task, participants saw similar words, but this time, the word “warm” was replaced by “systematic.”

After completing the sentence task, participants were asked to read a one-page narrative about a young woman who notices a change in her skin and decides to talk to her doctor about her risk of skin cancer. The narrative included various facts about skin cancer as well as a color photograph of a young woman.

After reading the narrative, participants completed a survey that assessed their tanning behavior intentions and risk perceptions. To assess social norms and social pressure, we also asked participants about their close friends’ tanning behaviors and attitudes. We hypothesized that people who reported a greater number of friends who tanned or felt more social pressure to tan would also report higher risk perceptions and behavior intentions after reading the narrative message. Further we expected

that when an experiential processing system was activated, participants who reported greater social norms and social pressure would report the highest risk perceptions and behavior intentions.

Linear regression was used to examine the effects of information processing and social influence on risk perceptions and behavior intentions. Across all risk perceptions and intentions, there were no significant effects of information processing. However, significant effects emerged for social influence. Across both social norms and social pressure, there were significant effects on comparative risk perceptions. These effects showed that as more friends tanned and increased pressure was felt, participants felt more at risk than an average person of their race, age, and gender. Another effect was that the more frequently pressure to tan was felt, participants saw themselves at an increased risk for skin cancer across every measure tested. Next, interactions between information processing and social influence on risk perceptions and intentions were examined. Only social pressure interacted with information processing to increase risk perceptions, but the trend only approached significance.

This research contributes to knowledge about developing effective interventions against tanning in the future. It also adds to the literature on narrative messages as a means to motivating healthy behaviors.