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Conversion Conundrums: Listener Perceptions of Affective Influence Attempts as Mediated by Personality and Individual Differences

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The study of religious conversion messages is currently an unexplored facet in interpersonal communication and social-cognition research. This study focused on the affective, intellectual, and cognitive needs of potential converts in reference to their attitudes and responses toward ministers utilizing the conversion appeals of fear and comfort. Eighty-nine participants, representing different levels of perceived personal relevance, religiosity (High Religiosity, Low Religiosity, Fundamentalism), familiarity with the type of appeal being made, and High/Low need for cognition were given a religious sermon to view, followed by various response and mood instruments. Results found familiarity with the message type to be a mediating factor of perceived speaker credibility and level of perceived influence, but not necessarily in reference to level of religious grouping. Possible explanations for these findings and applicability of the influence of emotional persuasion in religious conversion sermons were discussed.

Keywords: Perception; Affect/Emotion; Influence; Perceived Relevance; Familiarity; Religiosity; Need for Cognition; Religious Conversion; Fear; Comfort

Introduction

Research on cognitions in the religious realm has progressed steadily, from the study of conversion practices to other forms of religious social control (Kellett, 1993; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). Allport (1950) initially presented an affective theory of the motivational processes present in religion, but there are no generalized theories of

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emotional persuasion guiding religious research on personal experiences (Hill, 1995). Considering the important role of religion in culture, and the widespread use of advertising campaigns now implemented among mainstream religions, practitioners of interpersonal processes, human persuasion, and social cognition need to pay particular attention to individuals' attitudes and perceptions toward religion within an emotional context, as these factors aid in an understanding of the cognitive processes driving such individuals.

This study presents an experimental design measuring varying perceptions of religious figures and their choice of persuasive appeals, as mediated by the participant characteristics of perceived self-relevance, religiosity and familiarity with the messages, and level of cognition. However, before reporting individuals' religious attitudes, I will first review fear and comfort in reference to conversion, and secondly, provide the theoretical bases for the three aspects supporting this research: personal relevance, familiarity and religiosity, and need for cognition.

A Background of Influence

Miller (1980) defined persuasive communication as any message with the intent to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of others. This definition is suited for this study as it acknowledges the three components present in the persuasive communication of a conversion experience. It is a process of change, serves to reinforce faith, and is a process shaping responses in the present, as well as future attitudes toward similar, and thus familiar, messages. Schleiermacher (1958) proposed that "feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products" (p. 341). Conversion is ultimately a subjective, personal event in which the process of one individual's transformation is based on each past experience shaping personal relevance, familiarity with religious environments, and susceptibility to varying emotions. This study will not attempt to study the act or results of conversion itself, but will specifically focus on reactions toward conversion-type messages of fear and comfort, two emotional appeals often used in religious conversion or reinforcement sermons (Malony & Southard, 1992). In an effort to understand the attempted messages practitioners often use in conversion messages, it still remains important to understand the persuasive implications of such messages.

Persuasion and Conversion Utilizing Fear and Comfort

Within Christian churches, fear appeals are employed to scare forth conversion while comforting messages serve to reinforce contentment and calmness (Whittaker, 1990).

Fear

Of all the emotions, fear is commonly recognized as one of the most convincing and gripping persuasive tools and is an outstanding example of an emotion "organizing

and directing perceptual and cognitive processes" (Nabi, 1999, p. 297). Basically, the premise underlying most fear appeal research and many of its theoretical models is that persuasion follows from a state of fright (Dillard, 1994).

The Extended Parallel Process Model (Witte, 1992, 1993, 1994) holds that cognitions about threat and efficacy cause attitude, intention, or behavior changes. Therefore, thinking about the threat and consequences and how to avert them would bring about adaptive responses, while simply reacting to such threats would tend to be more automatic and involuntary, resulting in maladaptive responses. For example, concentrating on the pain and suffering associated with eternal damnation may cause one to dwell in sorrow, while thinking about ways to avert it could cause changes in lifestyle (behavior), reactions toward similar-believing individuals (attitude), or desires to continually live life differently and remedy the past (intentions).

Certainly, persuasion's effectiveness provides reasons for ministers to employ fear, because "'minds warped by emotion' . . . will accept whatever probability is made to appear most appealing to them" (Oliver, 1995, p. 359). Some conservative religious groups regarded the source of a high fear appeal message as being more credible than the source of a low fear message (Ragsdale & Durham, 1987). But why would an individual who is familiar with religious messages be continually drawn to feeling afraid?

Morinis (1985) examined initiation ceremonies involving ritualistic mutilations, and presented the notion that provocation of pain may serve to intensify self-awareness and demonstrate the self-sacrifice involved with group affiliation. Persuasive fear appeals can also be seen as a form of emotional gratification (Rambo, 1993). Theories have been put forth that individuals in states of physiological and/or emotional excitation, who do not understand what is happening to them, will have their "evaluative needs aroused" (Spilka & McIntosh, 1995, p. 426).

However, fear appeals can and often do fail (Witte & Morrison, 2000). Fear appeals presented by evangelists on secular college campuses served to not only alienate listeners from the speaker, but negative impressions of the religion advocated and the message itself were also formed (Brannan, 2001). Further, negative emotions have been linked to avoidance, defensiveness, and closure to stimulation (Lacey & Lacey, 1970; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1990). There exists duality in human nature; what is familiar and attractive to one person may be foreign and repel another. With this in mind, it is beneficial to this study to examine another emotional appeal—comfort.

Comfort

This study embraces Burleson and Goldsmith's (1998) definition of comfort as verbal and nonverbal behaviors enacted by a source, bringing about a decrease in the affective distress of a recipient. Comfort messages deal explicitly with emotional distress and have been found to promote positive credibility assessments of speakers employing behaviors suggesting their use (Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990).

The persuasive implications of protection motivation theory suggest that individuals want to be reassured and will seek out cognitive activities allowing them to achieve this desire (Gleicher & Petty, 1992). As positive affective states allow individuals to feel their environment is a familiar and safe place, individuals will be more likely to avoid discomforting messages, and instead seek out those that reinforce their feeling of security (Schwarz, Bless, & Bohner, 1991).

The credibility of Christianity appears to depend on a church's ability to inspire positive sentiments (Whittaker, 1990). Thus, reinforcement of beliefs and of familiar and safe subjects is crucial to churches wanting to maintain membership. Churches invoke such traditions and comforting rituals to provide a "mediating and protective function, rendering the world predictable and relatively safe" for its devotees (Hopson & Openlander, 1995, p. 65).

Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999) noted that individuals seek groups who are not only attractive, but who reinforce their personality characteristics within the group's culture. Studies have shown that high anxiety individuals are not as persuaded by strong fear appeals as they are by other persuasive appeals, such as reassurance and comfort (Boster & Mongeau, 1984; Dillard, 1994; Janis & Feshbach, 1954; Witte & Morrison, 2000).

In relation to Christianity, comfort appeals may also have negative repercussions. The use of such appeals in preaching is viewed in many fundamentalist churches as non-convicting, or not presenting the perceived necessary emotional distress and challenge a sermon should supposedly instill (Berton, 1965; Swope, 1998). From this perspective, the church has

> Tended to soothe consciences, rather than stir them up; it has set about to *salve* human misery rather than to *solve* it. As an institution, the church has lost sight of that past era when it confronted secular society and demanded that matters of value and principle be placed above those of comfort and self-interest. (Glock, Ringer, & Babbie, 1967, p. 6)

Those who consistently employ the use of comfort appeals may be seen as wishy-washy, passive, and "sappy" and were labeled by respondents in one study as administering a "lovey-dovey" or motivational speech, rather than an actual sermon (Eckstein, 2003, p. 16).

It appears that any type of persuasive appeal has its drawbacks. Because emotional message cues have a significant immediate impact on the effectiveness of persuasion, personal preference for a particular type of message may instead rely on the individual characteristics of the potential convert. Therefore, such an examination of respondents' personal characteristics was essential to this study.

Personal Characteristics

In the persuasive settings of religious environments, listeners are continually reconciling new ideas with their currently established belief systems. A variety

of factors affect listeners' reception of such ideas. Overall, people are drawn to, and become more accepting of, messages perceived highly self-relevant, which their level of religiosity renders familiar, and that align with their level of cognitive complexity.

Relevance

First, individuals are more likely to attend to a message if they have a vested interest in its outcome. Perceptions of messages relating to self created higher interest levels, and messages presenting issues relevant to listeners' attitudes about themselves were rated to be much more persuasive than identical messages framed as irrelevant to listeners' self-schemata (Cacioppo, Petty, & Sidera, 1982; McCallister, 1995). Characteristics of ideology, age, sex, and education are all important and may impact perceived relevance (Rambo, 1992), but even more intriguing is the factor of religious association.

Familiarity/religiosity

The affective nature of a religious experience is largely impacted by individuals' past experiences and how those impact their understanding of religion (Hill, 1995). Religiosity is described as the type of experience most easily fulfilling an understanding of observable religious actions and indicates the degree to which religious faith is incorporated into one's existence (Malony, 1995; Poloma & Pendleton, 1990). Religiosity has been found to affect various outcomes of persuasion. The theologies of many Christian denominations have at their base the notion of sin, damnation, and repentance, which might suggest that the level of religiosity, and thus familiarity (through willing church attendance), plays a role in message acceptance of both fear and comfort (Brown, 1996; Hudson, 1992; McKim, 1992; Rambo, 1993).

Individuals who rate high on religiosity and a fundamentalist lifestyle may rate similar-believing speakers, who are not only familiar to them, but whose religious affiliations also endorse messages involving fear, as more credible.

Therefore, the following hypothesis was put forth:

> *H1a: High religiosity individuals will perceive fear appeals as more favorable than low religiosity individuals, who will favor comfort appeals.*
>
> *H1b: High religiosity individuals will perceive speakers who present a fear appeal as more favorable than low religiosity individuals, who will favor speakers who present comfort appeals.*

Clearly, different denominations within the Christian faith have different belief systems and tenets. The degree to which these denominations are continually differentiating themselves from one another leads the observer to assume they would

have different viewpoints toward diverse styles of conversion messages (Rambo, 1993) based on the particular message with which they are more familiar. Denominations not considered fundamentalist in origin, and therefore not possessing many of the conservative and moralist tendencies of their non-fundamentalist counterparts, may differ in their reception of sermon appeals. Individuals with a fundamentalist orientation have been found to rate speakers of high fear appeals as more credible than speakers utilizing appeals of less fear (Ragsdale & Durham, 1987). Based on the above conclusions regarding fundamentalist religions, the following hypothesis was proposed:

> *H2a: Fundamentalist individuals will perceive fear appeals as more favorable than low religiosity individuals, who will favor comfort appeals.*
>
> *H2b: Fundamentalist individuals will perceive speakers who present a fear appeal as more favorable than low religiosity individuals, who will favor speakers of comfort appeals.*

It is unclear, however, what the results of fundamentalist versus low religiosity comparisons might be when looking at messages appealing to comfort. Therefore, the following research question was put forth:

> *R1: Do fundamentalist individuals perceive comfort appeal messages as less favorable than do non-fundamentalist individuals?*

Cognition

A third component affecting perception of persuasive messages is that of analytic processing. An individual's processing preference allows for subsequent predictions of attitudinal responses toward those similarly valenced (appeals of fear or comfort) religious messages. Individuals with a need for cognition have been shown to possess a higher tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Those who readily embrace cognitive processes may be more likely to dwell on the argumentation of the appeal, while those with a lower need for cognition may focus on the peripheral aspects of the message, such as delivery style and environment (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986; Haugtvedt, Petty, Cacioppo, & Steidley, 1988). Those with lower cognition needs may be more likely to embrace emotional messages than would those with high need for cognition, as being "caught up" in the emotion of a conversion message may cause those with lower cognition needs to be less likely to attend to the arguments being made. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forth:

> *H3: Individuals with a high need for cognition will perceive the speakers of comfort and fear appeals as less credible than will individuals with a low need for cognition.*

Methods

Quasi-experimental research is more commonly conducted in the context of developmental religious research because of the difficulties involved in controlling participant characteristics and in reproducing religious experience in a laboratory setting (Tamminen & Nurmi, 1995). This study works against that tendency by implementing an experimental approach toward the examination of cognitive influences.

Procedure

After completing the initial survey comprised of demographic items, religious affiliation, and the religiosity measurement, individuals were selected to participate in the second stage of the study. For the experimental portion, the viewings of each sermon were immediately followed by a mood checklist and items measuring message perceptions, need for cognition, and speaker character credibility.

Each of the 8 minute sermons employed to measure reactions was videotaped being delivered by the same minister. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four viewing sessions, with an equal quota assigned from each subject category. Groups of High-Religiosity/Non-Fundamentalism (H); High-Religiosity/Fundamentalism (F); and Low-Religiosity (L) individuals were assigned to either a comfort ($n =$ 19H, 11F, 19L) or fear ($n = 12$H, 12F, 16L) appeal viewing session. Two versions of both the fear and comfort messages were used to reduce the possibility that message effects could be caused by idiosyncratic characteristics of the sermons, independent of the use of comfort versus fear appeals (Jackson & Jacobs, 1983).

Participants

Participants in this experiment were drawn from a public speaking course at a western university and given extra credit for participation. Participants were selected based on their religious background and limited to Christian individuals because of their experience with similar religious messages. The experiment was comprised of 89 individuals (44 males, 45 females), with a mean age of 21.29 years. The religious affiliation of the participants is broken down in Table 1. The final composition of each group was formed according to a quota sample (Babbie, 1999), with individuals representing high ($n = 31$) and low ($n = 35$) religiosity levels as well as fundamentalists ($n = 23$).

While Fundamentalists and High Religiosity Non-Fundamentalists were both drawn from the High Religiosity group, Fundamentalists were chosen based on their religious affiliation. For example, the more traditionalist religious groups tend to be those comprised of authoritarian individuals, puritanical belief systems, and a day-to-day lived religion (i.e., Assembly of God, Southern Baptist, Born-Again, Calvinist,

Table 1 Religious Affiliation by Count and Percent of Cases

Affiliation	*n*	Percent of cases
Assembly of God	5	5.6
Baptist	6	6.7
Born-Again	7	7.9
Calvinist	1	1.1
Catholic	26	29.2
Charismatic	4	4.5
Christian	35	39.3
Episcopalian	2	2.2
Evangelical	3	3.4
Lutheran	12	13.5
Mennonite	1	1.1
Methodist	11	12.4
Mormon	1	1.1
Nazarene	2	2.2
Non-denominational	19	21.3
Pentecostal	6	6.7
Presbyterian	2	2.2
Protestant	2	2.2
Other	7	7.9

Charismatic, Evangelical, Mennonite, Mormon, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist) (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997).

Measurements

Varied measurements were employed in this study. First, a nominal scale designating religious orientation, along with the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF), was included in the initial test to determine further participants. The SCSORF ($\alpha = 0.93$), a ten-item index, was used to measure religiosity (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997a,b). The mean strength of religious faith score in this study was $M = 25.82$ ($SD = 8.71$). After tercile percentiles were calculated, "high" religiosity individuals were those scoring 29 or higher, while "low" religiosity individuals scored 22 or lower. In the Plante and Boccaccini (1997a,b) studies, the SCSORF had extremely high Alpha reliabilities ($\alpha = 0.94$ to 0.97 and 0.95). High internal consistency reliability was also found in this study ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Second, the perceptions of individuals participating in the experiment were assessed after viewing one of the messages. Perceptions were measured using 5-point Likert scales that assessed basic and immediate reactions to the message. These scales measured message evaluation (the degree to which the participant felt positively or negatively toward the message itself), message familiarity (the degree to which the participants were accustomed to hearing this type of message in their own denomination), and manipulation checks, determining the degree to which the participant felt either comforted or fearful in response to the particular appeal

experienced (see Figure 1). The message evaluation index ($\alpha = 0.93$) was comprised of six items ($M = 3.67$). The message familiarity index ($\alpha = 0.89$) consisted of three items ($M = 2.96$). The manipulation check dimensions had three items for the comfort messages ($\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 2.75$) and three for the fear messages ($\alpha = 0.80$, $M = 2.27$).

Third, the character dimension from McCroskey's (1966) Source Credibility Scale was used to ascertain reactions toward the speaker. Original reliabilities for the entire version of this scale were 0.92 (McCroskey, 1966). Reverse items were recoded so that higher scores represented higher levels of perceived speaker credibility. In this study, reliability for the character dimension was also strong ($\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 29.7$).

Fourth, to consider how individuals' need for cognition affected their perception of the message and its speaker, the 18-item version of the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) was administered. Cacioppo and Petty (1982) found strong reliability for the factor structure of this scale's version ($r = 0.76$). The mean score of the scale in this study was $M = 50.7$, with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Evaluation

Instructions: Please write the number which best describes your reaction to the following statements. There are no right or wrong answers. Please work as quickly as possible while carefully responding to the sermon you just viewed.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

____ 1. This sermon was persuasive.

____ 2. This sermon appeals to fear.

____ 3. I am used to hearing this type of sermon in my religion.

____ 4. The goal of this sermon is to give me comfort.

____ 5. I have a negative reaction toward this sermon.

____ 6. This was a good sermon.

____ 7. I feel comforted by this sermon.

____ 8. This sermon is similar to ones that I have heard in my own church.

____ 9. The goal of this sermon is to scare me.

____ 10. I enjoyed this sermon.

____ 11. The style of speaking in this sermon is very familiar to me.

____ 12. The goal of this sermon is to reassure the listener.

____ 13. This sermon was effective for me.

____ 14. This sermon makes me feel afraid.

____ 15. I liked this sermon.

Figure 1

Finally, an emotion checklist (Dillard & Peck, 2001) was administered as a further manipulation check, to determine the degree to which messages affected the mood of participants. The original checklist was comprised of seven emotions: Surprise ($\alpha = 0.84$), Anger ($\alpha = 0.88$), Fear ($\alpha = 0.94$), Sadness ($\alpha = 0.82$), Guilt ($\alpha = 0.83$), Happiness ($\alpha = 0.90$), and Contentment ($\alpha = 0.85$). The original overall reliability for these emotion indexes was high ($\alpha = 0.95$) (Dillard & Peck, 2001). In this study, many indexes possessed similar reliabilities, though some were significantly lower (α for Surprise $= 0.65$, *Happiness = 0.94*, Sadness $= 0.49$, Anger $= 0.86$, *Fear = 0.95*, Contentment $= 0.66$, and Guilt $= 0.88$). It is important to note that the two highest reliabilities were found for Fear and Happiness—both components of particular interest in this study.

Analysis

All hypotheses and the research question were tested using univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). Four sermons were chosen from religious publications for their essential appeals, including two sermons that relied on fear and two that relied on comfort. To determine whether the sermons differed in comfort and fear, a 2×2 ANOVA was performed on each of the manipulation check variables (perceived fear and perceived comfort). The two independent variables were emotion appeal (fear versus comfort) and appeal version (i.e., the two versions of each appeal), which was treated as a random effects variable, as recommended by Jackson and Jacobs (1983). There were significant effects of emotion appeal for perceived use of fear ($F = 1934.2$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$) and perceived use of comfort ($F = 616.35$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). As expected, perceived use of fear was higher for the fear sermons ($M = 3.34$) than for the comfort sermons ($M = 1.39$). Perceived use of comfort was higher for the comfort sermons ($M = 3.69$) than for the fear sermons ($M = 1.68$).

Results

Overall, positive reactions toward both the message and the speaker were reported along with positive feelings from the participants, while negative emotions were experienced by those who rated the speaker and the message unfavorably. Familiarity with the type of message used was also reported along with favorableness toward the message and its speaker, as well as positive feelings toward the message with which they were familiar.

Pearson's correlational tests revealed religiosity to have a significant ($p < 0.05$) negative correlation ($r = -0.26$) with need for cognition. Familiarity also had significant correlations with level of religiosity, favorable message reaction, and with favorable speaker evaluation. Table 2 delineates all significant correlations found.

In the first phase of the data analysis, a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether appeal type (fear versus comfort), religious group (Fundamentalist versus High Religiosity versus Low Religiosity), and particular

Table 2 Significant Correlations

	Relig.	Charac.	Cog.	Messg.	Famil.	Anger	Fear	Guilt	Happy	Surprise
Relig.		**	−0.24[c]	**	0.30[a]	**	**	**	**	**
Charac.	**		**	0.69[a]	0.57[a]	−0.58[a]	−0.40[a]	**	0.52[a]	**
Cog.	−0.24[c]	**		**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Famil.	0.30[a]	0.57[a]	**	0.63[a]		−0.47[a]	−0.40[a]	**	0.50[a]	−0.23[c]
Messg.	0.27[c]	0.69[a]	**		0.63[a]	**	−0.32[b]	**	**	**
Anger	**	−0.58[a]	**	**	−0.47[a]		0.35[b]	0.25[c]	−0.54[a]	0.31[b]
Fear	**	−0.40[a]	**	−0.32[b]	−0.40[a]	0.35[b]		**	−0.29[b]	0.33[b]
Guilt	**	**	**	**	**	0.25[c]	**		**	0.33[b]
Happy	0.40[a]	0.52[a]	**	**	0.50[a]	−0.54[a]	−0.29[b]	**		**
Surprise	**	**	**	**	−0.23[c]	0.31[b]	0.33[b]	0.33[b]	**	

Notes: **Pearson correlation not significant; [a]$p < 0.001$; [b]$p < 0.01$; [c]$p < 0.05$.

version of the appeal affected evaluation of the message and speaker character. There were no significant main effects or interactions for appeal version. Therefore, the versions were collapsed in subsequent analyses.

Post hoc tests, using the Bonferroni adjustment for pairwise comparisons, revealed significant differences between religious groups. Specifically, highly religious individuals had significantly more favorable mean ratings for *both* types of messages (Fear $M = 2.63$, Comfort $M = 4.02$, $p < 0.05$) than did low religiosity individuals (Fear $M = 2.44$, Comfort $M = 3.03$) (Table 3). Highly religious individuals also had significantly higher mean ratings (Fear $M = 4.31$, Comfort $M = 5.87$) by comparison to low religiosity individuals (Fear $M = 3.68$, Comfort $M = 5.25$) of speaker character for *both* appeal types ($p < 0.05$) (Table 4). Fundamentalists did not have significantly higher means than high religiosity/non-fundamentalists in rating either speaker character or message.

Subsequent 2×3 ANOVA's assessed the effects of appeal type and religious group on message evaluation and speaker character. Again, no significant interaction effects were found between appeal type and religious group. However, significant main effects emerged among religious groups in ratings of the message ($F = 5.29$, $df = 2, 83$, $p < 0.01$) and speaker character ($F = 4.96$, $df = 2, 83$, $p < 0.01$). The main effects for religious groupings in the message evaluations were 3.48 for high religiosity, 3.36 for fundamentalists, and 2.76 for low religiosity individuals. The main effects for religious groupings in the evaluation of speaker character credibility were 5.27 for high religiosity, 5.17 for fundamentalists, and 4.53 for low religiosity individuals. There was also a significant main effect for appeal type, not counting religious group distinctions, in ratings of message ($F = 28.00$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$) and speaker character credibility ($F = 56.12$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). The main effects for appeal types in evaluation of the messages were 2.63 for fear and 3.61 for comforting messages. The main effects for appeal types in evaluation of speaker character credibility were 4.07 for fear and 5.67 for comforting messages. Tables 3 and 4 outline all of the above main effects.

Table 3 Message Evaluation—Main Effects for Religious Group and Type of Appeal

Appeal	Group	*n*	Main effects: relig. grp	Main effects: appeal type	Mean	*SD*	*SE*
Fear	HR	12	3.48	2.63	2.63*	1.06	0.25
Comfort	HR	19	–	3.61	4.02*	0.56	0.20
Fear	F	12	3.36	–	2.88*	1.12	0.25
Comfort	F	11	–	–	3.89*	0.90	0.26
Fear	LR	16	2.76	–	2.44	0.85	0.22
Comfort	LR	19	–	–	3.03	0.82	0.20

Notes: HR = High Religiosity; F = Fundamentalist; LR = Low Religiosity; *Means with subscript differ significantly from low religiosity means at $p < 0.05$ by the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons; **Main effects are reported for both the Fear and Comfort Appeals in the Fear rows; ***Main effects for each appeal type are both reported in the HR row.

Table 4 Speaker Character Credibility—Main Effects for Religious Group and Type of Appeal

Appeal	Group	*n*	Main effects: relig. grp.	Main effects: appeal type	Mean	*SD*	*SE*
Fear	HR	12	5.27	4.07	4.31*	0.75	0.29
Comfort	HR	19	–	5.67	5.87*	1.31	0.23
Fear	F	12	5.17	–	4.36*	0.81	0.29
Comfort	F	11	–	–	6.06*	0.83	0.30
Fear	LR	16	4.53	–	3.68	0.96	0.25
Comfort	LR	19	–	–	5.25	0.96	0.23

Notes. HR = High Religiosity; F = Fundamentalist; LR = Low Religiosity; *Means with subscript differ significantly from low religiosity means at $p < 0.05$ by the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons; **Main effects are reported for both the Fear and Comfort Appeals in the Fear rows; ***Main effects for each appeal type are both reported in the HR row.

The two initial tests revealed no support for hypothesis one, which predicted high and low religiosity individuals would differ in regard to both message favorableness and perceived speaker character, with high religiosity individuals preferring fear appeals, and low religiosity individuals preferring comfort appeals. Obviously, the results above indicate that significant differences between high and low religiosity groups did exist, but group differences did not interact with appeal type. High religiosity individuals instead had higher means on *all* appeal types than did low religiosity individuals.

Likewise, the second hypothesis found no support in these results. The research question and the second hypothesis examined attitudinal differences between fundamentalist and low religiosity individuals in regard to both message favorableness and perceived speaker character, with fundamentalists preferring fear appeals, and low religiosity individuals preferring comfort appeals. Again, the above results indicate that significant differences between fundamentalist and low religiosity groups did exist; fundamentalists had higher means on *all* appeal types than did low religiosity individuals.

The third test employed analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine whether message evaluation and speaker character were impacted by appeal type and religious group, accounting for the perceived familiarity of the message. This test was employed because the rationale for all hypotheses was based on familiarity. Specifically, those who are familiar with messages will rate them favorably. As expected in the rationale, message familiarity was significantly different due to appeal type ($F = 31.74$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$), as well as group type ($F = 9.72$, $df = 2, 83$, $p < 0.001$). However, no significant effects were found when message familiarity was tested against appeal and group type together. Testing for familiarity with both types of messages, Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons revealed significant differences between high religiosity and low religiosity individuals ($p < 0.01$) and between fundamentalist and low religiosity individuals ($p < 0.001$), but not between

high religiosity individuals and fundamentalists. Both high religiosity individuals and fundamentalists were significantly more familiar with the messages than were low religiosity individuals.

The third test also employed analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine whether message evaluation and speaker character were impacted by appeal type and religious group, accounting for the level of need for cognition. This test was conducted as a way to measure the third hypothesis, and provide alternative explanations for reactions toward appeals. Tests revealed no significant effects of need for cognition. Therefore, although hypothesis three predicted those with high need for cognition would perceive speakers of emotional appeals as less credible than those with a lower need for cognition, it was not supported.

Additional correlational analyses (see Table 2) revealed significant correlations between the following emotions: surprise with anger, guilt, and fear toward the message. A happy mood was also significantly correlated with familiarity toward the message. Strong negative associations (see Table 2) were also found when the emotions of anger, surprise, and fear were correlated with the degree of perceived familiarity toward the message. Additionally, both favorable speaker evaluation and favorable message reaction were each negatively correlated with subsequent feelings of anger and fear.

Basically, positive reactions toward message and speaker were reported when positive feelings from the participants were present, while negative feelings were experienced by those rating the speaker and the message unfavorably. Familiarity with the message type was also reported when the individual was favorable toward the message and the speaker. Expectedly, positive feelings were reported when evaluating a message with which individuals were familiar.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of religious figures and their choice of persuasive appeals, as mediated by the participant characteristics of level of cognition, religiosity and familiarity with the messages. In general, the study indicates that individuals who are more familiar with religious messages, namely those possessing high levels of religiosity, are likely to rate conversion messages and their speakers more positively than those with lower levels of religiosity, who are less familiar with the messages presented.

Although none of the hypotheses were fully supported, the research revealed interesting findings. The rationale for each hypothesis was that of familiarity. Specifically, those who respond favorably to a message and its speaker should be those who are more familiar with that message type. While none of the interaction hypotheses were supported, familiarity was nonetheless a significant factor in explaining the differences found, as shown above.

Personal relevance, as suggested earlier, must be present for an individual to recognize a sermon as pertaining to one's self-schema; the material presented in the

sermon must become a part of the individual's personal experiences (McCallister, 1995). As Gordijn, Postmes, and deVries (2001) found, the extent to which one perceives those portrayed (in this case, the minister) as similar to oneself mediates self-persuasion. Therefore, if an individual sees someone presenting a belief system with which they are familiar, they are more likely to rate that person, and perhaps their message, more favorably if familiar phrases are employed (Howard, 1997).

While comfort appeal messages and their speakers were more favored by everyone in general, the fear appeals had low mean scores for message and speaker evaluation. In this study, hypotheses that Fundamentalist individuals would be more familiar with fear appeal messages, and thus respond favorably to them, were not supported. It may be that this type of message is not as prevalent in those denominations as stereotypes indicate. In contrast to Ragsdale & Durham's (1987) study, fear appeals were not favored by anyone. This is likely a result of population variables, as their study included a specific, homogeneous Bible study group in a small church in Louisiana, measured during a Sunday morning service.

However, another explanation to a lack of support for the above hypotheses may be that fundamentalists perceive fear appeals as extremely appropriate when used to outside others, but not when directed at themselves. For example, it has been found that university campus evangelists yelling and preaching *at* students (perceived as "sinners" by the ministers) are generally perceived negatively (Brannan, 2001) and qualitative evaluations of fear appeal sermons revealed approving reactions from fundamentalist believers ("People need to hear this."), while simultaneously acknowledging that it might make themselves bored ("It's not meant for me.") (Eckstein, 2003, p. 19).

Familiarity toward a message has certainly been found to trigger non-analytic processing, when seen as a subjective experience (Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 2001). As demonstrated in this study, highly religious individuals may attend equally to inherent message characteristics as well as to previously formed religious attitudes. Indeed, automatic activation of an attitude toward a religious message, without conscious control, "may be descriptive of what a highly religious person may experience . . . [and] a less religious person may require considerable effort in constructing an attitude toward the object" (Hill, 1995, p. 368). Supported by protection motivation theory, this would allow highly religious individuals to stay safely within the realm of religious security, avoiding thoughts foreign to their belief systems.

This study also found a negative correlation between level of religiosity and need for cognition. Highly religious people may simply fall back on their formerly established attitudes to react to similar attitude-objects in the future. Indeed, Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer (1994) concluded that religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy were negatively related to complexity of thought for existential issues, of which religion is a prime example.

It was originally thought that highly religious and fundamentalist individuals, by comparison to low religiosity individuals, would be more prone to approve of

speakers and their messages when fear appeals were used. Instead, the research revealed that highly religious people were more favorable toward any type of religious message and its speaker than less religious individuals, regardless of the type of appeal. Further, the results suggested, and the theoretical foundations support, that the more favorable reactions of highly religious individuals could be explained by their familiarity with religious messages. However, this study did possess certain drawbacks.

Limitations

Simple identification of religious affiliation to distinguish between fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist individuals is limiting. Individual differences in crucial doctrinal tenets could have impacted the reception of messages in ways not accounted by this study. Future work would benefit from the implementation of a fundamentalism scale, established solely for the differentiation of fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist individuals.

Another limitation is the number of individuals contained in each cell, approximately 12. While this number satiated experimental requirements when each cell was combined into its sermon version, this number of participants does not allow generalization toward larger religious groupings as a whole. Thus, future studies should work to fill beyond the number of participants this study found constraining itself.

Finally, when drawing conclusions based on the overarching significance of this study, it can be said that persuasion is effected, but very specifically. This study did not measure persuasion, as trying to produce actual conversion occurrences may not only be difficult, but unethical. What was tested, however, was degree of favorableness to the message. Therefore, if persuasion is seen as an explicit change in the attitude and belief structure of the individual, then this study cannot confirm conversion messages as "effective" for favoring groups. If, however, persuasion is seen as a tool of reinforcement of attitudes and beliefs, then this study can definitely confirm conversion messages as "effective" for some individuals with similar groupings. The limitation then becomes the looseness with which the term persuasion is used. More specific operationalization throughout the study would provide clearer insight into persuasion's effectiveness among religious groups.

Conclusion

This study focused on the affective, intellectual, and cognitive needs of potential converts in reference to their attitudes toward ministers actually utilizing conversion appeals. Religious sermons have varying implications among diverse religious affiliations and levels of religious commitment. This study examined fear and comfort in relation to religious persuasion, and found that familiarity mediates favorableness toward religious sermons.

The study of religious conversion messages is an unexplored facet in interpersonal communication and social-cognition research. Religious affiliations significantly influence societies throughout the world, especially of late. A phenomenon with such hold over individuals' lives, unfortunately providing justification for seemingly any action, cannot be ignored, especially when researchers have the ability to analyze the cognitive and communicative components of such a power. By examining elements of religious perception, we may finally begin to understand the rationale behind others' lives.

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