



Psycho-Take

Corona and Fear Appeal: Psycho-Insights

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Abstract

Human being has been the most vulnerable lot amongst living species on earth. And all this is because human being has the ability to think! In fact, they think more, much more beyond requirement. Corona crisis gave humans ample time to think, yes, about pros and cons of different scenarios emerging and they tried their level best to cope up with such a situation. More so, interestingly, in this critical situation of CoViD lockdowns, there arose the psycho-connect, obviously not to be understood by the masses, but then as researchers and students of management or applied sciences, we chose to bring forward this unique write-up involving the 'appeal' parlance. The paper is based upon observations encountered during CoViD days right from March 2020 till today and tries to explore the situation through the 'appeal' lens.

Keywords: Epidemiology, Fear Appeal, Infodemic, Reassuring leadership

1. Introduction

Hope and positivity have given way to despair and helplessness and death urges are reigning supreme on human minds as CoViD-19 has

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become the enormously fearsome global brand that feeds on 'fear appeal'. *Fear* appeals are a type of high-impact persuasive technique that contain a high-threat component and a high-efficacy component. A high threat condition is created when the negative consequences of some action are highly probable and the target believes he or she is highly susceptible to them. The high-efficacy condition is created when the recommended action to avert the threat is effective and the target believes he or she can achieve that recommendation.

Unfortunately, algorithm based mathematical models from reputed research organisations are predicting death and doom of gargantuan proportions. Predicting the trajectory of spread of viruses requires much more rigour and methodological considerations given the fact that variables like demographic profile, co-morbidities, herd immunity, weather conditions and individual resilience may have a very important role to play in mortality rates.

2. Literature on Fear Appeal

Essentially an appeal is a persuasive statement; it can be directed either toward logic or toward emotion. Normally, it is expected that an advertising message should appeal, directly or indirectly, to those key needs which influence behaviour response. Fear appeals are also known as *fear arousing communications* (try to scare consumer into action). An effective fear appeal contains a high-threat component and a high-efficacy component (Witte and Allen 2000; Witte 1992, 1998) as said earlier. Although it has been argued that fear appeals are no longer effective but most research continues to support their effectiveness for both youth and adults (Beaudoin 2002; Biener and Taylor 2002).

Schiffman and Kanuk write "Some Researchers have found a negative relationship between the intensity of fear appeals and their ability to persuade", however, Ken Chapman has found a positive relation between fear and persuasiveness. Aaker adds, "Anxiety has two kinds of possible effects on message reception and yielding. As a stimulus, its effects tend to be negative; as a drive, they tend to be positive".

Fear appeals refer to risks that one can either prevent or reduce by accepting or not accepting the idea or proposition. Risks as physical, social, financial, opportunity and related to idea acceptance are frequently encountered in everyday life. Hovland and colleagues (1953) studied the impact of such an appeal on the acceptance of a recommendation that would reduce the threat. They found that the weakest appeal was most effective in changing attitudes and behaviour. Here the concept of 'defensive avoidance' was introduced arguing that the strong fear appeal was so threatening that it was more effective for recipients to reduce fear by rejecting the appeal as alarmist rather than accepting the recommendation.

3. Fear – the problem

Mathematico-statistical tools sound scientific but have their own weaknesses and their ability to predict outcomes need not always be taken at face value. Epidemiology is a biological science in which the role of mathematical science will always be limited. Moreover, there is need to understand that people can be literally scared to death by such propositions and creating fear-psychosis is not advisable. Surprisingly, people from the widely viewed media, men and women of substance, are not realising the damage this kind of a thanatophobia can do to the society at large. The irrational fear of death has created anxiety neurosis of mass scale and wittingly or unwittingly is doing more damage to the societal psyche at large. Facilitated by free access of information technology, doomsday forebodings are creating an 'infodemic' of sorts, increasing the severity of the pandemic.

In times of crisis human mind is anxious and accepts the undesirable more than the desirable. To worsen the situation, the many forms of social media are further aggravating the crisis with their fantastic and fanciful posts. Hysterical reactions are the outcome as both the States, as well as the subjects are overreacting and a fear-psychosis grips the world. It was evident when some half a million people in India took to the roads to make it to their respective villages hundreds of miles away walking with little cash and no food expecting the worst to happen in the days to come. It is 'awfulizing' that is creating more problems than the virus itself.

Novel coronavirus, as the new variant is being called, has created a global scare of the same proportions, leading to a virulent paranoid response. There is need to stop and think rationally. The fact is that the scare is more severe than the virus attack. There is a need to think of the 1918 Spanish flu that killed some 50 million people worldwide. Those were the pre antibiotic era of medicine. We survived that although we were less competent. We can cope with the present one more effectively. This is a different era and we have the wherewithal to cope with the pandemic. This is not to under play the threat but what is important is to not to overplay the panic. That would create more problems than the disease. We are already witnessing frenzied responses from a large cross section of the people across the globe. From puerile to paranoid the reactions appear to be alarmingly universal. Fear, insecurity and anxiety are often fuelled by fear appeals.

4. Care or Scare

Interestingly, the basic precautions that were advised hundred years ago still need to be the same and there is hardly any reason to overreact. Social distancing to flatten the curve, quarantine for the suspected or the infected and sanitization for all, the narrative then seems to change hardly as the nature of the pathogen remains quite similar to what is given in the class 9 biology book. It says that many viruses can be transmitted as particles in the air and a single sneeze will distribute thousands of particles which may hang in the air or cover articles we may touch. So even without a direct contact with a sufferer from a viral disease, it is possible to get infected by touching those articles or breathing in the air left behind by the infected. Naturally we need to have learnt by experience and acquired greater maturity to cope with the severity.

But the panic that has become a natural concomitant of the present pandemic has taken the better of our reason and needs to be curbed. In fact, in the 1918 Spanish flu days also when we were less armed and more vulnerable the one common refrain was "*do not worry too much about the disease*". The rule still applies and it is important to ensure that in this media driven commerce age, Paranoia does not spread faster than the pathogen which is more out of scare than care.

The corona scare has given rise to severe delusions. Every sneeze or cough is now being considered as a possible case of covid 19 and every such case appears to be a certain death. The degree of scaremongering is so intense that psychological ailments are afflicting people and depression, phobic reactions and other syndromes are on the rise. With people being forced to stay inside due to the lock down, ideal for negativities to rise with people having hardly anything to do, this backed by the anxiety and fear of the uncertain situation is a fit enough case for rise of stress and anxiety disorders.

The washing of hands with sanitizers or soap and water every few minutes has acquired the dimension of an obsessive compulsive reaction. Cases of countries with high population density and low per capita income and that of countries with low population density and high per capita income don't appear much different and some kind of a global mass hysteria is building up with free flow of information depicting scary future scenarios. This is the time to think of humanity rather than economy and make amends for the competitive globalisation and replace it by collaborative globalisation. As uncertainty mounts, it helps mis-information to flourish, and people appear to be clueless as to how to cope with the threat. The rich are stacking provisions for a lifetime while the poor are worried about their next meal. These are the times for reassuring global leadership that comes forward to save humanity at large with cooperative endeavour and strategic alliances. Such actions will spontaneously create positivity and minimise fear that may prove to be a bigger threat than the virus.

An old Indian parable explains this rather succinctly. There was an ascetic living in a hut on the outskirts of a village. One night he sees a dark shadow moving menacingly towards the village. The ascetic picks up the courage to ask the shadow who he was and what his motive was. The shadow replied he was the Death and was going to the village to pick up people who were to die due to an impending endemic that was to hit. He asked how many people would die. The shadow said 1000 and moved towards the village. In a few days the endemic struck and a few thousand died. The ascetic was shocked because he thought the death had lied. He decided to wait for the

shadow to return. As the shadow returned the ascetic charged him saying that he had lied as not 1000 but several thousand had died. Why did the shadow lie? The shadow of death said that it did not lie. The endemic had killed only a thousand. The rest died of 'fear' to which endemic had no connection. The moral of the story is clear. Fear of death is more dangerous than death itself.

5. Conclusion

It is important to assuage the fears of people and ensure that the crisis is temporary and will end soon. The media must also realise that at times it is important to adhere to the time tested principle that promoting hope and positivity leads to better results than awfulizing figures to spread panic. Reassuring news in the form of positive instances, which are there, must also be emphasized. It has to be realized that positivity and faith go hand in hand, providing the healing touch. They strengthen the immune system by creating a desire to survive. It is imperative to drive away fear unitedly. This is the time for some reassuring leadership rather than casting a shadow of 'fear'. The most motivating statement in these times of distress may be – let us get back to work!

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