

**A study of the effectiveness of fear appeals PSA's  
on young adult college students**

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**Abstract**

We examined the effectiveness of Fear Appeal Public Service Announcements (PSA's) as judged by young adult college students. The Fear Appeals literature indicates that the effectiveness of PSA's should be related to three factors: (1) fear arousal (2) perceived threat from the behavior and (3) perceived efficacy of behavior changes. Our study examined whether PSA's can be effective with young adult college students, given the exposure to graphic images in the media, video games, and movies that is prevalent in today's society.

We conducted an experiment with 41 young adult college students. The participants were shown six fear appeal PSA's concerning various behaviors relevant to young adult college students (smoking, HIV, distracted driving, drugs). After viewing each video, the participants completed a questionnaire asking them to judge the videos on three dimensions (i.e., questions related to fear arousal, perceived threat, and perceived efficacy) and to provide an overall effectiveness rating for each video.

As expected, we found that the higher the fear arousal from the PSA, the higher the effectiveness ratings of the PSA. The video that was judged to be most graphic was rated to be highly effective, indicating that young adult college students can still be reached by Fear Appeal PSA's, albeit ones with extremely graphic content. We also found perceived threat and perceived efficacy were not statistically significant factors in predicting the effectiveness ratings of these participants.