

Framing Legal Fines: How Message Presentation Affects Severity Perceptions

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Abstract

In many public settings, people face legal notice for minor violations where identical fine limits are presented with various wordings, such as “up to,” “maximum,” “or below,” or “range.” This research examines whether these subtle linguistic differences in fine frames influence consumers’ perceived severity of the fine and their deterrence intentions. We hypothesized that up-to and maximum frames would lead to higher perceived severity than or-below and range frames, with the range frame yielding the lowest severity perceptions. We further anticipated that these effects would be mitigated for more serious offenses. Three preregistered between-subjects experiments (total $N \approx 1,200$; all UK adults) presented participants with public notice scenarios. Participants read a notice about a minor offense (littering) in Studies 1 and 2, and a more serious offense (vandalism) in Study 3. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four framing conditions, and reported perceived severity and deterrence intentions. For the minor offense (Studies 1 and 2), as hypothesized, up-to and maximum frames led to the highest perceived severity, followed by the or-below frame, with the range frame yielding the lowest. The range frame resulted in weaker deterrence intentions. Mediation tests were statistically consistent, showing that perceived severity linked framing effects to deterrence. In contrast, for the more serious crime (Study 3), framing had no significant effects on perceived severity or deterrence. The findings demonstrate that subtle differences in the linguistic framing of fines in minor offense notices can influence perceived severity and compliance intentions, providing preliminary evidence that framing effects extend to public-facing legal notices.

Track: Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing