Self-affirmation:
Value and Health Message Recall Over Time

Robin L. Hunt, Reed T. Wonn, Bethany R. Shorey Fennell, and Renee E. Magnan

Washington State University Vancouver

INTRODUCTION

- Self-affirmation refers to a process by which an individual recognizes personal values when there is a threat to the self-concept.
- Self-affirmation can broaden perspective of the self and reduce the experience of threat (e.g., Critcher & Dunning, 2015). For example, people presented with health intervention messages after self-affirming, are more likely to engage with the threat in a more constructive than defensive manner (e.g., Steele, 1988).
- Various approaches are used to reflect on an important value, and these could differentially influence active information processing.
- This study evaluated whether different self affirmation formats (essay vs non-essay based) would have an impact on value and health message recall accuracy .

METHODS

Participants
- N= 491
- 52.5% female, 74.3% Caucasian, mean age 39.72 years (*SD* = 12.00)

Procedure
- As part of a larger study, participants in an online study were randomly assigned to one of five self-affirmation conditions (two essay based; two non-essay based) or a control condition. After completing the task, they viewed a message about sun-protective behaviors (Figure 1) and were asked to recall both value and message content immediately after the survey (T1) and one week later (T2).

- **Essay Based Affirmations**:
  - Values Affirmation (Steele, 1988; *n*=95): Ranking of values (see Table 1) in order of personal importance then 3-5 minute essay explaining why the top value is important.
  - Social Values (modified Shnabel et al., 2013; *n*=99): Ranking of values in order of personal importance then 3-5 minute essay explaining how the top value make them feel connected to others.

- **Non-essay Based Affirmations**:
  - Perspective Circle (modified Critcher & Dunning, 2015; *n*=98): Ranking of values in order of personal importance then, using a pie chart, indicating how much of the pie represents the most and least important values.
  - Implementation Intention (modified Armitage et al., 2011; *n*=100): Completing an If-Then statement. "If I feel threatened or anxious, then I will…" with one of five value based options provided (e.g., think about things I have succeeded in).

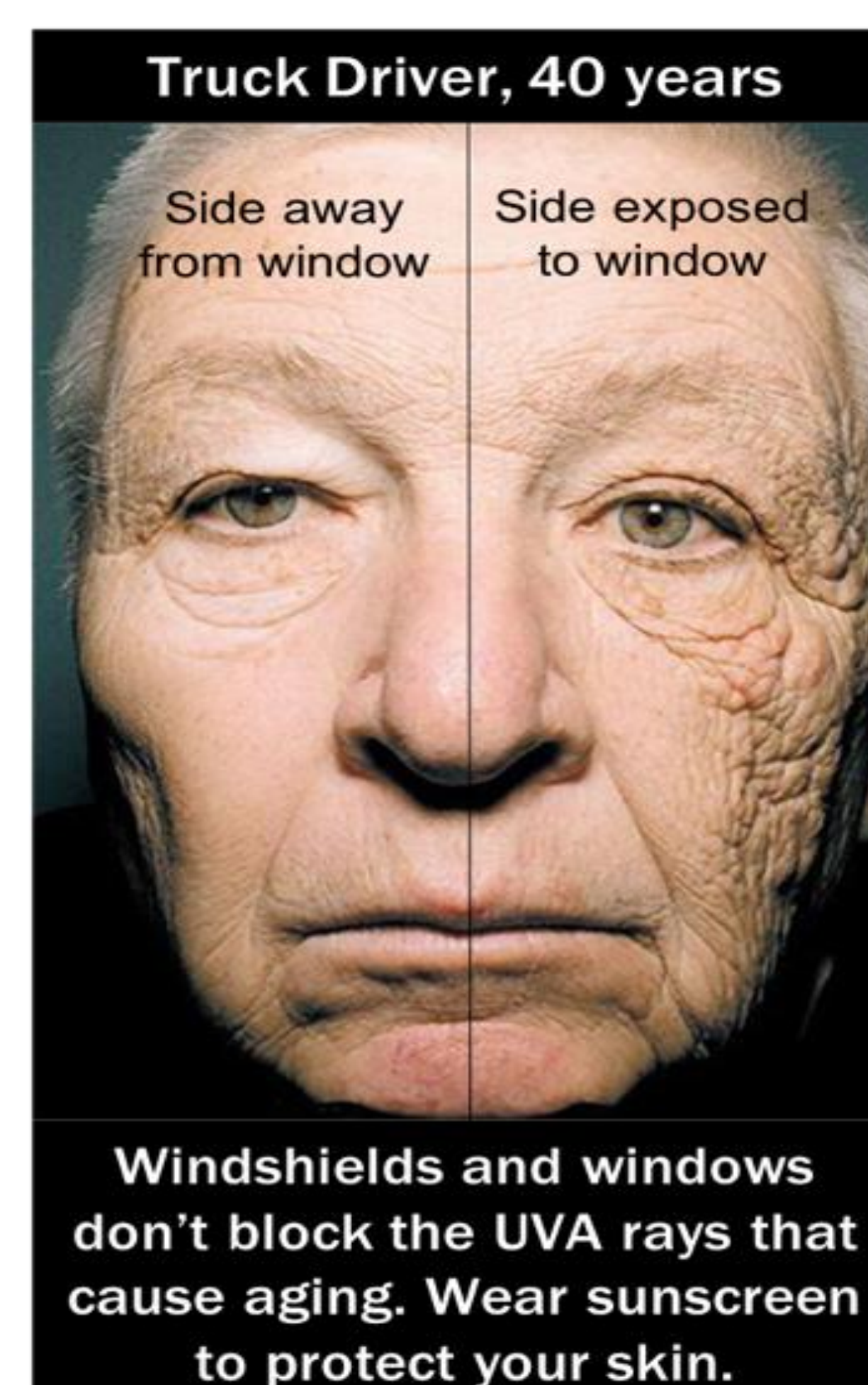- **Control** (Casico et al., 2015; *n*=94): Three minutes explaining steps to charge a cell phone.

Truck Driver, 40 years

Side away from window | Side exposed to window

Windshields and windows don't block the UVA rays that cause aging. Wear sunscreen to protect your skin.

Figure 1. **Message of consequences of not engaging in sun protective behaviors.**

Table 1. List of Values used in Self-Affirmation Tasks

- Friends and family
- Religion
- Politics
- Science
- Cultural values
- Personal appearance
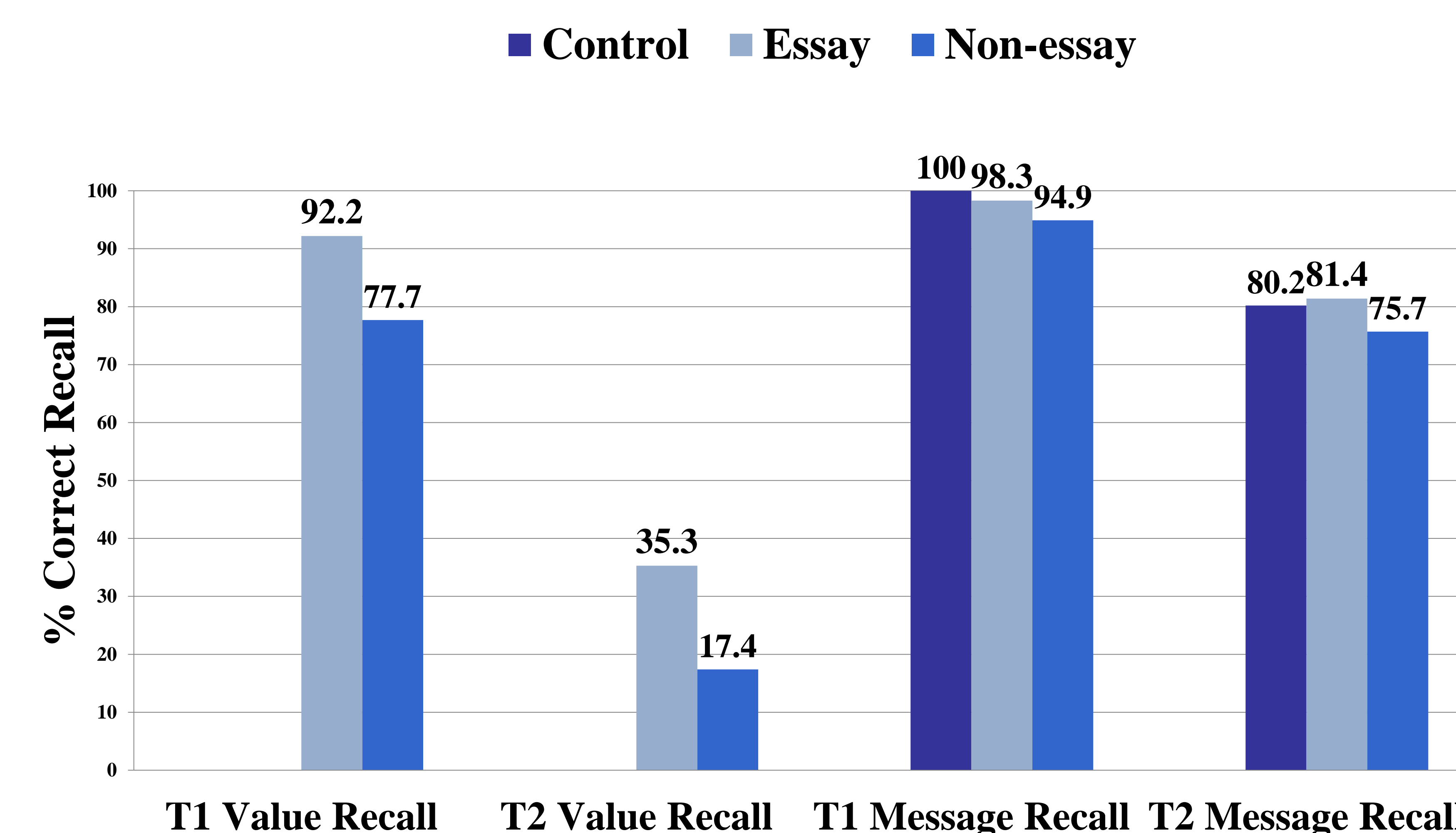- Intelligence
- Sports
- Art
- humor

RESULTS

Essay-based vs non-essay-based :
- Those in the essay conditions were more likely to accurately recall the value than those in the non-essay conditions both immediately ($\chi^2 (1)$=15.31, p<.001) and one week later ($\chi^2(1)$=13.93, p<.001). However, they did not differ by message recall at either T1 or T2 (ps > .08).

Essay-based vs control:
- Those in the essay conditions vs control did not differ by message recall at either T1 or T2 (ps > .20)

Figure 2. **% Correct Recall by Self-Affirmation Type**

Legend: ■ **Control** ■ **Essay** ■ **Non-essay**

	T1 Value Recall	T2 Value Recall	T1 Message Recall	T2 Message Recall
Control			100	80.2
Essay	92.2	35.3	98.3	81.4
Non-essay	77.7	17.4	94.9	75.7

CONCLUSIONS

- Essay-based affirmations may involve deeper processing of self-relevant values relative to non-essay affirmations.
- However, better recall of one's values may not translate into helping individuals remember content of health messages over time.
- The strength of the message outlining consequences of sun exposure may have overcome any potential advantage of a specific self-affirmation on message recall over time. Future work should vary strength of the health message to address this possibility.

2180