Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ethical risk perception of freebies and effects on journalists' ethical reasoning

Ven-hwei Lo[a]* and Ran Wei[b]

[a]*National Chengchi University, Taiwan;* [b]*University of South Carolina, USA*

Accepting freebies and the consequence of doing so is a long-standing ethical issue in journalism. Critics argue that freebies corrupt journalists and undercut the integrity of journalism. Working journalists tend to agree. Accepting freebies, however, is widespread in many countries. Why is there such an attitude-behavior gap? Surveying 771 journalists in Taiwan, we explored the gap from the framework of optimistic bias regarding risk perceptions and risk-taking behavior. Results reveal that most journalists thought freebies were unacceptable, but they perceived their peers as more vulnerable to the freebies-accepting situation than themselves. The less vulnerable to such situations those journalists felt, the more tolerant they were toward freebies and the more likely they were to accept them.

Keywords: ethic; ethical risk; freebies; optimistic bias

Purpose of study

Accepting freebies from sources and the consequences of doing so are long-standing concerns in journalism ethics (Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005; Wulfemeyer, 1989). "Freebies" refer to something given to journalists at no cost (Goodwin, 1983). In the context of journalistic practice, freebies include free samples, free meals, free bottles of wine, token gifts, discounts on new cars, free concert and movie tickets, discount air tickets, and even free trips abroad. Critics argue that freebies corrupt journalists and undercut the integrity of journalism (Day, 1998; Goodwin, 1983). Working journalists tend to agree. Many news organizations have developed policies against staff journalists accepting freebies (Goodwin, 1983). Major professional media organizations have also adopted code of ethics dealing with conflict of interest and freebies (Day, 1988). For instance, the Taiwan Press Council adopted a code of ethics in 1974 and revised it in 1992; the code has a clause requiring journalists to refrain from accepting gifts, freebies, and special treatment from news sources.

However, in reality, accepting freebies is commonplace among working journalists in a large number of countries (Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005; Wulfemeyer, 1990). What accounts for this dichotomy? Why are some journalists more tolerant of freebies than others? And what is the reasoning behind their ethical decision-making regarding freebies?

The purpose of the study is to seek answers to these questions. As Wright (1996) argued, ethical decisions are influenced by both the decision-making process and the decision-makers. Using the optimistic bias hypothesis regarding risk perceptions and risk-taking behavior as the analytical framework (Weinstein, 1980), we attempt to understand the attitudinal-behavioral gap in reasoning about freebies by examining

*Corresponding author. Email: loven@nccu.edu.tw

journalists' perceived vulnerability to the freebie-accepting situation with a self-other comparative perspective.

Specifically, in thinking and reacting to risks, the optimistic bias hypothesis proposes that people tend to think they are less likely than others to risk experiencing negative life events or threats to their well-being (Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein & Klein, 1996). Fundamentally, the bias in estimating one's own risks relative to others represents a pattern of flawed self-assessment (Gold, 2007). Consequently, biased people tend to believe that they would be less likely to engage in risky behaviors than their peers (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986).

Optimistic bias was found a robust phenomenon in Western (particularly the US and Britain, see Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002) and non-Western countries (such as China, see Ji, Zhang, Usborne, & Guan, 2004). On the other hand, past research focused mostly on health risks. This study is the first to examine accepting freebies as an ethical risk to journalists. An ethical risk is different from a health risk that threatens one's physical well-being. Nevertheless, it is a risk. The risk can be viewed at several levels. At the individual level, journalists accepting freebies risk being accused of accepting bribes. At the organizational level, accepting freebies risks compromising the integrity of the journalism profession and subsequently the reputation of the news organization that employs the journalist who accepts freebies. At the societal level, accepting freebies undermines the public's confidence in the journalism profession as an independent institution. Hence, accepting freebies constitutes a risk-taking behavior.

Applying the optimistic bias framework, we first examine journalists' ethical views of various types of freebies. We also examine the relationship between optimistic bias and journalists' ethical views of freebies and their likelihood to accept them, a projected future risk-taking behavior. Findings will shed light on the understanding of journalists' ethical reasoning in reacting to the risks posed by accepting freebies. The findings will help reveal the ethical reasoning patterns and ethical decision-making mechanisms of working journalists, thus advancing research in journalism ethics. Practically, the findings may lead to new approaches to ethics training for working journalists regarding the acceptance of freebies.

Review of the literature, research question and hypotheses

Ethical views toward freebies

Ethical standards are one of the most significant aspects of contemporary public debate about mainstream news media (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). Although contemporary journalists have become reasonably sensitive to ethical concerns about freebies, many of them are nevertheless receptive to them (Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005). In a survey of 286 television and radio news directors in the United States, Wulfemeyer (1989) found that 51% of the news directors surveyed said tickets to cover news/sports events were acceptable. About 47% thought non-alcoholic beverages and food at news events were okay. About one-third felt non-alcoholic beverages and food at non-news events were acceptable. Free trips for personal pleasure (5%) were judged to be the least acceptable, followed by special discounts (8%), token gifts (10%), alcoholic beverages at news events (14%), tickets for personal use (19%), alcoholic beverages at non-news events (22%), and free trips to cover news events (27%).

A survey of 103 newspaper editors and television news directors in the United States (Anderson & Leigh, 1992) revealed that 92% of the respondents found special discounts for journalists unacceptable. About 68% said it was improper for journalists to accept free movie tickets. About 64% thought free trips from news sources were inappropriate. About 54% felt journalists should not accept freebies of token value. In China, paid journalism, which refers to the practice of taking cash from sources for pushing promotional materials disguised as news reports (Zhao, 1998), was widespread in the 1990s.

In a comparative study of Chinese journalists in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Lo, Chan, and Pan (2005) found that a substantial majority of Chinese journalists in the three regions thought most freebies were unacceptable. Cash from news sources was judged to be the least acceptable, followed by freebies from sources, and free trips from sources. Free meals from sources were judged to be most acceptable. On the other hand, they also found that most journalists in the three regions believed that accepting freebies was widespread. Free meals from sources were thought to be the most commonplace. Free gifts and free trips from sources came second and third. Cash from sources was judged to be the least commonplace. More recently, two *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reporters who were embedded during the war in Iraq received thousands of dollars worth of combat training at media boot camps organized by the Pentagon. They were at the center of a controversy on whether journalists should accept military handouts at taxpayers' expense (Robertson, 2003).

In summary, a review of previous studies shows that there seem to be a relatively high level of consensus among journalists around the world that accepting cash from sources is unethical. There is also a relationship between the value of a freebie and its perceived acceptability by journalists. Expensive freebies, such as free trips abroad, are less likely to be deemed acceptable by journalists than low-valued freebies such as free drinks, meals, and tickets. Based on the above review, we first explore the following research question:

> RQ: *How prevalent are freebies in journalistic practices in Taiwan? What are the ethical views of Taiwan journalists toward various types of freebies?*

Optimistic bias and ethical views of freebies

In assessing risks and threats to one's well-being, especially the probability of encountering negative life events such as being attacked by an animal, being involved in an accident, and contracting diseases, people have the tendency to make comparative assessments (Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002; Weinstein, 1987, 1989) and believe that they are less vulnerable to risks and threats than others. This phenomenon of biased optimistic perception or biased optimism is known as optimistic bias (Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein & Klein, 1996) or illusions of invulnerability (Perloff, 1987). According to Gouveia and Clark (2001), optimistic bias is a psychological tendency in which people will think they are less likely to experience negative future events and more likely to experience positive future events as compared to others.

The optimistic bias phenomenon was found robust in numerous studies examining people's perceptions of risks in a variety of health-related and

non-health related contexts (Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001; Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002; Salmon, Park, & Wrigley, 2003). Health-related risks included sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS (Ellen, Boyer, Tschann, & Shafer, 1996), cancer (Ji & Riffe, 2004; Rise, Strype, & Sutton, 2002), smoking (Williams & Clarke, 1997), substance abuse (Hansen, Raynor, & Wolkenstein, 1991), radon at home sites (Weinstein, Sandman, & Roberts, 1990), response to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreaks (Ji hang, Usborne, & Guan, 2004), and bioterrorism (Salmon, Park, & Wrigley, 2003). Non-health related risks included campus violence (Chapin, 2001a; Chapin, de las Alas, & Coleman, 2005), attacks by animals (Gore et al., 2005), railroad accidents (Lange, Fleming, & Toussaint, 2004), motorcycle injuries (Rutter, Quine, & Albery, 1998), bungee jumping (Middleton, Harris, & Surman, 1996), and earthquakes (Spittal, McClure, Siegart, & Walkey, 2005).

Furthermore, the existing literature on biased optimism suggests that optimistic individuals tend to believe that they are better and more competent than others (Alicke, 1985; Gouveia & Clark, 2001; Hoorens, 1995). This bias was characterized as "positive illusions" (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995, p. 213) that may lead people to believe that they can solve problems, take control of events in their lives, and avoid being victimized. Hoorrens (1995) found Dutch high school students believed that they possessed positive traits to a higher degree and negative traits to a lower degree than the average student. Harris (1996) also found that people tend to possess exaggerated perceptions of their capacity to control events, and their perceived controllability was associated with optimistic bias about avoiding experiencing negative events. In a survey of 387 high school students in urban Pennsylvania, Chapin, Alas, and Coleman (2005) found respondents believed that they were less likely than others to become victims of violence or perpetrators of violence at school. In an experimental study of 309 undergraduate students in Taiwan, Lin and Raghubir (2005) found students estimated that they were more likely to have a happy marriage and less likely to get divorced than others.

As discussed earlier, accepting freebies can endanger journalists' careers, the reputation of the news organizations they work for, and the journalism profession at large. Accordingly, we propose that the optimistic bias hypothesis is highly applicable to examine the ethical reasoning of journalists about freebies. Based on the above review of past research, we hypothesize that:

> H1: *Surveyed journalists will perceive other journalists to be more vulnerable to the freebie-accepting situation than themselves.*

Optimistic bias and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes

Previous research suggests that biased optimistic perceptions have an impact on attitudinal outcomes such as anxiety and behavioral intentions. For example, in a study to determine whether adolescents systematically underestimated their relative risk for STDs and HIV, Ellen, Boyer, Tschann, and Shafer (1996) found that adolescents' perceptions of risk were related to anxiety about STDs and HIV. In a study about sexual practices among African American teens, Chapin (2001b) found optimistic bias was linked to sexual attitudes. Teens with a greater level of biased optimism were more likely to engage in pre-marital sex.

Further, though biased optimism may have some benefit in helping maintain self-esteem (Kos & Clarke, 2001; Perloff, 1987), past research indicates that

optimistic bias about personal risks may amount to barriers to taking precautions to reduce risks (Harris & Middleton, 1994; Weinstein, 1980, 1987; Weinstein & Lyon, 1999). As Kos and Clarke (2001, p. 534) put it, "This perception of invulnerability may lead people to ignore legitimate risks in their environment and to fail to take measures to offset those risks."

Prior research on optimistic bias has examined the consequence of biased optimistic perceptions on risk-taking behavior. In fact, the perception of one's own vulnerability to risks is essential to self-protective behavior. Past research showed that people who believe they were less prone to experience risks are less likely to take protective action. Optimistic bias may even make people underestimate their actual risks, leading to lower intentions to take action. As Weinstein and Lyon (1999) put it, optimistic biases about personal risks were barriers to action. Chapin, de las Alas, and Coleman (2005) found that the less American students believed that they were likely victims of violence, the less likely they were to take measures to prevent violence in school environments. Dolinski, Wojciech, and Zawisza (1987) reported that after the Chernobyl nuclear-plant disaster, Polish students who perceived themselves as invulnerable to radiation were less likely to report taking precautions. Burger and Burns (1988) found that women who believed their risk of unwanted pregnancy was less than that of other women were less likely to use contraceptives. McCoy et al. (1992) found similar findings in a study of smokers' behavior. Chapin (2001b) found optimistic bias was related to sexual intentions (intended future risks) among African American teens. The theoretical explanation of not taking protective action is that optimistic bias may be rooted in the inherent feelings of the self being superior (Mead, 1934).

Accordingly, we propose that the magnitude of optimistic bias will predict journalists' ethical behavior. Journalists with high biased optimism will be likely to believe they are invulnerable to negative consequences of freebies. Since they believe that negative consequences of freebies will not affect them but other journalists, they may tolerate freebies. In addition, we consider explicitly the likelihood for journalists to take freebies as a projected risk-taking behavior. The hypotheses concerning the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of optimistic bias regarding accepting freebies are developed as follows:

H2: *The magnitude of optimistic bias will be a significant predictor of ethical views of freebies.*

H3: *The magnitude of optimistic bias will be a significant predictor of the likelihood of accepting freebies.*

Method

The present study relied on a national survey of working journalists in Taiwan in 2004 to explore the research question and test the three hypotheses. Following the definition used by Weaver and Wilhoit (1996, p. 168) in their study of American journalists, we defined journalists as those "who have editorial responsibility for the preparation or transmission of news stories or other information." Unlike the Weaver and Wilhoit definition, however, our definition is broader. Researchers, photographers, and camera operators were included to take into consideration of the unique situation in Taiwan. These people are traditionally considered journalists. Accordingly, the population of our survey were full-time editorial personnel

including reporters, editors, wire editors and translators, correspondents, columnists, news researchers, news announcers, photographers, and camera operators working at Chinese-language radio and television stations as well as daily newspapers in Taiwan.

To draw a probability sample, we used a multi-stage sampling plan. In the first stage, we compiled a list of Chinese-language daily newspapers and radio and television stations in Taiwan. At the second stage, we drew a random sample of individual newspapers as well as radio and television stations. In the third stage, we obtained lists of all journalists working for the selected newspapers and radio and television stations. In the final stage, we drew a random sample of individual journalists from the list provided by the selected news organizations. The multi-stage sampling procedures resulted in a total of 1,642 journalists being selected systematically.

We sent a letter to each of the journalists in our sample informing them about the purposes of the study and requesting their participation. The survey was conducted in November 2004 using a self-administered questionnaire. Of the 1,642 journalists sampled, 1,185 completed the questionnaire successfully. The response rate of 75.7% was higher than similar surveys conducted in other countries. Of the sample, 771 (65.1%) were reporters and 414 (34.9%) were non-reporters, including editors, wire editors and translators, researchers, and news announcers.

In this study, only reporters were used for the subsequent analysis because they are most likely to encounter a work situation where freebies are offered. Of the 771 reporters, 43 (5.6%) worked for radio stations, 305 (39.6%) for television stations, and 423 (54.9%) for newspapers.

Of the sample, 63.2% were males and 36.8% were females. The average age of the respondents was 34.98 (SD= 6.97, ranging from 22 to 61). A total of 96.9% indicated they had received some level of college education. Specifically, 17.5% held a three-year college degree, 76.7% held a bachelor's degree, and 17.4% held a graduate degree. Among college degree holders, 66.1% majored in journalism or mass communication. The average income of respondents was US$1,625 per month. Their average length of time working as a journalist was 9.41 years (SD=6.37, ranging from 1 to 33).

Measurement

Ethical views of freebies

To measure respondents' ethical views of freebies, we asked them to indicate their agreement with four statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) concerning their views on accepting (1) free gifts from news sources, (2) cash from news sources, (3) free trips for personal pleasure, and (4) free trips to cover news events. Results of a principal component analysis showed that the four items grouped in a single factor, suggesting that they measured a single underlying concept (Eigen value=2.49, accounting for 62.16% of the variance, KMO=.76). Therefore, we added the four items and divided by four to create a composite measure of "ethical views of freebies" (M=2.35, SD=.82, alpha =.79). The higher the score, the more acceptable the freebies are.

Then, we asked the respondents to indicate the extent to which they would agree that the following four types of freebies were commonplace in journalistic practices

in Taiwan: (1) free gifts from news sources, (2) cash from news sources, (3) free trips for personal pleasure, and (4) free trips to cover news events. The response categories ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Perceived vulnerability to accept freebies on self and on peer journalist

To measure these two variables, we first asked respondents to estimate how vulnerable they were to accept (1) free gifts, (2) cash, and (3) free trips for news assignments in their own journalistic work. Then, we asked them to estimate how vulnerable other journalists were to accept (1) free gifts, (2) cash, and (3) free trips for news assignments. The response categories involved a 1–5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (meaning "invulnerable") to 5 (meaning "vulnerable").

Then, we factor analyzed the items using exploratory factor analysis procedures. Results of the factor analysis with Varimax rotation showed a two-factor solution, explaining a total of 86.35% of the variance (KMO=.69).[1] The first factor contained the three self items (Eigen value =2.64; 43.96% of the variance), while the second factor included the three others items (Eigen value=2.54; 42.39% of variance). As a result, we added the three self items and divided them by three to form an index of "perceived vulnerability to accept freebies on self" (M=2.268, SD=1.20, alpha=.91). The three others items were added and divided by three to form an index of "perceived vulnerability to accept freebies on peer journalists" (M=3.11, SD=1.00, alpha=.93). Both scales demonstrated high internal consistency. The higher the score, the more vulnerable to accept freebies.

Optimistic bias

Differences in scores between perceived vulnerability to accept freebies on self and on peer journalists were computed to generate a measure of optimistic bias (M= 0.84, SD=1.06). The higher the score, the larger the magnitude of optimistic bias regarding invulnerability to accept freebies.

Likelihood of accepting freebies (intended future risk)

Finally, to measure the projected risks involving freebies from sources, we asked respondents to indicate how likely they were to accept (1) free gifts, (2) cash, and (3) free trips for news assignments. The response categories were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (meaning "very unlikely") to 5 (meaning "very likely"). To make sure these items measured the same underlying concept, we performed another exploratory factor analysis. Results of a principal component factor analysis showed that the three items were grouped in a single factor, explaining 64.37% of the total variance (Eigen value=1.93; KMO=.64). Accordingly, we added the three items and divided them by three to form an index of "likelihood of accepting freebies" (M=2.59, SD=.94, alpha=.72). The internal consistency of the scale was sufficiently high. The larger the number, the higher the likelihood to accept freebies.

Control variables

They included measures of demographics such as gender, education, income, and major of study in college. In addition, organizational variables such as position, media types, and years of working in journalism were included.

Results

Results of frequency analysis revealed that a substantial majority of surveyed journalists in Taiwan viewed most freebies as unacceptable. To be specific, cash from news sources (M=1.79, SD=.88) was considered to be the least acceptable, followed by free trips for personal pleasure (M=2.14, SD=1.01) and free gifts from sources (M=2.63, SD=1.11). On the other hand, taking on trips to cover news events with no out of pocket cost was viewed as the most acceptable (M=2.84, SD=1.16). These results are consistent with previous studies (Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005).

Further, the results show that most journalists surveyed believed that accepting freebies was a widespread journalistic practice. Free gifts from sources (M=3.74, SD=.98) were judged to be most commonplace, followed by free trips to news events (M=3.71, SD=.98), and free trips for personal pleasure (M=3.36, SD=1.14). Cash from sources was perceived to be the least commonplace (M= 3.07, SD=1.16).

To test H1, which examined optimistic bias in estimating journalists' vulnerability to freebie-accepting situations as compared to peers, paired t-tests were used. As shown in Table 1, respondents perceived that their peer journalists (M=3.11, SD=1.00) were more vulnerable to accepting freebies than they were themselves (M=2.27, SD=1.20). The t value of 21.80 was significant at the p<.001 level. H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that optimistic bias regarding freebies would be a significant predictor of ethical views toward freebies. To test this hypothesis, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed. In the regression, demographic variables were entered first, followed by three organizational variables (e.g., position, media type, and years of working in journalism) and optimistic bias. The dependent variable was ethical views of freebies. Results show that income, media type, and years of working in journalism were three significant predictors. The higher the income, the less likely freebies were acceptable. Journalists working for newspapers were more likely to not to accept freebies. The longer a journalist had worked in the profession, the more likely they were to agree that freebies were unacceptable.

With the influence of demographic and organizational variables taken into account, optimistic bias was a significant predictor of ethical views of freebies (Beta=−.09, p<.01; see Column 1 in Table 2). This particular result indicates that the greater the optimistic bias, the less likely the agreement that freebies were acceptable. That is, the more respondents perceived others to be more vulnerable to freebies-accepting situations, the more they were against accepting freebies in journalistic practices. Conversely, the less vulnerable respondents viewed themselves

Table 1. Mean estimates of perceived vulnerability to accept freebies on self and on peer journalists.

Sample	N	Self	Peers	t-values
Freebies	762	2.09 (1.20)	2.94 (1.05)	21.13***
Cash	760	2.29 (1.36)	3.19 (1.08)	20.70***
Free trips	760	2.42 (1.34)	3.19 (1.07)	18.35***
Composite index	759	2.27 (1.20)	3.11 (1.00)	21.80***

***p<.001

Note: Figures in parentheses are standard deviations.

to freebie-accepting situations relative to others, the more acceptable they viewed freebies. H2 was supported.

Finally, H3 predicted that magnitude of optimistic bias would be a significant predictor of the likelihood of accepting freebies. To test it, another hierarchical regression analysis was performed. Similar to the earlier run, demographic variables were entered first, followed by three organizational variables (e.g., position, media type, and years of working in journalism) and magnitude of optimistic bias. The dependent variable was likelihood of accepting freebies. Results show that income, type of media, and years of working in journalism were significant predictors. Respondents who earned a higher income, had longer working experiences in journalism, and worked for newspapers tended to be less likely to accept freebies.

With the influence of demographics and organizational variables taken into account, magnitude of optimistic bias was a significant predictor of likelihood of accepting freebies (Beta $= -.14$, p$<$.001; see column 2 in Table 2). This result means that the greater the magnitude of optimistic bias, the less likely the acceptance of freebies, and the smaller the magnitude of optimistic bias, the more likely the acceptance of freebies. The more respondents perceived their peers to be vulnerable to the freebies-accepting situation, the less likely they were to accept freebies from sources. Conversely, the less respondents perceived themselves vulnerable to accept freebies relative to others, the more likely they were to consider accepting freebies. H3 was supported as well.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis predicting ethical views of freebies and likelihood of accepting freebies.

Predictors	Ethical views of freebies	Likelihood of accepting freebies
Block 1: Demographics		
Gender (male)	0.04	-0.00
Education	0.02	0.11**
Income	-0.11*	-0.16***
Major of study	0.03	0.01
Adjusted R^2	5.7%	7.2%
Block 2: Organizational Variables		
Position/rank	0.02	-0.01
Media type	-0.16***	-0.23***
Years of working in journalism	-0.14**	-0.04
Incremental adjusted R^2	3.8%	5.3%
Block 3: Optimistic Bias Variable		
Optimistic bias	-0.09**	-0.14***
Incremental adjusted R^2	0.8%	1.7%
Total adjusted R^2	10.3%	14.2%

Notes: Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (1=male, 0=female); major (1=journalism/mass communication, 0=else); position (1=reporter, 0=else); media type (1=newspaper, 0=radio/TV); ethical views of freebies (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree); and likelihood of accepting freebies (1=very unlikely, 5=very likely).
*** p$<$.001; ** p$<$.01; * p$<$.05.

Discussion

Freebies are a long-standing issue in journalism ethics. They pose a risk threatening the integrity of the journalistic profession. Though the consensus among working journalists is high in being against accepting freebies from news sources, the behavior of accepting freebies of various types is widespread in many countries. Previous research on ethics of freebies tended to use a direct approach, which triggers strong social desirability. Journalists are disdainful of accepting freebies yet do so anyway. We address the attitude-behavior discrepancy from a self-other perceptual perspective, minimizing social desirability.

First, the results of our study confirm the contradiction in ethical reasoning about freebies. A substantial majority of Taiwan journalists surveyed in this study viewed most freebies, particularly the acceptance of cash, as unacceptable. However, results also show that most of them believed the acceptance of freebies was common in journalistic practices in Taiwan. These findings suggested that freebies are a more serious problem facing journalists in Taiwan than in Hong Kong. For example, a recent study (Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005) found that only 7.9% of Hong Kong journalists felt that accepting cash from sources was prevalent in Hong Kong, while 40.6% of Taiwan journalists in the present study thought such a practice was prevalent in Taiwan. Lo and his associates (2005) also found that 47.6% of Hong Kong journalists felt that the acceptance of free gifts from sources was prevalent in Hong Kong. In contrast, the present study found that 73.7% Taiwan journalists thought such a practice was prevalent in Taiwan.

Further, we found that respondents perceived themselves to be less vulnerable to the negative consequences of accepting freebies than their peer journalists. This biased optimism in believing self as less vulnerable was found to predict attitudes to freebies and intention to take freebies. Those journalists who perceived that they were less vulnerable to negative consequences of accepting freebies than their peers tended to tolerate and accept freebies in their journalistic practices.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature of risk communication by expanding risk perceptions from health to ethical risks. We view freebies explicitly as a risk and find that the self-other comparative perceptions of freebies as a risk have real effects on journalists' ethical attitudes and behavior. Thus, optimist bias is an appropriate framework for understanding journalists' ethical reasoning process with regard to freebies.

In addition, ethical risk perceptions, optimistic bias, and behavioral intention were found to be related. Those journalists who tend to consider themselves relatively immune to negative consequences of accepting freebies were found not motivated to change attitudes toward freebies and/or to refuse freebies. This finding helps address the perplexing attitudinal-behavioral gap in verbally condemning freebies but actually accepting them. As Wright (1996) suggested, people often resort to rationalizations to justify their questionable behavior. Results indicate that the perceived invulnerable self is the rationale behind journalists' ethical reasoning about accepting the risks associated with freebies. When journalists think that they have a unique, optimistic, and better-than-average mentality, they tend to view freebies as less risky and will be likely to actually accept them as a "it won't-hurt-me" risk. We conclude that the perception of peer journalists as more vulnerable to the risk caused by freebies and the perceived personal immunity to the harms of freebies on journalistic ethics appear to be the reasoning mechanisms at work.

The findings of our study have practical implications for ethical training for journalists' dealing with freebies. To narrow the gap in attitude and behavior regarding freebies, training programs should focus on reducing biased optimism in viewing oneself as less vulnerable to the risks of freebies than others. Educating journalists about freebies as a risk to their career, employer, and profession will be instrumental in changing the biased perceptions of working journalists. In addition, our study found that senior journalists who had worked in journalism for a long period of time were more likely to oppose accepting freebies than their junior colleagues. As a former official of the International Monetary Fund said, "a good example is worth a thousand theories" (quoted in Friedman, 2006, p. 565). Hence, senior journalists can play a key role in communicating the risks of freebies to rookies as part of newsroom socialization.

This study has several limitations. The extent to which the findings are generalizable or are unique to journalists in Taiwan needs to be researched in follow-up studies. In addition, the data were self-reported; further research should include measures of actual behavior such as data compiled from the press ombudsman. The significant relationships we reported are not necessarily causal. In addition, the variance accounted for in our regression models is modest, suggesting that other factors should be considered in further studies with a goal to build a fuller model. For example, factors such as self-efficacy, as well as concerns about and knowledge of a given risk, will affect optimistic bias. Types of news that the journalists are responsible for could also affect their attitudes and behavioral intention regarding risk perception and ethical behavior. Unfortunately, we did not include these antecedents of biased optimism. Future research can consider expanding the present study in developing a fuller model to explain the projected behavior of taking freebies.

Acknowledgement

Note

1. The factoring criteria were: (a) a minimum loading $>.50$ on a factor; (b) Eigen value >1.0; (c) only one primary loading for each item; (d) at least two items with loading $>.50$.

References

Alicke, M. (1985). Global self-evaluation as determined by the desirability and controllability of trait adjectives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *49*, 1621–1630.

Anderson, D.A., & Leigh, F.A. (1992). How newspaper editors and broadcast news directors view media ethics. *Newspaper Research Journal*, *13*(1), 112–121.

Burger, J., & Burns, L. (1988). The illusion of unique invulnerability and the use of effective contraception. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *14*, 264–270.

Chapin, J. (2001a). Optimistic bias regarding campus violence. *Current Research in Social Psychology*, *6*(16), 237–251.

Chapin, J. (2001b). It won't happen to me: The role of optimistic bias in African American teens' risky sexual practices. *The Howard Journal of Communication*, *12*, 49–59.

Chapin, J., de las Alas, S., & Coleman, G. (2005). Optimistic bias among potential perpetrators and victims of youth violence. *Adolescence*, *40*(160), 749–760.

Day, L.A. (1998). *Ethics in media communication: Cases and controversies*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Dolinski, D., Wojciech, G., & Zawisza, E. (1987). Unrealistic pessimism. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *127*, 511–516.

Ellen, J., Boyer, C., Tschann, J., & Shafer, M. (1996). Adolescents' perceived risk for STD and HIV infection. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *18*(3), 177–181.

Friedman, T. (2006). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Gouveia, S., & Clark, V. (2001). Optimistic bias for negative and positive events. *Health Education*, *101*, 228–234.

Gold, R. (2007). The link between judgments of comparative risk and own risk: Further evidence. *Psychology Health & Medicine*, *12*(2), 238–247.

Goodwin, H. (1983). *Groping for ethics in journalism* (1st ed.). Ames: Iowa State University Press.

Gore, M., Siemer, W., Shanahan, J., Schuefele, D., & Decker, D. (2005). Effects on risk perception of media coverage of a black bear-related human fatality. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, *33*(2), 507–516.

Hansen, W., Raynor, A., & Wolkenstein, B. (1991). Perceived personal immunity to the consequences of drinking alcohol: The relationship between behavior and perception. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *14*, 205–225.

Harris, P. (1996). Sufficient grounds for optimism? The relationship between perceived controllability and optimistic bias. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *15*, 9–52.

Harris, P., & Middleton, W. (1994). The illusion of control and optimism about health: On being less at risk but no more in control than others. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *33*, 369–386.

Helweg-Larsen, M., & Shepperd, J.A. (2001). Do moderator of the optimistic bias affect personal or target risk estimates? A review of the literature. *Personality & Social Psychology Review*, *5*, 75–95.

Hoorens, V. (1995). Self-favoring biases, self-presentation, and the self-other asymmetry in social comparison. *Journal of Personality*, *63*, 793–817.

Ji, H., & Riffe, D. (2004). *Optimistic bias about cancer risk and information sources in Appalachia*. Paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Canada.

Ji, L., Zhang, Z., Usborne, E., & Guan, Y. (2004). Optimism across cultures: In response to the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, *7*, 25–34.

Klein, C., & Helweg-Larsen, M. (2002). Perceived control and the optimistic Bias: A meta-analytic review. *Psychology & Health*, *17*(4), 437–446.

Kos, J.M., & Clarke, V.A. (2001). Is optimistic bias influenced by control or delay? *Health Education Research*, *6*(5), 533–540.

Lange, L., Fleming, R., & Toussaint, L. (2004). Risk perceptions and stress during the threat of explosion from a railroad accident. *Social Behavioral and Personality*, *32*(2), 117–127.

Lin, Y., & Raghubir, P. (2005). Gender differences in unrealistic – Optimism about marriage and divorce: Are men more optimistic and women more realistic? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*(2), 198–207.

Lo, V.H., Chan, J.M., & Pan, Z. (2005). Ethical attitudes and perceived practice: A comparative study of journalists in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *15*(2), 154–172.

McCoy, S., Gibbons, F., Reis, T., Gerrard, M., Luus, E., & Suffka, A. (1992). Perceptions of smoking risk as a function of smoking status. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *15*(5), 488–496.

Mead, G. (Ed.). (1934). *Mind, self and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Middleton, W., Harris, P., & Surman, M. (1996). Give 'em enough rope: Perception of health and safety risks in bungee jumpers. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, *15*, 68–79.

Perloff, L. (1987). Social comparison and illusions of invulnerability to negative life events. In C.R. Snyder & C. Ford (Eds.), *Coping with negative life events: Clinical and social psychological perspectives on negative life events* (pp. 217–242). NY: Plenum Press.

Perloff, L., & Fetzer, B. (1986). Self-other judgments and perceived vulnerability to victimization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *50*, 502–510.

Rise, J., Strype, J., & Sutton, S. (2002). Comparative risk ratings and lung cancer among Norwegian smokers. *Addiction Research & Theory*, *10*, 313–320.

Robertson, P. (July 2003). Pressroom confidential, Milwaukee Magazine. Available at http://www.milwaukeemagazine.com/072003/pressroom.asp.

Rutter, D.R., Quine, L., & Albery, I.P. (1998). Perceptions of risk in motorcyclists: Unrealistic optimism, relative realism and predictions of behaviour. *British Journal of Psychology*, *89*, 681–696.

Salmon, C., Park, H., & Wrigley, B. (2003). Optimistic bias and perceptions of bioterrorism in Michigan corporate spokespersons. *Journal of Health Communication*, *8*(1), 130–143.

Spittal, M., McClure, J., Siegert, R., & Walkey, F. (2005). Optimistic bias in relation to preparedness for earthquakes. *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies*, 2005–1.

Taylor, S., & Gollwitzer, P. (1995). The effects of mindset on positive illusions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 213–226.

Weaver, D., & Wilhoit, C.G. (1996). *The American journalist in the 1990s: US news people at the end of an era*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Weinstein, N. (1980). Unrealistic optimism about future life events. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *39*(5), 806–820.

Weinstein, N. (1987). Unrealistic optimism about susceptibility to health problems: Conclusions from a community-wide sample. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *10*(5), 481–500.

Weinstein, N. (1989). Effects of personal experience on self-protective behavior. *Psychological Bulletin*, *105*, 31–50.

Weinstein, N., & Klein, W. (1996). Unrealistic optimism: Present and future. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, *15*, 1–8.

Weinstein, N., & Lyon, J. (1999). Mindset, optimistic bias about personal risk and health-protective behaviour. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, *4*(4), 289–300.

Weinstein, N.D., Sandman, P.M., & Roberts, N.E. (1990). Determinants of self-protective behavior: Home radon testing. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *20*, 783–801.

Williams, T., & Clarke, V. (1997). Optimistic bias in beliefs about smoking. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *49*(2), 106–112.

Wright, D. (1996). Communication ethics. In M. Salwen & D. Stacks (Eds.), *An integrated approach to communication theory and research* (pp. 519–536). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Wulfemeyer, K. (1989). *The news blues: Problems in journalism*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.

Wulfemeyer, K. (1990). Defining ethics in electronic journalism: Perceptions of news directors. *Journalism Quarterly*, *67*, 984–991.

Zhao, Y. (1998). *Media, market, and democracy in China: Between the party line and the bottom line*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.