How Do People Talk About Health Campaign Messages?
The effect of message construal level on subsequent conversational content

Stella Juhyun Lee, MA
Doctoral student
Annenberg School for Communication

Mailing Address:
3620 Walnut Street,
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Email: slee@asc.upenn.edu

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Robert Hornik
Wilbur Schramm Professor of Communication and Health Policy
Annenberg School for Communication
Specific Aims

This research examines how different types of persuasive anti-smoking messages can influence the content of subsequent interpersonal responses. Results from this research will provide campaign producers with the knowledge of which messages will ultimately produce effective conversations that may amplify campaign outcomes. I choose smoking cessation as my behavior of interest as tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Funding is being sought to recruit and compensate participants for this research.

Background and Significance

Mass media health communication campaigns have played a central role in promoting public health by changing a variety of health-related behaviors (Noar, 2006). In addition to the direct effect of campaign messages, recent research has shown that campaign message effects can vary as a function of the interpersonal communication around those messages (Dunlop, 2011; Hendriks, de Bruijn, & van den Putte, 2012; Southwell & Yzer, 2007). For instance, analysis of the Truth campaign found that campaign exposure led to campaign-related conversation which in turn had a positive effect on youth anti-smoking beliefs (Hwang, 2012). On the other hand, adolescents who discussed anti-drug campaign messages with other adolescents in a chatroom environment expressed more pro-drug attitudes than those who had only been exposed to the messages, suggesting a boomerang effect of interpersonal communication (David, Cappella, & Fishbein, 2006).

Although it is known that interpersonal communication may facilitate or debilitate campaign effects, the field currently lacks a clear understanding of how and when interpersonal communication can be facilitating or debilitating (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). Empirical research that addresses these issues will provide practical guidelines for predicting what types of campaign messages elicit conversations favorable to changing health-related attitudes and beliefs. In order to address this gap in the literature, it is essential to go beyond measures of interpersonal communication presence/absence or frequency, and to focus on the actual content of campaign/message-induced conversations or interpersonal responses (Berger, 2014; Southwell & Yzer, 2009).

I propose to deepen our understanding of how and when interpersonal communication can amplify or hinder campaign message effects by first examining how people talk to a target campaign audience as a function of the type of campaign message they are exposed to, and second by examining the effect of these interpersonal responses on the target campaign audience. The current research will focus on the first phase of predicting interpersonal response features from the features of messages people were exposed to in a smoking cessation context. My predictions are guided by the framework of construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), which delineates the bi-directional relationship between and within construal levels and psychological distance. According to the theory, mental construals are mental representations/mindsets that can be either high (abstract, broad, concerning desirability) or low (concrete, detailed, concerning feasibility) in level. Psychological distance is the extent to which an event or object is temporally, spatially, socially, and hypothetically removed from one’s own experience. An object or event is psychologically distant if it occurs in the future, in a remote location, to others less like oneself, or with a small probability. Numerous studies have found that people tend to think about psychologically distant (e.g. temporally, spatially, socially, hypothetically distant) objects in higher levels of construal, and when primed with higher levels of construal, tend to bring to mind distant objects.

Applying this theory to the area of predicting interpersonal responses from message exposure, I theorize that exposure to a message of high (low) construal level will evoke a high (low) construal level mindset which will subsequently influence the level of construal (high/low) expressed in an interpersonal
response (H1). For example, if a stimulus message emphasized a distant versus proximal temporal frame (e.g., Every “year” people die from smoking vs. Every “day” people die from smoking) this would put the receiver of the message in a high construal mindset—and then when asked to construct an argument to persuade someone else to change their behavior, he/she would choose an argument that is high in construal (e.g., linguistically abstract, desirability arguments) as well. The core argument here is that the preferred argument would not be a simple copy of the argument in the stimulus message; rather the preferred argument would match the stimulus message in its construal level, but not necessarily mimic the original message. As these expected effects are hypothesized to be mediated by the mindset that the respondent is in, one can expect message exposure to also affect the construal level mindset which can be measured by standard measures such as the behavioral identification scale (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) (H2).

Research Design and Methods

**Research design.** Two experiments each comprised of two conditions will be conducted online. For the two experiments, design and procedures are identical except for the measured outcome; one experiment will examine the outcome of argument choice, while the other will examine open-ended textual responses. Participants will be randomly assigned to either a high construal level message condition or a low construal level message condition. After being exposed to three messages relevant to their condition, participants will be asked to choose arguments that they would be willing to use to persuade a smoker to quit from a larger set of arguments or will be instructed to write open-ended responses to persuade a smoker to quit. Participants will subsequently answer questions that measure their construal level mindset (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), and demographic questions.

**Sample.** Non-smokers from Survey Sampling International’s (SSI) opt-in panel will be recruited for the experiment’s purposes (N=1200; n=600 per experiment). Those who have smoked a 100 cigarettes in their lifetime or have smoked in the past 30 days (current smokers) will be excluded from the experiment.

**Stimuli.** High construal level messages will combine message features that are known to be related to high construal level while low construal level messages will combine message features known to be related to low construal level. Specifically, high construal level messages will combine distant temporal frames (Chandran & Menon, 2004; Nenkov, 2012; Pounders, Lee, & Mackert, 2015), gain frames (Pounders et al., 2015; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011), and non-narratives (Kim & Nan, 2016; Yan & Sengupta, 2013), while the low construal level messages will combine proximal temporal frames, loss frames, and narratives.

**Measures.** To examine argument choice, participants will be given 7 pairs of arguments and asked to choose one argument to use to persuade a smoker to quit from each pair. The pair of arguments will contain one desirability argument and one feasibility argument. An example desirability argument is: “You can lead a healthier and more energetic life if you quit smoking” while a feasibility argument reads: “There are a lot of smoking cessation aids that can help you quit smoking”. The number of desirability arguments chosen will be the outcome of interest. This task will also be administered using linguistically abstract and concrete arguments (Coenen, Hedeboew, & Semin, 2006). To examine open-ended interpersonal responses, participants will be instructed to write in text what they would tell a smoker in order to persuade them to quit. Open-ended textual responses obtained from the experiment will be content analyzed for desirability/feasibility statements, and linguistic abstractness/concreteness based on the linguistic category model (LCM) (Coenen et al., 2006; Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). Finally, construal level mindset will be measured using Vallacher and Wegner’s (1989) behavioral identification scale.
Budget and Budget Justification

Rationale for Funding

Funding will be used to recruit and compensate non-smoker participants needed for the two proposed experiments from Survey Sampling International’s (SSI) panel. SSI’s panel will provide a more representative sample of participants than recruitment through other convenience sampling (such as Amazon Mechanical Turk) methods, which will strengthen external validity claims. In addition, a sample of 600 per experiment will provide sufficient power to detect effects that may be small in size.

Detailed Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSI participant cost per 15 minute survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
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<td>Estimated total cost</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total amount requested</strong></td>
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Description of Other Funding Sources

The Annenberg School for Communication provides $1,200 for each fiscal year to support academic presentations at conferences. Annenberg School for Communication graduate students may also apply for a dissertation budget of up to $1,200.
References


http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2014.05.002


http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01698.x


