

Improving Health Messages Using Persuasive Communication Techniques

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE PERSUASIVE HEALTH COMMUNICATION	4
BACKGROUND	5
DISCUSSION	6
NARRATIVE STORYTELLING	6
APPEALING TO MOTIVATIONAL ORIENTATION	7
APPEALING TO CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS	8
APPEALING TO SENSATION SEEKING PREFERENCES	8
DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST AND RESPECT	9
PREVENTION OF REACTANCE	10
CONCLUSION	11
WORKS CITED	13

Executive Summary

Persuasive health communication is perhaps one of the most prevalent forms of communication that is both ubiquitous and often times perceived under the conscious unawareness. These health messages can take many forms, such as a conversation with a physician, a health-promoting advertisement, or a newspaper article. Many of us fail to recognize how these health communication messages are developed specifically with a target audience in mind, and key goals that it aims to achieve. While these messages generally encourage healthy behaviors and the “right thing to do,” they are often ignored or not followed through by the receivers of the message.

Why do these messages fail, and how do we fix this issue? The scientific community investigates this question by testing how the content, structure, and framework of health messages can impact their overall effectiveness. In many studies, researchers make a prediction surrounding a communication technique, and test this hypothesis to determine its validity. These studies find relationships between various health communication techniques and the effectiveness of the overall message. For instance, researchers found that the use of appeals to cultural frameworks can increase the believability of a message, making it more effective.

In the scientific community, there is a general consensus that not all individuals think the same— in other words, one health communication technique will not work universally. Thus, researchers actively seek out diverse groups of people to participate in the investigations of communication strategies. Overall, the testing and examination of various techniques among a varied audience is the way in which researchers discover novel effective persuasive health communication techniques, of which will be examined in this paper.

Suggested Framework for Effective Persuasive Health Communication

- **Narrative Storytelling**: Individuals who read a health message written as a narrative story are more likely to understand the larger contextual factors that affect a negative health situation such as obesity, and empathize with the person who is suffering from the issue.
- **Appealing to Motivational Orientation**: Researchers found that appealing to an individual's motivational orientation is an effective health communication technique. This refers to the way in which individuals respond differently to either gain-framed (highlighting the benefits of engaging in the desired behavior), or loss-framed (highlighting the cost of failing to engage in the desired behavior) health messages.
- **Appealing to Cultural Frameworks**: Research has shown that individuals are more likely to heed messages that are matched to the cultural framework that he/she was raised in. The cultural frameworks that they investigated included individualist and collectivist models.
- **Appealing to Sensation Seeking Preferences**: An investigation suggests that individuals are more likely to follow health messages that match with their sensation seeking preference. Those that are classified as high sensation seeking (HSS) are more motivated to make a behavior change after reading messages with a high sensation value (HSV, more dramatic and stimulating), whereas low sensation seeking (LSS) individuals prefer the opposite— messages with a low sensation value (LSV, less stimulating).
- **Development of Trust and Respect**: Research shows that military servicemen are more likely to seek mental healthcare (a treatment that is highly stigmatized among the

population) when values such as combat credibility, trust, and respect are developed between the message deliverer and receiver.

- **Prevention of Reactance**: Reactance Theory suggests that if the message receiver feels that he/she was ordered to carry out a healthy lifestyle choice, he/she is less likely to follow through with it, due to a feeling of lack of control. Currently, researchers aim to discover a method to reduce reactance to health messages.

Background

The discussion surrounding persuasive health communication and health communication in general is a relatively recent development in the scientific community. In fact, the first peer-reviewed journal solely devoted to the topic, *Health Communication*, was developed in 1989 (“Health Communication”, 2017). This not only suggests that the conversation is new, but the conversation is also ongoing and evolving as more and more researchers add their voice to the discussion novel developments.

Not only is the discussion relatively recent, but it is also relatively small compared to other topics in scientific research. This remains the case even though the topic of health communication is critical and affects the daily lives of all individuals. For instance, while the *Health Communication* journal has an impact factor is 1.464, this number is relatively low compared to other journals (“Health Communication”, 2017). This measure tells us how often a journal is cited by other journals; essentially, it describes how much discussion there is surrounding a topic. Because there is little to the health communication conversation, it is up to us to spur greater discussion, making strides toward a health system that is centered around open communication and patient satisfaction.

Discussion

Narrative Storytelling

Narrative storytelling is an emerging form of health communication that has been developed to increase the reader's empathy for individuals suffering from a health issue. The goal of this technique is to show how a health issue is caused by a multitude of interworking systemic, socioeconomic, and political factors, rather than solely the individual's personal choice (Shapiro et al., 2014). In the scientific community, a narrative is defined by, "a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed" (Kumanyika et al., 2008).

One group of researchers wanted to test the efficacy of this novel development by applying it to those suffering from obesity (Shapiro et al., 2014). This issue was specifically chosen because many people possess a lack of understanding of the complicated and multifaceted causes of the issue (Shapiro et al., 2014). Often, people tend to place much of the blame on the individual for the problem, because obesity is commonly associated with laziness and lack of self-control (Shapiro et al., 2014). The researchers designed tests to discover if narrative storytelling could educate the individual of the issue's complexity, and if changing the framework of the narrative could make the person more likely to offer support to someone suffering from the epidemic (Shapiro et al., 2014). The results proved that the use of narrative heightened the reader's ability to empathize with a character and recognize how both individual choices and larger cultural or societal factors contribute to the health issue (Shapiro et al., 2014).

To expand on these results, the researchers designed a follow-up study in which they modified the frameworks of narratives to see if this would impact someone's support for health

policies to assist suffering individuals (Shapiro et al., 2014). When participants read stories with characters who took high personal responsibility (HPR) for their actions, they were more likely to offer support, whereas they were less likely to assist after reading stories with characters that took no personal responsibility for their actions (NPR) (Shapiro et al., 2014). This suggests that creating narratives that feature a character that takes high personal responsibility for his/her actions would be the most effective way to communicate (Shapiro et al., 2014).

Appealing to Motivational Orientation

Health message effectiveness can also be strengthened by appealing to a person's motivational orientation. This term refers to a preference for either a gain-framed (highlighting the benefits of engaging in the desired behavior), or loss-framed (highlighting the cost of failing to engage in the desired behavior) health messages (Updegraff et al., 2007). One study found that participants predominantly motivated by harm avoidance were more likely to listen to loss-framed messages, while those motivated to reach positive outcomes were more likely to listen to gain-framed messages (Updegraff et al., 2007).

From the same study, self-reported data showed that individuals preferred messages that matched their motivational orientation, as they paid more attention to the content of the message and showed more favorable attitudes toward the message (Updegraff et al., 2007). This demonstrates how appealing to motivational orientations can increase a health message's effectiveness by affecting how the message is perceived and the amount of attention drawn towards it.

Appealing to Cultural Frameworks

An individual's cultural framework impacts the ways in which a message is perceived as well. In research done by Oyserman, two groups of individuals from either individualistic or collectivistic cultures read health messages that were either congruent or incongruent with their cultural values. Individualistic cultures focus on the individual's own value and place less value on what the individual contributes to the group, whereas collectivistic cultures place value on contributing to the community and contributing to the good of others. Interestingly, the study concluded that those primed with health messages that were congruent with their cultural values were more likely to be persuaded by the message (Oyserman, 2010).

The researchers went on to investigate how different health models are more or less effective with certain cultures. Specifically, they looked at self-focused (health consequences to the self, such as getting lung cancer from smoking) and relational-focused health messages (lack of ability to fulfill social roles, such as a smoker failing to support the family) (Oyserman, 2010). They found that those raised in an individualistic culture were more likely to heed self-focused messages, while collectivist individuals were more likely to listen to relational-focused messages (Oyserman, 2010). Thus, a health message that is specifically geared to the culture that the person was raised in is more likely to be effective (Oyserman, 2010). As a whole, this research highlights the significance of culture on one's perception of health messages (Oyserman, 2010).

Appealing to Sensation Seeking Preferences

Individuals vary widely in their sensation seeking behavior, and research was done to investigate how this quality impacts their perception of health messages. For instance, one group of researchers had participants read health messages persuaded them to call a hotline to receive

help (“Mass Media”, 2002). They found that those classified as high sensation seeking (HSS) were more motivated to make a behavioral change when the message was more dramatic and stimulating (high sensation value, or HSV) (“Mass Media”, 2002). Conversely, those classified as low sensation seeking were more likely to make a change when the message was less dramatic (low sensation value, or LSV) (“Mass Media”, 2002).

These results are similar to the cultural frameworks effect described above; if a message is designed to compliment the individual’s personal sensation seeking preferences, the message is more likely to be successful (“Mass Media”, 2002). While this technique is a recent development, it has to potential to shape the way in which health professionals approach persuasion in the future.

Development of Trust and Respect

Recently, it has been proven that trust and respect are major values that increase the believability of health communication messages. Specifically, a group of researchers were curious about the most effective way to encourage military service members to seek help for mental health disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Clark-Hitt et.al., 2012). The process involved using focus groups— the researchers asked questions surrounding different types of communication, and observed whether the service members preferred or disliked those techniques (Clark-Hitt et.al., 2012).

As a whole, the results displayed that the servicemen value combat credibility, respect, and trust (Clark-Hitt et.al., 2012). Combat credibility refers to hearing a message from someone who has been through a combat experience or traumatic experience, and knows firsthand how the experience feels (Clark-Hitt et.al., 2012). Respect involves receiving a message from

someone that they have developed a strong relationship with and who they respect as a leader (Clark-Hitt et.al., 2012). Trust was important to the service members as well, as they were more likely to seek help if those that they trust are also seeking mental health services (Clark-Hitt et.al., 2012).

Not only are the values of combat credibility, respect, and trust valued by the focus groups, but these values are predicted to apply to the general population as well. Future studies aim to investigate this prediction and discover how public health officials can use these values to increase the effectiveness of health messages across a larger audience.

Prevention of Reactance

While it is important to discuss examples of techniques that increase the believability of a health message, it is just as important to investigate the ways in which these messages can fail—for instance, if they provoke a feeling of reactance. This concept was examined by researchers who wondered how an individual’s perception of a health communication message is influenced by his/her potential for reactance (Shen, 2005). Reactance is an individual’s desire to disobey health advice purely because they feel that they have been ordered to follow through with it (Shen, 2005). In other words, people who feel that their freedom of choice has been restricted are unlikely to heed what is asked of them (Shen, 2005). Because this factor is an inhibitor to following health advice, the researchers wanted to find a way to reduce this effect (Shen, 2005).

Based on these observances, a study was formulated to test if one could supposedly “inoculate” someone from feeling reactance, or make them immune to this behavior (Banas, 2015). During the test, participants were told to react to a persuasive health message—one that aimed to convince them to not engage in an unhealthy behavior such as underage drinking

(Banas, 2015). Then, those in the experimental group read a second follow-up passage that acknowledged that they may feel a threat to their freedom, and that this feeling is acceptable (Banas, 2015). The researchers predicted that this accepting follow-up message would reduce reactance among the participants (Banas, 2015). However, there was no significant difference between the two groups, which proves that the follow-up message was unable to reduce the feeling of reactance (Banas, 2015). The researchers concluded that even though this way of including an accepting follow-up message was found to be ineffective, this does not mean that all attempts to reduce this particular reaction will fail (Banas, 2015). Future studies surrounding reactance aim to draw attention to this relatively new concept, and investigate novel ways to avoid this behavior (Banas, 2015).

Conclusion

There is an ongoing conversation in the public health community surrounding the benefits and drawbacks of various forms of persuasive health communication. This is because there are many personal, socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors that can influence whether an individual is more or less likely to listen to a health message. Overall, there is a general consensus surrounding the benefits of the use of narrative storytelling, appealing to one's motivational orientation, appealing to one's cultural framework, appealing to sensation seeking preferences, and the development of trust and respect. On the other hand, messages that reduce one's independence are likely to cause reactance and tend to be less effective. Further research is focused on discovering novel techniques that can lessen this reaction, because as described above, the process of including an accepting follow-up paragraph was found to be ineffective. As the discussion continues, researchers will perform multiple investigations by manipulating the content, structure, and framing of health messages and measuring the effectiveness of those

messages. In this way, public health research can move closer to the overall goal of creating the most effective health messages by maximizing the use of effective communication techniques and minimizing any inhibitors, such as reactance.

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