



The Step approach to Message Design and Testing (SatMDT): A conceptual framework to guide the development and evaluation of persuasive health messages

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 February 2014

Received in revised form 17 July 2015

Accepted 20 July 2015

Available online 9 September 2015

Keywords:

Health persuasion

Health advertising

Road safety advertising

Message development

Message evaluation

Theoretical framework

Step approach to Message Design and

Testing (SatMDT)

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an important and timely overview of a conceptual framework designed to assist with the development of message content, as well as the evaluation, of persuasive health messages. While an earlier version of this framework was presented in a prior publication by the authors in 2009, important refinements to the framework have seen it evolve in recent years, warranting the need for an updated review. This paper outlines the Step approach to Message Design and Testing (or SatMDT) in accordance with the theoretical evidence which underpins, as well as empirical evidence which demonstrates the relevance and feasibility of, each of the framework's steps. The development and testing of the framework have thus far been based exclusively within the road safety advertising context; however, the view expressed herein is that the framework may have broader appeal and application to the health persuasion context.

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1. Introduction

This paper provides a review of a conceptual framework which was devised to aid the development of message content for, as well as the evaluation of, persuasive health messages. From the outset it is noted that this framework was designed intentionally for use within the road safety advertising context. To that extent, the studies which are noted herein as examples illustrating the application of steps of the framework are studies which have been based on road safety messages. As will be discussed, there are aspects of the framework, such as the extent to which it welcomes the addition of other relevant constructs, which may make it applicable to the health persuasion context more broadly. There are, however, certainly many opportunities for further applications

of the framework within the road safety advertising context given the range of risky road user behaviours that contribute to road trauma and the need to devise effective, targeted messages to reduce individuals' engagement in such behaviours.

It is acknowledged that an earlier, and in many respects a less refined, version of this framework was provided in Lewis et al. (2009). Since then, the specificity of the framework has evolved with particular emphasis on the framework moving beyond just description of key constructs and considerations to providing some suggestion as to how such constructs and considerations may be used to inform message content writing and subsequent evaluation (the latest version of the framework is presented in Fig. 1). Consistent with this move, among the more substantive refinements to the framework are the following aspects: (i) the addition of methodological-related tasks, presented as intervening steps, which represent specific actions to be undertaken when devising and testing messages; (ii) adding greater specificity to the first and second steps of the framework which relate to individual- and message-related characteristics, respectively. In regards to the first step, the functions of "identifying" the target audience and

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STEP 1 Pre-existing individual characteristics		Methodology Step 1 Pilot work	STEP 2 Message-related characteristics		Methodology Step 2 Message Exposure	STEP 3 Individual responses		Methodology Step 3 Concept testing & Message checks	STEP 4 Message outcomes		Methodology Step 4 Quantitative-based assessment of persuasive effects
Identify	Elicit		Focus & Content	Emotional & Cognitive		Acceptance & Rejection					
Gender/ age (relevant socio-demographic variables) + Extent & nature of involvement in/with behaviour	Salient beliefs + Strategies for avoiding behaviour (response efficacy)		<u>Focus of Message</u> Challenge perceived benefits	Emotional responses (anticipated emotion elicited?) + Cognitive responses (e.g., perceptions of response efficacy, involvement)		Intentions to adopt message and/or denial, defensive avoidance reactions					
			And/Or Highlight perceived disadvantages <u>Key content</u> - Emotional appeal type (e.g., fear-based, humour-based) - Modelling of behaviour - Strategies								

Fig. 1. The Step approach to Message Design and Testing (SatMDT; adapted from Lewis et al., 2009).

“eliciting” their key beliefs, motivations, and strategies represent the means by which an understanding about “pre-existing individual characteristics” may be gained. In regards to the second step, the framework identifies how the writing of message content should have both a particular “focus” as well as particular “content” in mind. Thus, while the earlier framework simply identified “beliefs” as a pre-existing individual characteristic to consider in developing message content, the latest version of the framework identifies that message content should be written with a particular “focus” which is to either challenge the perceived positive beliefs which members of the target audience identified as being associated with engaging in a risky/illegal behaviour or emphasise the perceived negative beliefs. In regards to “content”, the framework identifies such aspects as the type of emotional appeal and the role of behavioural modelling. In summary, the latest version of the framework’s first two steps function to provide greater guidance with regards to what to should be done with key beliefs, motivations, and strategies once they have been elicited from members of the target audience. Acknowledging the important theoretical, methodological, and applied implications that this framework may hold for road safety advertising research and practice, this paper provides an important and timely review of this framework: a framework which is now acknowledged more formally in name as the Step approach to Message Design and Testing or the SatMDT.

2. Background to the framework

It has been acknowledged that theory is crucial to campaign and message development (Fishbein, 2001). Greater levels of health-protective behaviours have been associated with theoretically-based campaigns as compared with atheoretical ones (Elliott, 1993; Maibach and Parrott, 1995). Further, conducting evaluations of advertising countermeasures is easier and more cost effective with theoretically devised approaches given that clearly measurable constructs can be identified and examined (Elliott, 1993; Maibach and Parrott, 1995). Unsurprisingly, then, the absence of theory has long been identified as a criticism of the design of many health advertising campaigns (Stead et al., 2005) including road safety advertising campaigns (Elliott, 1993). It has been suggested that the limited use of theory in health

advertising practice may be due not to an absence of theories but, rather, the availability of numerous theories and the uncertainty as to which one theory may represent the most appropriate one to apply in a given context (Slater, 1999). Alternatively, others have suggested that the atheoretical nature of much health campaign development may be due to many of the available theories not having been designed intentionally for the explicit purpose of informing the development of message content (see Slater, 1999). In the attempt to address these suggested limitations, the Step approach to Message Development and Testing, or SatMDT (Lewis et al., 2009) was devised. Consistent with the view adopted by Slater (1999) and others (e.g., Armitage and Conner (2000), Witte (1995) in relation to the Persuasive Health Message framework; see also Fishbein et al. (2001) in relation to the Theorists’ Workshop Model of behaviour change), the different theories informing the framework are best regarded as complementary rather than competing. Slater (1999, p. 335–336) suggests that the “theories of persuasion and behaviour change are complementary because their foci and boundary conditions make them useful in solving different types of communication problems”. To the extent that the SatMDT framework draws upon well-validated social psychological models of persuasion, decision-making, and attitude-behaviour relations, consistent with Slater’s propositions, this feature of the SatMDT functions, arguably, to strengthen its feasibility in guiding the design and evaluation of road safety messages. Extending upon Slater’s (1999, p. 335–336) propositions, he suggested that an orienting framework (and he identified the Stages of Change model) may be needed to help identify which theory may be most appropriately applied for a given communication context and/or objective. The SatMDT demonstrates, however, how all steps ranging from message design through to evaluation may garner insights from the different social psychological models that it incorporates.

3. The conceptual model

The SatMDT provides guidance, via a step-based process, for devising key aspects of message content likely to enhance message persuasiveness. The framework identifies four steps, termed as “Pre-existing individual characteristics”, “Message-related characteristics”, “Individual responses”, and “Message outcomes”. The

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