



Persuasive appeals in road safety communication campaigns: Theoretical frameworks and practical implications from the analysis of a decade of road safety campaign materials



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ABSTRACT

Communication campaigns are employed as an important tool to promote road safety practices. Researchers maintain road safety communication campaigns are more effective when their persuasive appeals, which are central to their communicative strategy, are based on explicit theoretical frameworks. This study's main objectives were to develop a detailed categorization of persuasive appeals used in road safety communication campaigns that differentiate between appeals that appear to be similar but differ conceptually, and to indicate the advantages, limitations and ethical issues associated with each type, drawing on behavior change theories. Materials from over 300 campaigns were obtained from 41 countries, mainly using road safety organizations' websites. Drawing on the literature, five types of main approaches were identified, and the analysis yielded a more detailed categorizations of appeals within these general categories. The analysis points to advantages, limitations, ethical issues and challenges in using different types of appeals. The discussion summarizes challenges in designing persuasive-appeals for road safety communication campaigns.

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1. Introduction

Communication campaigns have been credited with having an important role in promoting road safety practices; for example, by explaining reasons for speed limits or by influencing social norms regarding drinking and driving. However, they have been found to be effective mainly when they are part of multi-faceted interventions and when they utilize explicit theoretical frameworks and a social marketing approach. Several comprehensive books and reports provide an overview of behavior change theories and conceptual models particularly relevant to road safety (e.g., Delaney et al., 2004; Delhomme et al., 2009; Elder et al., 2004; Fylan et al., 2006; Lonero et al., 2006; Rodriguez and Anderson-Wilk, 2002; Wundersitz et al., 2010; Vaa et al., 2009). Studies that analyzed road safety communication campaigns identified several main types of persuasive approaches used in their message design (referred to also as message content strategy), including informative, positive emotional, rational, negative emotional appeals, fear appeals, hard-hitting, shocking, and funny (e.g., Boulanger et al., 2007; Delhomme et al., 2009; Elder et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 2011;

Winkelbauer and Machata, 2007). However, within them additional types of appeals can be differentiated (e.g., appealing to reason by using analogies or by simulations). Further, certain appeals that appear similar could actually differ according to behavioral theory (e.g., simulations using mock-up figures differ from those using human figures and death). Although the impact of communication campaigns depends on a multitude of factors (e.g., media reach, combination with enforcement measures), their appeals are the central communicative element. Therefore, this study aimed to develop a more detailed categorization of appeals/message content strategy and to point to advantages, limitations and ethical concerns in using each type, drawing on behavior change theories and social marketing. The literature review begins with an overview of arguments regarding the importance of using theory in road safety communication campaigns, followed with a brief description of several conceptual frameworks. Next, the methods section describes the analytic approach and campaign materials used for the study. The findings section presents, mainly in the form of tables, categories generated by the analysis according to four main types of appeals, and notes advantages and limitations of each, drawing on conceptual frameworks. The paper concludes with a discussion of challenges in using different types of appeals in road safety communication campaigns and limitations of the study.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Use of theory

The literature underscores the importance of using theories in the design of campaigns because they explain why people behave in certain ways, contrary to what might be expected according to intuition, and how behaviors can be changed. For example, theories explain why using images of death as a means to increase particular audience members' motivation to avoid a traffic risk could actually do the opposite (Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 1999). Theories also pinpoint what should be known before developing campaign messages or evaluations; for example, why social norms data are critical (Delaney et al., 2004; Delhomme et al., 2009; Trifiletti et al., 2005). Researchers explain that there is no "right" or "wrong" answer regarding which type of appeal is "best" because it should be based on specific campaign objectives, as it relates to specific audiences, drawing on relevant theory and research (Delhomme et al., 2009).

Compared to an earlier era of road safety campaigns, current campaigns are more likely to be based on social marketing and behavior change theory (Rodriguez and Anderson-Wilk, 2002). Yet, many contemporary ones are also not based on explicit conceptual models (Phillips et al., 2011). This might be the result of practitioners' intuitive beliefs regarding what influences people's views and behaviors (Hoekstra and Wegman, 2011) as well as the challenge to attract audiences' attention when competing with other media messages (US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2014), which results in their preference to use appeals believed to be creative rather than theory-based (Delhomme et al., 2009).

2.2. Behavior-change conceptual frameworks and constructs

2.2.1. Self-efficacy and social norms

People's conception of their ability to carry out the desired safety practice, referred to in Social Cognitive Theory as their self-efficacy, is an important factor affecting behavior. Further, this theory explains that people's conceptions of what is appropriate is influenced by observing behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others, who might serve as positive or negative 'models' (Bandura, 2004). Culture, social norms and expectations, whether observed or believed to be shared by significant others (Atchley et al., 2012; Rimal et al., 2005), also influence people's road safety practices. For example, young drivers were more inclined to use their phone while driving when they believed their peers approved it (Nemme and White, 2010). Similarly, respondents reported keeping up with others' speed rather than adhere to speed limits (Musselwhite et al., 2010). Conceptual frameworks on culture and social norms explain why campaigns that emphasize negative behaviors (e.g., showing drivers speeding) might actually reinforce these behaviors as normative by creating the impression they are prevalent (Schultz et al., 2007).

2.2.2. Appeals to reason

Cognitive theories also explain the limitations of simply warning or scaring people as a means to influence behavior. For example, people tend to hold an 'optimistic bias'; assessing they are less at risk than others or that they have the ability to control it (Weinstein and Klein, 1996). Risk perception studies demonstrate how people's tolerance of risk relates to social and psychological factors rather than "logical" ones such as familiarity with it, assessment of its benefits, or if it is taken voluntarily (Slovic et al., 2004). Cognitive theories also explain how persuasive processes can be enhanced when people elaborate on arguments on issues that are important to them (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984). Visual analogies also contribute to persuasion when people gain pleasure by decoding messages

and by eliciting cognitive processing (Jeong, 2008; Smith and Yang, 2004).

2.2.3. Emotional appeals

Strong emotional appeals can have the advantage of being memorable and contributing to the appreciation of their source. Yet, memorability does not necessarily indicate persuasiveness or actual behavior change (Perloff, 1993).

2.2.3.1. Appeals that make people feel good. Positive appeals can elicit identification and found to favorably affect intended populations in health and other contexts (Hastings, 2007). Humor is noted as a contested tactic: It can attract people's attention to content they are uninterested or 'process' it less critically, and even 'pass it on' to others. However, it might interfere with attending to the message itself (Conway and Dubé, 2002).

2.2.3.2. 'Fear' appeals. Theoretical conceptions regarding using "fear" or threat appeals to influence people to adopt safety practices draw on drive theories, further developed as dual-process models that include recipients' appraisals of the threat's severity and their vulnerability to it, their appraisal and effectiveness of the safety measure to avert it ('response efficacy'; Witte, 1998), and of their capacity to employ it (drawing on the notion of self-efficacy). These elements can serve as conditions for using risk information more effectively and ethically (Ruiter et al., 2001), and if not met, could elicit a 'reactance' response (Elliott, 2011) and ethical concerns (Hastings et al., 2004). Additional concerns are that their repeated use in road safety campaigns leads to expectations that graphic images are necessary, thus positive approaches appear "too weak" (Lewis et al., 2010). Also, theories on heightened sensations (Lupton, 2013) and the Terror Management Theory explain why using death as a threat could paradoxically increase, rather than decrease people's predisposition to adopt risky practices, by eliciting thoughts to reassure one's self esteem and mastery (Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 1999). Critics add that eliciting strong emotions from crash images can mainly serve cathartic or voyeuristic gratifications (Brottman, 2001) and thus raising additional ethical concerns.

2.2.3.3. Provocative appeals. Provocative appeals deliberately employ controversial or 'shocking' words or images mainly by challenging norms and taboos (Dahl et al., 2003). Advantages in using them are raising issues to the personal and public agenda, memorability, and 'sharing' with others. Criticisms include associating a negative image of the source, people might avoid them (Huhmann and Stenerson, 2008), and they often violate ethical standards (Guttman, 2000; Smith, 2001).

2.3. Deterrence theory

According to General Deterrence Theory people aim to avoid legal punishment if they perceive the cost of engaging in the illegal activity as high and the penalties relatively certain and immediate. Practical means for achieving this in road safety typically include increasing overt police presence and apprehension rates (Tay, 2005). Critics maintain people differ in their support for policies and enforcement measures and that enforcement could reduce internalization of the importance of the safety practice (Dula and Geller, 2007).

2.4. Social marketing

Social marketing provides 'guiding principles' for voluntary behavior change, focusing on people's specific perceived needs, desires, and beliefs and the 'price' they believe they have to 'pay' (e.g., loss of time, embarrassment, diminished pleasure) to adopt

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