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Introduction to the Special Issue: Message Design in Health Communication Research

Nancy Grant Harrington

Nancy Grant Harrington, Department of Communication, University of Kentucky

Abstract

Message design is one of the most complex and vibrant research areas in the communication discipline. Based on the preconference of the 2014 Kentucky Conference on Health Communication, this special issue of *Health Communication* is focused on a broad range of message design concerns. It features 10 original articles addressing topics ranging from fundamental questions related to theory and method to questions of message adaptation for translation and dissemination. Together, these articles reflect the rich variety of health behaviors addressed by health communication researchers and the breadth and depth of theoretical, methodological, and practical approaches to be considered in message design research.

Keywords

message design; persuasion; health; communication; interventions; measurement

Introduction

Introduction to the Special Issue: Message Design in Health Communication Research What a pleasure it is to welcome you to this special issue of *Health Communication*, which is based on the preconference of the 2014 Kentucky Conference on Health Communication. The theme of the preconference was issues in message design research. Our speakers and discussion facilitators addressed a broad range of topics, from fundamental questions of what should count as evidence of message effects to how we should be concerned with message adaptation for implementation and dissemination across different contexts. I'm excited to share their work with you here.

Message design research is one of the most complex and vibrant areas in the communication discipline. From micro-level decisions such as word choice (e.g., Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett, & Wilkes, 2007) to macro-level concerns such as campaign strategy (e.g., Rice & Atkin, 2013), the variations on message design are seemingly endless (Cappella, 2006). Furthermore, these variations apply across contexts, from interpersonal conversations to media-based interventions.

With message variations, questions of classification naturally arise. We can consider content, format, and structure dimensions (Harrington, Helme, & Noar, 2015; see also, Shen & Bigsby, 2013), and we can question precisely which message elements comprise those dimensions (e.g., is message sidedness a structure or content dimension?). Beyond that, we have the host of individual differences that can affect message reception, as well as the characteristics of health behaviors themselves, which are understudied in message design research but may very well have an impact on message effects (Rimal, Lapinski, Turner, & Smith, 2011).

As communication researchers, we explore these variations using theoretically-driven and methodologically rigorous approaches to determine which variations matter for whom and in what contexts, with the ultimate goal of designing more effective persuasive messages to have a positive impact on health behavior. We have learned a great deal over the years, but there is so much more to know. In the articles in this special issue, you will get a taste of both.

Our special issue begins with an article by Dan O'Keefe, one of our discipline's most renowned message design scholars. O'Keefe notes that decisions to adopt particular message strategies for use in persuasive health interventions should be evidence based, just as evidence-based medicine informs health screening and treatment decisions. For example, in deciding to adopt a narrative approach or a statistical approach, we should look for evidence in the literature for which will be more effective in influencing attitude, intention, or behavior change. But what should the nature of that evidence be? That is, what kind of evidence is needed to reach dependable generalizations about the relative persuasiveness of different message strategies? O'Keefe offers five compelling propositions to guide us.

Next, Robin Nabi tackles the topic of emotion in persuasive health messages. In a comprehensive review of the literature, she notes how most research has considered discrete emotions (e.g., fear or guilt or humor), but more recent work has acknowledged that a message may elicit multiple emotions (e.g., fear and guilt and humor). Building on this idea, Nabi suggests that instead of considering individual or multiple emotions as an outcome of message exposure, it may be more fruitful to consider the experience of emotion throughout the process of message exposure, the emotional flow of a message. She considers how the concept of emotional flow might be applied to increase the effectiveness of persuasive health messages and offers an agenda for future research.

Marco Yzer and colleagues offer an incisive analysis of the conceptual ambiguity of the perceived effectiveness (PE) of a message. They note that the PE construct is vital to researchers who need a proxy for a message's potential effectiveness before implementing that message as part of an intervention or campaign. However, very little conceptual work has been done on this construct, and that has resulted in a proliferation of measures whose validity may legitimately be questioned. After reviewing the foundations of PE research, Yzer et al. identify and discuss several threats to the validity of PE measures that appear in the health communication literature. They close by proposing a new conceptual definition of PE and offering suggestions for advancing PE theory and measurement.

Moving from the conceptual to the empirical, Jeannette Sutton and colleagues present the results of a case study on the nature of emergency warning messages disseminated through social media. They note that although social media have become an extremely popular channel for disseminating emergency warning messages, very little is known about how message source, content, and features might be associated with message impact. In an in-depth study of Twitter messages sent by public safety agencies during the 2013 Boulder, Colorado floods, Sutton et al. identify the sources of messages most likely to be re-tweeted, the most common topic of the messages, and the stylistic features of message content related to conveying essential public health information.

In a shift from the mediated to the interpersonal, Allison Scott and John Caughlin consider the impact of communication nonaccommodation on end-of-life decision-making discussions between adult children and their parents. Noting the increasing complexities surrounding end-of-life decisions, including the physical, psychological, and financial implications of these decisions, the researchers argue that finding ways to improve the quality of conversations about end-of-life preferences is essential. Communication accommodation offers one possible approach. Using observer and self-report data, Scott and Caughlin investigate whether under- and over accommodation in conversations can predict uncertainty, decision-making efficacy, and concordance between conversational partners on end-of-life preferences. They discover that these conversational message features are related to outcomes in distinct ways, and they suggest that communication accommodation offers a promising direction for enhancing end-of-life discussion quality.

Next, Lauren Frank and colleagues offer the latest in a series of analyses of data from their NIH-funded project on using narrative to promote HPV awareness and cervical cancer prevention. They note that narratives are commonly used in persuasive health messages but that not enough is known about how narrative storyline and characters interact with audience characteristics to influence outcome variables. The researchers explore the impact of character identification and narrative involvement, perceived relevance, and immersion on audience response efficacy, perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, and behavior. Their findings reveal complex patterns of effects for identification and personal relevance that provide important direction for future narrative message designers.

Seth Noar and colleagues delve into the topic of indoor tanning with an approach that emphasizes the central role of theory in message development. They present a new scale that they developed to measure indoor tanning expectations, and they test its psychometric structure with confirmatory factor analysis. Then they test comprehensive social cognitive theory-based models to predict intentions and behavior. Finding support for their measure's factor structure and somewhat modified models, the authors conclude by offering suggestions for indoor tanning prevention messages based on the theoretical constructs in their models. The next step, of course, will be to develop and test these messages' impact on the problematic behavior of indoor tanning.

Xiaoquan Zhao and colleagues tackle yet another problematic behavior: cigarette smoking. Building on a major study that was designed to investigate the effectiveness of cigarette package warning labels, these researchers explore the influence of psychological and

behavioral individual differences on responses to messages that emphasized either the short- or long-term effects of smoking. In particular, they questioned whether persons who scored high or low on consideration of future consequences would respond more favorably to messages that were temporally framed to emphasize long-term or short-term consequences of smoking. An intriguing pattern of results emerged to suggest that predicted interactions are influenced by whether or not the message recipient is a smoker.

Matt Savage and colleagues introduce us to an area that is infrequently addressed in the health communication literature: oral health. In their article, they present the results of three studies designed to increase understanding of oral health behavior among college students in Appalachia Kentucky. A series of focus group interviews provides insight into how these young adults perceive oral health in Appalachian communities, a representative survey reveals perceptions of barriers to and facilitators of good oral health, and dental screenings of a sample of students provide evidence that, indeed, oral health behavior is problematic in this area of the country. The authors conclude with recommendations for message design to promote good oral hygiene in Appalachia Kentucky.

Finally, our issue concludes with an article by Elisia Cohen and colleagues, who consider issues of dissemination once a message intervention has been demonstrated to be effective. The emphasis on translational research in recent years has highlighted the importance of actually implementing our interventions in schools, clinics, and communities, not simply publishing results and calling it a day. The question is how to do so successfully. These authors present a case study of their effective HPV vaccination intervention, “1-2-3 Pap,” and how they worked to build partnerships with relevant organizations and adapt their intervention to make it translatable to three other communities. They offer three important health communication intervention design considerations for future researchers to follow.

Together, the 10 articles in this special issue reflect the rich variety of health behaviors addressed by health communication researchers and the breadth and depth of theoretical, methodological, and practical approaches to be considered in message design research. I hope they serve as motivating examples of the kinds of questions we should be asking about persuasive health message design as we move forward with our research.

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