

Persuasion in Public Communication Campaigns:
Towards a More Nuanced Perspective on Message Strategies

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The President:

Prof. Dr. Bernhard Ehrenzeller

To my parents whose love and support have always encouraged me to strive for my dreams.

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List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
E.g.	For example
EC	Empathic concern
ELM	Elaboration likelihood model
Et al.	et alii
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
I.e.	id est
ICC	Intraclass Correlation Coefficient
LSD	Least significant difference
NFA	Need for affect
NFC	Need for cognition
NPO	Nonprofit organization
RQ	Research question
TTM	Transtheoretical model of behavior change
TV	Television
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

Summary

Public communication campaigns have become one of the most important tools of strategic communication to achieve social change and to change behaviors. However, despite their recognized potential to contribute to a better world, their effectiveness often remains below expectation. By examining message strategies and their effects on individuals, the present dissertation aims for a more nuanced understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns. This research is guided by two theoretical perspectives: The first theoretical perspective considers the influence of audience characteristics on the effects of persuasive message strategies (Paper 1 & Paper 2). The second theoretical perspective looks at the role of proximal, of the moment responses in the persuasion process (Paper 3). Paper 1 identifies four basic message approaches used in public communication campaigns and delineates what message approach is most effective for target audiences depending on their stage of readiness to change. Paper 2 focuses on one particular target audience: namely, those people who are usually not inclined to support a public communication campaign. The aim is to find out how to persuade these people through variations in visual and verbal message features. The results of an experimental study indicate that less empathic individuals are more supportive of a prosocial advertising campaign when exposed to sad images and anecdotal evidence. Paper 3 explores the interplay between visual and verbal message features. The goal is to better understand what kind of momentary responses explain the persuasive effects of different image-text combinations. A repeated measures experiment identifies perceived interpretational guidance (that is, as an effort to steer recipients toward one interpretation of the message and away from others) as the key explanatory mechanism. Overall, the findings suggest that recipients are particularly responsive to messages that are matched to their motivational orientation and to simple and clear messages.

Zusammenfassung

Öffentlichkeitskampagnen sind zu einem der wichtigsten Werkzeuge der strategischen Kommunikation geworden, um sozialen Wandel herbeizuführen. Doch trotz ihres Potentials, zu einer besseren Welt beizutragen, bleibt ihre Effektivität oftmals hinter den Erwartungen zurück. Die vorliegende Dissertation untersucht Message-Strategien mit dem Ziel, zu einem vertiefteren Verständnis von Persuasion in Öffentlichkeitskampagnen beizutragen. Dieses Forschungsvorhaben wird von zwei theoretischen Perspektiven geleitet: Die erste Perspektive befasst sich mit dem Einfluss bestimmter Zielgruppen-Merkmale auf die Effekte von persuasiven Message-Strategien (Paper 1 & Paper 2). Die zweite Perspektive betrachtet die Rolle von unmittelbaren kognitiven Reaktionen im Persuasionsprozess (Paper 3). Paper 1 identifiziert vier basale Kommunikationsansätze, die in Öffentlichkeitskampagnen zur Anwendung gelangen, und leitet her, welcher Ansatz für welches Zielpublikum am effektivsten ist. Die verschiedenen Zielgruppen werden dabei anhand ihrer Bereitschaft, ihr Verhalten zu ändern, segmentiert. Paper 2 fokussiert sich auf eine bestimmte Zielgruppe: Jene Individuen, die normalerweise nicht geneigt sind, Öffentlichkeitskampagnen zu unterstützen. Im Fokus steht die Frage, wie sich die Unterstützung jener Individuen durch visuelle und verbal Message-Strategien gewinnen lässt. Die Ergebnisse einer experimentellen Studie zeigen auf, dass wenig empathische Menschen signifikant positiver gegenüber prosozialen Öffentlichkeitskampagnen eingestellt sind, wenn die Kampagne traurige Bilder und anekdotische Evidenz verwendet. Paper 3 erforscht das Zusammenspiel zwischen Bild und Text in Öffentlichkeitskampagnen. Hierbei liegt das Augenmerk auf den kognitiven Reaktionen, welche die persuasiven Effekte von verschiedenen Bild-Text-Kombinationen erklären. Die Ergebnisse aus allen drei Studien implizieren, dass Botschaften besonders persuasiv sind, wenn sie auf die motivationale Orientierung der Rezipienten zugeschnitten sind. Des Weiteren zeigt sich, dass die Rezipienten einfache und klare Botschaften bevorzugen.

1 Introduction

Social change does not come over night nor does it happen on its own (Campbell & Scott, 2011). In fact, social change happens is a long-term process that is fundamentally driven by social initiatives (Lauri & Lauri, 2005). These initiatives can take a vast range of forms as organizations nowadays have a comprehensive toolkit of strategies to promote social change (Campbell & Scott, 2011; Werder, 2020). Public communication campaigns are one of the most fundamental and common forms of social initiatives (Atkin & Rice, 2013). With millions of dollars being spent annually on public communication campaigns, they have become staple tools to promote social change (Grunig & Ipes, 1983). The most costly campaign that has been conducted so far was the American Legacy Foundation's "The Truth Campaign" – an antismoking campaign that amounted to 185 million dollars (Schmid et al., 2008). Public communication campaigns can constitute a decisive input for social processes as they are designed to reach out to large audiences (Cho & Salmon, 2007; Dibb & Carrigan, 2013). In particular, public communication campaigns are purposive and targeted attempts „to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specified time period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society” (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 3).

Public communication campaigns address a wide range of topics including health issues (e.g., drug abuse, smoking, obesity), prosocial issues (e.g., human rights, social exclusion), and environmental issues (e.g., climate change, energy consumption) (Coffman, 2002; Hille et al., 2018; Paisley & Atkin, 2013). The breadth of topics covered by public communication campaigns has gone hand in hand with a proliferation of labels (Werder, 2020). Depending on the issue domain, public communication campaigns are referred to as health campaigns (Atkin & Salmon, 2012), prosocial advertising campaigns (Jacob & Guéguen, 2015), social communication campaigns (Patrut et al., 2011), environmental campaigns (Brulle, 2010) or communication campaigns (Werder, 2020). Although public communication campaigns have become an umbrella concept that goes by many names, their uniting purpose is to achieve social change by means of changing or reinforcing behaviors (Holbert & Tchernev, 2013).

However, campaign designers face certain obstacles that must be overcome before people are willing to perform a desired behavior. Such obstacles can include lacking awareness, misconceptions, or resistance to change (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013). It is therefore common that public communication campaigns focus on preliminary or intermediate outcomes along the persuasion process (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013). A great deal of public communication campaigns aims to influence attitudes (O’Keefe, 2016). “The assumption has been that attitudes are important determinants of behavior and, correspondingly, that one avenue to changing a person’s behavior will be to change that person’s attitudes” (O’Keefe, 2016, p. 9). The link between attitudes and behaviors is empirically well documented (Anker et al., 2010; O’Keefe, 2016; Slater, 1999; Yzer, 2012). Moreover, public communication campaigns might want to influence further intermediate outcomes. Sometimes a persuasive attempt focuses on a precursor of attitude, for example, specific beliefs about the attitude object (O’Keefe, 2016). An “object” here can include persons or organizations, products and services, social issues, or policies (O’Keefe, 2016). For instance, a public communication campaign might try to change people’s negative beliefs about vaccination (e.g., that vaccines harm children) as a means to improve their attitude towards vaccination and, ultimately, to persuade them to vaccinate their children. In addition, public communication campaigns are sometimes concerned with mental states which are not (directly) related to attitudes. For instance, persuasion research has identified one’s perceived ability to perform a behavior as an important determinant of actual behavior (O’Keefe, 2016). If someone doesn’t believe that she or he is able to stop smoking, this person will be unlikely to engage in cessation attempts.

The majority of public communication campaigns relies on direct persuasion and targets audience segments whose behaviors the campaign ultimately seeks to influence (Atkin & Rice, 2013; Hornik, 2013; Martinez & Lewis, 2016). These so-called focal audience segments are subpopulations who might benefit from a desired social change because they are at risk for harm or in need of help or improvement (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Public communication campaign might aim to persuade these individuals to get vaccinated, stop smoking, eat healthy, vote, or recycle (Coffman, 2002). However, focusing on personal choices alone is not always the most effective and efficient strategy to achieve the desired social change (Hornik, 2013). There are circumstances, in which focal

audiences are at risk or susceptible to a threat but lack the ability, the will, or the resources to change their behaviors. In these cases, it might be more productive to rely on indirect persuasion and address secondary target audiences who can exert interpersonal influence on focal audiences or who can help create the social, political, or economic ramifications that contribute to a desired social change (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Interpersonal influencers can be opinion leaders, family members, friends, co-workers or other persons who are in the position and willing to nudge focal audiences toward particular behaviors. Secondary target audience may also include individuals who are not affected by a social problem themselves but who can be mobilized for helping others by donating money, signing petitions, writing letters to politicians, or participating in demonstrations (Atkin & Rice, 2013).

But, how to communicate to strike a positive chord with target audiences and to make them comply with the recommended behavior? What messages are most persuasive? Surprisingly, such questions have received less attention than one might expect. Public communication campaigns often fail their goals because they were poorly conceived and didn't generate the intended responses (Atkin & Rice, 2013). In fact, a consistent pattern emerges across hundreds of studies, pointing to a gap between the objectives of public communication campaigns and their effects (Atkin & Salmon, 2012; Logan et al., 2015). While public communication campaigns have proved their utility to raise awareness, they have often failed to achieve the intended behavioral outcomes (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013). Numerous examinations indicate that public communication campaigns "are capable of generating moderate to strong influences on cognitive outcomes, less influence on attitudinal outcomes, and still less influence on behavioral outcomes" (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 13). One reason lies in the sheer abundance of social problems and the fact that they all compete for people's attention. This fierce competition for attention urges for compelling message strategies that resonate with the target audiences (Paisley & Atkin, 2013). People are less motivated to engage with a message when they perceive it as boring, irrelevant, preachy, or offensive (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Similarly, communicating in a clear and concise fashion is a key success factor (Kernbach et al., 2015). When messages are unclear, people are "unlikely to understand us; and if they don't understand us, they will not agree with us. If they don't agree, they are unlikely to make a decision or take action in

our favor” (Eppler & Bischof, 2011, p. 9). However, communication practitioners often put a lot of effort and resources into creating pretty messages using nice fonts or creative layouts but spend too little time on understanding how target audience members process a given message or how they think about the behavior at issue (Hornik, 2013). This is not to suggest that communication practitioners do not consult literature. Empirical persuasion research is a relatively young discipline and, as a result, many questions related to what message strategies work best still remain to be addressed. Therefore, this dissertation pursues the following overall research objective:

This dissertation seeks to contribute to a broader and more nuanced understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns by examining message strategies and their effects on individuals.

This introductory chapter provides a holistic working definition of persuasion in public communication campaigns as a basis for the subsequent study of message strategies and their effects. Persuasion in public communication campaigns will be conceptualized as a phenomenon that can be immediately influenced by campaign strategists in three ways: 1) through the message source, 2) the channel, 3) and the message. Subsequently, the chapter operationalizes the research objective and the research questions of this dissertation. The introductory chapter further provides a brief overview of the methods used to answer the research questions and the structure of this dissertation.

1.1 Persuasion in public communication campaigns

Persuasion refers to the „use of symbols (sometimes accompanied by images) by one social actor for the purpose of changing another social actor’s opinion or behavior“ (Dillard, 2010, p. 203). For as long as humanity has existed, people have attempted to influence each other. Yet, the systematic and documented study of persuasion dates back to the ancient Greeks, where it became a dominant theme in rhetoric (Hogan, 2013). The classical rhetoric tradition was characterized by its focus on the techniques of persuasion in politics and civil life and by its overriding concern with the *ethics* of persuasion (Hogan, 2013). In modern communication research, however, ethical considerations have increasingly moved into the background and have been gradually superseded by concerns with the *effects* of persuasion (Hogan, 2013). Persuasion, from

this perspective, centers around questions of how, when, why, and where purposive communication attempts produce what kinds of effects (Holbert & Tchernev, 2013). Persuasion in public communication campaign is therefore concerned with the outcomes (or, the effects) that are produced by these campaigns.

McGuire (2013) identifies three factors that can be directly manipulated by campaign strategists and that play a critical role in the production of a persuasive effect: the source (who), the message (says what), and the channel (via which media). Although recipient factors are not subject to manipulation by the campaign strategists, sensitivity to the predispositions, abilities, and cultural attributes of an individual is crucial to understand persuasion (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013; McGuire, 2013). All of these factors are at work at some level in the production of persuasive effects, although not every factor may be equally important in a given campaign (Holbert & Tchernev, 2013). Thus, only focusing on messages and their effects might not adequately consider the complexity of persuasion. Any public communication campaign message “functions alongside the source of that message, a broad range of recipient characteristics (e.g., demographics, needs, traits), the context within which the message is provided, and the channel through which it is offered (e.g., television, radio, newspaper)” (Holbert & Tchernev, 2013, p. 37). In order to provide a holistic understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns, these factors will be elaborated in the following.

1.1.1 Source

Source refers to both the organization that sponsors a campaign and the messenger who conveys the message (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013; McGuire, 2013). The number of organizations engaging in public communication campaigning has diversified over the course of the 20th century. Prior to World War II, public communication campaigns were mainly sponsored by voluntary associations (e.g., social, environmental, health, or religious organizations), the mass media, and governmental actors (e.g., Food and Drug Administration) (Paisley & Atkin, 2013). Three further actors, foundations (e.g., Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), trade unions (e.g., United Farm Workers of America), private corporations (e.g., insurances or pharmaceutical firms) and celebrities (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio) became increasingly involved in public communication campaigns

in the aftermath of World War II. The latest group to conduct public communication campaigns are social scientists (Paisley & Atkin, 2013). There are three source characteristics that are conventionally assumed to enhance the persuasive impact of a public communication campaign: credibility, attractiveness, and power. While credibility derives from a source's perceived trustworthiness and expertise, attractiveness refers to a source's likeableness and its pleasantness. Power is related to the source's ability to reward or sanction the recipient (McGuire, 2013).

1.1.2 Channel

The vehicle used to transport the campaign message is called channel (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013; McGuire, 2013). The emergence of the internet has given rise to many new campaign channels. These new channels – including social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, blogs, and online news sites – offer unprecedented possibilities to reach target audiences that are dispersed across states, countries, and continents. Moreover, search engines such as Google or Yahoo help people look up information on anything that interests or bothers them (Dibb & Carrigan, 2013). Nevertheless, public communication campaigns still heavily rely on traditional mass media (Atkin & Rice, 2013; McGuire, 2013). “Due to their high reach the traditional mass media channels (television, radio, newspapers, magazines) provide a good way to reach many people all at once” (Rossmann, 2013, p. 418). Also, “small media” such as posters, flyers, or brochures are important campaigning channels (Buller et al., 2013; Noar, Palmgreen, et al., 2009; Rice & Robinson, 2013; Robinson et al., 2014). However, each channel has its pros and cons. While digital channels are commonly more dialogical and inclusive of marginalized or oppressed voices, traditional channels may be more effective to reach (elder) people who don't have access to the internet (Campbell & Scott, 2011). Most public communication campaigns combine several channels (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013). This decision is often grounded in the insight that even the most sophisticated campaign ultimately fails when it is not seen or heard (Hornik, 2013).

1.1.3 Message

A persuasive message is a “complex, informationally-dense creation” that is aimed at changing attitudes and behaviors (Kim, 2019, p. 73). Persuasive messages can be analyzed at different levels. At a higher level, we can examine the message approaches employed in public communication campaigns. Message approaches, or synonymously communication approaches, can be understood as bundles of messages that share the same purpose and scope (Dorfman et al., 2002; Werder, 2020). Moreover, message approaches can be characterized in terms of the communication style that they use. For example, Brulle (2010) investigated the communication approaches of two environmental nonprofit organizations and found that both used a top-down communication style that failed to promote civic engagement and dialog. Because most public communication campaigns disseminate a considerable quantity of diverse messages, campaign strategists often employ a variety of communication approaches (Atkin & Salmon, 2012). Moreover, public communication campaigns tend to be conducted over a long period of time, ranging from several weeks to several months or even years (e.g., anti-smoking campaigns). This timespan gives strategists an ample opportunity to develop and refine their message approaches to increase the campaign’s impact (Atkin & Salmon, 2012). At a lower level, we can examine message features. “Persuasive messages are often broken into parts for study and analysis with researchers examining the persuasive influence of specific message features” (Shen & Bigsby, 2014, p. 20). Each message may include various content dimensions (e.g., themes, arguments, appeals, evidence), style dimensions (e.g., message framing, politeness, clarity, literalness, humorousness) and structure dimensions (order of arguments, coherence markers, layout) (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013; McGuire, 2013; Shen & Bigsby, 2014). Moreover, messages can be differentiated in terms of the semiotic modes of communication that they use. Most public communication campaigns are multimodal in that they combine image and written text (Kjeldsen, 2012). For instance, poster campaigns commonly feature colorful images and catchy headlines that explain – or anchor – the meaning of the image. Likewise, social media campaign videos offer “(...) multimodal compositions of moving images, spoken language, and sound, enhanced by written text inserts” (Wessler et al., 2016, p. 424). The visual mode includes images such as photographs, drawings, graphs, charts, or cartoons but excludes any kind of “mental visualization” which is not materially realized and therefore not immediately

available for others (Meyer et al., 2018, p. 394). The verbal mode includes any written document as well as any oral recordings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Meyer et al., 2018). Persuasion research has been characterized by its distinct focus on verbal message features and it was only in the last decade that the persuasive effects of visual message features have moved to the forefront of scholarly interest. What has still remained a largely uncharted territory, however, is the persuasive effects of *image-text-combinations*. In other words, the *interplay* between image and text has not yet received the attention that a thorough understanding of persuasion in modern (and multimodal) communication campaigns would require (O’Keefe, 2004; Seo et al., 2013).

1.1.4 Audience

A campaign might be as carefully and cautiously planned, but there is no guarantee that the desired effects occur. The critical factor between a campaign (i.e., sources, channels, and messages) and its intended effect is the audience. The recipients – or, audience members – do not just passively “soak up” persuasive messages and act upon what they are being told (Webster, 1998). If recipients don’t feel that a campaign resonates with them, they are unlikely to support it, let alone comply with a recommended behavior (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Yet, recipients may largely differ in what they find resonating and thus can have markedly different responses to the same message (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). Not everyone fancies the same types of campaigns and not everyone is triggered by the same cues and images. In fact, there is a multitude of audience characteristics that may influence how recipients respond to a campaign. Persuasion research emphasizes the role of sociodemographic factors (e.g., age, sex, income, education), personality traits (e.g., need for cognition, need for affect, empathy) and mental states (e.g., attitudes, norms, beliefs) (Atkin & Salmon, 2012; O’Keefe, 2016). Research that engages with the influence of audience characteristics on the effects of persuasive messages addresses questions such as “*what* messages work best for whom”? This strand of research accordingly seeks to enhance the effectiveness of public communication campaigns by better understanding what messages are most persuasive for which target audiences. Although audience characteristics have increasingly moved to the forefront of scholarly interest, understanding their influence on persuasion is often a challenging endeavor (O’Keefe, 2016). Audience characteristics “may affect persuasion in a number of different ways, so perhaps it is

unsurprising that research has so often yielded complex results” (O’Keefe, 2016, p. 254).

A complementary way to understand how persuasion works is to engage with the underlying mechanisms that drive people’s responses. This means investigating *why* people respond to campaigns the way that they do (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013). The focus here lies on the momentary responses that drive recipients’ reactions to a campaign (McGuire, 2013). Persuasion is conceptualized as a process where momentary responses to a persuasive message shape later and more distal outcomes including attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Dillard & Seo, 2013; Rhodes & Ewoldsen, 2013). Momentary effects describe “relatively microscopic responses that are made to messages as they unfold” (Seo et al., 2013, p. 567). Although the ultimate interest of persuasion researchers and communication strategists lies on distal outcomes, a full understanding of persuasive message effects requires to consider momentary responses as well: Momentary responses are considered key explanatory mechanisms that govern persuasive message effects (Seo et al., 2013). Research that investigates momentary responses accordingly addresses questions such as “*why* do messages work the way they do”?

Overall, a critical aspect in understanding how persuasion works and how to increase the effectiveness of public communication campaigns is to understand what recipients “do” with a campaign. This fundamentally involves questions about 1) what messages best resonate with which target audience and 2) the momentary responses that drive persuasive message effects.

1.2 Research objective

Having provided a working definition of persuasion in public communication campaigns, this section establishes the overall research objective. I will then operationalize this research objective through several research questions. The main purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to a better understanding of public communication campaigns and their potential to promote and foster social change. To

sharpen the scope of this dissertation and to make the research objective more specific and practically relevant, several restrictions will be introduced.

First, this dissertation focuses on *message strategies* in public communication campaigns and their effects. I do not address effects of campaign sources and campaign channels, although I acknowledge that sources and channels can influence persuasion in public communication campaigns. It is likely, for instance, that the credibility of the campaign sponsor has an influence on recipient's support for the campaign. Likewise, a campaign message that was disseminated on Facebook might have very different effects if used for print advertising. While the campaign might strike a positive chord with the users on Facebook, it might irritate or confuse recipients when published in a newspaper because it does not fit the genre. Despite these potential effects of campaign sources and channels, this dissertation focuses on the effects of message strategies. It does so because studies on the effects of messages are at the heart of persuasion research (Shen & Bigsby, 2014). As emphasized by Dillard and Pfau (2002), "questions concerning how messages might be designed to produce the greatest suasive impact lies at the very center of persuasion research" (p. xvi). Moreover, this dissertation acknowledges the fact that most campaigns are multimodal and combine verbal and visual communication. A particular interest therefore lies on messages that are made up of verbal *and* visual components.

The second restriction concerns the understanding of effects. When referring to the effects of a campaign, I mean the *intended* effects. Intended effects describe the array of impacts that the campaign aims to produce (Salmon & Murray-Johnson, 2013). For example, a campaign might seek to improve people's attitude toward eating healthy or to increase the amount of money they donate for charitable purposes. However, campaigns sometimes produce unintended effects. These effects can be wanted or unwanted (Salmon & Murray-Johnson, 2013). An example of an unintended but wanted effect is an anti-smoking campaign that decreases smoking among adults, although its actual goal was to prevent adolescents from smoking uptake. An effect is unwanted if it runs counter the campaign's objectives: for instance, if a campaign sought to promote vaccination but people are responding with reactance and counter-arguing because they

feel patronized. The present dissertation addresses the extent to which public communication campaigns are successful – or, *effective* - in achieving their intended objectives.

Third, to predict and explain message effects, I consider the way that messages are being processed by the recipients. Specifically, I am interested in the factors that shape their responses to campaign messages. I therefore consult two theoretical perspectives: 1) audience characteristics and their impact on persuasion and 2) momentary responses to campaign messages and their role in the persuasion process. Figure 1 provides an overview of the scope of the present dissertation project.

To summarize, the overall research objective of this dissertation is to contribute to the knowledge on persuasion in public communication campaigns by examining message strategies in multimodal campaigns and their effects on individuals. This will be done under consideration of 1) the influence of audience characteristics on the effects of persuasive message strategies and 2) the role of momentary responses in the persuasion process.

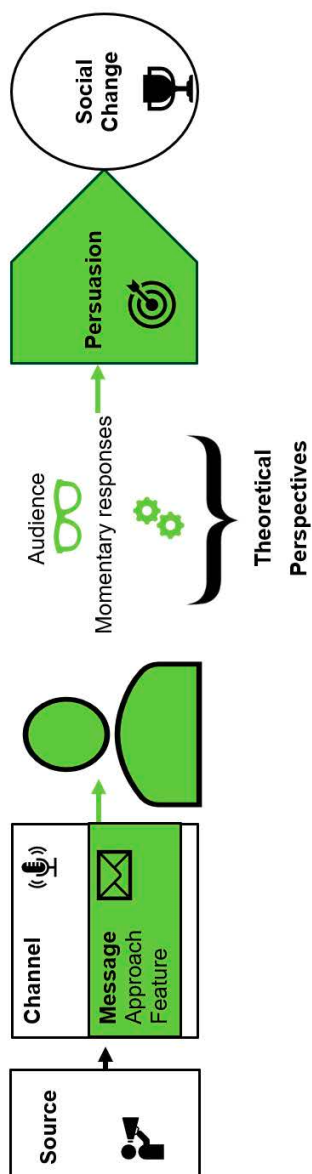


Figure 1. Scope of the dissertation project.

1.3 Research questions

The overall research objective will be operationalized by three intermediate research objectives, each forming the basis of a separate paper with specific research questions.

To gain a better understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns, this dissertation will be first concerned with the effects of *message approaches* (i.e., bundles of messages) and subsequently with the effects of *message features* (i.e., specific components within a message). The focus will accordingly be narrowed down from a higher-level perspective to a lower-level perspective on message effects.

When examining *message approaches*, I am interested in what approach is most persuasive for which target audiences. The first intermediate research objective is thus to match the different message approaches used in public communication approaches to specific target audiences and their characteristics (*intermediate research objective 1*). Multimodality is addressed implicitly. I argue that message approaches are not tied to a specific mode of communication (e.g., the verbal mode). Instead, each message approach can potentially be realized in (a combination of) various modes. Several examples will be provided to illustrate that the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns can be implemented using all kinds of modes – ranging from written text and imagery to speech, gesture, and embodiment.

I will be further concerned with audience characteristics when exploring the effects of *message features*. However, I will do so from a slightly different angle. I am interested in how to win the support from one specific target audience: namely, from those people who are usually not inclined to support a public communication campaign. The aim is to find out how to persuade these people through variations in visual and verbal message features (*intermediate research objective 2*).

The *third intermediate research objective* explores the interplay between visual and verbal message features. The goal is to better understand what kind of momentary responses drive the persuasive effects of different image-text combinations.

Each of these three intermediate research objectives will be explored in a separate paper and operationalized by specific research questions. The following section delineates the research questions and puts them in a broader context of the dissertation.

1.3.1 Paper 1

The first paper focuses on the different message approaches used in public communication campaigns. Public communication campaigns address a vast array of social problems ranging from unhealthy lifestyles to plastic pollution or domestic violence. Moreover, these campaigns often make use of different semiotic modes to raise awareness to their cause. The breadth of campaign topics and modes, on the one hand, offers a rich ground for research. On the other hand, this heterogeneity bears the risk that research on public communication campaigns becomes fragmented. It is therefore important to have theoretical concepts that cover all kinds of campaigns and that provide an overview of the basic communication strategies that are being used. Yet, persuasion research has paid surprisingly little attention to message approaches in public communication campaigns. In fact, there is no overarching typology that identifies and classifies message approaches across topics and modes (Kaufman, Harman, Smelyanskaya, Orkis, & Ainslie, 2017; Oku et al., 2016; Rice & Robinson, 2013; Werder, 2013). “To our knowledge, there have been no attempts to develop a framework for organising the range of communication interventions in campaign activities” (Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 3). The first research question therefore is:

RQ1.1.: How can the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns be categorized and systematized in an overarching typology?

The resulting typology serves as a basis to address the persuasive potential of each message approach. Specifically, the goal is to understand whom to best address with what message approach. Since public communication campaigns ultimately seek to influence behaviors, I will suggest to segment target audiences based on their readiness to adopt a behavior. I will then elaborate how people’s readiness to change influences

their responses to different message approaches. The second research question accordingly asks:

RQ1.2: What message approach is most persuasive for which target audiences?

1.3.2 Paper 2

The second paper of this dissertation examines how to win the support from those who are usually not inclined to support a public communication campaign. Getting people to help others is of great strategic relevance for the success of many social change endeavors. For instance, most humanitarian nonprofit organizations rely on financial resources or volunteers to successfully implement food assistance programs, build schools, or provide health services (Renner et al., 2013; Shehu et al., 2015).

Empathy has been identified as a critical determinant of people's propensity to engage in helping behaviors. While empathic individuals have a strong tendency to help others, less empathic individuals are more reluctant to perform prosocial behaviors (Davis, 1983a). For instance, less empathic individuals have consistently shown to volunteer less and to donate less than empathic individuals (FeldmanHall et al., 2015; S. J. Kim & Kou, 2014; Willer et al., 2015). The first research question of the second paper therefore asks:

RQ2.1: To what extent do people differ in their responses to prosocial advertising campaigns depending on their level of empathy?

Because empathic individuals are usually more receptive towards prosocial advertising campaigns, they can be more easily mobilized (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Yet, achieving social change often requires broader support. The ability to even garner the support of less empathic individuals can therefore yield a decisive strategic advantage (Willer et al., 2015). But what messages work best to persuade less empathic individuals? Persuasion research has paid remarkably little attention to this question. Therefore, the second paper investigates how to increase the support for prosocial advertising

campaigns among less empathic individuals. I thereby examine visual *and* verbal message features. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ2.2: To what extent do variations in visual and verbal message features increase persuasion among less empathic individuals?

1.3.3 Paper 3

Paper 3 is concerned with the momentary responses that drive people's reactions to message features. I thereby focus the *interplay* between image and text. This interest is triggered by the fact that the relationship between text and image has remained a widely uncharted territory in persuasion research. Although images and words rarely occur independently in public communication campaigns, fundamental questions about the relationship between text and image are not only unanswered, but have been barely even articulated (Bergkvist et al., 2012; Lick, 2016; Myers et al., 2011).

When put together, image and text adopt specific functions to deliver the message advocacy (Geise & Baden, 2015). Over the last decades, a remarkable shift in the functions of imagery and text has taken place in public communication campaigns (Kjeldsen, 2012; Madupu et al., 2013). Nowadays it is common for imagery to take the thematic spotlight with text assuming more of a supporting role (Phillips, 2000). Imagery thus often communicates the key message of the ad, whereas verbal text explains, or anchors, the meaning of the image (Phillips, 2000). But how much verbal anchoring is most effective? Should the text explicitly anchor the meaning of the image or is it more impactful to give only give a hint at the preferred interpretation? Or, what if no verbal copy is provided at all? This leads us to the following research question:

RQ3.1: What amount of verbal anchoring is most persuasive?

The primary interest of the third paper lies in the underlying mechanisms that govern these effects. I thereby focus on the momentary responses that drive the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring. The second question therefore asks:

RQ3.2: What momentary responses govern the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring?

1.4 Research methodology

The following section presents the research methodology underlying this dissertation. I first make explicit the epistemological positioning of this research endeavor, before addressing the research methods that are being applied.

This dissertation positions itself as theory-driven research. Theory-driven research is at the heart of robust scientific knowledge and is described as the basic objective of science (Cash, 2018; Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). It allows researchers to develop generalizable insights about the world beyond the specific context in which they were generated (Cash, 2018). A theory is defined as the explanation of a set of relationships that apply under specific circumstances. A theory explains why and how these relationships exist and predicts what could, should or would happen in certain situations (Wacker, 2008). A theory, accordingly, can be seen as “a collection of assertions, both verbal and symbolic, that identifies what variables are important and for what reasons, specifies how they are interrelated and why, and identifies the conditions under which they should be related or not related” (Campbell, 1990, p. 65). Theory-driven research is underpinned by an iterative cycle, involving theory building and theory testing (Figure 2) (Cash, 2018; Meredith, 1993). Theory building includes the description and explanation of phenomena. This essentially involves identifying key variables, mapping their interconnections and boundaries as well as providing a rationale that explains the “why” of these connections. Theory testing, in contrast, focuses on testing, validation, and refinement. This includes to put propositions, explanations, and predictions under scrutiny and to revise the theoretical models derived from theory building (Cash, 2018; Meredith, 1993). Theory building and theory testing differ in terms of the theoretical contributions that they allow. Whereas theory building offers conceptual – or analytical – contributions, theory testing engenders empirical contributions (Cash, 2018). All kinds of methods can potentially be useful in theory building *and* theory testing. However,

their adequacy must be critically assessed with regard to the type of research question and the knowledge that is to be generated (Cash, 2018).

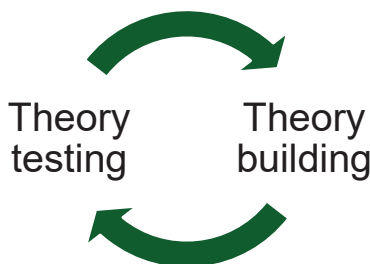


Figure 2. Theory building/testing cycle (own figure based on Cash, 2018).

This dissertation engages with both theory building *and* theory testing. This endeavor is motivated by the idea that a holistic understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns necessarily requires both the formation as well as the testing of theoretical models. Paper 1 seeks to identify the different message approaches used in public communication campaigns and to predict what message approach is most persuasive for which target audiences. These research questions will be approached from a theory building perspective. Paper 1 offers a conceptual model that is made up of two components: 1) a typology that identifies and systematizes different message approaches deployed in public communication campaigns and 2) an explanatory framework that links the effectiveness of each message approach to recipients' readiness to change. Conceptual papers do not include data – although they might be based on qualitative or quantitative data) (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). This is because “their focus is on integration and proposing new relationships among constructs” (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015, p. 127). I will use systematic literature reviews as a method of knowledge generation. A literature review is an objective, comprehensive synthesis and critical analysis of the relevant available research on a given topic (Hart, 1998). Its primary purpose is to offer a holistic background for understanding a phenomenon, inspire ideas, and identify research gaps as a means to advance theory building (Cronin et al., 2008). Literature reviews use a well-defined approach to review extant literature

in a specific subject area of interest. Literature reviews involve to formulate research questions, to set inclusion or exclusion criteria (e.g., time frame, keywords, data bases, languages, types of publications), to assess the quality and appropriateness of the literature included, and to analyze respectively synthesize the literature (Cronin et al., 2008). I conduct a systematic literature review because a good conceptual paper “starts with an overview of the domain and the state of the science; what do we know, where have we come from, and what are the areas yet to be examined” (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015, p. 128).

Paper 2 investigates how to increase support for prosocial advertising campaigns from less empathic individuals. Paper 3 examines the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring and the momentary responses that govern these effects. The research questions related to Paper 2 and 3 will be addressed using theory building and theory testing. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) developed an interesting typology that categorizes empirical articles based on the extent to which they build new theory (first dimension) and the extent to which it tests existing theory (second dimension). Figure 3 positions the papers constituting this dissertation within the typology.

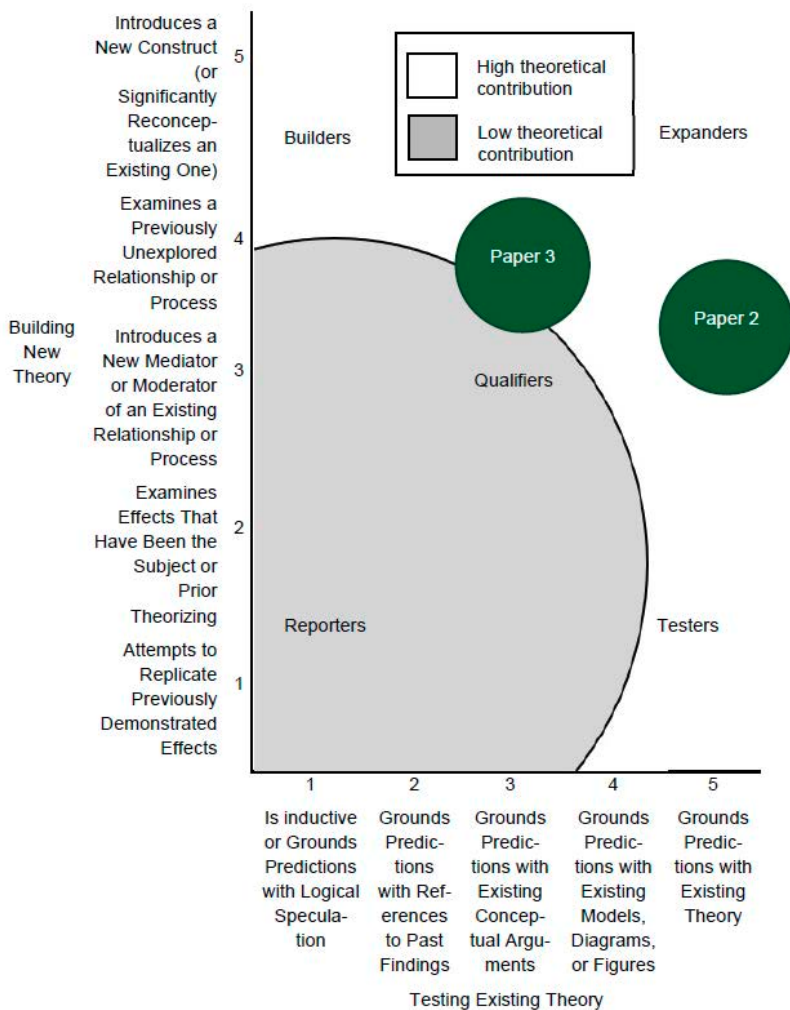


Figure 3. Typology of theoretical contribution for empirical articles
(own figure based on Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

Paper 2 can be best positioned between the “Expanders” and “Testers”. Based on existing theory (trait theories of motivation), Paper 2 develops a new theoretical account for why less empathic individuals can be expected to respond more favorably to particular types of campaign messages. The article grounds its predictions on existing theory (level 5 on the test-existing-theory-dimension), while at the same time introducing empathy as a new key variable moderating the persuasive effects of particular campaign messages (level 3 on building-new-theory-dimension). Due to the lack of existing theory on the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring, Paper 3 grounds its predictions on past conceptual arguments (level 3 on the testing-existing-theory-dimension). Moreover, the paper introduces a new mediator – a specific momentary response that we will identify as the key mechanism explaining the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion. Also, we examine a previously unexplored relationship between verbal anchoring, the complexity of an ad’s image and persuasion (level 4 on the building-new-theory-dimension). Paper 3 can therefore be positioned between the “Builders” and “Expanders”.

Paper 2 and Paper 3 use experimentation as a method. Experimental research has established itself as a powerful empirical method to examine and test casual claims (Imai et al., 2013). The main purpose of experiments is to make causal inferences and, as a result, to derive principles and laws (Ross & Morrison, 2004). Experiments investigate the effects of specific “treatments” (e.g., different types of campaign messages), thereby controlling all extraneous factors as much as possible (Rosenstein, 2019; Ross & Morrison, 2004). A further constitutive characteristic of experiments is that participants are randomly assigned to one treatment or another (Rosenstein, 2019). There are two basic types of experiments: between-subjects-experiments and within-subjects-experiments. A between-subjects experiment is one in which the researcher compares two or more groups of participants on an outcome. A within-subjects experiment is one in which the participants are assigned to several groups and, as a result, the outcome is measured at multiple points (Rosenstein, 2019). Paper 2 will use a between-subjects design, whereas Paper 3 will use a within-subjects design.

1.5 Structure

This dissertation is a cumulative thesis. Unlike a monograph, which takes the form of a book, a cumulative dissertation consists of at least three individual articles, all of which being thematically connected with each other. A further requirement of a cumulative dissertation at the University of St.Gallen is that all articles must be undergoing a peer-reviewing process.

This dissertation is written as a cumulative one for several reasons: First, this form allows to conduct multiple research projects, resulting in a potentially more nuanced and multi-faceted view on persuasion in public communication campaigns than a monographic dissertation. Second, a cumulative dissertation offers the possibility to become familiar with the peer-reviewing process of international journals and conferences already during the PhD process. Also, by approaching persuasion in public communication campaigns from different theoretical and methodological angles, writing a cumulative dissertation is a valuable opportunity to advance one's own skills as a researcher. Third, cumulative dissertations are more closely linked to current research and thus tend to receive more interest from the research community than a monograph.

This dissertation is structured in three parts: an introductory part (chapters 1 and 2: introduction and literature review), a research part (chapters 3, 4, and 5: individual articles), and a conclusion part (chapter 6: discussion and overall conclusion). The introductory part discusses the relevance of this dissertation, the underlying research gaps, the research objectives that are to be addressed and the research methodology of this dissertation. The first part also offers an overview of the current research on 1) the influence of audience characteristics on persuasion and 2) the role of momentary responses in the persuasion process. The second part presents the three individual articles that constitute the “core” of this dissertation project. Table 1 provides an overview of the three papers in terms of their underlying theoretical perspective, research objectives and research questions, method, and current submission status. The third and concluding part of this dissertation synthesizes the key insights and addresses

Introduction

the limitations of the research projects. It closes by identifying and discussing gaps and questions for future research.

Table 1. Overview of the three papers constituting this cumulative dissertation.

Overall research objective	Theoretical perspective	Intermediate research objective	Research questions	Method	Status
Understanding persuasion in public communication campaigns by examining message strategies and their effects on individuals	Audience characteristics	Paper 1 Matching message approaches to target audiences' stage of readiness	RQ1.1: How can the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns be categorized and systematized in an overarching typology?	Conceptual	Presented at the <i>annual conference of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SGKM) 2018</i> (awarded with the Best Paper Award) Published in <i>Nonprofit Management & Leadership</i>
			RQ1.2: What message approach is most persuasive for which target audiences?		
		Paper 2 Matching message features to people who are less inclined to help others	RQ2.1: To what extent do people differ in their responses to prosocial advertising campaigns depending on their level of empathy?	Empirical; Experiment	Presented at the <i>annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) 2020</i> and at the <i>annual conference of the Association for Business Communication (ABC) 2020</i>
			RQ2.2: To what extent can variations in visual and verbal		

Overall research objective	Theoretical perspective	Intermediate research objective	Research questions	Method	Status
			message features increase persuasion among less empathic individuals?		Under review at the <i>Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing</i> (a later version of the manuscript is accepted for publication in the <i>Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing</i>)
	Persuasion process (momentary responses)	Paper 3 Understanding the image-text interplay and the underlying persuasive mechanisms	RQ3.1: What amount of verbal anchoring is most persuasive? RQ3.2: What momentary responses govern the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring?	Empirical; Experiment	Earlier versions presented at the <i>annual conference of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SGKM) 2019</i> and at the <i>annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) 2020</i> Accepted for presentation at the <i>annual conference of the Association for Business Communication (ABC) 2021</i> Under review at <i>Visual Communication Quarterly</i>

2 Literature review

In the following, I will elaborate on the two theoretical perspectives underlying this dissertation. As outlined in the previous chapter, the overall research objective is to gain a more nuanced understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns by examining message strategies in multimodal campaigns and their effects on individuals. This research interest is guided by two theoretical perspectives: The first theoretical perspective considers the influence of audience characteristics on the effects of persuasive message strategies. The second theoretical perspective considers the role of momentary responses in the persuasion process.

Section 2.1 synthesizes the literature and research on message tailoring as a basis to understand the role of audience characteristics on persuasion in public communication campaigns. The section discusses the different degrees to which a message can be customized to target audiences, the mechanism by which customized messages work, and the different types of audience characteristics which have been identified as relevant to persuasion. Section 2.2 reviews the literature and research on momentary responses in the persuasion process. I will start out with the distinction between momentary responses and distal responses in order to provide a conceptual basis to distinguish different types of outcomes in the persuasion process. Focusing on momentary responses, I will subsequently elaborate on what types of momentary responses have been of particular interest for persuasion research. The chapter concludes by locating the three papers constituting this dissertation within the broader context of this synthesis.

2.1 Tailoring messages to audience characteristics

Persuasive messages can be classified based on the degree to which they are tailored – or, customized – to the target audiences (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). In their by now classical typology, Kreuter et al. (1999) suggest that persuasive messages can be customized along a continuum that ranges from most generic to most customized (Figure 4): 1) generic messages, 2) personalized generic messages, 3) targeted messages, 4) tailored messages, and 5) interpersonal messages.

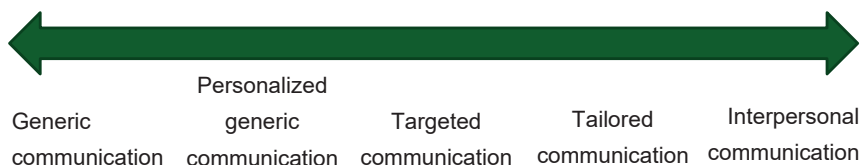


Figure 4. Degrees of message customization (own figure based on Kreuter et al., 1999).

Generic messages are non-customized in that they are mass-produced and distributed to all target audiences and subgroups. In other words: everyone gets the same message. Personalized generic messages differ from generic messages in that they use superficial characteristics (e.g., name, title) to give recipients the impression of customization. Targeted messages are considered “an incremental advance over the generic one-size-fits-all approach” (Kreuter et al., 2000, p. 5) because they are customized to specific audience segments. The goal is to organize messages around groups – segments – of people who are relatively homogenous in terms of the key factors that influence their responses to the campaign (Slater et al., 2006). The practice of dividing audiences into relatively homogenous subgroups based on shared characteristics is also known as audience segmentation (Huang & Shen, 2016; Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). Audiences can be segmented on a number of factors including demographic, geographic, psychographic, behavioral or cultural variables (Noar, Harrington, et al., 200). However, this approach relies “entirely on identifying group similarities and subsequently targeting messages at the group level” (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009, p. 75). Individual differences within these groups are not addressed. For instance, an environmental campaign might use prior attitudes toward climate change as a segmentation variable. The question is, however, whether the differences between the audience segments are large enough or whether the recipients differ just as much within the segments as they do between the segments (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). Whereas targeted messages seek to be effective with an entire audience segment, tailored messages are customized at the individual level (Kreuter et al., 2000; Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). Message tailoring can be defined as “any combination of strategies and information intended to reach one specific person, based on characteristics that are unique to that person, related to the outcome of interest, and derived from an individual assessment” (Kreuter et al., 1999, p. 277). The idea behind message tailoring is to match

the message to the individual, so that it fits like a glove (Schmid et al., 2008). Message tailoring was used, for instance, in a health campaign promoting fruit and vegetable intake where messages were matched to individual's tendency to be motivated by promotion versus prevention goals (Latimer et al., 2008). According to Kreuter et al. (1999), interpersonal communication is the most customized message type. Interpersonal communication is synchronous in time and involves two or more people. The use of interpersonal message strategies is particularly popular in the context of health campaigns. Vaccination campaigns often use door-to-door visits to discuss common misconceptions about vaccination (Ames et al., 2017). However, although interpersonal communication has the *potential* to be most highly customized, it is not necessarily always the case (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009, p. 111). When dialogues with target audiences are pre-scripted, campaign workers have a limited degree of freedom to tailor communication to their audiences. Furthermore, the amount of customization hinges on factors such as the knowledge, training, and motivation of the campaign worker (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

2.1.1 The use of message tailoring

Until the early 1990s, most public communication campaigns relied on generic message strategies to address undifferentiated and largely unknown audiences (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). Campaigns predominantly used costly print products such as brochures, booklets, or posters to advertise their cause. "The high cost of printing made it necessary to print many copies of materials to be cost effective" (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006, p. S185). Campaign strategists therefore aimed to produce campaign materials that would satisfy the needs of as many recipients as possible (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). However, in the past three decades, campaigners have increasingly begun to customize messages. A key driver for this development was the advent of modern information and communication technologies. The invention of the internet in combination with major improvements in computing provided campaigners the tools to develop customized messages (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). For instance, computer algorithms can be used to address individuals with campaign messages that are matched to their personality, their behaviors and so on. These messages are stored and derived from message libraries, which may consist of hundreds of messages (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). Modern technologies also brought a significant diversification of campaign channels, which allow campaigners to

disseminate messages at relatively little cost and potentially reach global audiences. Furthermore, the emergence of customized public communication campaigns was tied to important advances in research. As persuasion research accumulated knowledge about the heterogeneity within mass audiences and about the effects of customized messages, campaign strategists have increasingly begun to create different versions of campaign messages for specific audiences (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006).

A broad variety of studies has been dedicated to answer the question of *whether* customized messages are more persuasive than generic messages (Brug et al., 1999; Noar et al., 2007; Skinner et al., 1999). The findings yield strong support for the persuasive superiority of customized messages over generic messages. For instance, Skinner et al. (1994) showed that tailored health messages (391'000 combinations possible) promoting mammography were significantly more often read and remembered than generic health messages. Another study found that even minimally tailored messages are more effective than generic messages (Dijkstra, 2005). It is noteworthy that customizing messages has been primarily considered a matter of customizing message *content*. Aspects related to message design, style, or structure have received far less attention (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). While prior studies demonstrate *that* customizing messages works, however, they do not elucidate *why* they work.

2.1.2 The mechanisms behind message tailoring

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM: Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) is commonly invoked to explain how customized messages achieve their effects. The ELM asserts that recipients process information either using the central route or the peripheral route. Central processing includes an analytic and thoughtful elaboration of the message content (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). “As such, it demands and consumes cognitive capacity” (Dillard & Peck, 2000, p. 462). Heuristic processing requires less cognitive effort and occurs when recipients rely on a more superficial processing where judgmental rules, so-called heuristics, are activated and applied (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). The ELM further posits that central route processing leads to attitudes that are more stable over time and, as consequence, more predictive of future behaviors. Thus,

from a persuasion perspective, central route processing is more advantageous and effective than peripheral route processing (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). But how can recipients be motivated to take the central route? A main tenet of the ELM is that the extent to which recipients engage in more systematic processing depends on their personal involvement with a message. Recipients most likely experience personal involvement when they perceive “a message to be personally relevant” (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009, p. 111). According to Noar et al. (2009), recipients tend to evaluate customized messages as more personally relevant because these messages resonate more with their individual preferences, interests, and needs than generic messages. When addressed with customized messages, recipients are therefore more likely to engage in central processing and, as a result, more willing to change their attitudes and behaviors. In other words: An ELM-based perspective explains the persuasive advantage of customized messages as a matter of increased motivation to process information (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). Nevertheless, there might be instances where customized messages might not be the best or most effective strategy. Kreuter and Wray (2003) argue that customizing messages should only be considered a) when there is a high variability in the target audience with regard to the key determinants of a desired outcome, b) when there is sufficient understanding of the outcome in a given target audience, and c) when there is the possibility to collect data about the target audience. A related question is what level of customization is most effective. If campaign strategists decide to customize messages, should they rather use message targeting (i.e., messages that are customized at the group level) or message tailoring (i.e., messages that are customized at the individual level)? Tailored messages might be more persuasive because audiences regard them as more personally relevant. However, customizing messages at the individual level requires a thorough and in-depth understanding of the target audience ahead of time. “The high demand for prior knowledge of the audience and the associated costs might hinder their practical implementation” (Huang & Shen, 2016, p. 696). Schmid et al. (2008) therefore conclude that the choice of message targeting or tailoring depends on a variety of factors such as the availability of financial and personal resources, the size and the variability of the target audience and whether the desired behavior change is simple (e.g., small one-time donation), or more complex (e.g., lifestyle change).

2.1.3 Typology of audience characteristics

A message can be customized along an almost infinite number of characteristics (Schmid et al., 2008). This has also manifested itself in the sheer amount of audience characteristics that have been examined so far. Table 2 provides an overview of audience characteristics that have been investigated with regard to their influence on the effects of message strategies in public communication campaigns. The synthesis is not exhaustive but should offer a helpful systematization of the different types of audience characteristics that influence message effects in public communication campaign. This dissertation differentiates audience characteristics based on their permanence over time. Some audience characteristics are more permanent and invariant, while others are more dynamic and prone for change. The permanence of audience characteristics can be understood as a continuum. However, for the sake of analytical clarity, I suggest to conceptualize it here as a dichotomous categorization (dynamic vs. permanent).

Table 2. Overview of audience characteristics that have been examined with regard to their influence on the effects of message strategies in public communication campaigns.

Type	Dynamic audience characteristics	Permanent audience characteristics
Demographic	• Age • Income • Location	• Sex • Race • (Education)
Motivational	• Situational motivation • Mood	• Personality traits (e.g., need for cognition, need for affect, need for sensation-seeking, Big Five personality traits, empathy, trait reactance, prevention vs. promotion-oriented motivations)
Attitudinal	• Attitude • Self-efficacy beliefs • Beliefs about a behavior • Perceived norms	• Culture (e.g., values, familial role models)
Behavioral	• Readiness to change	• Routines • Habits/addictions

The simplest and most widely used method to segment audiences is to divide them by socio-demographic characteristics (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009; Slater, 1995; Tabi & Wüstenhagen, 2017). As Slater et al. (2006) note, it is common for campaign strategists to start segmenting audiences by demographic or geographic variables they have readily

available through surveys. Examples of dynamic variables are age, income, or location. Age is dynamic as it changes every day: with each day, we get older. Also, income varies over time. People might earn more or less money when they find a new job, they might experience pay cuts, or lose their income due to unemployment. Moreover, most people change their location from time to time due to several reasons (new job, new relationship etc.). In contrast, audience characteristics such as sex and race are stable over time. The sex that was assigned at birth is something that is fixed. Also, identifying as white, African American or Hispanic is not something that is subject to change. Other demographic variables, however, might be more difficult to categorize as either dynamic or permanent. Education is such an example. The educational level of children and adolescents changes as they move through the educational system. Once they have completed their education, however, their educational level likely doesn't change (except when they pursue further studies).

Motivational characteristics constitute another class of audience characteristics. Situational motivation and mood are examples of dynamic characteristics. Situational motivation describes the extent to which someone is inquisitive about or wants to gain an in-depth understanding of an issue (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Yan et al., 2018). According to the situational theory of publics, situational motivation is a situation-specific *need* to make problem-solving efforts. It increases as people perceive a problem to be relevant for themselves (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Mood is another motivational audience characteristic. According to the mood-as-a-resource theory (Aspingwall, 1998; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002), individuals “use positive moods as a resource to help them deal with aversive but potentially useful negative information” (Wirtz et al., 2015, p. 184). The underlying assumption is that a certain amount of positive feelings is necessary to pursue goals in the face of things that could threaten one's self-esteem. A recent study lends support to the theory of mode-as-a-resource. Wirtz et al. (2015) showed that participants who read a loss-framed message (i.e., a message that emphasizes negative outcomes) were more favorable toward the message and reported higher intentions to comply with the recommended behavior, but only when they were in a positive mood.

When needs are relatively stable over time and consistently influence people's responses *across* situations, they are considered personality traits. Need for cognition and need for affect are two personality traits that have received particular attention from persuasion scholars. Need for cognition (NFC) is a cognitive motivation that reflects the tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful thinking (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). People high in need for cognition tend to actively seek out information and process it more carefully, whereas those low in need for cognition tend to process information more superficially, thereby relying on mental short-cuts and heuristics such as the credibility or popularity of the message source (e.g., experts or celebrities) (Barbaro et al., 2015; Geoffrey Haddock et al., 2008; Nikoloudakis et al., 2018; Williams-Piehota et al., 2003). A considerable body of research indicates that high NFC individuals are more responsive to messages that contain strong arguments, straightforward facts, details, and statistics. In contrast, low NFC individuals are more persuaded by the presence of peripheral cues including well-known, attractive, or credible message sources and by the *number* of arguments presented (Geoffrey Haddock et al., 2008; Williams-Piehota et al., 2003). Need for affect (NFA) is an affective motivation and is described as the emotional counterpart to the need for cognition (Appel & Richter, 2010; Maio & Esses, 2001). It is understood as the "general motivation of people to approach or avoid situations and activities that are emotion inducing for themselves and others" (Maio & Esses, 2001, p. 585). The need for affect has been related to differences in narrative persuasion. People high on need for affect are more persuaded by narratives because they more readily indulge in the experience of being transported into the fictional world of the narrative (Appel & Richter, 2010). Moreover, high NFA individuals have shown to be more responsive to affect-based messages (Haddock & Huskinson, 2004; Maio & Esses, 2001). There is a variety of further personality traits that are considered important segmentation variables. Examples include need for sensation-seeking (Donohew et al., 1998), the Big Five personality traits (Kajzer et al., 2014), trait empathy (Lee & Cho, 2017), trait reactance (Quick et al., 2011), or prevention versus promotion-oriented motivations (Lee & Aaker, 2004). The influence of personality traits on people's responses to persuasive messages in public communication campaigns can be explained by trait theories of motivation. These theories assume that traits generate an impulse – as striving – towards some objectives (McDougall, 1932; Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018). This striving is what we experience as motivation – that is, a recurring pattern of desire and related behavioral tendencies (Baumeister, 2016). Traits play a major role in

how people respond to persuasive messages: they can exert a decisive influence on the types of messages that work best to change behaviors (Baumeister, 2016; Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018).

A great deal of studies has been concerned with attitudinal audience characteristics, which include different types of assessments or evaluations about the world. Prior attitudes, self-efficacy, beliefs, and perceived norms are examples of dynamic characteristics. Persuasion research has long acknowledged the impact of prior attitudes on people's responses to persuasive messages (Brown & Albarracín, 2005). To explore the influence of prior attitudes, Kumkale et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analytic review on the persuasive effects of source credibility. The findings showed that recipients relied on the credibility of a message source especially when they had no prior attitudes about an issue. Similarly, an experimental study by Jäger and Eisend (2013) revealed that ads with humorous elements significantly increased intentions to comply with the recommended behavior (safe driving) among participants with a less favorable prior attitude toward the promoted behavior. In contrast, fear-arousing ads tended to lead to greater intentions among those with a more favorable prior attitude. Likewise, Sung and Lee (2015) demonstrated that individuals with a strong negative prior attitude toward an organization were less affected by online comments than individuals with a neutral attitude.

Self-efficacy describes people's confidence that they are able to perform a particular behavior (Rimal & Limaye, 2013). As an example, it is one thing to have a favorable prior attitude toward smoking cessation, but it is another thing to believe that one has the (mental) strength to quit smoking. Previous research indicates that people high on self-efficacy perceive the H1N1 flu as significantly more threatening than those low on self-efficacy (Shehu et al., 2015). Similarly, a study by Kim et al. (2018). revealed that a stigmatizing anti-smoking message significantly decreased cessation intentions among smokers with less self-efficacy.

Audiences can also be segmented based on the beliefs that they hold about a particular behavior (Slater, 1999). Beliefs originate from a broad variety of sources including

personal experiences, education, the media, interaction with family and friends, or cultural factors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Dijkstra (2009) examined the influence of disengagement beliefs on the effects of persuasive messages advocating smoking cessation. “A disengagement belief may be true in itself, but it does not provide valid reasons to take a certain risk nor does it seriously challenge that risk” (Dijkstra, 2009, p. 792). For instance, a smoker may say “we all die someday”. This belief may be true, but it suggests that the cause of death is not a relevant issue (Dijkstra, 2009). The study showed that tailored persuasive messages about the consequences of smoking led to significantly higher quitting activities among smokers who strongly adhered to disengagement beliefs. The result was interpreted as an indication that disengagement beliefs can be overruled by persuasive information on the consequences of smoking. Also, perceived norms can be an important segmenting variable. Perceived norms capture the influence of people’s social context on their evaluation of a particular behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Yzer, 2012). Injunctive norms, also known as subjective norms, refer to the extent to which people believe that others think they should or not perform a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Descriptive norms describe the extent to which people believe that others engage in particular behaviors themselves (Cialdini et al., 1990). Personal norms, in contrast, refer to people’s internal standards for behaviors that derive from their internalized values (Cialdini et al., 1991). A recent study shows that people with strong personal norms about reduced water consumption were less affected by normative persuasive messages than people with low personal norms (Schultz et al., 2014). Theories such as the health belief model (Becker, 1974), social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), or the theory of planned behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) are commonly used to guide message tailoring based on dynamic attitudinal audience characteristics (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). The health belief model suggests to customize persuasive messages to people’s beliefs about their susceptibility to a health risk and to their perceived self-efficacy to perform the behavior (Atkin & Rice, 2013). The social cognitive theory emphasizes the relevance of role models, self-efficacy, and explicitly demonstrated behaviors (Atkin & Rice, 2013). The theory of planned behavior suggests that messages should be tailored to recipients’ attitudes, perceived norms, and motivations (Atkin & Rice, 2013).

The attitudinal characteristics that we have discussed so far are dynamic. However, there are further attitudinal characteristics which can be presumed to be more consistent or persistent over time. Specifically, I mean characteristics such as cultural values, traditions, or religious beliefs (Huang & Shen, 2016). Culture is commonly understood as a shared meaning system that includes “values, beliefs, norms, practices, patterns of communication, familial roles, and other social regularities” (Kreuter & McClure, 2004, p. 440). In an experimental study, Huang and Shen (2016) demonstrated that messages that were tailored to people’s cultural values, norms, and religious beliefs had an overall small but significant effect on persuasion. The effect of cultural tailoring can be explained using the theory of situated cognition (Oyserman et al., 2009). Culture is associated with a set of established and deeply held (and thus relatively stable) mindsets that may be activated by culturally tailored persuasive messages: “When the cultural cues successfully activate the desired schema, messages will be more easily processed and result in intended attitude and behavior change” (Huang & Shen, 2016, p. 697).

Behavioral factors constitute another class of audience characteristics. People are often segmented along their readiness to change a given behavior (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). Readiness to change is a dynamic characteristic as it is likely to vary over time. The stages-of-change approach – also known as the transtheoretical model of behavior change (TTM) – has established itself as the most widely used concept to divide audiences along their readiness to change (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009; Slater, 1999). The theory was developed by Prochaska and Velicer (1997) and identifies five major stages in the change process. People move from the precontemplation stage (no intention to change, unaware of a problem) and the contemplation stage (ambivalent about a problem) to the preparation stage (intentions to change), before they enter the action stage (perform a desired behavior) and eventually reach the maintenance stage where they perform a behavior on a regular basis. Prior research indicates that people largely differ in their response to persuasive messages depending on how ready they are to perform a promoted behavior (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). For instance, Cho and Salmon (2006) showed that fear appeals promoting skin cancer preventive behavior led recipients in the contemplation stage to think more fatalistically about health risks than those in the preparation stage. Concurrently, fear appeals led those who were in the precontemplation stage to report less favorable attitudes toward the message and weaker

intentions to comply with the desired behavior. Another study explored the influence of people's stage of readiness on the effects of narrative perspectives (first person vs. third person) and framing (gain vs. loss). The results showed that a loss-framed first-person narrative was most persuasive for precontemplators, whereas a gain-framed first-person narrative was most effective for contemplators and preparers. Another behavioral audience characteristic is prior experience with a given behavior (Anker et al., 2016). Cho et al. (2010) examined risk judgements about online privacy and found that prior experiences significantly moderated people's risk perceptions.

Whereas readiness for behavior change and prior experiences with a given behavior are dynamic, other behavioral audience characteristics are more stable across time and situations. Routines, habits, or addictions are examples of more permanent behavioral audience characteristics that can influence people's responses to persuasive messages (Jeong & Bae, 2018). A readily explanation is that "people tend to increase their resistance to campaign messages to avoid having to go through the challenges of overcoming an addiction" (Jeong & Bae, 2018, p. 990).

2.2 Persuasion process

This dissertation argues that our knowledge of persuasion in public communication campaigns can be enhanced by 1) by better understanding what messages best resonate with which target audiences and 2) by better understanding the momentary responses that drive persuasive message effects. The following section focuses on the literature and research on momentary responses in persuasion.

Persuasion is not a single, one-shot event, but rather a "sequence of linked changes" (Seo et al., 2013, p. 567). It is a process where more immediate responses to a given message shape later and more distal responses (Dillard & Seo, 2013; Rhodes & Ewoldsen, 2013). Persuasion research therefore commonly distinguishes between momentary effects (alternatively known as proximal outcomes) and distal effects (Figure 5) (Kim & Niederdeppe, 2014; Seo et al., 2013; Shen & Han, 2014). Momentary effects describe "relatively microscopic responses that are made to messages as they

unfold”, whereas distal effects are understood as “summary judgments of entire messages or advocacies” (Seo et al., 2013, p. 567). Although the ultimate interest of persuasion researchers and communication strategists lies in distal outcomes, a full understanding of persuasive message effects requires to consider momentary effects as well: Momentary effects are the key explanatory mechanisms governing distal effects (Seo et al., 2013). “Because they are of-the-moment, proximal effects should be relatively more sensitive to variations in message design. In this regard, they are a crucial means for testing the effects of design elements such as language and imagery” (Seo et al., 2013, p. 579). Since they precede distal effects, momentary responses to persuasive messages should be more readily measured and detected (Shen & Han, 2014). The idea of momentary responses being causal antecedents of distal responses suggests a “hierarchy of effects” in message processing (Slater, 2002, p. 166). Examining momentary responses accordingly helps answering the question of how and why a message exerts its effects.

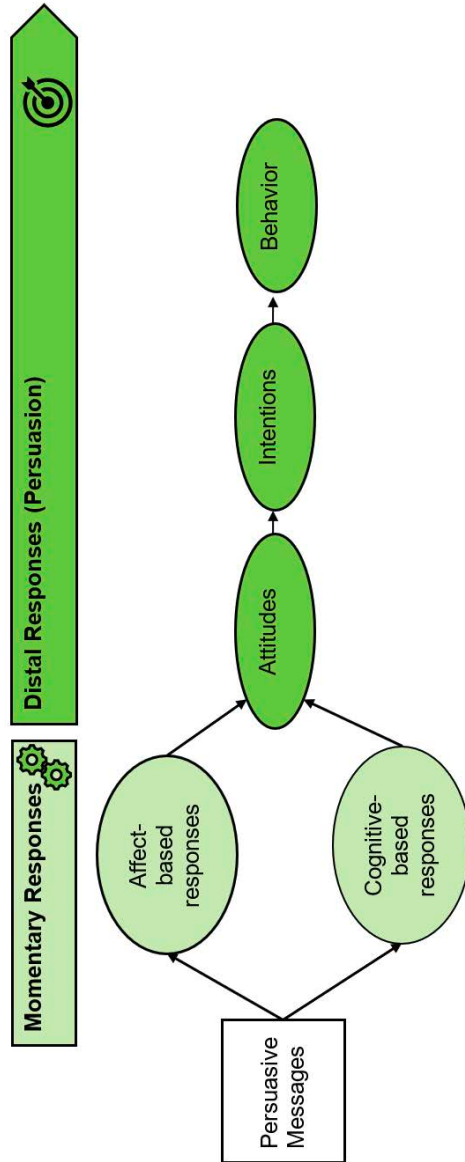


Figure 5. Persuasion as a process involving momentary and distal responses.

2.2.1 Momentary responses

Momentary responses can be differentiated in terms of whether they are cognitive-based or affect-based (Seo et al., 2013). A typical cognitive-based momentary effect is what is known as cognitive responses. Cognitive responses refer to rapid and concentrated thoughts about aspects of the persuasive message or the persuasive situation (Cacioppo et al., 1981). Cognitive responses are usually classified into three categories: Positive thoughts include favorable and supportive cognitions about the message or the advocacy (e.g., “This argument is very convincing”). Negative thoughts refer to unfavorable and counter-arguing perceptions (e.g., “This point does not make any sense and is not logical”). Neutral thoughts include non-judgmental cognitions about the message or advocacy such as “This message deals with plastic pollution” (Seo et al., 2013). Research on cognitive responses yields mixed findings. Seo et al. (2013) found that cognitive responses did not have any impact on perceive message effectiveness in two health campaigns on dental flossing and sunscreen use. Dunlop et al. (2010) conducted two studies on the persuasive effects of narrative transportation (i.e., the experience of being absorbed in a narrative). The results of both studies showed that participants who were more transported had more positive thoughts about quitting smoking. However, cognitive response was only significantly related to participants’ intentions to quit smoking in the first study. In contrast, Banerjee and Greene (2012) found that positive cognitive responses were significantly associated with stronger anti-drug attitudes. Similarly, Guadagno et al. (2011) examined the effects of “vivid messages” in health campaigns and found that supportive cognitive responses mediated the effects of vivid messages on attitude. Yan (2015) explored the effects of health message framing (emphasizing the advantages of compliance with a recommended behavior vs. emphasizing the disadvantages of non-compliance) and attitudinal ambivalence on persuasion. The results indicated that ambivalent individuals were more persuaded by the disadvantage frame and that this effect was explained by the fact that they had more favorable cognitions. Cognitive response is not the only cognitive-based momentary response that has shown to influence persuasion. Examples of further cognitive-based momentary responses include perceived manipulative intent (Hart LaVail et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2020) and learning (Shen & Han, 2014).

Emotions are affective-based momentary responses. Emotions are discrete feelings that vary in intensity “such that individuals may experience more or less fear, anger, sadness, or happiness in response to any given message” (Seo et al., 2013, p. 567). Emotions have shown to play a crucial role in the persuasion process (Cousse et al., 2020; Rinscheid & Wüstenhagen, 2018). Yet, the activation of an emotion does not, by itself or automatically, influence persuasion. Dillard and Peck (2000) demonstrated that only some emotions influenced the perceived effectiveness of a message, while others did not. For instance, a study of health campaigns revealed that fear was the central mechanism explaining the effects of message frames and visual images on persuasion (Seo et al., 2013). Similarly, Yzer et al. (2011) explored the affective antecedents of persuasion. The findings showed that affective valence (unpleasant vs. pleasant) and affective arousal (intensity) can influence people’s overall judgements about the effectiveness of a given persuasive message. Further examples of affective momentary responses are source likeability or state empathy (Shen 2010).

Psychological reactance is an example of a momentary response that has cognitive *and* affective components. Psychological reactance is understood as a combination of negative cognition and anger in response to a perceived threat to one’s freedom (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Previous research has shown that individuals who felt that becoming a donor would be a threat to their freedom were less likely to become absorbed into the story of the campaign and showed less favorable attitudes toward the message (Reinhart & Anker, 2012). Similarly, Lienemann and Siegel (2016) demonstrated that autonomy-supporting messages increase reactance and, by doing so, decrease persuasion among individuals with high levels of depressive symptomatology. The authors therefore conclude that the “results warn that language perceived as autonomy-supportive by people without depression might be perceived as controlling among people with depression” (Lienemann & Siegel, 2016, p. 102).

2.2.2 Distal responses

Distal effects are commonly equated with persuasion and refer to changes in attitudes and behavioral intentions (Shen & Han, 2014, p. 613). Attitudes can be distinguished in terms of whether they are held toward the message itself or toward the advocacy (Seo

et al., 2013). Attitude toward the message is often measured by the extent to which people perceive a message to be effective (Dillard et al., 2007; Seo et al., 2013; Yzer et al., 2011). Perceived effectiveness is defined as the overall judgment of the expected impact of a given persuasive message. It reflects how persuasive, convincing, and effective recipients find the message (Seo et al., 2013). Beyond perceived effectiveness, attitude toward the message is also be measured by how credible, interesting, involving, or informative recipients perceive the message to be (Garcia-Retamero & Cokely, 2011; Lee & Cho, 2017). Attitude of the advocacy describes a general assessment of the *advocacy* put forward by a given persuasive message (Seo et al., 2013). It refers to a recipient's overall assessment of the *idea or cause* advocated by the message (Seo et al., 2013). Behavioral intention means an individual's decision to comply with a behavior (Seo et al., 2013; Yzer et al., 2013). There is a considerable body of studies indicating that distal outcomes are causally linked (Seo et al., 2013). Previous research has consistently shown that attitudes are key determinants of people's intention to comply with a behavior and that intention is a casual antecedent of actual behavior (O'Keefe, 2016; Yzer, 2012).

2.3 Context of this dissertation

In the following, I will locate the three papers constituting this dissertation within the broader context of the presented research on audience characteristics and momentary responses. This dissertation aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns. Questions related to the persuasive effects of message approaches and message features will be addressed in three individual papers. Papers 1 and 2 will be concerned with the influence of audience characteristics on persuasive message effects. Specifically, I will examine the impact of dynamic *and* stable audience characteristics. Paper 1 uses people's readiness to change – a dynamic audience characteristics – as a segmenting variable to understand what message approach best resonates with which target audience. Given that most public communication campaigns ultimately seek to change behaviors, segmenting audiences based on their readiness to change offers a valuable foundation to understand what message approach is most effective to guide people toward this end. Paper 2 uses empathy – a stable audience characteristic – as a segmenting variable. Empathy is

chosen as a segmenting variable because it has been identified as a key motivator for helping behaviors and may thus offer important insights about how people's trait tendency to experience compassion for others influences their responses to persuasive messages.

Paper 3 examines the interplay between visual and verbal message features. Specifically, the goal is to better understand the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring. Perceived interpretational guidance is thereby identified as the key momentary response explaining the effects of verbal anchoring. Perceived interpretational guidance is a cognitive-based momentary response and describes the extent to which recipients perceive the verbal text to constrain their interpretation. Perceived interpretational guidance is a novel variable in that it has not yet been empirically examined.

3 Paper 1: Strategizing for social change in nonprofit contexts: A typology of communication approaches in public communication campaigns

3.1 Abstract

By Fabienne Bünzli & Martin J. Eppler¹

Public communication campaigns aim to create social change by influencing audiences' behaviors and thus help nonprofit organizations fulfill their mission. These campaigns, however, often fail to deliver their anticipated impact. Using public relations research as a theoretical lens, this paper's contribution is twofold: first, we develop a typology that classifies the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns. Based on one of the most prominent public relations theories, the Four Models of Public Relations, we differentiate communication approaches along the dimensions of communication purpose and communication style. Combining these two dimensions in a typology, we identify the following communication approaches: directing, platforming, mobilizing, and involving. We provide numerous real-life examples of public campaigns for each one. Second, we formulate propositions about these communication approaches' effectiveness relying on a key concept of public relations research: namely, audience segmentation. Using the transtheoretical model, we show that audiences can be segmented along five "stages of readiness to adopt a promoted behavior." Conceptualizing behavior change as an iterative, dynamic process

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that entails stage progresses as well as backdrops, we derive how audiences' "stage of readiness" relates to the effectiveness of the identified communication approaches.

Keywords: analysis, nonprofit management, public communication campaigns, public relations, strategic, strategic communication

3.2 Introduction

Resolving social problems lies at the very heart of nonprofit organizations' (NPOs') mission. Therefore, NPOs are a "first line of defense" where social issues can be addressed (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004, p. 136; Jones, 2018, p. 492; Salamon, 1997, pp. 10–11).

"Nonprofit organizations also play an important role in mobilizing public attention to social problems and needs, serving as conduits for free expression and social change" (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004, p. 136).

However, to ultimately fulfill their mission, NPOs need to use strategic communication (Kelly, 2000, p. 91; Shumate et al., 2017, pp. 160–167). That means, deliberate communication to reach predefined, mission-related goals (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 4).

Public communication campaigns designate a particular type of strategic communication and are referred to as "instances of the broad category of strategic communication, although by no means the only instances" (Botan, 1997, p. 188). Yet, due to their potential to contribute to achieving mission-related goals, public communication campaigns have gained increasing relevance in nonprofit contexts. Through shaping people's behaviors, these campaigns aim to resolve social problems and create social changes (Coffman, 2002, p. 5):

"Public communication campaigns can be defined as purposive attempts to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specified time period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple

channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society” (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 3).

Objectives of such campaigns may include eating healthier, drinking less, recycling more, signing a petition for more strict environmental laws, or participating in demonstrations against human rights violations. Shaping behaviors, however, often requires the achievement of further (precedent) outcomes such as changes in target audiences’ knowledge, attitudes, norms and skills (Coffman, 2002, pp. 3–5; Lundgren & McMakin, 2013, p. 359).

Yet, there is only little evidence of the effectiveness of public communication campaigns (Logan et al., 2015, p. 1424). Across hundreds of studies, the verdict is that the record of success is rather meager. While public communication campaigns have proved their utility to raise awareness, they have often failed to achieve the intended behavioral outcomes (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013, p. 149). According to Atkin and Rice (2013), this modest impact is also due to poorly conceived, inappropriate communication approaches (p. 15). The current state of research on public communication campaigns gives a strong hint why this might be the case. First, there is a lack of theoretical concepts that identify and systematize the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns (Oku et al., 2016, p. 4). “To our knowledge, there have been no attempts to develop a framework for organising the range of communication interventions in campaign activities” (Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 3). This, in turn, creates the situation that NPOs may not be aware of the various communication approaches available to them (Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 2). Second, and closely related to the first aspect, research provides only little insights about the effectiveness of the different communication approaches. NPOs are left on their own when it comes to deciding which communication approach to use to guide their audiences towards adopting a particular behavior (Oku et al., 2016, p. 2; Sharkey et al., 2014, p. 11).

Hence, to address the outlined research gaps, our contribution is twofold: (a) We develop a typology that systematizes the different communication approaches that

NPOs use in their public communication campaigns and (b) we derive propositions about the effectiveness of these approaches to lead audiences towards performing a particular behavior. We show under which conditions each of the identified communication approaches is appropriate. We therefore deploy a theoretical lens that has demonstrated its utility to examine strategic communication, such as public communication campaigns, and communicative effectiveness: public relations research. In terms of scope, we focus on how audiences can be brought towards performing “desired” behaviors and not, for instance, on how to influence the media or the campaign coverage.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the second section specifies the employed theoretical perspective and lays the groundwork for our typology. We introduce a fitting, prominent public relations theory, the Four Models of Public Relations, and identify which dimensions are used to differentiate communication approaches. However, reflecting on the criticism that has been expressed towards these dimensions, we propose to revise them so that the underlying categories are mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive, and tailored to public communication campaigns. Combining the adapted dimensions in a 2×2 typology, the subsequent section then presents and illustrates the four resulting communication approaches. In the fourth section, we formulate eight propositions about the effectiveness of these communication approaches. To do so, we include audience segmentation, a key concept of public relations research. We propose that NPOs should segment their target audiences on the basis of their “stage of readiness” to perform a desired behavior. The transtheoretical model (TTM) provides a thorough foundation for this segmentation, as it differentiates whether audiences are in the precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, or maintenance stage. Ultimately, in the fifth section, we provide a brief summary and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our paper. We identify open questions and present an outlook for further research.

3.3 Methods

Our paper builds on three extensive literature reviews. Relevant books, book chapters, and (mostly) peer-reviewed journals were identified through searches in the databases ABI-INFORM, BASE, MEDLINE, ScienceDirect, and PsycINFO, and Social Sciences Citation Index. Proceeding iteratively and inductively, we drew on a funnel approach “starting with a lot of extraneous material and gradually refining the information to the most relevant articles and sources” (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 121).

The first review served to lay the foundation for our typology and focused on the Four Models of Public Relations. We used combinations of the keywords “public relations,” “Four Models of Public Relations,” “models,” and “Grunig and Hunt.” After identifying the most prominent classification dimensions underlying the Four Models of Public Relations, we narrowed our search by adding the keywords “(dimension of) communication purpose,” “asymmetric communication,” “symmetric communication” “(dimension of) communication direction,” “one-way communication,” and “two-way communication.” Since the Four Models were developed in the early 1980s by Grunig and Hunt (1984), we only considered publications within the past 40 years.

The second review focused on audience segmentation based on the TTM. We deployed combinations of the keywords “Transtheoretical Model,” “TTM,” “stages,” “stages of change,” “stages of readiness,” “audience,” and “audience segmentation.” After we had identified the five stages most commonly used to segment audiences, we refined our query by adding search terms that referred to audiences’ progress through these five stages. As the TTM was conceptualized by Prochaska and Di Clemente (1982) in the 1980s, we chose this decade as a scope for our review.

The third review was conducted to apply the above-mentioned theoretical concepts to the context of public communication campaigns. We decided not just to use the keywords “public communication campaigns” but also to search for specific types of public communication campaigns which are prominent and well-researched (“health campaigns,” “environmental campaigns,” “prevention campaigns,” “public education campaigns,” “awareness campaigns”). After we scanned the identified literature to

delineate what constitutes public communication campaigns, we narrowed our search scope by adding terms related to the Four Models of Public Relations, audience segmentation, and the TTM. As public communication campaigns have begun to draw broad attention from research since the late 1980s, we only considered studies published after 1985 in our review (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 3).

3.4 The four models of public relations

Over the last three decades, public relations research has witnessed a rapid growth and increasing popularity among communication and management scholars (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 645; Kim & Ni, 2013, p. 1).

“Public relations is both a professional practice and a subfield of communication with its own research and theory base. Public relations is relatively young as an academic field, however, having developed identifiable theory in only about the last 25 years” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 645).

Public relations research has been traditionally characterized by its strong interest for strategic communication (Jarren & Röttger, 2015, pp. 35–36). The focus lies on how strategic communication enables organizations to build mutually beneficial, sustainable relationships with the public and thus to ultimately achieve their goals (Lee & Kee, 2017, p. 261; Miller Russell & Opdycke Lamme, 2016, p. 744).

3.4.1 Presenting the four models

Developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), the Four Models of Public Relations figure among the most influential middle-range theories in public relations (Jarren & Röttger, 2015, p. 35; Laskin, 2009, p. 37). Examining how organizations strategically communicate with their publics, the authors identify four different communication approaches: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), these communication approaches can be differentiated along the following dimensions: communication purpose and communication direction. The former dimension refers to

the intended effects; that is, whether communication is asymmetrical in terms of organizations pursuing their own interests, or whether communication is symmetrical in terms of organizations seeking both their own as well as the public's interests. The communication direction, in turn, captures whether organizations use one-way or two-way communication. One-way means that organizations only disseminate information and thus conduct a monologue. Two-way, in contrast, means that information flows in both directions and organizations therefore engage in a dialogue with their audiences (Crane & Livesey, 2003, pp. 46–49; Hutton, 1999, p. 204; Laskin, 2009, pp. 45–49; Röttger, 2010, pp. 42–43).

We now discuss these dimensions with regard to public communication campaigns. We then make suggestions on how to improve the dimensions and the related categories so that they are collectively exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and tailored to public communication campaigns.

3.4.2 Dimension of communication purpose

Although the dimension of communication purpose is widely used in research, the underlying distinction into symmetrical and asymmetrical communication has recurrently been questioned. Laskin (2009) is one of the most critical voices, contending that asymmetrical and symmetrical communications are not mutually exclusive categories (p. 49). “If asymmetrical effects are organization's own interests and represent one side of the continuum, then on the other side of the continuum it is logical to expect the opposite – the interests of the publics” (Laskin, 2009, p. 47). However, as symmetrical communication incorporates both the organization's own interests as well as the publics' interests, it “overlaps” with asymmetrical communication (Laskin, 2009, p. 47).

Moreover, taking a closer look at the definitions of asymmetrical and symmetrical communication purposes, some striking inconsistencies emerge. Although the communication purpose was initially defined as *intended* communication effects, many scholars mix up organizations' intentions with the achieved results. This, for example,

shows in Grunig and White's (1992) understanding of asymmetrical communication, since they describe it as “a way of getting what an organization wants without changing its behavior or without compromising” (p. 39). Furthermore, Grunig (1989) argues that symmetrical communication can be defined as “effects that a neutral observer would describe as benefitting both organization and publics” (p. 119). But also the definition of Kelly, Laskin, and Rosenstein (2010) shows how intended effects are mixed up with results. According to the authors, symmetrical communication “(...) with a goal of balanced effects may result in either or both the organization and publics changing their behavior” (Kelly et al., 2010, p. 191).

With regard to public communication campaigns, the differentiation between asymmetrical and symmetrical communication purposes becomes questionable. As Eiró-Gomes and Nunes (2012) point out, NPOs' own interests are linked to the publics' interests (p. 178). This is due to the fact that NPOs' overall purpose behind launching public communication campaigns is to achieve beneficial social changes. It follows that pursuing the publics' interests and pursuing organizational interests become inseparably connected and mutually constitutive. It is thus neither possible nor does it make sense to distinguish whether an NPO's public communication campaign is based on an asymmetrical or symmetrical communication purpose.

Against this background, we argue that the categories asymmetrical and symmetrical are not suited to distinguish between communication purposes – particularly not in the context of public communication campaigns. Thus, to identify more distinctive categories that are tailored to these campaigns, we systematically search for classifications that refer to and categorize different communication purposes of public communication campaigns (intended effects of a campaign). Specifically, we are interested in what kinds of (sub-) purposes NPOs pursue in their public communication campaigns to achieve a desired social change.

To the best of our knowledge, there is only one classification that systematizes communication purposes in public communication campaigns: the COMMVAC

taxonomy which was initially designed for vaccination campaigns. This lack of further classifications is also mentioned by the scholars who use the COMMVAC taxonomy (Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 3).

“The COMMVAC taxonomy was developed in response to the lack of a comprehensive approach to identifying and organising communication strategies or interventions used to improve childhood vaccination uptake (...). The taxonomy illustrates the relationships between different types of communication interventions and clarifies the key purposes and features of interventions to aid implementation and evaluation” (Oku et al., 2016, p. 4).

The taxonomy systematizes the purposes of public communication campaigns along seven categories. These categories include “inform and educate,” “remind or recall,” “teach skills,” “facilitate decision-making,” “enhance communication,” and “enhance community ownership” (Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 2).

This categorization is somewhat problematic as several categories overlap. For instance, it is hardly possible to make a clear-cut differentiation between “teach skills” and “provide support” given that the former refers to providing “individuals with the ability to operationalize knowledge through the adoption of practicable skills” and the latter refers to providing “assistance or advice for consumers outside the traditional consultation environment” (Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 2). Therefore, we propose to collapse the seven categories to a mutually exclusive set. Examining the definitions underlying the categories of the COMMVAC taxonomy, we discover two different purposes: While the categories “inform and educate” and “remind or recall” emphasize educating audiences, the categories “facilitate decision-making,” “teach skills,” “provide support,” “enable communication,” and “enhance community ownership” stress the empowerment of audiences. Accordingly, we suggest to distinguish whether NPOs aim to *educate* (in the sense of inform) or to *empower* (in the sense of activate) their publics in a public communication campaign.

Since “educate” and “empower” subsequently serve as categories of the dimension “communication purpose,” we deem it important to further clarify and delineate what we subsume under the two terms. In public communication campaigns, educating publics is “largely governed by the idea that people need more and better personal information (...)” (Dorfman & Wallack, 2013, pp. 335–336). As a result, education is aimed to create an understanding of a social problem, its underlying causes and the related consequences (McEntee & Mortimer, 2013, p. 72; Nerlich et al., 2010, pp. 99–100; Owens & Driffill, 2008, p. 4415). It also serves to make audiences aware of the “solutions” to this problem. NPOs might, for example, want audiences to learn that drinking sugar-sweetened beverages can cause obesity and that taxing those beverages helps reducing excessive consumption (Dorfman & Wallack, 2013, p. 336; Jou, Niederdeppe, Barry, & Gollust, 2014, pp. 851–852; Lee, 2018, p. 384). We hence define the communication purpose “educate” as follows: *Providing information so that publics learn about a social problem, develop an (in-depth) understanding of the underlying causes, consequences, and the recommended “remedies.”*

Empowerment, in turn, relies on the notion that social problems can be tackled by equipping audiences with appropriate skills, capacities, and tools (Krishnan et al., 2010, p. 285). Hence, empowerment is geared at enabling publics in terms of building their competences and offering them specific opportunities where they can contribute to a social change (McEntee & Mortimer, 2013, pp. 71–72). Moreover, empowering also means to increase audiences’ motivation to take responsibility and to develop own activities (Gulaid & Kiragu, 2012, p. 6; Rice & Robinson, 2013, p. 237). When NPOs strive to empower people in their public communication campaigns, they might, for example, provide guides (booklets, apps, etc.) that help making sustainable food choices or offer trainings to treat childhood illnesses (Rice & Robinson, 2013, p. 240; Sharkey et al., 2014, pp. 1–2). Accordingly, we define the communication purpose “empower” as follows: *Creating enabling conditions to build publics’ capacities and competences as well as strengthening their motivation to develop a sense of issue ownership.*

3.4.3 Dimension of communication direction

Communication direction describes whether organizations use one-way or a two-way communication to engage with their audiences. Yet, this differentiation into one-way and two-way approaches has sparked controversial debates about whether these categories are mutually exclusive. According to Laskin (2009), they are not. The author considers two-way communication not a separate category but rather a type of one-way communication. “In fact, two-way communication includes one-way communication in itself – only it includes it twice: one-way from the organization to the public and one-way from the public to the organization” (Laskin, 2009, p. 49).

While Laskin targets the conceptual shortcomings of two-way communication, Crane and Livesey (2003) focus on the weaknesses of one-way communication. As the authors assert, one-way communication is based on the assumption that organizations can control the information flow between them and their publics (Crane & Livesey, 2003, p. 46). Strictly speaking, one-way communication suggests that organizations can decide to conduct a monologue and can therefore “turn off” reactions from their audiences. The reality looks different as stakeholders are able to initiate a dialogue or provide feedback – even if not actively stimulated by an organization. In public communication campaigns, this limited controllability of information is particularly apparent. Because these campaigns address large target audiences and deploy a broad set of different (mass) media to reach them, it seems illusory that NPOs ever manage to “enforce” one-way communication in their campaign (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 3).

These considerations indicate that the categories of one-way and two-way communication are neither mutually exclusive nor practicable – especially in the context of public communication campaign. Yet, when closely examining the definitions of one-way and two-way communication, an interesting aspect emerges that helps to identify alternative categories. Many scholars link one-way and two-way communication with specific ways of *how* organizations communicate with their audiences. Specifically, they associate a particular *communication style* with one-way and two-way communication. According to Herkenhoff (2015), using one-way

communication is straightforward and focuses on expressing one's own interest (p. 876). Organizations thereby emphasize their own point of view and do not proactively solicit stakeholders' feedback or welcome their participation in decision-making (Dhanesh, 2017, p. 931; Morsing & Schultz, 2006, pp. 326–237). Accordingly, one-way communication is often related to a “telling, not listening” communication style (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 23; Svendsen & Laberge, 2005, p. 100). Interestingly, the association of one-way communication with this particular communication style also appears in the literature on public communication campaigns. Specifically, when NPOs deploy one-way communication in their campaigns, they are described to only present information or articulate calls to action and to not stimulate audiences to give inputs or contribute their own ideas to the campaign (McEntee & Mortimer, 2013). Thus, when NPOs use this communication style in their public communication campaign, they signal resoluteness. We hence propose the following definition of “signaling resoluteness”: *Communicating in a straightforward way by making announcements, expressing demands or calls to action, and not proactively soliciting the publics' inputs nor stimulating their participation in decision-making. This communication mode emphasizes telling over listening.*

In contrast, two-way communication is associated with a more responsive communication style: organizations communicate in an inclusive manner by stressing their willingness to “listen actively” to their audiences. Organizations further underline their receptiveness towards the publics' feedback and needs (Crane & Livesey, 2003, p. 47; Roper, 2005, p. 69). This communication style is hence inherently characterized by an emphasis on an open conversation culture and a “giving and taking” (Dhanesh, 2017, pp. 926–927; Waters & Williams, 2011, p. 359). Likewise, the literature on public communication campaigns brings us to the same conclusion. According to scholars in this field, two-way communication in public communication campaigns includes that NPOs express their willingness to respect others' opinions and listen to them. Furthermore, it involves welcoming audiences' ideas and encouraging them to take part in decision-making (Burnside-Lawry & Carvalho, 2016, p. 7; Kaufman et al., 2017, p. 8; Wildemann, 2006, p. 77). We consequently suggest to call this communication style “signaling openness” and to define it as follows: *Communicating in an inclusive way by*

emphasizing one's willingness to "listen actively" and to be responsive to the publics' concerns, as well as explicitly welcoming their inputs or their participation in decision-making. Hence, it's all about stressing an open/reciprocal conversation culture.

The communication style (signaling resoluteness vs. signaling openness) does not necessarily have to be associated with the communication direction (one-way vs. two-way), as it might be regarded as a separate and independent dimension: Since signaling resoluteness and signaling openness refer to how organizations communicate, the question about whether information flows from the organization to the audience or vice versa is in fact not relevant. Thus, we suggest to drop the dimension of communication direction and to instead use the dimension of communication style.

In the following, we synthesize these considerations and use them to build a typology of public campaign strategies. We then illustrate the typology using real examples of public communication campaigns.

3.5 Delineating the typology

Based on the Four Models of Public Relations, we have derived two dimensions that serve to characterize communication approaches in public communication campaigns: communication purpose and communication style. The former describes organizations' intended communication effects and thus refers to the "what dimension." As outlined, we differentiate whether NPOs want to educate or whether they want to empower their audiences. The communication style denotes the way NPOs engage with their publics and thus addresses the "how dimension." We distinguish whether NPOs signal resoluteness or openness in their public communication campaigns. Combining these two dimensions in a 2×2 matrix, a typology emerges where each of the four categories designates a particular communication approach.

To enhance the typology's value, we pay particular attention to a consistent labeling of the four communication approaches. Since engaging with audiences always requires

that NPOs “do” something, our intention is to clarify the activities related to each communication approach. Based on this idea, we label the categories as follows: directing, platforming, mobilizing, and involving. Figure 6 depicts the typology with the four approaches. To outline the four communication approaches, we now briefly explain and illustrate them.

**Communication
Style**

Signal Openness	Platforming	Involving
Signal Resoluteness	Directing	Mobilizing
	Educate	Empower

Communication Purpose

Figure 6. A typology of communication approaches used in public communication campaigns.

Using a “directing” approach, NPOs strive to educate their audiences. In this approach they proceed in a straightforward manner by emphasizing their own point of view without soliciting stakeholders’ inputs nor stimulating their participation in decision-making. As an example, we can take an Israeli NPO that focuses on the prevention and early detection of breast cancer. Their information campaign included shocking advertisements that were published in newspapers and on television. These advertisements showed a close-up shot on the breast of a woman wearing a T-shirt with the following print: “As opposed to commercial advertisements exposing women’s

breasts for no reason, we have a very good one – the health of each and every woman” (Herstein et al., 2008, p. 70).

Educating audiences is also at the heart of the “*platforming*” approach. Yet, by signaling openness NPOs clearly emphasize their willingness to actively listen to their audiences and to be receptive regarding their concerns and ideas – to serve as a platform for exchange. We can illustrate this approach with campaigns that include so-called “door-to-door visits” which are particularly common in health campaigns. Often accompanied by local political or religious leaders, NPO representatives personally visit households and talk to people about vaccination issues, their concerns, and the pros and cons of vaccinating (Ames et al., 2017, pp. 14–15; Oku et al., 2016, p. 7).

NPOs using a “*mobilizing*” approach seek to empower audiences. By telling their audiences “what to do,” they signal resoluteness. The Seafood Watch Campaign, which aimed at improving sustainable seafood consumption, serves as a good example. In cooperation with the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the campaign provided free, wallet-sized printed booklets and an app to guide consumers to make more sustainable seafood choices. Through these activities, the campaign sought to “build skills and motivations to empower consumers to follow through with conservation actions” (Rice & Robinson, 2013, p. 240). Similarly, the Global Fund’s “Born HIV Free” campaign, which was one of the most successful campaigns of all times, convinced more than 700,000 people to sign a petition to stop the transmission of HIV from mother to child. “The campaign ‘ask’ was simple – sign your name to the digital petition that stated your belief in that goal, and affirmed your support for your government’s contribution to the Global Fund” (Gonzalez & Bogen, 2013, p. 234).

And ultimately, using an “*involving*” approach, NPOs empower their stakeholders and use a communication style that stresses an open conversation culture. This approach can be illustrated by a health campaign in which the Nigerian government collaborated with UNICEF and other partners to reduce childhood mortality. In their campaign they conducted participatory community meetings to identify barriers to child survival

programs and to jointly come up with ideas to overcome them (Sharkey et al., 2014, p. 3).

Having developed the typology, we now focus on deriving propositions regarding the effectiveness of the communication approaches. To do so, we again draw on a public relations perspective.

3.6 Formulating propositions

Over the last years, public relations research has intensively dealt with how NPOs can enhance the effectiveness of their strategic communication. In this domain, audience segmentation is considered a key concept as it enables organizations to “profile” different audiences on the basis of shared characteristics and subsequently develop targeted communication approaches (Dhanesh, 2017, pp. 930–931; Dyer et al., 2002, p. 15; Harada et al., 2013, p. 710; Kim & Ni, 2013, p. 9).

Creating “matching” communication approaches is particularly important for public communication campaigns: if audiences do not feel that a campaign resonates with them, they will not engage with the campaign, let alone perform a specific behavior. Hence, the target audiences will not contribute in any way to a desired social change (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 5).

3.6.1 Segmenting audiences based on their stage of readiness to change

In the context of public communication campaigns, the TTM has established itself as an influential concept to segment audiences (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 5; Bowen, Meischke, & Tomoyasu, 1994, p. 87; Reger et al., 2002, p. 286; Slater, 1999, p. 337). This is due to the fact that public communication campaigns ultimately seek to influence people's behaviors and that the TTM helps to understand the process of behavior change by dividing publics into five “stages of readiness to perform a promoted behavior” (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997, p. 39; Slater, 1999, p. 337). In the first, the precontemplation stage, audiences are either not aware of or denying a social problem.

As a result, these audiences are not ready (yet) to comply with a behavior that is geared to tackle the problem. Contemplation designates the stage at which audiences are aware of a social problem. However, they are still ambivalent about performing the promoted behavior since they tend to overestimate the related costs or the “cons.” Therefore, they are not ready to comply with the behavior. Audiences in the preparation stage, in turn, are not just favorable towards performing the behavior: By planning, they are preparing themselves to adopt the behavior. “When individuals successfully and consistently perform the behavior in question, they are regarded as being in the action stage” (Armitage et al., 2004, p. 491). And eventually, when audiences perform a behavior on a sustained, habitual basis, they are in the maintenance stage (Mundorf, Redding, & Paiva, 2018, p. 4; Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 2008, p. 98; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997, p. 39).

The TTM is built on the assumption that audiences need to move through all of these stages to perform a behavior. Within each stage, particular outcomes need to be attained so that audiences can progress to the next (Paek, Bae, Hove, & Yu, 2013, p. 10; Prochaska et al., 2008, p. 103; Slater, 1999, p. 351). Since the required outcomes vary from stage to stage, communication approaches are “stage-specific in their effectiveness” (Davey et al., 2006, p. 91).

With regard to public communication campaigns, this highlights an important aspect that we have mentioned earlier, namely that public communication campaigns primarily seek to influence behaviors, but this requires the attainment of several precedent outcomes (Coffman, 2002, p. 3). Furthermore, to identify when each of the four identified communication approaches is most effective, we first have to outline the stage-specific outcomes required for audiences to progress in the context of public communication campaigns.

3.6.2 Choosing an effective communication approach

The progress from “precontemplation to contemplation in the campaign context is a matter of increasing attention to the campaign issue among members of the target

audience” (Slater, 1999, p. 344). Accordingly, public communication campaigns are required to build awareness and a basic knowledge of a social problem. This also means to recall and understand the underlying causes, the resulting (personal) implications as well as the promoted “solutions” to it (Abula et al., 2018, p. 78; Bauman et al., 2006, p. 312; Potter, 2012, p. 283; Slater, 1999, p. 351).

Research indicates that these outcomes can be best achieved with an educational communication approach (Patel et al., 2014, p. 595). For instance, Ghosh (2007) identifies the low levels of awareness of HIV/AIDS among people in India as “one of the most challenging public health problems ever faced by the country. Information is the first step in HIV prevention” (p. 134). Moreover, Veer, Tutty, and Willemse (2008) find that a graphic ad dealing with the harmful consequences of smoking resonates most among smokers in the precontemplation stage (pp. 319–322). Similarly, Niederdeppe, Farrelly, Nonnemaker, Davis, and Wagner (2011) show that smokers better recalled ads focusing on why smoking is dangerous than ads providing advice on how to quit (pp. 778–779). Also with regard to public communication campaigns on climate change, educating people is associated with significantly increasing their comprehension and knowledge on the subject at matter (Nerlich et al., 2010, pp. 99–100).

In terms of the communication style, building awareness and knowledge requires that public communication campaigns “shake up” precontemplators by directly confronting them with “what is going wrong” and what is needed to change this situation (Harada et al., 2013, p. 716; Slater, 1999, pp. 344–345). Godinho, Alvarez, and Lima (2013), for example, conclude that emphasizing the personal risk associated with unhealthy eating habits is not enough to achieve behavior change. It might “nonetheless, be a trigger to start contemplating changing one's diet” (Godinho et al., 2013, p. 1024). Thus, we formulate the following proposition:

Proposition 1: A “directing” communication approach is particularly successful in increasing awareness and knowledge, and is therefore best suited to guide audiences in the precontemplation stage to the contemplation stage.

The transition from the contemplation to the preparation stage requires “the acceptance of the campaign arguments and the willingness to consider acting on them” (Slater, 1999, p. 345). Creating favorable intentions, attitudes, and beliefs towards a promoted behavior therefore designates the most important outcomes for public communication campaigns to achieve in this stage (Potter, 2012, p. 289; Slater, 1999, p. 351). Research suggests that an educational approach is most suited to attain these outcomes. In an encompassing review of public communication campaigns, Bess, Neville, Forsyth, Cavill, and Fridinger (1998) find evidence that educational communication approaches successfully improved attitudes towards physical activity (p. 373). Similarly, Abula et al. (2018) show in a recent health campaign study that educating people results in a stronger intention to pursue an active lifestyle (p. 81). However, their findings also indicate that educational communication approaches help people in the earlier stages to progress “but not those in preparation, action, or maintenance stages” (Abula et al., 2018, p. 81).

Audiences in the contemplation stage are ambivalent towards a promoted behavior and tend to overestimate the related “costs.” To turn such attitudes and beliefs into more favorable ones, research indicates to use an open, inclusive, and responsive communication style (Morgan, 2013, p. 221; Oku et al., 2016, p. 7). It is argued that communicating in a straightforward, demanding, and non-participatory way and “simply providing the facts” leads to even greater resistance and skepticism (Owens & Driffill, 2008, p. 4414). “People are willing to listen to that which collides with or is new to their worlds when those communicating at them change to communicating with them.” (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013, p. 153). For instance, McEntee and Mortimer (2013) examined an environmental campaign undertaken by New Zealand's Ministry of Agriculture to eradicate an invasive pest moth. The authors conclude that the campaign missed to ensure residents’ support due to its failure to consult people, listen to their concerns, and engage in an open dialogue (McEntee & Mortimer, 2013, p. 72). Considering these arguments, we formulate the following proposition:

Proposition 2: A “plafforming” communication approach is particularly successful in creating favorable attitudes, beliefs, and intentions, and is therefore best suited to guide audiences in the contemplation stage to the preparation stage.

The transition from the preparation to the action stage is described as a process of experimenting with a promoted behavior and eventually adopting it successfully (Armitage et al., 2004, p. 491; Slater, 1999, pp. 345–347). Therefore, public communication campaigns primarily need to motivate “preparators” to make first attempts at the behavior and to strengthen their self-efficacy (Davey et al., 2006, p. 99; Godinho et al., 2013, p. 1024; Slater, 1999, p. 351). “For certain practices, many well-intentioned and highly motivated individuals do not carry out appropriate acts because they lack confidence in their ability to perform the behaviors competently (...)” (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013, p. 59).

The literature on public communication campaigns suggests that this outcome is best achieved with an empowerment communication approach which allows to create enabling conditions and helps audiences build their competences and skills (Atkin & Freimuth, 2013, p. 59; Harada et al., 2013, p. 716; Krishnan et al., 2010, p. 287; Wildemann, 2006, p. 2006). The effectiveness of empowering audiences is, for instance, mirrored in the fact that the majority of the transitions in a South Korean walking campaign occurred from the preparation to the action stage. By providing highly motivated people with a specific opportunity to improve their health, walking campaigns “seem to be effective in motivating people at the preparation stage to progress to the action stage of the TTM” (Jo et al., 2011, p. 442). Similarly, smokers were shown to be most responsive to campaigns giving advice on how to quit smoking and emphasizing the efficacy of these recommendations (Wong & Cappella, 2009, p. 11). Moreover, studies find that self-efficacy and motivation for behavior change can be increased with a directive communication style that tells people what they are supposed to do (Slater, 1999, p. 347). Therewith, people in the preparation stage are given “a sense that there is something they can do (...)” (Nerlich et al., 2010, p. 102). Subsequently, we derive the following proposition from these findings:

Proposition 3: A “mobilizing” communication approach is particularly successful in increasing self-efficacy and motivating audiences to make first attempts at the promoted behavior, and is therefore best suited to guide audiences in the preparation stage to the action stage.

The ultimate aim of public communication campaigns “is sustained change, or, in the stages-of-change vernacular, maintenance” (Slater, 1999, p. 347). Hence, for those in the action stage, campaigns need to ensure that they keep on adopting a behavior on a regular, sustained basis (Potter, 2012, p. 289; Slater, 1999, p. 351). To do so, empowering audiences is shown to be most appropriate. For instance, examining a large campaign to eliminate HIV Infections among children, Gulaid and Kiragu (2012) conclude that scaling up and maintaining community engagement requires to provide people with necessary resources and skills (p. 6). Moreover, with regard to audiences in the action stage, Jo et al. (2011) state that public communication campaigns such as the aforementioned South Korean walking campaign “should focus on providing continuous support and encouragement for walkers and their social networks in the action stage in order to maintain their behaviors” (p. 442). In terms of communication style, the relevant literature indicates that an open, feedback-oriented and participatory approach is most likely to encourage ongoing and sustainable behavior changes (Höppner et al., 2012, p. 1761). We therefore formulate the following proposition:

Proposition 4: An “involving” communication approach is particularly successful in encouraging audiences to perform a behavior on a regular basis, and is therefore best suited to guide audiences in the action stage to the maintenance stage.

We have outlined which communication approach is most effective for which stage of readiness. However, there is an aspect that decisively shapes the effectiveness of each communication approach. That aspect is the audiences’ risks for “relapsing” into earlier stages. In the following, we take a closer look at such “backdrops” and delineate their communicative implications.

3.6.3 Backdrops to earlier stages

The assumption that audiences need to progress through specific stages before adopting a behavior might imply a strictly linear process. It might imply that publics, after being addressed with an appropriate communication approach, proceed from one stage to the next and then stay in that stage. In reality, however, many public communication campaigns fail to achieve sustainable, long-term effects due to audiences “relapsing” to earlier stages (Jo et al., 2011, p. 2011; Marcus et al., 1998, p. 373; Potter, 2012, p. 289). The process of behavior change is thus often iterative and characterized by a more dynamic stage adherence. Research indicates that the likelihood for backdrops varies by the maturity of the stages. Specifically, adherence among audiences in the maintenance stage is shown to be greater than among audiences in earlier, less established stages. This can be explained by the fact that audiences in the maintenance stage have adopted a behavior on a habitual basis. Their behavior is subsequently more “stable” (Buckworth, 2001, p. 342; Mundorf et al., 2018; Prochaska et al., 2008, pp. 100–101). Hence, it can be expected that the likelihood of “backdrops” decreases with audiences’ readiness to perform a behavior. That means, people in the contemplation stage would be most likely to relapse and people in the maintenance stage would be least likely to fall back.

Proposition 5: The likelihood of audiences to fall back to earlier stages decreases along the stages of readiness.

In addition, the support that an individual experiences from its social environment also impacts the likelihood of backdrops (Atkin & Rice, 2013, pp. 6–7). “Perhaps the single greatest problem for a communication campaign designer occurs when behavioral intentions are heavily influenced by perceptions of family, peer, and other interpersonal expectations” (Slater, 1999, p. 342). In line with this, Sharkey et al. (2014) find that health campaigns are more effective when they are integrated into a comprehensive community involvement program (pp. 9–10). Similarly, Potter, (2012) points at the relevance of friends and bystanders to support victims of stalking and violence in protecting themselves (p. 292). Moreover, in the context of a health campaign among

students, “there were significant differences in social support for exercise (...) and those who were adhering after 6 months scored significantly higher on friends’ support for exercise at each measurement period” (Buckworth, 2001, p. 344). “Support” may take many different forms such as reinforcing receptiveness and perceived self-efficacy towards a promoted behavior, or rewarding attempts to change behavior. This is not to say that support always needs to be expressed explicitly. Instead, it might be also articulated more implicitly, for instance, through gestures, facial expressions, or through acting as a role model (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 7). How an audience member's social environment reacts to a public communication campaign is therefore expected to influence a campaign's effectiveness as follows:

Proposition 6: The better the social support that audiences experience, the less likely audiences are to fall back to earlier stages.

As outlined, the risk to “relapse” is greatest among audiences in in earlier stages and among those who receive low levels of support. However, there are certain strategies how NPOs can support the effectiveness of their communication approaches in terms of improving stage adherence. One of them refers to the frequency of communication (Hornik, 2013, p. 45; Marcus et al., 1998, p. 373; Slater, 1999, p. 348). For instance, in a study on anti-smoking websites, Paek et al. (2013) conclude that the used communication approaches would have been more effective if they were employed “more frequently and saliently, particularly in their efforts to tailor anti-smoking messages to target audiences at different stages of the quitting process” (p. 19).

Another strategy concerns the message-level, respectively the specific messages that are conveyed with a communication approach (Hornik, 2013, p. 45). Audience segments are far from constituting homogenous groups: Individuals within the same stage of readiness might not just differ in terms of demographic or socioeconomic characteristics, but also in terms of why they are in that particular stage.

“For example, in a campaign against drinking and driving, one group of people in the contemplation stage may not be very concerned with risk to themselves and, in fact, enjoy such risks; may have little

pressure from peers to behave responsibly; but may be concerned with the possibility of injuring others or with legal consequences. Another group may be quite concerned with minimizing risks but not consider their level of alcohol consumption to pose risks when in fact it does” (Slater, 1999, p. 349).

Hence, although these individuals share their receptiveness for a particular communication approach (here: for the “platforming” approach), the specific messages that are conveyed might not resonate equally well among all them. Accordingly, we posit:

Proposition 7: The more frequently a “stage-matched” communication approach is used, the less likely audiences are to fall back to earlier stages.

Proposition 8: The more a “stage-matched” communication approach disseminates messages that resonate with audiences’ reasons for being in a particular stage, the less likely audiences are to fall back to earlier stages.

3.7 Conclusion, limitations, and outlook

To conclude, our paper contributes to strengthening the theoretical underpinnings of public communication campaigning research. First, we have developed a typology that categorizes the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns. Second, we have derived propositions that comprehensively model how audiences’ “stage of readiness” relates to the effectiveness of the identified communication approaches. Our propositions conceptualize behavior change as an iterative, dynamic process that entails stage progresses as well as backdrops and that reflects the impact of audiences’ social environment. Moreover, the strength of our paper lies in the consistent, public relations perspective that it offers on public communication campaigns.

There are several aspects which future research should address. First, there is a need for reviewing the validity of the typology's dimensions: Do the dimensions "communication purpose" and "communication style" "suffice to exhaustively characterize communication approaches or are there further relevant dimensions which we have not yet taken into account (e.g., the media or channels used in a campaign)? Second, it could be fruitful to have a closer look at the operationalization of the different stages of readiness. As outlined, progressing from one stage to the next requires the attainment of particular outcomes. This implies that, within each stage of readiness, audience members can be more or less close to the next stage – depending on the degree to which they have reached these outcomes. Therefore, stages of readiness can be imagined as "intervals," where audiences need to exceed a threshold value on specific outcome variables to be assigned to the next stage. Future research could hence develop more nuanced, fine-grained definitions of the stages of readiness and the mentioned "threshold values." Third, we deem it important to empirically test the predictive validity of our propositions. We would like to encourage researchers to pay particular attention to the influence of the social environment, as we believe that interactions with families, peers, and friends can have a great impact on the effectiveness of a given communication approach. Moreover, there is an aspect which we might not have made explicit enough, but which is crucial to test the propositions: NPOs might use several communication approaches within the same public communication campaign. Hence, we recommend that future studies should examine questions such as these: What happens when preparators are confronted with a "directing" and a "mobilizing" approach? Do they ignore the "directing" approach as it does not match with their stage of readiness? Or, do combinations of certain communication approaches have synergetic or even counterproductive effects – for instance, because people feel "overwhelmed" or "pressured" to do something for which they are not yet ready?

In terms of the practical implications, we wanted to address the fact that public communication campaigns struggle to influence audiences' behaviors. Hence, to help NPOs design more impactful campaigns, our paper was intended to sensitize them to the array of different communication approaches that they could employ. Moreover, our propositions indicate which outcomes can be expected when using a particular

communication approach. Nevertheless, there are some constraints which are important to mention: First, segmenting audiences based on their “stage of readiness” might require pre-campaign research (e.g., surveys or focus groups). Oftentimes, however, such inquiries are costly and may therefore exceed the budgets of many smaller NPOs. Second, audience segmentation is clearly not a “magic bullet” that relieves NPOs from all the brain-crunching campaigning work: Not only is stage adherence instable under certain conditions, audiences are also – within the stages of readiness – very diverse. Furthermore, since audiences often encompass large numbers of individuals, NPOs cannot (fully) control who they are ultimately reaching.

Hence, despite these limitations, the value of our typology and our propositions consists in that they equip NPOs with an insightful conceptual tool that supports them to improve the effectiveness of their public communication campaigns.

4 Paper 2: Improving the effectiveness of prosocial advertising campaigns: Message strategies to increase support from less empathic individuals

4.1 Abstract

By Fabienne Bünzli²

Most nonprofit organizations rely on prosocial behaviors to achieve their goals. However, while empathic individuals have a strong tendency to help others, less empathic individuals are more reluctant to perform prosocial behaviors. This study examines how nonprofit organizations should frame the situation of people in need to increase the support from less empathic individuals. We investigate the effects of depicting daily life situations where people in need are happy versus sad (visual message strategies) and the effects of presenting statistical versus anecdotal evidence (verbal message strategies). An experiment among 214 participants indicates that less empathic individuals are more supportive of a prosocial advertising campaign when exposed to sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence. In contrast, empathic individuals are equally persuaded by sad and happy daily life images as well as by anecdotal and statistical evidence.

Keywords: prosocial advertising campaigns, social marketing, empathic concern, message strategies, persuasion

² A later version of this article is published in the *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing* (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/nvsm.1711>)

4.2 Introduction

Most nonprofit organizations depend on prosocial behaviors for mission achievement and for survival (Renner et al., 2013). Being successful often requires motivating voluntary actions including alms-giving (e.g., money, food, clothing), medical donations (e.g., blood, tissue), time donations (e.g., volunteering), and support for political initiatives (e.g., participating in demonstrations, signing petitions) (Hornik, 2013; Shehu et al., 2015). However, not everyone is equally inclined to engage in helping behaviors. Accumulated research indicates that empathy is a key driver for prosocial behaviors (Davis, 1983a). While empathic individuals have a strong tendency to help others, less empathic individuals are more reluctant to perform prosocial behaviors. For instance, empathic individuals have consistently shown to volunteer more and to donate more than less empathic individuals (FeldmanHall et al., 2015; Kim & Kou, 2014; Willer et al., 2015).

Relying on the support of empathic individuals alone, however, can be a risky endeavor for nonprofit organizations. First, mission achievement often requires the support from a broad public, including hundreds or even thousands of people (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Second, empathy seems to be declining. A meta-analysis among nearly 14,000 American college students found that self-reported trait empathy has declined since the 1990s, with a particularly steep drop in the past decade (Konrath et al., 2011). College students today reported being less concerned about people less fortunate than themselves and being less touched by the misfortune of others (Konrath et al., 2011).

It is therefore important to understand how to gain the support from less empathic individuals. But what communication strategies should nonprofit organizations use to persuade less empathic individuals to support a prosocial cause? The present study examines how the situation of people in need should be framed to increase the support from less empathic individuals. Specifically, we investigate the effects of depicting daily life situations where people in need are happy versus sad (visual message strategies) and the effects of presenting statistical versus anecdotal evidence (verbal message strategies). The following section lays out the theoretical background of the

study. In cooperation with the largest Swiss disability nonprofit organization, we carried out an experiment that makes an important contribution to our knowledge about the mobilization of less empathic individuals.

4.3 Theoretical background

Empathy is a personality trait that includes the ability to understand, experience and share what other people feel (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Gilet et al., 2013). One facet of empathy – empathic concern – has sparked particular interest among scholars (Davis, 1983a; Davis et al., 1999). Empathic concern (EC) captures an affective component of empathy and describes “the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for others in need” (Davis, 1994, p. 57). Research over the past forty years has consistently related empathic concern with helping behaviors. For instance, empathic individuals have shown to volunteer more and to donate more than less empathic individuals (FeldmanHall et al., 2015; Kim & Kou, 2014; Willer et al., 2015). The underlying mechanism can be explained using trait theories of motivation.

4.3.1 Mechanisms of empathic concern

Trait theories of motivation assume that dispositional traits explain why some people exhibit certain patterns of motivated behaviors across similar situations, whereas others do not (Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018). Traits are generalized neuropsychic systems with the capacity to initiate and guide consistent forms of goal-oriented behaviors (Allport, 1937). Traits generate an impulse, a striving, towards some objectives (McDougall, 1932; Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018). This striving is what we experience as motivation – that is, a recurring pattern of desire and related behavioral tendencies (Baumeister, 2016). Only when a trait is strong, does it trigger strong motivations and, as a result, influence behaviors consistently across different situations (Baumeister, 2016). Traits of moderate or low strength do not yield a consistent impact on behaviors (Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018). This tells us something important about the way that empathic concern works. Empathic individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors than less empathic individuals because they experience a stronger and more stable *desire* to help others. This motivational difference should also manifest itself in

the support for prosocial advertising campaigns. We might reasonably expect that empathic individuals would be more supportive of prosocial advertising campaigns than less empathic individuals. This leads us to the first hypothesis:

H1: Higher empathic concern leads to a higher support for prosocial advertising campaigns.

Less empathic individuals have a lower trait tendency to experience compassion for others and thus feel generally less motivated to engage in prosocial behaviors. However, their motivation to help others might be situationally increased through specific message strategies. The implication is that less empathic individuals can be “nudged” towards prosocial behaviors by means of communication. Although scarce, previous research lends support to this assumption. Takada and Levine (2007) tested the effects of ending a volunteer request with the motivational appeal “even a few minutes would help”. When the appeal was absent, compliance rate was significantly greater among more empathic individuals. In contrast, when the appeal was included in the volunteer request, the compliance rate was equally high among individuals with higher and lower levels of empathic concern. This is in line with the idea less empathic individuals need to be addressed with message strategies that reinforce their motivation to help.

Besides such explicit motivational appeals, there might be further message strategies to make less empathic individuals more motivated to help others and, as a result, to gain their support. The present study examines how nonprofit organizations should frame the situation of people in need to increase the support from less empathic individuals. Specifically, we investigate the effects of depicting daily life situations where people in need are happy versus sad (visual message strategies) and the effects of presenting statistical versus anecdotal evidence (verbal message strategies).

4.3.2 The effects of daily life images on less empathic individuals

Prosocial advertising campaigns routinely feature images of people in need of help such as victims of poverty, domestic violence or social exclusion (Cao & Jia, 2017; Li & Atkinson, 2020). These people are often portrayed in daily life situations where they feel happy or sad (Li & Atkinson, 2020; Small & Verrochi, 2009). Feelings of happiness and sadness can be visually conveyed through facial expressions (Cao & Jia, 2017).

There is a controversial debate among social marketers about what type of image is more effective. According to Bhati and Eikenberry (2016), the controversy stems from the tension between portraying people in need in a good light and creating awareness about their hardships. Previous research suggests that sad images enjoy a persuasive advantage over happy images. Jordan et al. (2019) showed that social media posts from children's nonprofit organizations that included sad images generated more likes, shares, and comments than posts that included happy images. Likewise, Cao and Jia (2017) found that images showing sad people increased giving intentions, but only among participants with low psychological involvement with charities. A study by Burt and Strongman (2005) points in a similar direction. In a series of four experiments, they showed that images displaying negative emotions generated greater intentions to donate money and to volunteer. Another study concluded that participants are more likely to donate when seeing sad images compared to happy images (Small & Verrochi, 2009). These findings can be explained by the theory of emotional contagion, which asserts that facial expressions of emotion cause emotional contagion in recipients (Hatfield et al., 1994). When someone displays sadness, people are likely to share that pain. This emotional contagion of sadness is theorized to increase sympathy for others and, as a result, to reinforce people's motivation to help (Hatfield et al., 1994; Small & Verrochi, 2009).

The present study posits that less empathic individuals are more supportive of prosocial advertising campaigns that depict situations where people in need are sad. However, we do not anticipate this effect for empathic individuals. Because of their strong compassion for others, empathic individuals should be supportive of a campaign,

regardless of the visual message strategy that is being used. The use of sad or happy daily life images should *not* make a substantial difference for them. We thus formulate the following hypotheses:

H2: For individuals with lower levels of empathic concern, sad daily life images will be more effective in increasing support for prosocial advertising campaigns than happy daily life images.

H3: For individuals with higher levels of empathic concern, sad daily life images will be equally effective in generating support for prosocial of advertising campaigns than happy daily life images.

4.3.3 The effects of evidence type on less empathic individuals

Another message strategy to frame the situation of people in need involves the use of statistical or anecdotal evidence. Statistical evidence presents numbers such as frequencies and percentages to support an advocacy position (Kopffman et al., 1998; Shen & Bigsby, 2014). Anecdotal evidence uses individual exemplars that represent a whole phenomenon or an issue (Chien & Chang, 2015).

Previous research indicates that anecdotal evidence has a persuasive advantage over statistical evidence. McEntire, Leiby, and Krain (2017) found anecdotal evidence to be more effective in mobilizing support for human rights than statistical evidence. Similarly, Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007) showed that people made greater donations when exposed to a single individual in need than when exposed to statistics identifying a large number of needy people. The results from a study by Das, Kerkhof, and Kuiper (2008) support this conclusion. Participants reported more favorable attitudes toward fundraising messages that included anecdotal evidence than toward fundraising messages that included statistical evidence. Furthermore, a meta-study found anecdotal evidence to be slightly but statistically significantly more persuasive than statistical evidence (Reinhart, 2006). The persuasive advantage of anecdotal evidence can be explained using exemplification theory (Yu et al., 2010; Zillmann, 2006). The theory contends that exemplars facilitate to group oneself with others and

that this increases one's motivation to engage in helping behaviors (Kang & Lee, 2017; Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

This study argues that less empathic individuals are more supportive of prosocial advertising campaigns that include anecdotal evidence. However, we do not anticipate this effect for empathic individuals. Due to their strong compassion for others, we might reasonably expect that empathic individuals would be supportive of a campaign, regardless of what evidence type is being used. We therefore assume that the use of anecdotal or statistical evidence does *not* make a substantial difference for empathic individuals. We put forward the following hypotheses:

H4: For individuals with lower levels of empathic concern, anecdotal evidence will be more effective in increasing support for prosocial advertising campaigns than statistical evidence.

H5: For individuals with higher levels of empathic concern, anecdotal evidence will be equally effective in generating support for prosocial advertising campaigns than statistical evidence.

4.3.4 Persuasion process

Following the tradition of the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), persuasion is understood as a process in which attitudes shape later and more stable responses, including behavioral intentions and behaviors. Persuasion research commonly distinguishes between two types of attitudes: Attitude toward the message and attitude toward the advocacy. Attitude toward the message describes an overall judgment of the message in terms of how credible, effective, or involving recipients find the message (Garcia-Retamero & Cokely, 2011; Lee & Cho, 2017). Attitude toward the advocacy means an assessment of the idea or the cause advocated by the message (Seo et al., 2013). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Attitude toward the message and attitude toward the advocacy predict intentions to support a prosocial cause.

4.4 Methods

We conducted a 2 (daily life situation: sad vs. happy) x 2 (evidence type: statistical vs. anecdotal) posttest-only experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four treatments.

4.4.1 Participants

The initial sample consisted of 214 graduate and undergraduate students from a Swiss University. The students received a small reward (approximately 7 US Dollars) in return for participation. The experiment took place in November 2018. Five participants were excluded because they did not finish the survey. We further dropped 3 participants which could be clearly identified as outliers (Sim et al., 2005). Hence, the final sample included 206 participants. They ranged in age from 18 to 42 years ($M = 22.53$, $SD = 3.82$), 81 (39.3%) were female, 125 (60.7%) were male. 130 reported their nationality as Swiss (63.1%), 97 as European (47.1%), 3 as American (1.5%), 3 as South American (1.5%), 3 as Asian (1.5%), 2 as Russian (1.0%), 1 as African (0.5%) 1 as Australian (0.5%). Multiple answers were possible for the nationality question, which resulted in the total exceeding 100%.

4.4.2 Topic and stimuli

In cooperation with the largest Swiss disability nonprofit organization (Pro Infirmis), we tested a prosocial campaign that addressed mobility issues of people with physical disabilities. The campaign revolved around a fictitious petition that sought to establish barrier-free access to all public buildings in Switzerland until 2025. We chose this topic because insufficient access to public facilities has been identified as one of the most common reasons why people with physical disabilities experience social exclusion.

All messages consisted of a title asking “Mobility for everyone?” and an information paragraph on a fictitious petition. After outlining the goal of the petition (i.e., barrier-free access to public buildings until 2025), the text inquired whether the disability rights organization could count on the recipient to sign the petition and stated that the recipient’s decision would affect how the mobility of disabled people would “look like” in 2025. Manipulation occurred in the image and in another text paragraph (Figure 7).

Two pictures were chosen from a commercial image website. The image of the “happy daily life situation” showed a man with a joyful facial expression sitting in a wheelchair moving up a disability-friendly ramp. The image of the “sad daily life situation” showed a man with a grieving expression on his face sitting in a wheelchair and being stuck in front of stairs.

Different evidence types were created in an additional information paragraph that addressed the challenges of people with physical disabilities. Anecdotal evidence included a story of someone called Luca who suffers from cerebral palsy and who needs a wheelchair because he is limited in his mobility. The other version of the information paragraph stated that there are 68,000 physically disabled people in Switzerland who need wheelchairs because they are limited in their mobility.

Aside from those image and text differences, other message components such as font size, color, layout, number of depicted persons, social distance from the viewer, or camera angle were carefully controlled. The final version of the stimuli was developed in an iterative process including a pretest among 20 students, feedback from other communication scholars, and discussion rounds with the Swiss disability nonprofit organization.

		Daily Life Image	
		Happy	Sad
Evidence Type	Anecdotal		
	Statistical		

Figure 7. Experimental treatments.

4.4.3 Procedure

Upon arriving at the laboratory, students were seated to one of 30 computers. They were subsequently informed of the study conditions and asked to give their consent to participate in the experiment. By clicking the “agree to participate” button, the students were randomly assigned to one of the four campaign treatments. Measures of manipulation check and the dependent measures were subsequently displayed. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide personal information on their level of empathic concern, on their prior experience with disabled people and on their socio-demographic background. After the participants had completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed that the campaign was fictitious.

4.4.4 Measures

The scales that we used were originally in English, but the experiment was conducted in German. To ensure conceptual equivalence, a German version of the questionnaire was developed using back-translation.

Manipulation check. Measures to assess the perception on the daily life image manipulation included two items. Participants were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*) the extent to which the campaign depicted people with physical disabilities in positive situations (happy person) or in negative situations (sad person). The evidence type manipulation check consisted of two items. Participants were asked to evaluate on a 7-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*) the extent to which they agreed that the campaign communicated the challenges of people with physical disabilities in Switzerland using statistical facts or using a personal example.

Attitude toward the message. Attitude toward the message captured to what extent participants assessed the campaign message as credible, effective, and involving ($\alpha = .68$). The responses were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and were adopted from Lee and Cho (2017) and Garcia-Retamero and Cokely (2011).

Attitude toward the advocacy. Attitude toward the advocacy (here: attitude toward supporting the petition) was measured based on three 7-point scale items (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*). The items were adopted from Seo, Dillard, and Shen (2013) and included the following statements: “I support what the petition was trying to accomplish”, “I agree with the position advocated in the petition”, and “I am favorable toward the petition” ($\alpha = .92$).

Behavioral intentions. Participants rated their intentions to support the petition with three items ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). The items were taken from Antonetti and Manika (2017) and captured intentions to sign the petition, to forward it to others, and to encourage friends and family to sign the petition ($\alpha = .81$).

Empathic concern. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) was developed by Davis (1983b) and has demonstrated good internal and external validity to capture different dimensions of dispositional empathy. In our study, we used an empirically validated, German translation of the IRI subscale for empathic concern (Enzmann, 1996). The subscale for empathic concern consists of seven items (e.g., “I am often quite touched by things that I see happen” or “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person”). Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*). The items showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

Controls. Several sociodemographic variables (Age, Sex, Nationality) were obtained. Experience with disabled people may also influence how recipients respond to disability-related advertising campaigns. Participants’ prior experience with disabled people was thus assessed using a 7-point scale (1 = *indirect experience*; 7 = *direct experience*) (van Gorp et al., 2012). Table 3 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the measured variables as well as the correlations among them.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations of the measured variables and correlations.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Attitude toward the message	4.96	1.03	-									
2. Attitude toward the advocacy	6.03	1.08	.252**	-								
3. Behavioral intentions	2.97	1.39	.365**	.384**	-							
4. Empathic concern	4.95	1.04	.170*	.353**	.310**	-						
5. Age	22.53	3.82	-.095	.037	.003	.011	-					
6. Sex ^a	1.61	0.49	-.135	-.372**	-.232**	-.374**	.014	-				
7. Nationality (Swiss) ^b	0.63	0.48	.083	.012	.069	.079	-.064	-.100	-			
8. Nationality (Europe) ^c	0.47	0.50	-.016	.130	-.100	.008	.013	-.017	-.71**	-		
9. Nationality (Other) ^d	0.06	0.24	-.132	-.058	-.037	-.004	-.089	.086	-.050	-.165*	-	
10. Experience with disabled people	3.69	2.16	-.040	.140*	.204**	.126	.065	-.042	.011	-.031	.288	-

Note. Sex^a: female = 1, male = 2; Nationality (Swiss)^b: No = 0, Yes = 1; Nationality (Europe)^c: No = 0, Yes = 1; Nationality (Other)^d: No = 0, Yes = 1 (* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$).

4.4.5 Statistical power

Assuming $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed, and $N = 206$, power to detect a small bivariate effect equal to r of .10 was .30, power to detect a medium bivariate effect equal to r of .25 was .95, and power to detect a large bivariate effect equal to r of .40 was .99. The study thus has adequate power to discover medium to large effects.

4.4.6 Data analytic plan

To test the hypotheses, a series of hierarchical multiple regressions analyses was performed. Attitude toward the message, attitude toward the advocacy, and behavioral intentions served as dependent variables. All regression models were structured in blocks. For hypothesis 1 we included the following blocks: The first block included control variables as predictors (age, sex, nationality, experience with disabled people). The second block contained empathic concern, daily life image, and evidence type as predictors. For hypotheses 2, 3, 4, and 5 we included the first and the second block and added a third block. The third block comprised interaction terms of daily life image by empathic concern and evidence type by empathic concern as predictors. To reduce multicollinearity between the interaction terms and their components, the continuous (7-point scaled) component variable (empathic concern) was centered (Aiken & West, 1991). Hence, to calculate the interaction terms, we used these centered scores. For hypothesis 6 we included all blocks used in prior analyses and added a block with attitude toward the message and attitude toward the advocacy as predictors.

4.5 Results

4.5.1 Manipulation check

Participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which the campaign depicted people with physical disabilities in a positive situation (happy person) or in a negative situation (sad person). A series of independent-sample t-tests indicated that the image manipulation was effective. Participants in the happy daily life image condition perceived the campaign to depict a positive situation ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.58$) more so than those who were in the sad daily life image condition ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.96$), $t(187) = 4.67$, $p <$

.001, $d = .659$. Conversely, participants in the sad daily life image condition perceived the campaign to depict a negative situation ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.98$) more so than those in the happy daily life image condition ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.83$), $t(204) = -5.771$, $p < .001$, $d = .803$. Moreover, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the campaign used a personal example or statistical facts to communicate the challenges of people with physical disabilities in Switzerland. A series of independent-sample t-tests suggest that the evidence type manipulation was successful. Individuals who were exposed to anecdotal evidence significantly more agreed that the campaign used a personal example to communicate the challenges of people with physical disabilities in Switzerland ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.51$) than those who viewed statistical evidence ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 2.02$), $t(181) = 8.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.211$. In contrast, individuals who were exposed to statistical evidence significantly more agreed that the campaign used statistical facts to communicate the challenges of people with disabilities in Switzerland ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.50$) than those who viewed anecdotal evidence ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(204) = 8.77$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.31$.

4.5.2 Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 predicted that empathic concern would lead to higher support for prosocial advertising campaigns. Table 4 summarizes the results of the regression analyses. In line with our assumption, the analyses revealed significant main effects of empathic concern on attitude toward the message ($\beta = .169$, $p = .025$, $r = .170$), attitude toward the advocacy ($\beta = .228$, $p = .001$, $r = .353$), and intentions to support the advocacy ($\beta = .236$, $p = .001$, $r = .310$). Daily life image did not yield a significant effect – neither on attitude toward the advocacy ($\beta = -.093$, $p = .145$, $r = -.069$) nor on intentions to support the advocacy ($\beta = .000$, $p = .995$, $r = .025$). Only with respect to attitude toward the message, the effect of the happy daily life image approached significance ($\beta = .118$, $p = .088$, $r = .126$). Similarly, we found no significant main effect of evidence type on attitude toward the advocacy ($\beta = .014$, $p = .829$, $r = -.027$) or on intentions to support the advocacy ($\beta = -.071$, $p = .292$, $r = -.102$). The relationship between evidence type and attitude toward the message approached significance ($\beta = .123$, $p = .082$, $r = .119$), indicating that anecdotal evidence led to a slightly more favorable attitude toward the message. Overall, findings fully support H1.

Table 4. Predictors of attitude toward the message, attitude toward the advocacy and intentions to support the campaign.

Block	Predictor	Attitude toward the Message	Attitude toward the Advocacy	Behavioral Intentions
1	Age	-.099	.041	-.015
	Sex	-.118 [^]	-.350***	-.228***
	Nationality (Swiss)	.064	.141	-.073
	Nationality (Europe)	.007	.229*	-.160
	Nationality (Other)	-.125 [^]	.012	-.063
	Experience with disabled people	-.030	.127 [^]	.172**
2	Empathic concern	.169*	.228***	.236***
	Daily life image	.118 [^]	-.093	.000
	Evidence type	.123 [^]	.014	-.071
3	Empathic con.x Daily life image	.140	.215*	.135
	Empathic con. x Evidence type	-.202*	.043	.133
4	Attitude toward the message			.315***
	Attitude toward the advocacy			.232***
	Total R^2	.124	.255	.330
	Adjusted R^2	.075**	.213***	.285***

Note. Regression coefficients in Block 1 were estimated using only predictors in that block. The regression coefficients in Block 2 are based on the full set of predictors in Blocks 1 and 2. The regression coefficients in Block 3 were estimated based on the predictors in all prior blocks. Likewise, the regression coefficients in Block 4 were estimated based on the predictors in all three prior blocks. Block 4 was only added to the model with behavioral intentions as the dependent variable (see Dillard & Yang, 2019). Numbers are standardized regression coefficients; Age: higher scores indicate higher age; Sex: female = 1, male = 2; Nationality (Swiss): No = 0, Yes = 1; Nationality (Europe): No = 0, Yes = 1; Nationality (Other): No = 0, Yes = 1; Experience: higher scores indicate more direct experiences with people with disabilities; Empathic concern: higher scores indicate higher empathic concern; Daily life image: sad = 0, happy = 1; Evidence type: statistical = 0, anecdotal = 1; ([^] $p < .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.)

A central purpose of this research was to examine the interaction effects between empathic concern and daily life image respectively between empathic concern and evidence type (Table 2). H2 postulated that sad daily life images would be more effective than happy daily life images for individuals with lower levels of empathic concern. H3 held that sad daily life images would be equally effective than happy daily life images for individuals with higher levels of empathic concern. The analysis revealed no significant interaction effects of daily life image and empathic concern on attitude toward the message ($\beta = .140, p = .158, r = .188$) or on intentions to support the advocacy ($\beta = .135, p = .161, r = .306$). However, a significant interaction effect between daily life image and empathic concern was found for attitude toward the advocacy ($\beta = .215, p = .019, r = .367$). To understand the nature of this interaction, the relationship between daily life image and attitude toward the advocacy was estimated at two values of empathic concern – one standard deviation above the mean (i.e., individuals with greater empathic concern) and one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., individuals with lower levels of empathic concern). All other control and independent variables were held constant (Aiken & West, 1991). The interaction pattern is plotted in Figure 8. Consistent with our expectations, presenting sad daily life images led to a significantly more favorable attitude toward the advocacy among individuals with lower levels of empathic concern ($\beta = -.238, p = .007, sr = -.168$). In contrast, the sad and the happy daily life images were equally persuasive among individuals with greater empathic concern ($\beta = .061, p = .501, sr = .042$). Hence, our findings lend partial support for hypotheses 2 and 3.

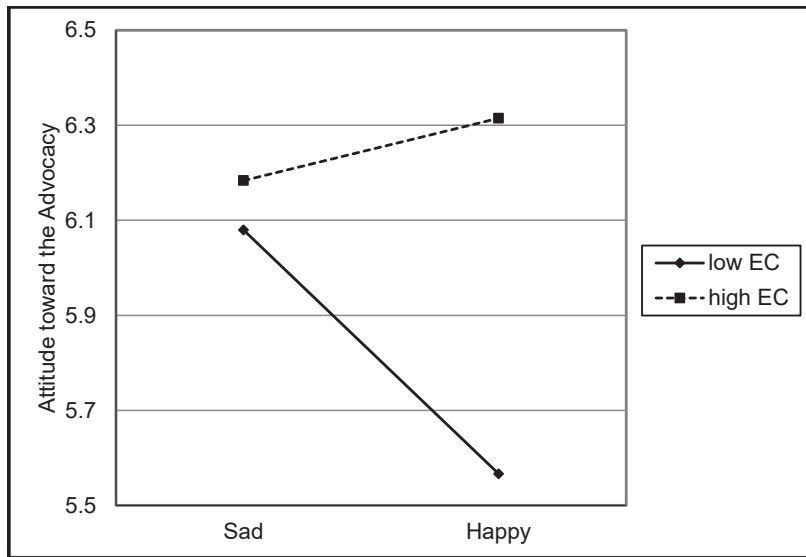


Figure 8. Interaction of empathic concern and daily life image.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 focused on the interaction between empathic concern and evidence type (Table 4). Hypothesis 4 suggested that anecdotal evidence would be more effective than statistical evidence for less empathic individuals. Hypothesis 5 held that anecdotal and statistical evidence would be equally effective for empathic individuals. Findings yielded no significant interaction effects between evidence type and empathic concern on attitude toward the advocacy ($\beta = .043, p = .636, r = .251$) or on intentions to support the advocacy ($\beta = .133, p = .168, r = .282$). However, our analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between evidence type and empathic concern on attitude toward the message ($\beta = -.202, p = .043, r = .026$). To specify this interaction, we used the same procedure as described above (Figure 9). Consistent with our hypothesis, results indicate that for less empathic individuals, anecdotal evidence led to a more favorable attitude toward the message than statistical evidence ($\beta = .266, p = .007, sr = .182$). For empathic individuals, anecdotal evidence and statistical evidence were equally effective ($\beta = -.014, p = .885, sr = -.010$). Overall, our results partially support hypotheses 4 and 5.

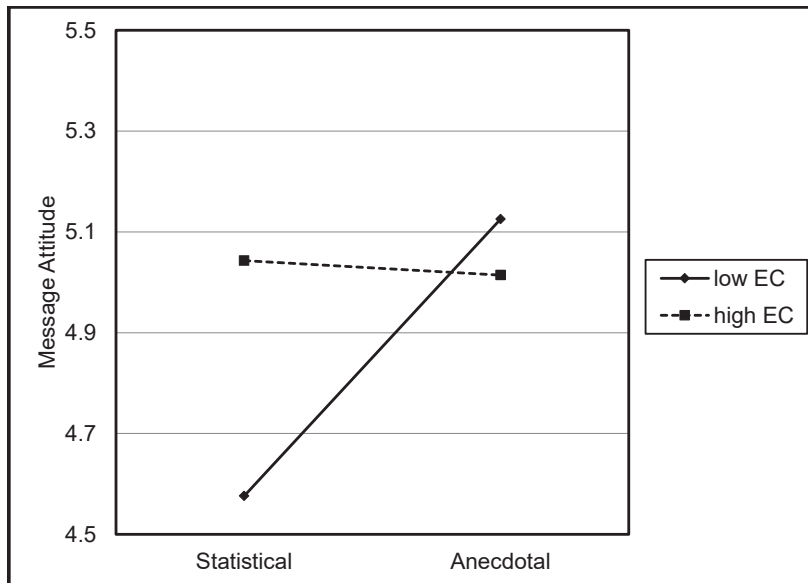


Figure 9. Interaction of empathic concern and evidence type.

Ultimately, hypothesis 6 proposed that attitude toward the message and attitude toward the advocacy would predict intentions to support a prosocial cause. The results show that attitude toward the message ($\beta = .315, p = .000, r = .365$) and attitude toward the advocacy ($\beta = .232, p = .001, r = .384$) have a significant positive impact on intentions. Hence, the data fully support hypothesis 6.

4.6 Discussion

Improving the lives of less fortunate people lies at the heart of prosocial advertising campaigns (Atkin & Rice, 2013). However, some people are more hesitant to support these campaigns than others. Previous research indicates that empathic individuals have a strong tendency to support prosocial advertising campaigns, whereas less empathic individuals are more reluctant to do so (Cohen & Hoffner, 2012; Kim & Kou, 2014). The present study therefore examined how the situation of people in need should be framed to increase the support from less empathic individuals. We thereby focused on

two message strategies: namely, daily life situations (sad vs. happy) and evidence type (statistical vs. anecdotal). Results are widely consistent with our predictions.

4.6.1 Theoretical implications

This study supports existing theory on empathic concern by showing that empathic concern consistently and positively predicts responses to prosocial advertising campaigns. The higher individuals' level of empathic concern, the more favorable their attitude toward the campaign, the more favorable their attitude toward the advocacy, and the higher their intentions to support the advocacy.

Although not hypothesized, it is intriguing to note that variations in daily life image and evidence type did not substantially influence support for prosocial advertising campaigns. Our analysis showed that the effect sizes of daily life image and evidence type were low for all outcomes. These findings concur with results from prior meta-analyses. For instance, Reinhart (2006) conducted a meta-analysis on evidence type and found a statistically significant but small advantage of anecdotal evidence over statistical evidence on attitudes. Hence, an interesting pattern emerges from our analysis. While empathic concern consistently yielded medium effects on support for prosocial advertising campaigns, daily life image and evidence type consistently yielded small effects. These findings underscore that empathic concern is a key driver of support for prosocial advertising campaigns and that variations in message strategies have a more subtle influence.

A significant contribution made by this study is to theorize the moderating influence of empathic concern on the effects of message strategies that involve different ways to frame the situation of people in need. We chose visual *and* verbal message strategies to more broadly validate the expected moderation effect. We argued that less empathic individuals would need to be “nudged” towards supporting prosocial advertising campaigns and that this could be done by means of message strategies that situationally reinforce their motivation to help. Also, we assumed that empathic individuals would be supportive of prosocial advertising campaigns, regardless of how a message is

presented. In line with our expectations, individuals with lower levels of empathic concern reported a more favorable attitude toward the message when exposed to anecdotal evidence. Furthermore, individuals with lower levels of empathic concern had a significantly more favorable attitude toward the advocacy when seeing an image of a daily life situation where a person in need is sad. Among less empathic individuals, the analysis revealed medium effects for the relationship between daily life image and attitude toward the ad and for the relationship between evidence type and attitude toward the message. In contrast, both types of daily life images (sad and happy) and both types of evidence (anecdotal and statistical) were equally effective among more empathic individuals. Taken together, the findings suggest that sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence can considerably increase support for prosocial advertising campaigns among less empathic individuals. The present study therefore lends support for the anticipated moderation effect between empathic concern and message strategies.

Interestingly, the moderating influence of empathic concern on the effects of daily life image and evidence type seems to be outcome-specific. The findings revealed a significant interaction effect of daily life image and empathic concern on attitude toward the advocacy and a significant interaction effect of type of evidence and empathic concern on attitude toward the message. However, we did not find any effects of daily life image or evidence type on intentions to support the advocacy. These findings can be explained with the sequential character of the persuasion process. In line with prior research, our study showed that attitudes (i.e., attitude toward the message and attitude toward the advocacy) predict intentions to support a prosocial cause. According to the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), attitudes are causal antecedents of intentions and are therefore more sensitive to variations in persuasive message strategies (Seo et al., 2013, p. 579).

4.6.2 Practical implications

This study suggests that campaign designers should prefer sad over happy daily life images and anecdotal over statistical evidence in prosocial advertising campaigns. While both types of images and both types of evidence worked equally well for

individuals with higher levels of empathic concern, individuals with lower levels of empathic concern responded more to sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence. Nevertheless, combining sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence might bear certain communicative risks. Such campaigns might portray disabled people as grieving individuals who struggle with their disability. If the mission of an organization is to empower disabled people, such campaigns may generate opposition and harsh reactions from people with disabilities. Thus, campaign designers should be very sensitive to potential unwanted effects when combining sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence. Drawing attention to a prosocial cause “needs to be balanced against the right of individuals to have their dignity protected” (Burt & Strongman, 2005, p. 579).

4.6.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, one could argue that all campaigns contained elements of anecdotal evidence in the form of the picture showing a man in a wheelchair. In our view, the distinction between anecdotal and statistical evidence is not confounded. The anecdotal evidence condition provided the name of the depicted man and some personal background information, whereas the statistical evidence condition left the man anonymous and presented him as only one of the 68,000 physically disabled people in Switzerland. Moreover, the results of the manipulation check showed that participants clearly discriminated between anecdotal and statistical evidence.

A second limitation concerns the statistical power of the non-effect findings for empathic individuals. In line with our expectation, variations in daily life image (sad vs. happy) and evidence type (statistical vs. anecdotal) did not significantly influence empathic individuals’ support for prosocial advertising campaigns. However, the small effect sizes obtained for these effects warrant some caution. As presented earlier, this study has adequate power to detect medium effects but has low power to detect small effects (see method section). The implication is that a much larger sample would be needed to confirm the non-effects of daily life image and evidence type for empathic individuals with sufficient confidence. Nevertheless, the small effect size suggests that

– even *if* a significant difference existed and empathic individuals would respond more favorably to one type of daily life images and one type of evidence – the difference would probably not be practically meaningful.

A third limitation concerns the effects of daily life image and evidence type on less empathic people: We theorized that sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence would reinforce prosocial motivations among less empathic individuals and thus make them more supportive of prosocial advertising campaigns. The results provide support for this mechanism, but future studies might want to actually measure prosocial motivations and include them as mediating variables in the analysis. Fourth, attitude toward the message, attitude toward the advocacy and behavioral intentions were measured immediately after message exposure. This naturally limits our ability to make predictions about the long-term impact of presenting recipients with different types of daily life images and evidence.

Despite these limitations, our study opens up an intriguing avenue for future research. To more broadly validate the observed moderation effect of empathic concern, studies on further message strategies are needed (e.g., message frames, conclusion explicitness, metaphors). Moreover, it would be interesting to compare the interaction effects between empathic concern and message strategies for different types of target behaviors. The present study promoted a one-time behavior (i.e., signing a petition). Possibly, the receptiveness of less empathic individuals towards particular message strategies may decrease when multiple-time behaviors such as volunteering are being advocated (Willer et al., 2015). Less empathic individuals may not be supportive of a campaign that promotes multiple-time behaviors because they are not willing to help others on a regular base.

4.7 Conclusion

This study examined how nonprofit organizations should frame the situation of people in need to increase support from less empathic individuals. We investigated the effects of depicting daily life situations where people in need are happy versus sad (visual

message strategies) and the effects of presenting statistical versus anecdotal evidence (verbal message strategies). We argued that less empathic individuals could be nudged towards supporting prosocial advertising campaigns by means of message strategies that reinforce their motivations to help. Moreover, we assumed that empathic individuals would be supportive of prosocial advertising campaigns, regardless of how the message is presented. The findings of an experiment support our hypotheses. Overall, our study indicates that presenting sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence increases support for prosocial advertising campaigns from less empathic individuals.

5 Paper 3: The persuasive effects of verbal anchoring and visual complexity

5.1 Abstract

By Fabienne Bünzli & James Price Dillard

The primary function of verbal text in modern advertising is to anchor the meaning of the image and, by doing so, guide the reader to the preferred conclusion. However, little is known about how variations in verbal anchoring influence persuasion. This study proposes a compact theory of message processing that identifies perceived interpretational guidance as the key explanatory mechanism. A repeated measures experiment ($N = 304$) finds that verbal anchoring (complete vs. moderate vs. none) is positively related to perceived interpretational guidance, regardless of the complexity of an ad's image (straightforward vs. visual rhetorical figure). Moreover, perceived interpretational guidance explains the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion. Findings suggest that complete anchoring should be preferred over moderate and no anchoring.

Keywords: advertising; verbal anchoring; visual complexity; perceived interpretational guidance; persuasion

5.2 Introduction

Addressing significant social problems, such as public health, climate change, and environmental pollution, depend for their success on the creation of effective persuasive messages (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Over the past decades, a remarkable shift in the use of imagery and text has taken place in these messages (Kjeldsen, 2012). As evidenced by several content analyses, the emphasis on images over words has continuously increased (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008; Pollay, 1985; Pracejus et al., 2006). It is now common for imagery to take the thematic spotlight with text assuming more of a supporting role (Phillips, 2000).

Persuasion theory has not kept pace. Indeed, there are fundamental questions about the relationship between text and image that not only remain unanswered, but have barely been articulated (Bergkvist et al., 2012). For example, should the text explicitly anchor the meaning of the image or would it be more impactful to give only a hint at the preferred interpretation? What is the consequence of eliminating verbal copy altogether?

This paper proposes a compact theory of message processing that enables clear and testable answers to these questions. It supposes that the primary function of verbal anchoring is to guide recipients toward the interpretation preferred by the message source. The theory further posits that this guidance function can affect the persuasiveness of verbal anchoring – either positively or negatively – depending on which of two basic message processing dynamics is prepotent. The study also takes into consideration that the complexity of an ad’s image might influence whether recipients perceive verbal anchoring as more or less constraining. Before we unpack the theoretical model, we explicate the key message variable under scrutiny: Verbal anchoring.

5.3 Theoretical background

5.3.1 Verbal anchoring

Verbal anchoring, a concept that can be traced to Barthes (1977), refers to the degree to which the ad copy explains the meaning of the accompanying image. Contemporary theory holds that verbal anchoring can be understood as a continuum (Phillips, 2000). No anchoring occurs when an ad contains an image but lacks any verbal copy except for the brand or product name. As an example, we can take a Greenpeace ad that depicts a scuba-diver in front of the Eiffel Tower (Figure 10). The ad raises awareness to the fact that global warming drastically increases sea levels without the aid of any verbal description. Moderate verbal anchoring refers to the presence of a word or phrase that hints at the meaning of the image (Phillips, 2000). An instance of moderate verbal anchoring can be found in an Amnesty International ad campaign (Figure 11). The ad shows a man who is being beaten by armed militia, while people are gathering around in circle formation. The people stand with their backs against the center and hence look away. The verbal text anchors the meaning of the image by stating “ignore us ignore human rights.” Complete verbal anchoring describes the presence of verbal text that explicitly spells out the meaning of the image (Phillips, 2000). The Child Health Foundation uses complete verbal anchoring in one of its anti-smoking ads (Figure 12). The ad depicts a girl with a smoke halo over her head, with a headline explaining that “children of parents who smoke, get to heaven earlier”.



Figure 10. Ad with no verbal anchoring.



Figure 11. Ad with moderate verbal anchoring.

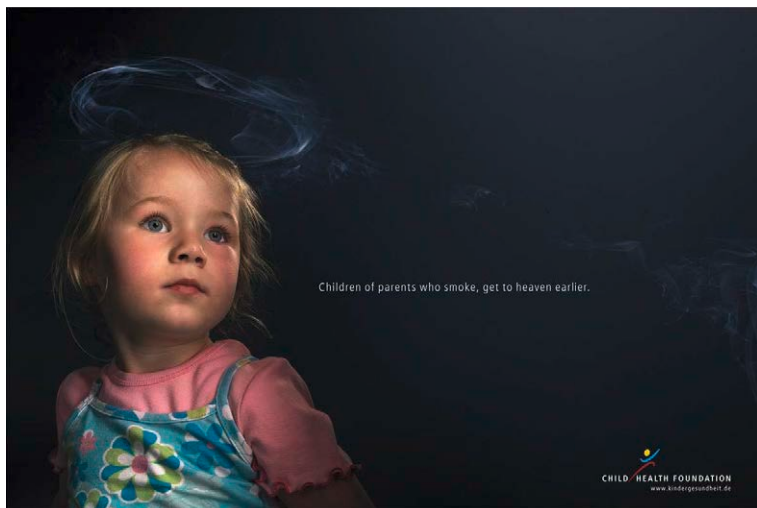


Figure 12. Ad with complete verbal anchoring.

Verbal anchoring performs a guidance function: It increases the comprehensibility of an ad and leads readers toward the intended meaning of the message advocacy (Lagerwerf et al., 2012). This ability to guide recipients' interpretation was demonstrated in van Enschoot and Hoeken (2015), who examined consumer response data for 153 TV commercials. They found that complete verbal anchoring was perceived as more comprehensible than commercials containing moderate verbal anchoring. Two experimental studies (Bergkvist et al., 2012; Phillips, 2000) on the effects of verbal anchoring in commercial print advertising point in the same direction. Both investigations found that complete verbal anchoring helped recipients to better understand the ad. The findings from a qualitative study on advertisements in a cross-cultural context lend further support for the guiding function of verbal anchoring. Sixty students from a Spanish university participated in the study and were asked to write down their interpretation of nine ads which were aimed at native English speakers. The analysis showed that verbal anchoring, when the text was understood, helped the participants to derive the intended interpretation of the ad (Calzada Pérez, 2018). Similarly, Lagerwerf, van Hooijdonk, and Korenberg (2012) showed in an experimental study on print advertising that recipients more often discerned the intended interpretation when exposed to complete verbal anchoring compared to no verbal anchoring. Comprehending an ad and discovering its intended meaning likely go hand-in-hand with *perceptions* of being guided. It is straightforward to assume that people consciously notice that verbal anchoring pushes them toward certain inferences. This brings us to the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the amount of verbal anchoring, the greater the perceived interpretational guidance.

The present study takes into consideration that visual complexity might influence whether recipients perceive verbal anchoring as more or less constraining.

5.3.2 Visual complexity

Visual complexity refers to a property of images that determines the level of cognitive load required for recipients to process the ad (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). This

concept is best conceived as a set of ordered categories. The least complex images are *straightforward*, in that they articulate literal meanings (i.e., matter of fact depictions of reality) (Huhmann, 2018; van Mulken et al., 2005). An example can be found in Figure 13. More complex images come in the form of rhetorical figures (Phillips, 2000). This term describes artful deviations from expectation that are not rejected as nonsensical (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). One example is that of an image of a melting penguin, implying that polar animals will lose their natural habitat and eventually die out due to global warming. Although penguins cannot actually melt, recipients do not perceive this as an error but rather understand it as a fusion of two concepts.

Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) assert that some visual rhetorical figures are more complex than others due to the manner in which they structure the relationship between the visual elements. The least complex option is *juxtaposition*, which involves a side by side arrangement that implicitly instructs viewers to make a comparison (Figure 14). *Fusion* is the blending or merging of elements (Figure 15). It is more complex than juxtaposition because one must derive the meaning of the two elements alone and together. *Replacement* occurs when one element appears in place of the other (Figure 16). Replacement is the most complex type because one must substitute the element that is present with an element that is visually absent.



Figure 13. Ad with a straightforward image.



Figure 14. Ad with a juxtaposition figure.



Figure 15. Ad with a fusion figure.



Figure 16. Ad with a replacement figure.

Previous research supports the idea that these visual complexity categories are ordered in terms of the cognitive demands that they place on the recipients (Gkiouzepas & Hogg, 2011; van Mulken et al., 2014). For instance, participants in an experimental study consistently identified ads with straightforward images as the least complex type, followed by ads with juxtaposition and fusion figures, which were in turn followed by replacement figures (van Mulken et al., 2010).

This study explores the possibility that visual complexity influences of how much recipients perceive verbal anchoring to push them toward certain interpretations. We speculate that verbal anchoring is perceived as relatively more constraining when paired with a less versus more complex image. This is because less complex images are easier to understand, even without the aid of verbal description. Verbal anchoring thus offers interpretational guidance that is not necessarily required and that might increase recipients' perceptions of being constrained in their reading of the ad. We therefore posit the following research question:

RQ1: Does visual complexity influence recipients' perceptions about the amount of perceived interpretational guidance offered by verbal anchoring?

The purpose of this study is to examine what amount of verbal anchoring is most persuasive. We argue that perceived interpretational guidance is the central explanatory mechanism underlying the effects of verbal anchoring. We further maintain that the effects of interpretational guidance are governed by two principles of message processing.

5.3.3 Principles of message processing

5.3.3.1 *Need for sense-making*

The first principle asserts that people possess an innate need to make sense of their experiences, their lives, and the world (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016). This desire to understand one's physical and social world is the product of an evolutionary design process that "motivates people to gather, attend to, and process information in a fashion that augments, and complements, autonomous sense-making" (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016, p. 137). However, people are minimalist in that they try to invest as little effort as required to understand information and often stop sense-making processes after having found the first relevant interpretation (Forceville, 2014; Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

Sense-making operates via pleasure and aversion mechanisms. Pleasure arises when one is able to make sense of information (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016). The *aha moment* evokes a pleasurable sense of achievement (Jeong, 2008). In contrast, the inability to make sense of information is aversive and causes frustration (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016).

The first principle has clear implications for the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring. We should expect that anchoring would aid sense-making by guiding the recipient's interpretation and, in doing so, produce greater persuasion. The underlying assumption is that the interpretational guidance offered by verbal anchoring meets people's need to comprehend the world around them: it facilitates the pleasurable experience of "getting" what the ad says while minimizing cognitive effort. The more recipients feel guided in

their interpretation, the more favorable they should be toward a message advocacy. We therefore assume that:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived interpretational guidance positively predicts persuasion.

5.3.3.2 *Need for autonomy*

The second principle, rooted in theories of psychological reactance and politeness, asserts that people wish to determine their preferences and actions and to be unimpeded in the process of making these choices (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Brown & Levinson, 1987). In other words, they desire autonomy. Thus, when individuals perceive that their freedom to choose is constrained, they resist persuasion. Although any attempt to persuade can be considered a threat to freedom, message strategies vary in the degree to which they are likely to be seen as threatening (Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013). Inexplicit speech invites people to elaborate on the message to discover the speaker's wants. The act of filling in the gaps makes recipients more willing to accept the message because they are able to draw their own conclusions (Blum-Kulka, 1987; O'Keefe, 1997). Accordingly, discerning the speaker's wants on their own gives recipients the pleasurable experience of being supported in their need for autonomy (Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013).

And what are the implications for verbal anchoring? Explicit requests and verbal anchoring are related in that both concepts are concerned with the extent to which meanings are spelled out (van Enschot & Hoeken, 2015). While the concept of explicitness refers to the degree to which a message source renders transparent his or her intentions in the message, verbal anchoring describes various degrees to which a verbal text explains meaning of an image (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Dillard, 2014). We should expect that any attempt to impose a specific reading on the recipients, including explicit requests and verbal anchoring, would interfere with the need for autonomy and, in so doing, decrease persuasion. This effect is presumably driven by perceived interpretational guidance. The more recipients feel guided in their interpretation, the less favorable they should be toward a message advocacy because they make the unpleasant experience of not being allowed to derive their own interpretation.

Accordingly, perceived interpretational guidance should have an inverse impact on persuasion.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived interpretational guidance negatively predicts persuasion.

Taken together, the need for sense-making and the need for autonomy yield conflicting implications for the impact of verbal anchoring. On the one hand, recipients appreciate the cognitive efficiency offered by higher levels of anchoring, and they are more persuaded because of it. On the other hand, recipients may dislike being told what to think and may, therefore, manifest resistance to persuasion. Depending on which need prevails, either complete or no verbal anchoring should be most persuasive. Implied in both perspectives is the assumption that interpretational guidance operates as the key mechanism explaining the relationship between verbal anchoring and persuasion. We therefore posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Perceived interpretational guidance is the key explanatory mechanism accounting for the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion.

5.3.4 Persuasion process

Persuasion is not a single event, but rather a “sequence of linked changes” (Seo et al., 2013, p. 567). It is a process in which early judgments about the perceived effectiveness of a message shape later and more stable outcomes, including attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Dillard & Seo, 2013; Rhodes & Ewoldsen, 2013). Perceived effectiveness refers to the overall judgment of the expected impact of a given message (Seo et al., 2013). It taps recipients’ perceptions of how persuasive, convincing, and effective recipients they find the message. Previous research has consistently identified perceived effectiveness as a key determinant of attitude (Dillard et al., 2007; Seo et al., 2013). Attitude means a general assessment of the *advocacy* put forward by a persuasive message (Seo et al., 2013).

Given prior work, we conceive persuasion as a process of linked changes, with perceived effectiveness being a causal antecedent of attitude toward the advocacy (Hypothesis 5). Figure 17 summarizes the presumed persuasion process that follows from variations in verbal anchoring and visual complexity and illustrates the specific expectation that:

Hypothesis 5: Attitude toward the advocacy is a direct function of perceived effectiveness.

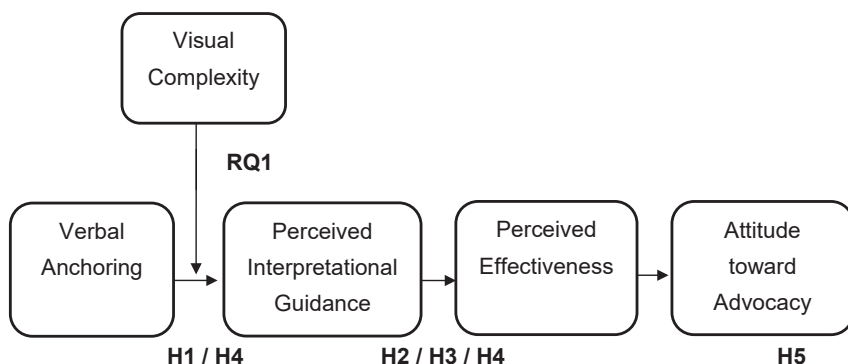


Figure 17. Summary of the hypotheses and research question.

5.4 Method

5.4.1 Design

The study was a 3 (verbal anchoring: none vs. moderate vs. complete) x 4 (visual complexity: straightforward vs. juxtaposition vs. fusion vs. replacement) factorial design. Complexity and anchoring were both within-participants factors. Each participant rated, in random order, one image from each visual complexity category: one ad with a straightforward image, one ad with a juxtaposition figure, one ad with a fusion figure, and one ad with a replacement figure. Within each complexity category there was an equal probability of viewing one of the three levels of verbal anchoring (none vs. moderate vs. complete verbal anchoring).

To enhance the generalizability of the findings, each of the 12 experimental conditions included three stimuli which were constructed from professionally produced advertisements. A random draw from the ads within each condition ensured that participants had an equal probability of viewing one of the three possible stimuli in the categories to which they were assigned.

5.4.2 Stimuli and pretests

To maintain topical consistency across messages, we selected only ads that dealt with environmental pollution. Twenty-three print advertisements that contained either a straightforward image, a juxtaposition figure, a fusion figure, or a replacement figure were collected from online databases (e.g., www.adsoftheworld.com and www.pinterest.com).

Through our own editing, each ad was produced in three levels of verbal anchoring. To create ads with no verbal anchoring, we removed all the text except for the brand logo. Then we added a completely anchored and a moderately anchored headline. In most cases, the original text was utilized for the high anchoring version. Variation in anchoring was created via application of the following rules: The complete verbal anchoring included information about a problem (human waste) and its negative impact (does what?) on the environment (to whom?). An example is the headline stating “Plastic waste replaces marine animals.” The moderate anchoring version mentioned only negative impact and environment (e.g., “replaces marine animals”). Thus, recipients had to infer from the image that human waste was the problem.

Two separate pretests were conducted. The first assessed perceived levels of verbal anchoring. Twenty five participants, drawn from a Qualtrics online panel, were shown two versions of each of the 23 ads, one with moderate and the other with complete verbal anchoring. Following each ad, they rendered a judgement on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) as to the extent to which *the ad explained the meaning of the image*. A series of paired samples t-tests showed that the complete verbal

anchoring headlines in all 23 advertisements were perceived as providing more explanation than the moderate verbal anchoring headlines: mean values differed at $p < .05$ for all but comparisons but one, which was $p = .054$. We concluded that our manipulation of verbal anchoring was successful.

The second pretest assessed visual complexity. All 23 ads were submitted to 4 judges with an academic training in communication science or rhetoric. The pretest started with a brief explanation of the differences between straightforward images and visual rhetorical figures and introduced the visual complexity typology developed by Phillips and McQuarrie (2004). The judges were then shown the ads in randomized order and asked to indicate whether or not the image contained a rhetorical figure. If participants thought a rhetorical figure was present in the image, they were asked to classify it as juxtaposition, fusion, or replacement. Within each visual complexity category, we retained three ads for the main study. We kept three ads in each visual complexity category to reduce the risk that the study results would be biased by the idiosyncratic features of individual ads. For each visual complexity category, we chose those three ads that were most often classified correctly (i.e., in agreement with our collective judgment). This meant ads with the highest pairwise percent agreement among all judges, whereby their classification had to be congruent with ours. The analysis showed an average pairwise agreement of 88%, a Fleiss' κ of 0.84 and a Krippendorff's α (nominal) of 0.84 for the selected ads.

Overall, the stimuli in the main study included 12 messages (3 ads with straightforward images, 3 with juxtaposition figures, 3 with fusion figures, and 3 with replacement figures), each three versions of verbal anchoring (none vs. moderate vs. complete). This resulted in a total set of 36 stimuli (available at XXX: Withheld for blind review).

5.4.3 Participants

Participants in a Qualtrics panel were invited into the study if they were residents of the U.S. and 18 or older. Screening questions ensured that the sample was balanced on gender, age, and education. The initial sample included 340 participants of which 36 were excluded because of straightlining (Final $N = 304$). Participants ranged in age

from 18 to 91 years ($M = 46.0$, $SD = 17.7$), 148 (49%) were female, 156 (51%) were male. In terms of ethnicity, 239 identified as white (79%), 29 as African descent (10%), 19 as Asian descent (6%), 18 as Hispanic (6%), and 6 as American Indian or Alaska Native (2%). The total value exceeds 100% because participants were allowed to check multiple categories. With regard to education, 11 indicated not having completed high school (4%), 94 indicated having a high school diploma (31%), 32 an associate's degree (11%), 97 a bachelor's degree (32%), and 70 a higher degree (23%).

5.4.4 Procedure

The experiment was conducted online in May 2020. Participants were first informed about the study conditions and asked to give their consent to participate in the experiment. They were subsequently directed to an experimental survey that consisted of two parts: (a) social category information (age, sex, gender, ethnicity, education) and (b) four ads (i.e., experimental treatments) each of which was followed by questions about their reactions to the ad (interpretational guidance, perceived effectiveness, and attitude toward the advocacy).

5.4.5 Measures

Perceived interpretational guidance. Perceived interpretational guidance ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.81$) was measured with three 7-point scale items ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “The ad tried to constrain my interpretation“, “The ad pushed me towards a particular interpretation“, “The ad tried to tell me what to think“ ($\alpha = .85$).

Perceived effectiveness. Three 7-point semantic differentials measured perceived effectiveness ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.78$). Participants were asked to report how persuasive (*not at all persuasive*–*very persuasive*), how convincing (*not at all convincing*–*very convincing*) and how effective (*not at all effective*–*very effective*) they perceived the ad (Seo et al., 2013). The items showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$).

Attitude toward the advocacy. Attitude toward the advocacy ($M = 6.0$, $SD = 1.63$) was measured by three items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The items were “I support what the message was trying to

accomplish”, “I agree with the position advocated in the message,” and “I am favorable toward the main point of the message” ($\alpha = .93$). The items were adopted from Seo, Dillard, and Shen (2013).

Controls. Three sociodemographic variables were included as control variables: sex ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 0.50$)³, age ($M = 46.0$, $SD = 1.81$), and education ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.24$).

5.4.6 Measurement analysis

To evaluate the structure of the theoretical measures (guidance, effectiveness, and attitude), we performed an exploratory factor analysis using principle axis factoring and promax rotation. The analysis supported a three-factor solution in which all of the items showed high loadings on their intended factor (.718 to .95) and low cross-loadings (-.142 to .119). Each of the factor exhibited eigenvalues greater than 1.

5.4.7 Theoretical analyses

Our data were structured into two levels. Level 1 captured the within-participant variation (i.e., the verbal anchoring, visual complexity manipulation and the self-reported persuasion data). Level 2 captured the between-participant variation (i.e., sociodemographic data). Multilevel modeling was conducted via SPSS using restricted maximum-likelihood estimation and treating intercepts as random effects. We first computed the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) for the unconditional models to check whether there was sufficient variation in the dependent variables at level 1. We observed significant variation at level 1 for perceived interpretational guidance (68%, $p < .001$), perceived effectiveness (55%, $p < .001$), and attitude toward the advocacy (78%, $p < .001$). We then performed a series of multilevel analyses that followed the process depicted in Figure 8. Accordingly, we began with the simplest model first, in which interpretational guidance was the dependent variable. The next model cast perceived effectiveness as the outcome and the third treated attitude as the dependent variable. To assess the predicted process, all predictors and outcome variables, once

³ 1 = male, 2 = female

included in the analysis, were kept and used as predictors in all subsequent analyses. Predictors were entered as covariates. For the interpretational guidance model, we included sex, age, and education (level 2) as well as verbal anchoring, visual complexity, and an interaction term (level 1) as predictors. To facilitate interpretation and reduce multicollinearity, we assigned orthogonal codes to verbal anchoring and visual complexity, then calculated the interaction term as their product. The second model deployed perceived effectiveness as the dependent variable. We used the same predictors and added perceived interpretational guidance as another level-1-predictor. The third analysis used attitude as the dependent variable. We included all predictors from the previous analyses in the model and added perceived effectiveness as another level-1-predictor. When the level-1 and level-2 predictors showed non-significant effects, we tested a reduced model without these variables. Results are reported only for the reduced models.

5.5 Results

The results are presented in three sections with each section being organized around one of the outcome variables in the model (i.e., perceived interpretational guidance, perceived effectiveness, attitude toward the advocacy). Within each, we briefly present the results for the full model and subsequently detail the results for the reduced model (Table 5).

Table 5. Multilevel modeling results arranged in columns by research questions and hypotheses (predictors entered as covariates).

	H1, RQ1: Perc. interpret. guidance		H2, H3, H4: Perc. effectiveness		H5: Attitude tow. advocacy	
Fixed effects	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	4.96***	.48	5.05***	.15	4.51***	.47
Sex	-.82***	.18	–	–	.71***	.17
Age	-.01**	.01	–	–	.02***	.01
Education	.24***	.07	–	–	-.17*	.07
Verbal anchoring	.09*	.03	.20***	.05	–	–
Visual complexity	–	–	–	–	–	–
Verbal anchoring x Visual complexity	–	–	–	–	–	–
Perc. interpret. guidance			.07*	.03	–	–
Perc. effectiveness					.06***	.02

Note. '–' indicates that the variable produced a non-significant result in the full model and, therefore, was removed from the reduced model. Each column (unstandardized coefficient plus SE) represents a single analysis headed by the hypothesis or research question and its corresponding dependent variable: Perc. interpret. guidance = Perceived interpretational guidance; Perc. effectiveness = Perceived effectiveness; Attitude tow. advocacy = Attitude toward the advocacy. Sex: male = 1, female = 2; Age: higher scores indicate higher age; Education: higher scores indicate higher education; Verbal anchoring: no verbal anchoring = -1, moderate verbal anchoring = 0, complete verbal anchoring = 1; Visual complexity: straightforward = 3, juxtaposition: 1, fusion = -1, replacement = -3.
*p < .05 **p < .01. ***p < .001.

5.5.1 Effects on perceived interpretational guidance: H1, RQ1

For the full model, the level-1 predictor verbal anchoring as well as the level-2-predictors sex, age, and education had a significant impact on perceived interpretational guidance. Neither visual complexity nor the interaction between anchoring and complexity yielded a significant effect. Thus, both were removed from the model. Results for the reduced model appear in table 1. As shown, verbal anchoring was significantly related to perceived interpretational guidance ($b = .09, p = .022$) such that higher levels of anchoring corresponded with higher levels of perceived constraint.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of this effect, we conducted a follow-up analysis using verbal anchoring as a factor in the model (instead of a covariate). Figure 18 presents the estimated marginal means for each level of anchoring. Pairwise comparisons of the estimated marginal means using Fisher's least significant difference test (LSD) showed that complete verbal anchoring ($M = 4.1, SE = .096$) led to significantly higher perceptions of being guided relative to no verbal anchoring ($M = 3.9, SE = .095, p = .022$). The difference between complete anchoring and moderate anchoring ($M = 4.0, SE = .096, p = .388$), as well as the difference between moderate and no anchoring ($p = .168$), were nonsignificant.

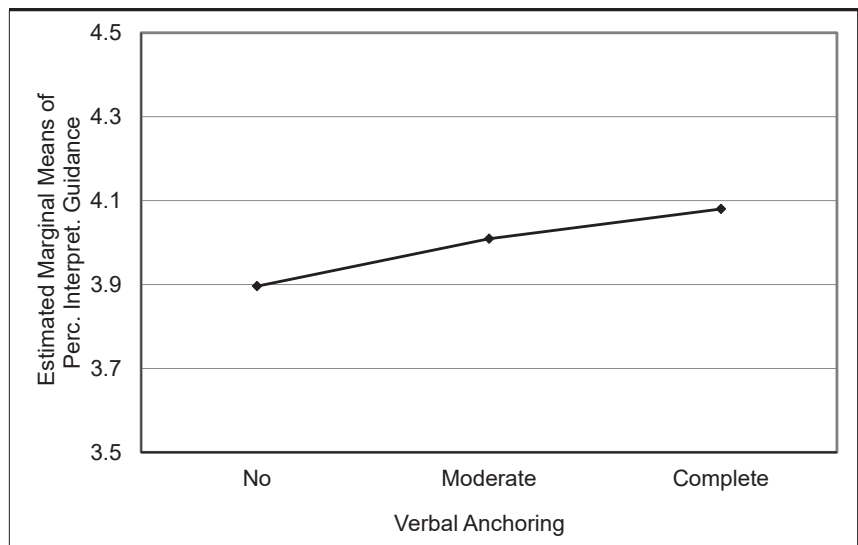


Figure 18. Estimated marginal means for perceived interpretational guidance.

The first hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between verbal anchoring and perceived interpretational guidance. H1 was supported. The study also took into consideration that the complexity of an ad's image might influence whether recipients perceive verbal anchoring as more or less constraining. RQ1 inquired about an interaction between verbal anchoring and visual complexity on perceived interpretational guidance. However, the interaction proved nonsignificant, suggesting that the effect of verbal anchoring on perceived interpretational guidance was unaffected by the complexity of an ad's image.

5.5.2 Effects on perceived effectiveness: H2, H3, H4

For the full model, verbal anchoring and perceived interpretational guidance as well as age predicted perceived effectiveness. Visual complexity, the interaction term, sex, and education showed nonsignificant relationships with perceived effectiveness. These variables were subsequently removed. Age was also removed from the model because

its effect became unequivocally nonsignificant. The reduced model thus only included verbal anchoring and perceived interpretational guidance (Table 5).

Hypothesis 2 and 3 predicted contrary effects of perceived interpretational guidance on perceived effectiveness. Whereas H2 assumed a positive relationship, H3 anticipated a negative relationship. The results showed that perceived interpretational guidance was positively associated with perceived effectiveness ($b = .07, p = .033$). Hence, H2 was supported while H3 was not.

Hypothesis 4 anticipated that perceived interpretational guidance would be the key mechanism explaining the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion. Besides a significant relationship between verbal anchoring and perceived interpretational guidance, this requires two further conditions to be met: 1) a significant positive relationship between perceived interpretational guidance and perceived effectiveness and 2) the lack of significant relationships between verbal anchoring and perceived effectiveness. In line with our expectation, perceived interpretational guidance had a significant positive effect on perceived effectiveness. However, verbal anchoring ($b = .20, p = .000$) also had a significant positive impact on perceived effectiveness, suggesting that greater amounts of verbal anchoring lead to greater perceptions of message effectiveness. Pairwise comparisons (Figure 19) indicated that ads with complete verbal anchoring ($M = 5.5, SE = .098$) were perceived to be significantly more effective than ads with moderate verbal anchoring ($M = 5.3, SE = .099, p = .01$) and no verbal anchoring ($M = 5.1, SE = .098, p = .000$). The difference between moderate and no verbal anchoring proved nonsignificant ($p = .211$). Overall, the results imply that perceived interpretational guidance partially mediates the relationship between verbal anchoring and perceived effectiveness. Accordingly, we only find partial support for H4.

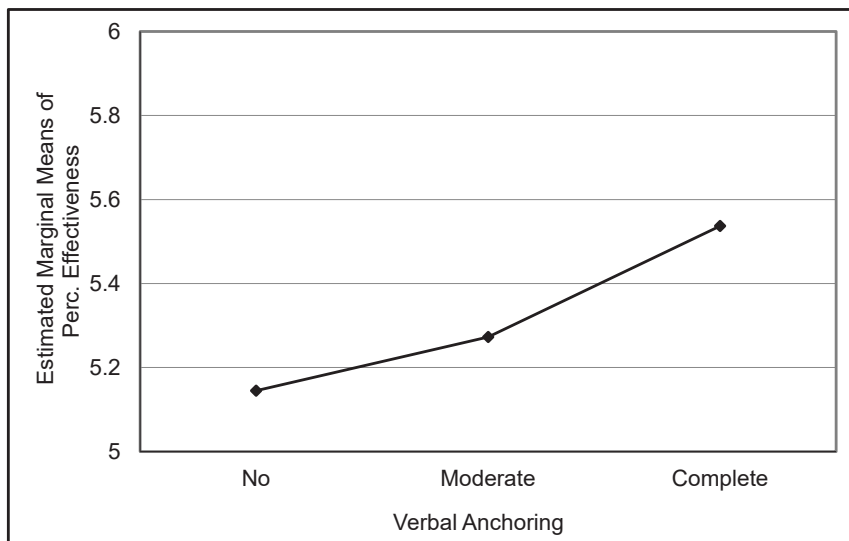


Figure 19. Estimated marginal means for perceived effectiveness.

5.5.3 Effects on attitude toward the advocacy: H5

For the full model, perceived interpretational guidance, perceived effectiveness, sex, age, and education had a significant impact on attitude toward the advocacy. No significant relationship was found for the level-1-predictors verbal anchoring, visual complexity, and the interaction term. These predictors were therefore removed from the reduced model. Although significant in the full model, perceived interpretational guidance was also removed from the reduced model because its effect did not meet the traditional $p < .05$ criterion (Table 1). The analysis in the reduced model produced $b = .06$, $p = .001$ for the relationship between perceived effectiveness and attitude toward the advocacy, indicating that the more effective participants considered an ad to be, the more favorable they were toward the message advocacy.

H5 predicted that attitude toward the advocacy would be a direct function of perceived effectiveness. This requires two conditions to be met: (a) a significant positive relationship between perceived effectiveness and attitude toward the ad and (b) the lack of significant relationships between other level-1-predictors (i.e., verbal anchoring,

visual complexity, interaction term, perceived interpretational guidance) and attitude toward the ad. Perceived effectiveness was positively related to attitude toward the advocacy. Moreover, none of the other level-1-predictors exhibited a significant effect. H5 was thus supported.

5.6 Discussion

Motivated by a desire to better understand the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion, we conducted an experiment that manipulated anchoring and one other, potentially relevant variable – visual complexity. The results clearly showed that higher levels of verbal anchoring were most effective, with perceived interpretational guidance serving as a key explanatory mechanism. Because our theory conceptualized persuasion as a multi-step process, we examine each step in turn.

5.6.1 Persuasive mechanism of verbal anchoring

Verbal anchoring is the idea that the intention of image-based advertisements may be explained, to varying degrees, by accompanying text. We anticipated that higher levels of verbal anchoring would be perceived by participants as providing interpretational guidance, that is, as an effort to steer recipients toward one interpretation of the message and away from others (Lagerwerf et al., 2012). The data showed precisely this effect. The association between three levels of verbal anchoring and perceived guidance was significant and roughly linear. This is an important result in that it establishes a clear empirical connection between the message features – anchoring – and the expected psychological state – perceived guidance.

Previous studies have consistently shown that verbal anchoring increases perceived comprehension and helps recipients discern the intended interpretation (Bergkvist et al., 2012; Lagerwerf et al., 2012; Phillips, 2000; van Enschot & Hoeken, 2015). These investigations, however, did not address the *mechanism* by which verbal anchoring increases ad comprehensibility. Our project makes an important contribution to this gap. The data indicate that the enhanced comprehensibility may result from recipients *perceiving themselves* as being guided in their interpretation.

This study was guided by two competing assumptions concerning the relationship between interpretational guidance and persuasion. One posited that recipients have an innate need to make sense of the world and would, therefore, appreciate being guided in their interpretation. The other assumption was that recipients strive for autonomy and, thus, would dislike being told what to think. The data revealed a positive relationship between interpretational guidance and perceived message effectiveness, suggesting that the need for sense-making was prepotent in our data. It appears that, under the conditions created by our experiment, message recipients valued cognitive efficiency over autonomy.

We caution against the conclusion that desire for autonomy is unimportant to persuasion theory. Indeed, decades of research suggest otherwise (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Rather it seems more plausible that our results, while veridical, are limited to certain conditions such as low personal relevance. Despite its serious impact on the environment and sea life, plastic pollution does not have an immediate or direct impact on most people's life. In such circumstances, message recipients may prioritize a quick and easy way to formulate their attitude (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

An unexpected finding was the significant impact of verbal anchoring on perceived effectiveness. The data were consistent though with the effect of perceived interpretational guidance on persuasion in that higher amounts of verbal anchoring significantly increased persuasion. This result is surprising because it indicates that perceived interpretational guidance is *a* key explanatory mechanism, but not *the sole* explanatory mechanism (because there is an effect for anchoring even after controlling for guidance). An explanation for this finding may lie in our conception of the guidance function of anchoring. That is, as a cognitive mechanism. Clearly, this overlooks the potential for affective influences on persuasion that co-occur with cognition (Seo & Dillard, 2019). Thus, future research might consider theorizing and measuring both types of processes.

5.6.2 Effects of visual complexity

Visual complexity is a message property that distinguishes messages with literal meanings from three conceptually distinct rhetorical forms: juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement. These forms are arrayed on a continuum that varies in terms of the degree of cognitive effort that is needed to grasp the intended meaning of a message (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). We examined the possibility that visual complexity might influence perceptions of being guided toward certain interpretations, either alone or in combination with verbal anchoring. Because the data showed no such effect on perceived interpretational guidance, we must ask why.

One possibility is that our operationalization of complexity was flawed. Our assessment of the rhetorical forms, as well as that of our pre-test judges leads us to give this possibility little weight. However, the ultimate arbiter of this point is the scientific community. Readers can inspect the images themselves to judge the degree to which our operations/images correspond with the concept of visual complexity as articulated in the literature (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

Alternatively, we cannot rule out the possibility that our results reflect reality. Perhaps, the variations in message form that were the focus of our study represent concepts that capture the attention of academics, but have no demonstrable impact on members of a lay audience. The weight of empirical evidence showing that visual complexity influences persuasion, however, clearly suggests otherwise (Lagerwerf et al., 2012; van Mulken et al., 2010, 2014). A more plausible explanation why visual complexity did not yield an effect on perceived interpretational guidance may have to do with the semiotic potential of the visual mode. The visual arranges information holistically and simultaneously. Since there are multiple ways of relating information to each other and since the visual mode lacks a distinct syntax, images guide meaning making to a lesser extent than verbal texts (Meyer et al., 2013). This polysemy inherent in images may be the reason why images – even when they are straightforward and easy to understand – are not perceived as offering interpretational guidance. These findings are theoretically valuable insofar as they support the idea that text and image adopt distinct communicative functions in advertising.

5.6.3 Persuasion process

In line with previous research (Seo et al., 2013), we conceptualized persuasion as a sequence of linked changes, with perceived effectiveness being a causal antecedent of attitude toward the advocacy. The data showed the anticipated pattern. This result is compatible with the idea of a “hierarchy of effects” in message processing (Slater, 2002, p. 166). Because perceived effectiveness precedes attitude toward the advocacy, it is relatively more sensitive to variations in message features (Shen & Han, 2014). Our result is not novel. But, because it replicates a well-known effect, it implies the veracity of other findings from our data.

5.6.4 Practical implications

With advertising becoming increasingly visual, the question poses itself, how much verbal copy is most persuasive? Our study suggests that campaign designers should use complete verbal anchoring because people find cognitive efficiency attractive.

Although not hypothesized, our study revealed a surprising finding with regard to the persuasive effects of visual rhetorical figures. The data showed no main effect of visual complexity on any persuasion outcome. This is remarkable insofar as it is empirically validated that ads with rhetorical figures enhance persuasion compared to non-figurative ads (Huhmann & Albinsson, 2019). However, previous studies on visual rhetorical figures have almost exclusively focused on commercial advertising. Our study, in contrast, examined social issue campaigns. The nonsignificant effects of visual complexity found in this study are a sensible finding and should sensitize practitioners to be careful about transferring “best practices” from commercial advertising to social advertising contexts.

5.6.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations. The most obvious is our focus on the single social problem, that is, environmental pollution. Although the use of multiple messages within this broad category should increase confidence in our findings, it simultaneously reduces our ability to generalize beyond that topic. Our sample, which consisted solely

of U.S. residents presents another limitation. A third limitation concerns the stimuli. We used professionally produced advertisements and manipulated only the amount of verbal anchoring presented in each one. However, the fact that the ads came from different message sources including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace might have influenced responses. Brand familiarity is known to affect responses to persuasive messages (Mikhailitchenko et al., 2009).

5.7 Conclusion

Imagery is the dominant element in modern advertising, with verbal text assuming a secondary, but important role of anchoring the meaning of the image. The present study advanced current understanding of verbal anchoring in two ways. It was the first study to confirm the notion that the primary function of verbal anchoring is to guide recipients' interpretation of the ad. Second, it modelled the persuasion process as a sequence of linked changes with perceived interpretational guidance being a key explanatory mechanism for the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring. Overall, the present study makes a useful contribution to our understanding of the interplay between image and text.

6 Discussion

This dissertation aimed for a more nuanced understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns by examining message strategies and their effects on individuals. The project was guided by two theoretical perspectives: The first theoretical perspective considered the influence of audience characteristics on the effects of persuasive message strategies. The second theoretical perspective looked at the role of momentary responses in the persuasion process. Based on these theoretical perspectives, three intermediate research objectives were posited. The first two intermediate research objectives focused on the influence of audience characteristics and sought to 1) match message approaches to people's stage of readiness and 2) match messages to people who are less inclined to help others. The third intermediate research objective focused on momentary responses and aimed to better understand the image-text interplay and the underlying persuasive mechanisms. Each of these intermediate research objectives was addressed in a separate paper. Figure 20 offers an overview of the papers constituting this dissertation. The results and conclusions of each paper have been extensively elaborated and discussed in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Therefore, the aim of the following chapter is to synthesize the key findings of the three research projects and to link them to each other. Specifically, I will present three theoretical insights that go beyond the scope and the boundaries of each single research paper and that inform the overall research objective. I will then present two key practical findings emerging from this dissertation. Limitations and directions for future research will be subsequently provided. The dissertation concludes with a final discussion about the advancements and the contributions made by this research project.

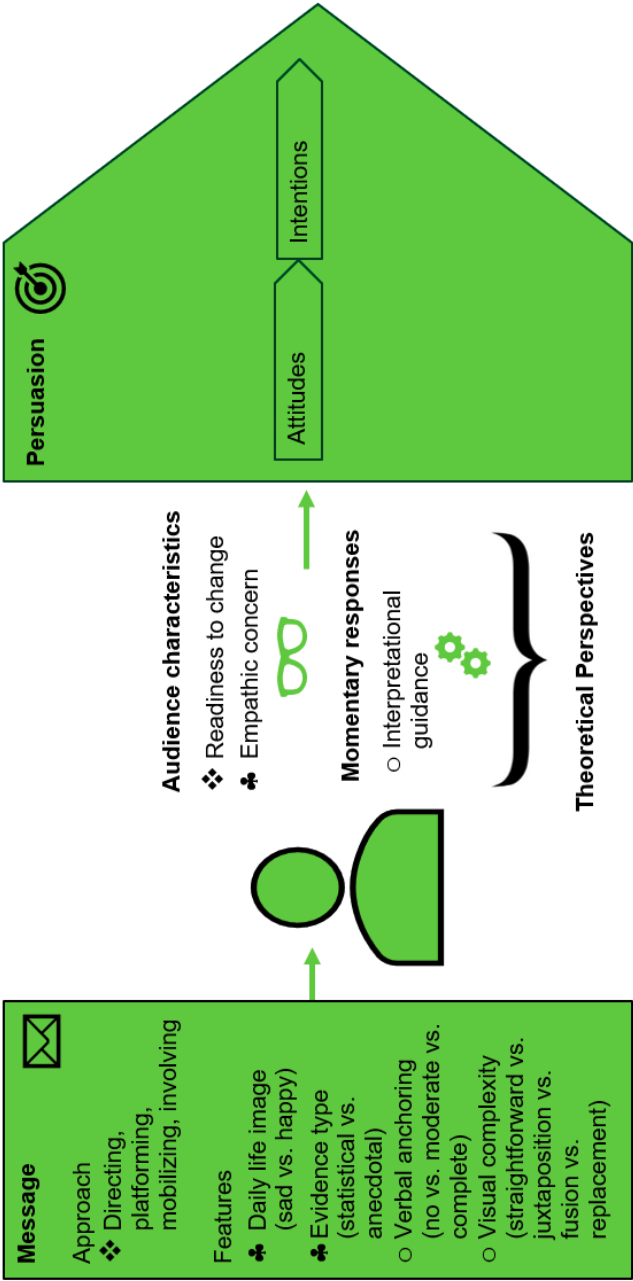


Figure 20. Focus of the research projects constituting this dissertation.

6.1 Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications drawn in this section go beyond the conclusions of every single paper and thus offer an integrated view on the research findings of this thesis. Table 6 provides an overview and indicates from which paper the findings are derived.

Table 6. Overview of the theoretical implications of this dissertation.

		Theoretical implications		
		Taking an integrated perspective on message approaches and features (Section 6.1.1)	Determining the right amount of customization (Section 6.1.2)	Seizing the full potential of the visual mode (Section 6.1.3)
Conclusions derived from ...	Paper 1 Message approaches & stage of readiness	X	X	X
	Paper 2 Message features & less empathic individuals	X	X	X
	Paper 3 Image-text interplay & underlying mechanisms	X		X

6.1.1 Insight 1: Taking an integrated perspective on message approaches and features

The first overall insight refers to a change in perspective on message effects. Persuasion research has traditionally focused on the examination of message features. However, as knowledge on the persuasive effects of message approaches accumulates, an integrated perspective might be required. An integrated perspective on message effects means to investigate the effects of message features under consideration of what message approach is being used. This would offer a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the persuasive potential of the messages under scrutiny.

In line with traditional persuasion research, this dissertation focused on message features. Paper 2 investigated how variations in the way that the daily life of people in need is framed (sad vs. happy image) and the type of evidence that is being used (statistical vs. anecdotal) influence persuasion. Paper 3 examined the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring (no vs. moderate vs. complete) and explored to what extent these effects are contingent upon the visual complexity of the ad's image.

Simultaneously, this dissertation has shown that the persuasiveness of a public communication campaign is not only influenced by variations in the features of a message but also by variations in the approach on which the message is based. In Paper 1, we identified four basic message approaches deployed in public communication campaigns and we showed that these message approaches differ in terms of their persuasive potential: Due to their underlying purpose and communication style, each message approach comes with a specific persuasive potential. For instance, a directing approach was theorized to increase awareness and knowledge of a social issue, whereas a mobilizing approach was theorized to increase self-efficacy and motivation. This is not to say that a mobilizing approach cannot generate awareness or that a directing approach cannot enhance people's self-efficacy beliefs. However, *persuasive potential* implies that each approach has its own strengths and limitations. Each message approach differs in terms of its ability and its strengths to elicit certain effects. The implication is that the use of a particular message approach might shape or even determine what can be achieved with a message. This might also include the effects of

message features. In other words: the use of a certain message approach might affect how recipients respond to variations in message features. For instance, this dissertation indicates that complete verbal anchoring is more effective to change attitudes than moderate or no verbal anchoring. The messages that we tested were characterized by an education purpose – that means, they were based on a message approach that is particularly suited to increase awareness, knowledge, and to influence attitudes. But what if the messages had an empowerment purpose – that means, if the messages were based on a message approach that is particularly suited to strengthen people's self-efficacy beliefs and their motivation to comply with a behavior. Would recipients still appreciate that the messages spell out the entire meaning of the image? Or, would recipients perceive the interpretational guidance provided by complete verbal anchoring as annoying because the message emphasizes empowerment, while at the same time patronizing them in their reading of the ad?

The point is that there might be interaction effects between message features and message approaches, such that the effects of message features are influenced by the message approach on which the message is based. What follows is that an integrated perspective on message effects might be required. An integrated perspective means to examine the effects of message features under consideration of the message approach that is being used. This would be novel in that persuasion research has traditionally focused on content-, style-, or structure-related message features and has not paid attention to the potential influence of message approaches. Simultaneously considering message approaches *and* features would allow for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of persuasion. This integrated perspective on message effects might help to explain under which circumstances certain variations in message features generate more or less strong effects. It is also possible that variations in message features show completely different effects depending on the underlying message approach.

6.1.2 Insight 2: Determining the right amount of message customization

The second overall insight calls for a more nuanced perspective on the extent to which messages should be customized. One of the most fundamental questions related to message design is how much messages should be tailored to target audiences. The

extent to which campaign messages should be customized has intrigued persuasion research for more than thirty years (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009). According to Kreuter and Wray (2003), campaign designers should customize messages a) when there is a high variability in the target audience, b) when there is sufficient understanding of the desired outcome, and c) when there is the possibility to gather data about the target audience. Moreover, availability of financial and personal resources is also deemed important (Huang & Shen, 2016; Schmid et al., 2008). In addition to these factors, the present dissertation suggests that campaign designers might want to take into account another aspect. Specifically, they might want to consider people's readiness to change when making decisions about the extent to which they want to customize campaign messages.

Message approaches define a campaign at an overarching level – they set the parameters with regard to the purpose that is being pursued and the communication style that is being used. In Paper 1, we have shown that readiness to change is a critical determinant of how people respond to the different communication approaches used in public communication campaigns. But beyond influencing how people react to these approaches, readiness to change might have a second function: it might influence what amount of message customization is most effective. We have delineated that one the key hurdles in any public communication campaign is to make people aware of a social problem and to make them understand its relevance to their own lives or to other people's lives (Paper 1). Thus, getting people to listen and to change their behavior can be viewed as a matter of increasing the perceived (personal) relevance of an issue. As outlined in the literature review in chapter 2 of this dissertation, the perceived relevance of an issue can be enhanced by customizing messages to target audiences. Recipients evaluate customized messages as more personally relevant because these messages align with their attitudes, needs, personality traits, and values (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009; Rimer & Kreuter, 2006).

An implication that derives from this is that readiness to change might be indicative of how much messages should be customized. The less people are ready to change their behavior, the more messages should be customized. The amount of message

customization can be varied quantitatively and/or qualitatively. Quantitative – in my understanding – describes the *number* of audience characteristics used to customize a message. The more audience characteristics are considered, the more the message is customized in quantitative terms. Qualitative refers to the *type* of audience characteristics that are considered. Relying on Resnicow et al. (1999), I suggest to differentiate between superficial and deep customization strategies. Tailoring messages to dynamic audience characteristics (e.g., mood, attitude, self-efficacy beliefs) reflects a superficial customization strategy as it means to consider features that are more variant and volatile over time. In contrast, tailoring messages to permanent audience characteristics (e.g., personality traits, cultural values, routines) reflects a deep customization strategy because these features are relatively stable over time and often constitutive of individual identity. The more permanent the audience characteristics that are being considered, the more the message is customized in qualitative terms. Previous research indicates that deep tailoring strategies are more effective than superficial tailoring strategies. Focusing on anti-alcohol advertisements, Wirtz et al. (2015) examined the moderating role of mood (i.e., a dynamic motivational audience characteristic) on the effects of message framing (i.e., message that emphasizes losses vs. message that emphasizes gains). The findings only showed a negligible interaction effect between mood and message frame (gain vs. loss frame) on persuasion. This weak effect stands in contrast with the effects observed in this dissertation. Testing a deep tailoring strategy, Paper 2 showed that sad images and anecdotal evidence significantly increase support from less empathic individuals. The analysis revealed medium-size effects for daily life image (sad vs. happy) on persuasion and for evidence type on persuasion, respectively. Similarly, Huang and Shen examined culturally tailored messages in cancer campaigns. The study showed that deep tailoring had a significantly stronger effect on persuasion than superficial tailoring (Huang & Shen, 2016).

Overall, my point is that readiness to change serves a double function: As outlined in this dissertation, readiness to change is a helpful and important segmenting variable. Moreover, it might help to determine what *amount of message customization* is most effective. This might be an interesting avenue for further research as it expands the criteria that are commonly used to assess what amount of message tailoring might be required (e.g., availability of financial or personal resources). Moreover, future research might want to examine to what extent it is more persuasive to tailor messages to

permanent audience characteristics (e.g., empathic concern) than to dynamic motivational audience characteristics (e.g., mood).

6.1.3 Insight 3: Seizing the full potential of the visual mode

The third insight calls for a more nuanced perspective on the meaning-making potentials of the visual mode. Public communication campaigns nowadays are predominantly multimodal, with many of them combining textual elements with imagery. Yet, persuasion research has traditionally been a text-focused discipline. This interest in written and spoken language has fueled the idea of a “priority” of the verbal mode. For a long time, the visual mode has been considered a mode with limited capacity for meaning making that cannot stand alone without text (Dillard & Seo, 2013). However, more recent research – including this dissertation – demonstrate that the idea of the visual mode as a mere accompanying resource fundamentally disregards the meaning-making potential of the visual mode. What is needed is a more nuanced understanding of the semiotic capacities of the visual mode. Specifically, this dissertation promotes a more mature understanding of the persuasive potential of the visual mode that includes identifying when imagery is more suited than text to convey particular messages.

This dissertation has shown that each of the message approaches used in public communication campaigns can be potentially realized in (a combination of) various modes. Paper 1 offered several examples to illustrate that the different communication approaches can be implemented using all kinds of modes – ranging from written text and imagery to speech, gesture, and embodiment. Similar applies to message features. The studies conducted in this thesis suggest that a lot of message features – which have been commonly realized in the verbal mode – can be expressed in the visual mode. For instance, we have shown in Paper 3 that rhetorical figures are not limited to the verbal mode. Just as verbal text, images can convey non-literal, figurative meanings (Huhmann, 2018, p. 231). A rhetorical figure is an artful deviation from expectation that is not rejected as nonsensical (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). Through repeated exposure to these templates over time, recipients have gained the competencies to respond to rhetorical figures and to decipher them. For instance, a metaphor requires to compare unlike things to see one object in the light of another object or hyperboles

exaggerate something for emphasis (Huhmann, 2018). This learning enables rhetorical figures to channel inferences and to delimit the range of possible interpretations (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). The ability of the visual mode to express rhetorical figures implies that it can be used for argumentative purposes and thus that it can potentially stand alone without text (Kjeldsen, 2012; Phillips, 2000; Scott, 1994). This makes imagery more than a mere “decoration” or an accompaniment to the text. In Paper 3, we have also explored the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring, which describes to the extent to which the verbal copy explains the meaning of the ad’s image (Barthes, 1977; Phillips, 2000). We have concluded that recipients enjoy the cognitive efficiency associated with being guided in their interpretation and that, therefore, higher amounts of verbal anchoring are most persuasive. But is this anchoring function something that can be exclusively realized in the verbal mode? According to van Enschoot and Hoeken (2015) it is not. The authors argue that depictions of products, services, or related attributes can be considered a form of visual anchoring. A content analysis of 153 TV commercials revealed that visual anchoring significantly increased comprehension of an ad and, as a result, improved recipient’s attitude toward the ad. Similarly, in Paper 2, we have investigated the effects of depicting daily life situations where people in need are happy versus sad (visual message strategies) and the effects of presenting statistical versus anecdotal evidence (verbal message strategies). Theoretically, both message strategies could be realized in the respective other mode: the verbal mode could be used to describe situations where people in need are happy or sad. Likewise, statistical evidence could be visually expressed through diagrams or dotted patterns and anecdotal evidence could be provided through narrative pictures (e.g., photo series or comics).

The point is that although the visual and verbal mode fundamentally differ in the way they make meaning, there might be more overlaps and commonalities between them than persuasion research has traditionally acknowledged. Social semiotics – a research strand that studies the social dimensions of meaning – offers an appealing explanation for this. Social semiotics builds on the assumption that all modes fulfill the same basic communicative metafunctions that operate simultaneously and that unfold the meanings of any communication (Höllerer et al., 2017). The ideational metafunction designates the ability to represent our experience of the world and denotes meaning in the sense of

“content” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Royce, 2015). The interpersonal metafunction refers to the ability to address the viewers and to express an attitude towards what is represented (Jancsary et al., 2018). The textual metafunction describes how a mode organizes and integrates ideational and interpersonal meanings into an organized whole (Jancsary et al., 2018). Due to their mode-specific properties, the verbal and visual mode accomplish the three communicative metafunctions in their very own and unique way (Höllerer et al., 2017; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Most fundamentally, their semiotic properties differ in terms of materiality and syntax. The verbal mode is based on cultural conventions and thus its signifiers are symbolic. Furthermore, the meaning of verbal texts materializes as linear sequences of words, which are regulated by explicit rules of expression (Meyer et al., 2018). The clearly defined grammar and syntax allow for a more prescribed and straightforward meaning making (Geise & Baden, 2015; Meyer et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2015). The signifiers of the visual mode, in contrast, can be iconic (e.g., photo of a dog), indexical (e.g., photo of smoke to indicate fire), or symbolic (e.g., national flag) (Meyer et al., 2018). Moreover, the visual mode arranges information holistically and simultaneously (Meyer et al., 2013). To access meaning, recipients need to oscillate between the totality and its elements. Since there are multiple ways of relating information to each other and since the visual mode lacks a distinct syntax, images guide meaning making to a lesser extent than verbal texts (Meyer et al., 2013). This polysemy inherent in images leads to the fact that interpretations are more open-ended and to a stronger degree shaped by recipients’ prior knowledge, their interests, and their socio-cultural experiences (Geise & Baden, 2015).

Despite these differences, the ability to realize all three metafunctions allows the visual and verbal mode to realize a vast array of (similar) meanings. As we have seen, many message features we that we explored in this dissertation could have been implemented *visually or verbally*. The question is: when to use the verbal mode and when to use the visual mode to express a particular message feature? When is each mode most effective? The answer may have to do with the meaning-making potentials – the affordances – of each mode. “Given basic knowledge of grammatical structures and lexical expressions, most words and propositions can be decoded easily and uniquely” (Geise & Baden, 2015, p. 58). These properties engender the verbal mode with certain affordances. In particular, the verbal mode has the potential to express and balance arguments, to

specify information, to narrate complex stories, and to convey abstract concepts and ideas (Meyer et al., 2018). In contrast, the superior salience and richness of images are “bought at the cost of reduced control over the meaning constructed by the recipients of visual messages” (Geise & Baden, 2015, p. 61). These properties endow the visual mode with specific affordances. The visual mode is particularly suited to captivate audiences. The simultaneous spatial arrangement and the immediacy of perception endow the visual mode with the potential to attract attention quickly and to express attitudes and emotions in a way that invites audiences to get cognitively and affectively engaged with what is represented (Meyer et al., 2018). Due to its weaker social regulation, the visual mode can also transport meanings that are difficult to articulate through words. This particularly applies to meanings that deviate from norms or that concern intangibles (Meyer et al., 2018). Moreover, given its “true-to-life” quality, the visual mode has the potential to suggest “objective reality” and “facticity” (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Each mode has its unique potentials and its strengths for meaning-making and accordingly, each mode may be more or less suited to express a particular message feature in a message (Bresciani & Eppler, 2015; Eppler & Platts, 2009). Let’s take anchoring as an example. Verbal anchoring might be more effective than visual anchoring a) when a message uses imagery that is difficult to understand on its own or polysemous or b) when a message addresses a complex topic where the image alone cannot capture the entire complexity.

Overall, the dissertation at hand urges to rethink the long-held assumption by many persuasion scholars that the visual mode can be merely used to accompany and reinforce what the text says. In fact, the thesis suggest that a lot of message features – which have been commonly realized in the verbal mode – can be expressed using the visual mode. This underscores the idea that the visual mode is a fully mature mode that is at eye level with the verbal mode. However, future research is needed to better understand when to use which mode to realize a particular message feature.

6.2 Practical implications

Similar to the theoretical implications, the practical implications offered in this thesis go beyond the findings of each individual paper. In the following, two core practical

insights of this dissertation will be presented and discussed. Table 7 provides an overview of the practical implications.

Table 7. Overview of the practical implications of this dissertation.

		Practical implications	
		Use an alternative approach to message customization (Section 6.21.)	Create simple and clear messages (Section 6.2.2)
Conclusions derived from ...	Paper 1 Message approaches & stage of readiness	X	X
	Paper 2 Message features & less empathic individuals	X	
	Paper 3 Image-text interplay & underlying mechanisms		X

6.2.1 Insight 1: Use an alternative approach to message customization

Previous literature and research has consistently shown that customizing messages to target audiences is a powerful way to increase the effectiveness of public communication campaigns (Noar, Palmgreen, et al., 2009; Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). But while traditional message tailoring approaches require that organizations gather data about their target audiences, this thesis offers an alternative approach.

The results from this dissertation support the idea that message customization can significantly boost the effectiveness of public communication campaigns. Paper 1 theorized about the influence that people's stage of readiness has on the effectiveness of different message approaches. The paper was grounded on previous theory and research on public communication campaigns and argued that campaign strategists should either use a directing, platforming, mobilizing, or involving approach – depending on how ready people are to perform a desired behavior. However, to the extent to which message tailoring increases a campaign's effectiveness, it also requires a profound understanding of these audiences ahead of time – particularly because people's stage of readiness is relatively volatile over time (Huang & Shen, 2016, p. 696). This means that campaign strategists have to collect data about their audiences' stage of readiness *in advance*. But how to obtain these data? A common way to gather such data is to conduct surveys or focus groups. However, this is often associated with high costs (Noar, Harrington, et al., 2009; Schmid et al., 2008). While larger organizations commonly have the necessary financial or personal resources, smaller organizations do not. As a result, larger organizations have a competitive advantage over smaller organizations because they create messages that are more personally relevant for their target audiences.

Paper 2 also focused on message customization but chose a slightly different approach that may be particularly valuable for smaller (nonprofit) organizations. The advantage of this approach is that organizations do not necessarily have to collect data themselves. The approach is based on the idea that the mere understanding of the personality traits that are activated by a public communication campaign can help improve the effectiveness of the campaign. Personality traits exert a large impact on our behaviors – they initiate and guide our behaviors across situations (Allport, 1937; Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018). Depending on the social issue that is being addressed, public communication campaigns trigger certain traits. These traits generate an impulse, a striving, towards certain objectives (McDougall, 1932; Scheffer & Heckhausen, 2018). This striving is what we experience as motivation – that is, a recurring pattern of desire and related behavioral tendencies (Baumeister, 2016). Given that personality traits (e.g., empathic concern) lead to a gap in people's propensity to support a desired social change, particular persuasive message strategies may help close this gap: using the right

message strategies may increase the support from more “reluctant” individuals, while at the same time not significantly influencing the support from the others because they are already prone to support the cause. Paper 2 started from the observation that less empathic individuals are more reluctant to help others and therefore asked how the support for prosocial advertising campaigns could be enhanced among less empathic individuals. In line with the theory presented, the findings suggest that campaign strategists should generally prefer sad over happy daily life images and anecdotal over statistical evidence in prosocial advertising campaigns. While individuals with lower levels of empathic concern responded more to sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence, both types of images and both types of evidence worked equally well for individuals with higher levels of empathic concern.

Hence, the approach adopted in Paper 2 includes understanding a) *what are the relevant traits* that lead people to support a desired social change and b) *how the individuals low on that trait* could be motivated by means of resonating messages. This may provide a promising foundation to ensure support from those who are already favorably disposed toward an advocacy, while additionally increasing support from those who usually would be more hesitant. This may be particularly beneficial for smaller (nonprofit) organizations as it helps them create powerful messages – without having large data bases and comprehensive information on their target audiences. However, to the extent that organizations do not have to collect data themselves, it requires persuasion research to provide knowledge on what message strategies work best for people low on a given trait. Although persuasion research has accumulated a considerable body of knowledge on the moderating role of personality traits, much is yet to be explored. This particularly applies to public communication campaigns addressing issues other than health. Thus, by focusing on prosocial advertising campaigns, this dissertation made a valuable contribution towards this end.

6.2.2 Insight 2: Create simple and clear messages

The advent of the internet and modern computer technology has opened up unprecedented possibilities to design campaigns and communicate about social issues. It is therefore not surprising that organizations often seek to trump each other with their

campaigns and compete over who launches the most sophisticated, playful, and unique public communication campaign (Wang et al., 2013). However, overwhelming creativity can go at the expense of clarity and focus. The findings from this dissertation caution against overwhelming creativity and call for clear and simple campaign messages.

The emphasis on creative and sophisticated campaigns also manifests itself with regard to the use of imagery: campaigns have become increasingly visual and often “speak” through attention-grabbing and artful images (Kjeldsen, 2012). Some campaigns even come without any verbal copy, leaving the interpretation of the campaign message entirely to the recipients (Bergkvist et al., 2012). This trend is accompanied by a shift in the perceived role of the audience. According to McQuarrie and Phillips (2008), older ads presume an attentive *reader*, while more recent ads assume a “visually oriented, casually browsing *viewer*” (p. 96). Based on the findings from this dissertation, the emphasis on creative and visual-only campaigns needs to be critically questioned. Paper 3 showed that people are most persuaded by campaigns that verbally spell out the meaning of the image because they appreciate the cognitive efficiency associated with being led in their interpretation. This can be interpreted as a *call for clarity and simplicity* in public communication campaigns: *Clarity in terms of what the campaign means and simplicity in terms of how much effort is required to process the campaign*. People like being told in a straightforward and explicit manner how to interpret a message. The call for clarity and simplicity applies beyond the level of message features. The conclusions offered on the effectiveness of the different message approaches in public communication campaigns lend support to the relevance of keeping campaigns simple and clear (Paper 1). Each of the four basic message approaches has its own persuasive potential and is therefore suited to address people in a particular stage of readiness. We have categorized these message approaches based on their underlying purpose (educate vs. empower) and based on their communication style (signaling resoluteness vs. signaling openness). It is plausible to assume that mixing different purposes and communication styles within the same message would confuse recipients and attenuate the effectiveness of a campaign. Pursuing different purposes or using different communication styles within the same message may be

counterproductive. Recipients may find it difficult and cognitively challenging to figure out what the campaign wants to say.

The call for clarity and simplicity is empirically backed up by persuasion literature (Chokriensukchai & Tamang, 2010). According to Atkin and Rice (2013), one of the most influential message qualities is understandability, “with simple, explicit, and detailed presentation of content that is comprehensive and comprehensible to receivers” (p. 9). The use of simple and clear messages is recommended because it enhances the memorability and the persuasiveness of a campaign (Cavill & Bauman, 2004).

Overall, this dissertation indicates that straightforward, explicit, and easy-to-understand messages can significantly enhance the effectiveness of a public communication campaign. Recipients prefer being guided and not being left with task of guessing what the message might want to say. Although the sheer abundance of social issues leads to a fierce competition for attention, campaign strategists should resist the urge to overwhelm recipients with sophisticated, implicit, and cognitively demanding messages. Instead, they should keep the campaign as clear and simple as possible.

6.3 Limitations and outlook

To sharpen the scope of this dissertation, I had to take several key decisions regarding *the type of effects* that were examined, the *methodological approaches* that were used, the *sample population* and the *stimuli* that built the basis for the empirical studies. Each of these decisions was important to render this thesis more focused and clear. Simultaneously, each choice came with certain limitations. In the following, I will make the limitations related to the *overall research endeavor* transparent, discuss them, and provide an outlook on future research. The limitations related to each *individual paper* were extensively discussed in sections 3.7, 4.6.3, and 5.6.5.

6.3.1 Type of message effects

The overall purpose of this dissertation was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the message effects in public communication campaigns. I thereby focused on the *intended effects*, which refers to the array of impacts that the campaign aims to produce (Salmon & Murray-Johnson, 2013). The outcomes of interest were attitude toward the message, attitude toward the advocacy and intentions to support the advocacy. However, the extent to which variations in message approaches or message features might produce unintended effects was outside of this dissertation's scope. This might be considered a desideratum insofar as that a holistic understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns requires to be aware of all potential effects – not only the ones that are intended. Message strategies may also have *unintended and unwanted effects*. This includes all kinds of boomerang effects such as hysteria or panic, confusion, reactance, or misunderstandings (Salmon & Murray-Johnson, 2013). Investigating unwanted effects could offer a fruitful avenue for further research. For instance, future research might want to explore unwanted effects of the different message approaches used in public communication campaigns. Paper 1 delineated what message approach should be most effective for which target audiences to move them toward behavior change. But what if an inappropriate message approaches is being used? What are potential unwanted effects? To what extent can inappropriate message approaches cause backlashes in people's stage of readiness? Paper 2 examined how to increase the support for prosocial advertising campaigns among less empathic individuals. While this dissertation focused on the "dos" of communicating with less empathic individuals, future studies might want to explore the "don'ts" of communicating with less empathic individuals. Specifically, it might be interesting for future research to explore what are the message strategies that trigger or reinforce their resistance to prosocial advertising campaigns. Unintended and unwanted effects might also occur with regard to verbal anchoring. It might be thinkable that lower levels of verbal anchoring cause confusion and, as a result, decrease persuasion. Likewise, it is possible that lower levels of verbal anchoring lead to misinterpretations. Overall, I recommend that future research pays more attention to unintended message effects as a means to better understand how persuasion works in public communication and what message strategies may backfire.

6.3.2 Methodology

This dissertation used two different methodological approaches to examine message effects in public communication campaigns: first, we used a qualitative method in the form of a systematic literature review (Paper 1) and a quantitative method in the form of an experiment (Papers 2 & 3). Each method was selected based on its appropriateness to answer the respective research questions. However, this mono-method approach comes with certain downsides. By solely looking at qualitative *or* quantitative data to answer research questions, we might have missed important insights (Alexander et al., 2019). An entirely qualitative study may overlook potential correlations that require statistical analysis, whereas an entirely quantitative study may not sufficiently capture and explain dynamics and communicative processes (Alexander et al., 2019, pp. 33–34). To gain breadth and depth in understanding, Alexander et al. (2020) therefore suggest to triangulate qualitative and quantitative approaches and to use mixed methods. Mixed methods involve “multiple sources and types of data and/or multiple approaches to analysis of those data, in which *integration* of data and analyses occurs prior to drawing final conclusions about the topic of the investigation” (Bazeley, 2018, p. 7). In this dissertation, triangulating qualitative and quantitative approaches might have helped to further strengthen the insights generated. For instance, quantitative data and inference techniques might have been helpful to validate the propositions we delineated about the effectiveness of the different message approaches used in public communication campaigns (Paper 1). At the same time, qualitative methods might have proven useful to explain and investigate the surprising or counterintuitive findings from the experimental studies in this thesis. For instance, given that perceived interpretational guidance was found to only partially explain the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion, qualitative interviews could have been deployed to explore what functions other than guiding recipients’ interpretation verbal anchoring has (Paper 3).

6.3.3 Sample population

Another limitation concerns the sample populations examined in the experimental studies (Paper 2 and 3). A sample of Swiss students built the empirical basis of Paper 2, whereas a representative sample of U.S. residents built the foundation of Paper 3. The findings generated in these studies pertain to different populations and, therefore,

the conclusions drawn can be expected to be most valid for different sample populations. Although it is reasonable to assume that the insights generated are generalizable beyond these populations, replication studies among other audiences are required. For instance, future studies might want to validate to what extent sad daily life images and anecdotal evidence increase support for prosocial advertising campaigns among less empathic individuals with a) lower educational degrees or b) from other age cohorts. Prior research indicates that sociodemographic variables play a decisive role in how people respond to persuasive messages (Bull et al., 2001; Rimer & Kreuter, 2006; Schneider et al., 2001). Likewise, it might be thinkable that the effects of verbal anchoring on persuasion might differ across cultures, such that people with other cultural backgrounds prefer lower levels of verbal anchoring. Previous studies indicate that people from high-context cultures have a higher preference for visual communication than their low-context counterparts (Würtz, 2005). Hence, to strengthen and validate the findings gained in this dissertation, I recommend future research to conduct replication studies with different sample populations.

6.3.4 Message source

The fourth limitation concerns the stimuli of the empirical studies (Paper 2 & 3). In study 2, we investigated a fictitious campaign that addressed mobility issues of people with physical disabilities. The campaign image and one of the text paragraphs were manipulated for the purpose of the examination. The message source was Pro Infirmis, the largest Swiss disability nonprofit organization. In study 3, we used real advertisements focusing on environmental pollution and manipulated the amount of verbal anchoring presented in each one. The ads came from different message sources including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace. The fact that these campaigns used real brands as message sources (e.g., Pro Infirmis, WWF) and that the campaigns in study 3 came from different message sources might be critically questioned. Brand familiarity is known to affect responses to persuasive messages (Bickart & Ruth, 2012; Mikhaïlitchenko et al., 2009). An alternative could have been to use fictitious brands as message sources. This has been done in several other studies (Burgers et al., 2015; Delbaere et al., 2011; van Mulken et al., 2014). Because I cannot exclude with absolute certainty the possibility that brand familiarity influenced people's

Discussion

responses to the campaigns that were tested, I recommend future research to use (sets of) stimuli with fictitious brands.

7 Overall conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, social change was described as a long-term process that requires targeted and deliberate social initiatives (Lauri & Lauri, 2005). Being one of the most popular forms of social initiatives, public communication campaigns have established themselves as staple tools for social change. However, it takes much more than a compelling design, attention-grabbing visuals or catchy headlines to bring forward social change. Creating effective public communication campaigns is an art and a science at the same time. If a message does not resonate with the target audience, even the most creative and nicely presented campaign is condemned to failure.

To contribute to extant knowledge on persuasion in public communication campaigns, this dissertation examined message effects from an *audience-centered perspective*. On the one hand, we investigated audience characteristics and their influence on recipient's responses to persuasive message strategies. On the level of message approaches, we identified four basic message approaches that are used in public communication campaigns and related their effectiveness to people's stage of readiness to change. The implication was that each message approach has its own strengths to achieve certain outcomes and, therefore, should be used to address people in a particular stage of readiness. On the level of message features, I examined the role of empathic concern in persuasion. Empathic concern is a personality trait that has shown to be a key motivator for prosocial behaviors. The findings from an experimental study demonstrated that sad images and anecdotal evidence can significantly increase support from less empathic individuals, while not substantially influencing support from empathic individuals. On the other hand, this dissertation was interested in the mechanisms that drive persuasive message effects. Focusing on the interplay between image and text in public communication campaigns, an experimental study was conducted to better understand the effects of verbal anchoring. The results showed a clear pattern such that higher levels of verbal anchoring were most persuasive, with perceived interpretational guidance serving as the key explanatory variable. Overall, by adopting an audience-centered perspective, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of persuasion in public communication campaigns in terms of "*what* messages work best for whom" and "*why* do messages work the way they do". A particular strength of this thesis is its theory

driven research approach. The combination of theory *building* and theory *testing* makes the conclusions drawn more robust and underscores the theoretical value of this research.

The practical contribution of this dissertation lies in its concern with “real challenges” that campaign strategists encounter in their daily work and in its ability to give clear answers as to what message strategies are most effective under which circumstances. The message strategies we examined were carefully selected based on their relevance for communication practitioners. For instance, our aim was to offer campaign strategists a simple and intuitive typology that helps them differentiate the array of message approaches they could use in public communication campaigns and understand what are the outcomes that each approach is most suited to achieve for a given target audience. Also did we illustrate the different message approaches using examples from real campaigns. To sum up, the typology is intended as a useful decision-making tool for campaign strategists. Similarly, our concern with the influence of empathic concern on persuasion in public communication campaign was grounded in a challenge with which many nonprofit organizations are confronted. On the one hand, most nonprofit organizations depend on helping behaviors (e.g., donations) to achieve their goals. On the other hand, people seem to become less empathic, which negatively affects their propensity to support prosocial advertising campaigns (Konrath et al., 2011). The findings of the study offer straightforward implications about how campaign strategists can maximize their campaign’s persuasiveness: namely, by using sad images and anecdotal evidence. Our interest in the persuasive effects of verbal anchoring was motivated by the observation that advertising becomes increasingly visual and that is widely unclear how much verbal copy is still required. The study yields a clear recommendation. The data suggest that campaign designers should use complete verbal anchoring because people find cognitive efficiency attractive.

Looking ahead, we might ask what will be the key challenges in public communication campaigning. Some years into the future, the competition for attention, resources, and social or political support will be accentuated as many social problems become more and more pressing. Global warming is melting polar caps in an unprecedented rate, with

the rising sea levels forcing millions of humans and animals to leave their homes. Simultaneously, climate change causes droughts, crop failures, and water shortages all over the world, leading to a surge in poverty and a dramatic deterioration of living conditions for the local inhabitants. In addition, the increasing globalization propels the spread of diseases and pandemics. Most of these problems, however, are not “new”. They have been acknowledged as a societal and environmental threat years or even decades ago. This makes it difficult for campaign strategists to not only capture but also *maintain* people’s attention. It is challenging to really “get to the audiences” and “move” them. Recipients are increasingly tired of hearing the same old story and some of them have completely lost their faith that change will happen in the near future. Efficiency and effectiveness of public communication campaigns are therefore more important than ever. Knowing what to say to whom and why determines the success of a campaign. As a result, seizing the full potential of persuasion is key. Campaign strategists need to ask themselves: how can we communicate with audiences to shake them up and to gain their support, although there are myriads of other social problems competing for their attention? How to communicate to work against ignorance and desensitization?

The most successful public communication campaigns are the ones that customize messages based on *various* audience characteristics, thereby considering dynamic as well as permanent audience characteristics. This mix ensures that the campaigns touch target audiences and resonate with their attitudes, personality traits, needs, and values. Moreover, cutting-edge campaign strategists have an in-depth understanding of how *multiple* audience characteristics – be they dynamic or permanent – work together and *in combination* affect recipients’ support for the campaign. Furthermore, effective campaigns are characterized by a sophisticated and informed use of the visual and the verbal mode: These campaigns use imagery and verbal text in a way that fully exploits their semiotic potentials for meaning-making. This is because campaign strategists have a nuanced knowledge of the *communicative functions of each mode* and, therefore, understand the persuasive mechanisms of the interplay between image and text.

Overall conclusion

We live in a world that, presumably, will never run out of social problems that urge for our attention, concern, and action. Which of these problems are being prioritized, however, is largely a matter of communicative effectiveness. Public communication campaigns can be an important means to make a social problem salient and to bring people to act, provided that the campaign message resonates with target audiences. Knowing what message works for whom and why is therefore key: sometimes even the seemingly slightest variations in a message can make a huge difference. A strong and compelling message has always been and will always be a powerful catalyst for social change.

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Appendix

Curriculum vitae

Fabienne Bünzli

*September 23, 1990 in Flawil (SG), Switzerland

EDUCATION

2017 – 2021	University of St.Gallen Doctorate (PhD in Organization Studies and Cultural Theory)
03/2020-06/2020	The Pennsylvania State University Visiting Research Scholar (virtual; due to the COVID-19-pandemic)
2012 – 2014	University of Zurich Master's degree in Communication and Media Research
2009 – 2012	University of Zurich Bachelor's degree in Communication and Media Research

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE (Selection)

2017 – present	Institute of Media and Communications Management, University of St.Gallen, St.Gallen, Switzerland Research Associate
2013 – 2016	Mediapolis AG für Wirtschaft und Kommunikation (Advertising & PR Agency), St.Gallen, Switzerland Project Manager
2013	Swiss Centre for Studies on the Global Information Society, Zurich, Switzerland Research Associate (project-based)
2012	German National Tourist Board, Zurich, Switzerland Public Relations Trainee
2011 – 2013	Argus Data Insights Schweiz AG, Zurich, Switzerland Media Analyst
2010 – 2011	Toggenburger Tagblatt (Newspaper), Wattwil, Switzerland Journalist