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Using Message Form to Stimulate Conversations: The Case of Tropes

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The use of tropes (e.g., metaphors, ellipsis) in messages from health mass media campaigns may spark conversations. Tropes require additional cognitive elaboration to arrive at the intended interpretation, thereby providing the audience with “the pleasure of text.” These characteristics make them useful for conversations in which ads are used to demonstrate one’s interpretation abilities or to strengthen group identity through a shared appreciation of ads. Tropes can thus stimulate people to think and talk about information they might otherwise ignore. As a result, this information is primed, increasing the chance that it will influence relevant behavior. At the same time, the use of tropes may have undesirable side effects such as yielding incomprehension or misunderstanding of the message’s meaning.

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Since 1999, an organization called loveLife has been running large-scale campaigns in South Africa aiming to reduce the rate of HIV infection among adolescents. The campaign’s tagline, “talk about it,” refers to the campaign’s goal to stimulate conversations among teenagers on issues pertaining to sexual health. A prominent part of the campaign is constituted by billboards that are used all over the country, displaying slogans such as “no until we know” and “if it’s not just me, you’re not for me.” These slogans present beliefs that the target audience is already familiar with, respectively, “sexual partners should know each other’s HIV status” and “polygamy increases the chances of HIV infection,” in a nonobvious way. One of loveLife’s campaign managers explained this strategy of using elliptical messages by stating that: “we want people to think about our posters” and “we will get people to wonder. This creates conversation between parents and children, dialogue between peers. That is exactly what we want to achieve, that people talk about HIV/AIDS and sex” (Holleman, 2005). Apparently, the

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campaign's strategy rests upon the assumption that the form of a message can spark conversations that subsequently may contribute to the campaign's effectiveness. If this strategy is successful, it may prove important for especially those health campaigns whose content the target audience is already familiar with.

In this essay, we will first discuss the types of conversations that can be sparked by a message's form and the functions these conversations may have for the participants. Next, we will focus on tropes as a class of formal features that is most likely to generate such conversations. Finally, we will specify the mechanisms through which tropes may have intended as well as unintended effects on a campaign's outcomes and explain how prior knowledge may moderate this process.

The social uses of mass media campaigns

The impact of health mass media campaigns may partly depend on their ability to spark conversations (see, e.g., Hornik & Yanovitzky, 2003; Rogers & Storey, 1987). There is indeed empirical evidence that interpersonal discussion may boost the effects of such campaigns (Boulay, Storey, & Sood, 2002; Hafstad & Aaro, 1997; Moreau, Bajos & Bouyer, 2002; Morton & Duck, 2001), even to the extent that such discussions have a stronger effect on individuals' beliefs than directly viewing the campaign's messages (Hornik, 2002). However, David, Cappella, and Fishbein (2006) show that conversations (within an online chat context) can have negative effects as well. Such findings point to the need for a better understanding of how conversations can contribute to or harm a campaign's success. A relevant question in this respect was raised by both Noar (2006) and Southwell and Yzer (2007, p. 428): How can the design of a message encourage conversation on the campaign's theme?

Inspired by theories and research on the two-step flow hypothesis (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1962, 2003), the relation between campaigns and conversation has been framed mainly as one in which information gained from a mass media campaign is spread through interpersonal communication. However, recent work by Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak (2005) within the realm of political communication has shown that thinking about news content in anticipation of engaging in a discussion (anticipatory elaboration) or as a result of the discussion (discussion-generated elaboration) may mediate the effects of discussions on political knowledge (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Eveland et al., 2005). Schlosser and Shavitt (1999, 2002) report similar effects for commercial products: When people know that they will have to participate in a group discussion they rehearse the type of information they expect to come up in this discussion. In a similar way, the effects of health campaigns may depend on the extent to which they generate thinking about issues either in anticipation or as a result of conversations. For campaigns to have such an effect, they should spread information that is perceived as novel and newsworthy to stir up conversations for informative purposes. Their content is therefore of crucial importance. In this essay, however, we set out to explore a different message dimension that may provide fodder for dialogue, namely the form of the message.

Southwell and Yzer (2007, p. 424) point out that interpersonal communication is not always primarily informative but that it can also serve a social function and that people may draw upon content from surrounding media to fulfill that function. Health mass media campaigns are part of these surrounding media. Kernan and Domzal (1997) note that messages developed for health campaigns are increasingly displaying the creative strategies used by advertising agencies to promote commercial products. The effectiveness of several such stylistic message features (e.g., visual and auditory special effects combined with a surprising ending of the message) of public service announcements (PSAs) has received ample attention within the research on message sensation value (see, e.g., Morgan, Palmgreen, Stephenson, Hoyle, & Lorch, 2003; Niederdeppe, Davis, Farrelly & Yarsevich, 2007; Stephenson, 2003; Stephenson & Southwell, 2006). As a result of applying such strategies, the format of PSAs within health mass media campaigns resembles that of commercial advertising messages. This conclusion is important because the ads' format may be used as a conversational topic to serve several social functions rather than an informative function.

The only study, to our knowledge, that provides evidence for the existence of such form-generated conversations is the one by Ritson and Elliott (1999). They conducted an ethnographic study among 16- to 18-year-old adolescents from six British schools. In each of the schools, a range of advertising-derived conversations could be observed on a daily basis. These observations led Ritson and Elliott (p. 265) to the conclusion that ads "were used as a central conversational resource." Through observing and interviewing informants, Ritson and Elliott uncovered several functions of using ads for conversational purposes, three of which are of central concern for this paper: the use of ads to strike up a conversation on a neutral theme, to prove one's intelligence in an effort to secure a higher position in the social hierarchy by providing a meaningful interpretation of an ad, and to strengthen the cohesion within a social group through shared evaluations of "what's hot and what's not."

The first function of ads in conversations is related to the phatic function of speech. Malinowski (1923) describes phatic speech as overcoming the strange, unpleasant tension caused by silence and/or establishing an atmosphere of sociability and personal communion. The conversation is aimed at establishing contact between the conversation partners and usually is a precursor to discussing other more important issues. To fulfill this function, it is important to find a "subject for safe, ceremonial conversation" such as the weather (Liebes & Katz, 1993, p. 92). In the study by Ritson and Elliott (1999), ads served this function. Because of the goal of maximum exposure that advertisers try to attain, ads are printed and broadcast again and again, making them as unavoidable as the weather. As a result, they provide the ideal fodder, as a safe topic, to start a conversation. To be able to take part in the conversation, however, a person needs to have seen or heard the message. Ritson and Elliott (pp. 265–266) report many incidences "in which informants described the experience of being 'left out,' 'talked around,' or 'blanked' when they were unable to participate in a particular exchange because they had not experienced the text." To

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3 prevent themselves from being cut off from the conversation, several informants
4 described their efforts to actively seek out ads that had been talked about.

5 As a second function of the conversational usage of advertising, Ritson and Elliott
6 (1999) consider securing one's knowledge status by giving a meaningful interpretation
7 of the ad. The reason that ads enable such conversations is that they seldom contain
8 straightforward claims about the brand's attributes or benefits. Nowadays, it is much
9 more common to employ a type of message that requires people to make additional
10 inferences to understand its intended meaning. An example in point is the headline
11 used by Mercury Sable: "We drove our competitors into the copier business." To come
12 up with the intended meaning, that is, other car manufacturers are copying the design
13 of the Mercury Sable, receivers have to reject the literal meaning of other car manu-
14 facturers starting to produce copying machines. Studies on print advertising have
15 shown that the use of such indirect claims is widespread (Leigh, 1994) and has
16 increased considerably in the last half century (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002).

17 Ritson and Elliott (1999) show how conversations between their informants may
18 focus on the interpretation of the intended meaning of an ad. Being unable to come
19 up with such an interpretation places an individual in a weakened position relative to
20 those who have been able to make sense of the ad. As a result, the interpretation of an
21 ad contributes to the position individuals take in the social hierarchy within their peer
22 group (Ritson & Elliott, 1999, p. 267). O'Donohoe (1994) also reports on this phe-
23 nomenon in her study on the uses and gratifications of advertising when she describes
24 the panic of a respondent who was confronted with an ad he could not understand
25 and who desperately tried to decipher the ad before it came up in conversation.
26 Informants in the Ritson and Elliott study appeared to be willing to accept mutual
27 aid in the construction of an interpretation in the company of their immediate friends
28 as opposed to accepting such aid from family members. Thus, it would appear that
29 the interpretation of a deliberately opaque ad is the ticket to group membership.

30 This peer group membership is also relevant to the third function that the
31 conversational use of ads may have. Ritson and Elliott (1999, p. 267) report that
32 the "most common form of advertising-based interaction was the critical evaluation
33 of the ads the group had seen." The explicit evaluation of which ads were considered
34 as cool and which as stupid functioned as a way of construing a group identity. This
35 process is similar to the way in which people signal their values through conspicuous
36 consumption. The conspicuous evaluation of ads provides a means to confirm
37 a group identity and one's individual membership of that group.

38 In sum: Messages from mass media campaigns can spark conversations that,
39 apart from breaking the silence, are meant to demonstrate one's ability to interpret
40 opaque messages and/or to strengthen the cohesion within the group through shared
41 evaluation. In none of the many conversations observed in their study, was any
42 aspect of product use or consumption mentioned (Ritson & Elliott, 1999,
43 pp. 273–274). The conversations were about the way in which the ad expresses that
44 a certain soft drink tastes good instead of being about the tastiness of the soft drink
45 itself. In other words: It was the way in which the information was packaged rather
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3 than the information itself that gave rise to the conversations. This observation calls
4 for an exploration of the distinction between form and content.

6 **Content, style, and tropes**

8 **Form versus content**

9 Scholars within the field of pragmatics have focused on the relation between message
10 content, message form, and communication (see, e.g., Clark, 1996; Grice, 1975;
11 Sperber & Wilson, 1995). These scholars claim that their theorizing is not only
12 restricted to verbal messages but also applies to messages communicated through
13 signs in other codes, such as visuals (see, e.g., Clark, 1996, p. 128; Sperber & Wilson,
14 1995, p. 172). The message's content, whether it is a radio commercial, a visual on
15 a billboard, or a brochure, can be considered as the answer to the question of what it
16 is that the producer of the message wants the intended audience to believe or to do.
17 This content can be represented in a propositional format. Both the verbal message
18 "AIDS kills" and a visual depicting tombstones with the word "AIDS" engraved on
19 them could be represented as LETHAL, AIDS.

20 Within the same code, the message's content can be expressed in different ways
21 by choosing different elements from the code. For instance, a message designer may
22 choose between "you and your partner should know your HIV-statuses before
23 having sex" and "no until we know" as different forms for expressing the proposition
24 (BEFORE [HAVING SEX, I MY PARTNER], [KNOW STATUSES, I, MY PART-
25 NER]). However, the fact that different forms can result in the same conceptual
26 representation does not imply that they are equivalent. The latter form is clearly
27 more implicit than the former. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995, pp. 217–
28 218), the choice of one form over the other reveals the sender's assumptions about
29 the intelligence and knowledge of the intended audience. Using the slogan "no until
30 we know" reveals that the audience is believed to be able to generate the necessary
31 inferences in a relatively effortless way, whereas "you and your partner should know
32 your HIV-statuses before having sex" reveals assumptions about the audience not
33 being very knowledgeable on this issue.

34 Each of the slogans may backfire if the reasons for choosing one over the other
35 are flawed. If the audience is underestimated, explicitly stating what it already knows
36 may give the audience the feeling of being patronized and may offend them. If the
37 audience is overestimated, it may be unable to understand what the message intends
38 to get across. As reported by O'Donohoe (1994) and Ritson and Elliott (1999),
39 adolescents felt uncomfortable when they were unable to come up with a meaningful
40 interpretation of an ad. This feeling is probably the result of the belief that one
41 should be able to interpret the ad but is not able to do so. Ads that require additional
42 processing can be used to separate those members of the audience who can fill in the
43 gaps from those who cannot.

44 A major difference between the forms discussed so far is whether the message's
45 content is spelled out or whether it is left implicit, containing gaps that the audience
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has to fill. This difference in style is mainly related to the question of how to find the optimal trade off between gaining knowledge and the effort needed to accomplish this gain. As such, it is a cognitive issue. There is, however, also a long and rich tradition, dating back to classical rhetoric, in which style is conceived as a means to please the audience.

Style as a means to please the audience

McQuarrie and Mick (1996) note that the propositional representation of many ads boils down to a claim about the brand having a certain attribute. However, this claim is seldom stated explicitly. It is far more common that a rhetorical figure such as rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, or pun is used. Leigh (1994) analyzed more than 2000 slogans in print ads and found that almost three quarters of them featured at least one rhetorical figure. In a more recent study, Phillips and McQuarrie (2002) report data that provide further support for the (increasing) popularity of such figures in advertising. McQuarrie and Mick (1996, p. 427) explain the popularity of rhetorical figures by referring to the notion of “pleasure of the text” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, p. 427). This concept, introduced by Barthes (1975), refers to the reward from processing a clever and artful arrangement of signs. In many cases, the claim made by a certain brand is the same over and over again: beer A is refreshing, bank B reliable, and car C fast. Processing messages including such claims does not yield any new knowledge for the audience. Tanaka (1992, 1994) argues that solving a pun, for instance, can provide an extra reward, which provides the audience with self-congratulatory thoughts and thoughts about the congeniality of the advertiser (Tanaka, 1992, p. 95). The use of rhetorical figures may therefore lead to a positive evaluation of the ad. In Ritson and Elliott’s (1999) study, the evaluation of ads was the most frequently occurring conversational topic. It is interesting to see how rhetorical figures can contribute to an ad’s evaluation.

McQuarrie and Mick (1996, p. 425) define rhetorical figures as artful expressions that deviate from expectation. The use of “artful” is important in two respects. First, it indicates that rhetorical figures aim to provide esthetic pleasure. Second, it refers to the intentionality of the deviation: Spelling mistakes or misprinted visuals also deviate from expectation, but they are unintentional and do not aim to please the audience. A commonly used distinction is the one between schemes (e.g., rhyme, alliteration) and tropes (e.g., ellipsis, metaphors). Schematic features are superficial, aesthetically pleasing features of the message; they do not alter the meaning of the message and do not require the audience to make inferences to get to the intended interpretation (e.g., Be wise, condomize).

That sets them apart from the other main category of rhetorical figures: tropes. For a message containing a trope, for instance, a metaphor (a cigarette is a time bomb) or an ellipsis (no until we know), the audience has to invest cognitive effort to arrive at the intended interpretation. McQuarrie and Mick (1996, p. 429) note that “tropes are incomplete in the sense of lacking closure. Tropes thus invite elaboration by the reader.” If the audience is successful in finding the interpretation intended, it

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3 is rewarded with the pleasure of having solved the riddle (Tanaka, 1992, 1994). The
4 occurrence of rhetorical figures is not restricted to the verbal part of messages; they
5 are used in the visual part as well. In a Swiss AIDS prevention campaign, for instance,
6 a visual was used of a man making love to a larger than life scorpion. In very small
7 print at the bottom of the billboard, it said: "Without a condom, it is AIDS itself
8 you're making love with. Protect yourself." For a meaningful interpretation of this
9 message, the audience has to infer that the scorpion metaphorically represents AIDS.
10 As such, this message presents an example of a visual trope. A longitudinal study on
11 advertising style revealed that tropes in particular are increasingly used in ads, both
12 in the verbal and in the visual part (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002).

13 14 **Tropes require additional cognitive effort**

15 In this essay, we focus on the comparison between tropes and their literal counter-
16 parts, for instance, the ellipsis "no until we know" compared to "you and your
17 partner should know your HIV-statuses before having sex." For a trope to have an
18 effect compared to its literal counterpart, it has to be perceived as a deviation rather
19 than a figure that complies with the formal definition of a trope. For instance,
20 metaphors are defined as presenting one concept in terms of another (Lakoff &
21 Johnson, 1980, p. 36). Lakoff and Johnson defend the claim that certain metaphors
22 have been conventionalized to the extent that they are no longer perceived as devia-
23 tions. Most readers will not have noticed that, for example, the word "defend" in the
24 previous sentence is used metaphorically. Describing a debate in terms of war, that is,
25 to defend one's position, to attack the other's claim, to line up one's arguments, is
26 conventionalized to the extent that most language users do not regard this type of
27 language use as an artful deviation anymore.

28 Conventionalized metaphors are not recognized as figuratively used language
29 and are comprehended as easily as their literal counterparts. One would expect that
30 novel metaphors, which do deviate from expectations, are always more difficult to
31 understand because the audience first has to discard the literal meaning as not
32 relevant before it embarks on a search for a relevant metaphorical interpretation
33 (Grice, 1975; McGlone, 2007; Searle, 1979). However, Gibbs (1994, 2002; Gibbs &
34 Tendahl, 2006) has claimed that "many kinds of figurative language, including
35 metaphors, can be understood as quickly as literal speech when these expressions
36 are encountered in rich linguistic contexts" (Gibbs & Tendahl, 2006, p. 380),
37 although he also acknowledges "that there may be cases where novel, creative, poetic
38 metaphors take a great deal of effort to understand" (Gibbs & Tendahl, 2006, p. 384).

39 Empirical research on the interpretation of tropes in ads suggests that these are
40 seldom interpreted effortlessly. In a study of six ads containing visual metaphors,
41 Phillips (1997) found that only one of the ads led almost all participants (92%) to
42 come up with the same, intended interpretation, whereas for all other ads, a signif-
43 icant proportion of participants came up with a range of other interpretations. Van
44 Enschoot, Hoeken, and Van Mulken (2008) found that almost one third of their
45 participants were unable to come up with a meaningful interpretation for the tropes
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used in ads, although these ads were for commonly used products and had been published in magazines for the general public. McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) report that, compared to literal slogans, both verbal and visual metaphors yielded more additional inferences, which suggests that they give rise to more divergent interpretations. Tropes used in this type of message apparently pose a considerable risk; the audience may not be able to come up with the intended interpretation. This raises the question why designers accept that risk.

Tropes as a sign of familiar content

Tanaka (1992, 1994) argues that rhetorical figures are used to repay the audience for the effort they put into interpreting the message with the pleasure of text instead of novel information. In many cases, the audience is already familiar with the message's content (beer A is refreshing, etc.). We argue that the same holds for the use of rhetorical figures in health campaign messages. Imagine, for the sake of argument, that research shows that blinking one's left eye twice before having sexual intercourse would be a sound method to prevent contracting HIV. Such information would be novel and relevant to a worldwide audience. We predict that no rhetorical figures would be used in campaigns spreading this information (and that it would spark numerous conversations). However, if in the years to follow surveys were to show that most people know about this prevention method but do not use it consistently, we predict that campaigns will be developed in which rhetorical figures are used.

Take, for instance, the messages used in the South African campaign on HIV/AIDS. In this campaign, the rhetorical figure ellipsis is often used, for example, "no until we know" and "if it's not just me, you're not for me." Young people in South Africa have good and accurate knowledge of the key aspects of HIV/AIDS, such as the causes of AIDS, the transmission of HIV by means of sexual intercourse, and ways to prevent HIV, and they recognize that having multiple sexual partners is a high-risk situation for HIV infection (see, e.g., Fox, Oyosi, & Parker, 2002; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Parker, 2000). These results suggest that the audience is already familiar with the message's content. Choosing an ellipsis may be the result of the designer's wish to repay the audience's attention with the pleasure of text; if they solve the riddle, the audience may experience self-congratulatory feelings.

In summary, a message containing a rhetorical figure can express the same (propositional) content as its (literal) equivalent containing no rhetorical figure. In the case of tropes, the audience has to exert additional cognitive effort to arrive at the intended interpretation. Tropes such as ellipsis or metaphor can be considered riddles, the solving of which can provide the audience with the pleasure of text, which may compensate for the lack of novel information. Tropes can be considered as prime suspects in sparking the types of conversations documented by Ritson and Elliott (1999). Given that tropes require additional processing to arrive at the intended interpretation, they can serve as a means to show one's ability to generate such interpretations. Furthermore, tropes are used intentionally to please the audience, which makes it plausible that they discuss the extent to which the choices made

are indeed artful and clever. Therefore, they also enable group members to strengthen group identity by agreeing upon the artfulness or stupidity of the choices made. The fact that tropes are typically used when the audience is already familiar with the message's content explains why Ritson and Elliott only found conversations on the ad's form instead of its content.

The influence of form sparked conversations on the campaign's effectiveness

At first sight, conversations evoked by tropes might be considered as belonging to the category of irrelevant side effects of a campaign (Cho & Salmon, 2007). However, Ritson and Elliott (1999, p. 274) claim that these conversations can have "enormous positive or negative implications for a campaign's effect on a target audience." This may hold for messages from health mass media campaigns as well. In this section, we provide a model for the effects tropes (compared to their literal counterparts) may have on (a) the effectiveness of a campaign in as far as this effect is influenced by (b) conversations evoked by tropes and (c) the cognitive and affective processes that may precede these conversations. We will argue that tropes can contribute to a campaign's effectiveness by priming beliefs relevant to the target behavior.¹ To attain priming effects, the successful interpretation of a trope requires the activation of relevant prior knowledge related to these beliefs; these priming effects may be intensified by conversations sparked by the ad. Additionally, we will argue that if people fail to generate the intended interpretation, tropes may have no effect on the campaign's outcome or may even backfire if people come up with the wrong kind of interpretation. Both positive and negative effects may be moderated by conversations sparked by tropes. Figure 1 offers a visual depiction of this model. The different stages will be discussed below in more detail.

Cognitive and affective processes preceding conversation

The first step, exposure to a message containing a trope, specifies a necessary condition for the message to have any effect (Hornik & Yanovitzky, 2003). Next, the audience has to recognize that the form of the message deviates from their expectations in that—compared to its literal equivalent—it communicates the message in an implicit way. As a result, the audience has to invest additional cognitive effort to arrive at the intended interpretation. Prior knowledge, required to fill in the gaps, is an important factor in the comprehension of tropes. The audience has to add information to the implicit message. In the case of "no until we know," it has to infer what to say "no" to and what has to be known to say "yes."

If the audience possesses prior knowledge, it will be capable of arriving at the intended interpretation. If the audience does not, it will remain puzzled about the message's content or arrive at a different, unintended interpretation. In the latter case, the use of tropes may give rise to the most common unintended effects of health communication campaigns: confusion and misunderstanding (Cho & Salmon, 2007,

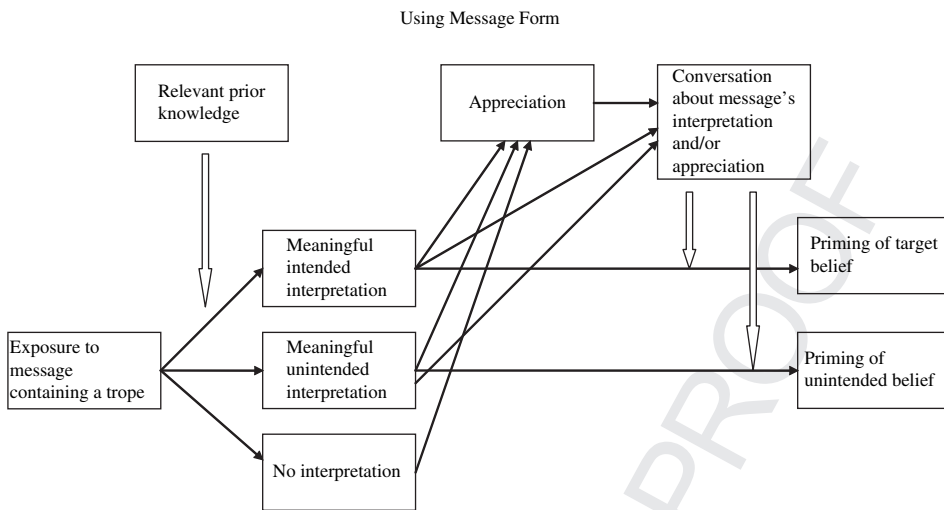


Figure 1 A model for the effects of tropes on conversation and campaign outcomes.

p. 298). Such misunderstanding can have devastating effects as documented by Cline, Johnson, and Freeman (1992) who found that the “talk to your partner” AIDS prevention campaign may have led people to believe that talking to your partner in itself is an effective way to prevent contracting HIV. The prior knowledge required to arrive at the intended interpretation in this case was apparently not in place.

The ultimate goal of tropes was not to communicate implicitly but to communicate in a pleasing way by deviating from the audience’s expectations. Being able to come up with a meaningful interpretation may provide the audience with the type of self-congratulatory thoughts hypothesized by Tanaka (1992, 1994), which may result in a positive evaluation of the message. Several studies have indeed shown that the extent to which people appreciate tropes depends on whether they are capable of providing a meaningful interpretation of this deviation (Ketelaar, van Gisbergen, & Bosman, 2004; Lee & Mason, 1999; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Phillips, 2000; Van Mulken, Van Enschoot, & Hoeken, 2005a, 2005b; Van Enschoot et al., 2008). We use the label “meaningful interpretation” instead of “intended interpretation” because people appreciate tropes more if they are satisfied with their interpretation even if this interpretation deviates from the one intended by the message designer (Van Mulken et al., 2005a, 2005b). Being able to come up with an interpretation does not guarantee that the trope will be appreciated; people may consider it a weak pun or a poor joke instead.

Conversational effects of tropes

The cognitive and affective processes described above occur before a conversation on the specific ad takes place. Their outcome, however, can influence the probability that the ad will be brought up in conversation. To bring up an ad in conversation can

serve one of two functions (apart from the phatic function of breaking the silence). One function is to prove one's knowledge status by providing a meaningful interpretation to an implicit message. Tropes can serve as fodder for such conversations because their message is implicit and the audience has to use its prior knowledge to arrive at the intended interpretation. For an ad to serve the knowledge demonstration function, two conditions have to be met. First, the speaker has to be confident that he or she has arrived at the intended interpretation. Southwell and Torres (2006, p. 336) document a relation between feeling confident about understanding a science issue and the willingness to bring it up in conversation. With respect to health campaign messages, Delate (2001) reports that people avoided raising certain messages in conversation because they felt unable to interpret them and were afraid of appearing foolish. The second condition an ad has to meet to serve the knowledge demonstration function is that the speaker has to believe that others in the group are incapable of coming up with this interpretation. Only if others are not able to generate a meaningful interpretation, can the ad be used to demonstrate superior knowledge.

The two conditions relate to perceptions held by the speaker and these perceptions can be wrong. The speaker may in actuality have come up with an interpretation different from the one intended by the message designer and/or all members of the group may have come up with the same interpretation. However, as long as the speaker feels confident that this interpretation is the intended one and others are unable to generate this interpretation, he or she may use this ad to demonstrate his or her superior knowledge.

The second function an ad may serve in a conversation is to strengthen the group's identity by encouraging them to share opinions on what's hot and what's not. Tropes can play an important part in this function as well. Given that tropes are intentionally used to please the audience, the conversation may be about whether the specific trope is a clever, artful choice or not. As indicated above, the appreciation of a trope is influenced by the extent to which the audience is capable of providing a meaningful interpretation. Its appreciation by group members may increase even further if people outside their group fail to provide a meaningful interpretation. Several studies have shown that certain ads are very popular among adolescents because their parents and (younger) siblings are *unable* to generate a meaningful interpretation for the ad (see, e.g., Hastings, Ryan, Teer, & MacKintosh, 1994; O'Donohoe, 1994, p. 69; Ritson & Elliott, 1999, p. 267). The conversation on a trope's appreciation may therefore include discussing the intended meaning of the message.

Campaign effects and tropes

The preconversational and conversational effects of tropes may influence a campaign's effectiveness. For a campaign to influence behavior, two strategies have been identified (see, e.g., Cappella, Fishbein, Hornik, Ahern & Sayeed, 2001; Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). One possible route to behavioral change is through changing the beliefs underlying the determinants of this behavior (Hornik & Woolf, 1999). This route

requires a change in knowledge. Given that tropes are typically used to dress up message content the audience is already familiar with, it is unlikely for tropes to have such an effect. The other route is media priming (Cappella et al., 2001; Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). Media priming posits that campaigns can influence people's behavior not so much by changing beliefs but by activating existing ones. Because of this activation, the belief will become more accessible, and, as a result the chances that it influences the decision process could increase.

Tropes may be an important message design strategy to obtain priming effects. The implicit nature of tropes requires the activation of relevant prior knowledge to arrive at the intended meaning. For instance, a successful interpretation of the slogan "no until we know" requires the activation of knowledge on the importance of knowing each other's HIV status before having sexual intercourse. As a result of this activation, this belief is primed. Subsequent conversation about this ad may prime this belief even further. The priming effect depends on the interpretation of the ad and not on the evaluation of the use of the trope. If the audience, after having reached the intended interpretation, considers the trope as weak, the relevant belief has still been activated.

Whereas the use of tropes in health campaign messages may contribute to a campaign's effectiveness, its use can also have serious drawbacks. Due to the implicit nature of tropes, people may be unable to arrive at the intended meaning or worse, may come up with an unintended, may be even damaging interpretation (see, e.g., Cline et al., 1992). Conversations may prime these incorrect beliefs as well. This danger is very real. Both the knowledge demonstration function and the in-group identity strengthening function of ads may lure message designers to use tropes that are understood by only (part) of the target audience, whereas the other part of the target audience and the audience in general may not get the message, or even worse, may get the wrong message. Therefore, the use of tropes in health campaign messages may have positive effects on the one hand, by encouraging some people to reactivate and discuss beliefs they would otherwise ignore, but may have negative effects on the other hand, by yielding confusion and misunderstandings among others.

Conclusions

In this essay, we have approached the relation between health mass media campaigns and conversations from a new perspective. Rather than focusing on the content of a message to spark a conversation, we focused on the use of tropes as a means to obtain that effect. Tropes such as metaphors and ellipsis require additional cognitive processes and the activation of prior knowledge to arrive at the intended interpretation, thereby providing the audience with "the pleasure of text" (if they are successful at generating this interpretation). The cognitive (interpretation) effect and the affective (appreciation) effect of tropes make them the ideal fodder for conversations in which ads are used to demonstrate one's ability to interpret such ads or in which

a shared appreciation of ads is used to strengthen group identity. In this way, tropes can stimulate people to think and talk about information they are already familiar with, information they probably would have ignored had it been presented without a trope. As a result, the information becomes more accessible, thereby increasing the chance that it will influence relevant behavior. This strategy might be especially effective in influencing the notoriously hard to reach target group of adolescents in situations where there is no new information that can be offered. Although attractive in this respect, we also pointed out that this message strategy may have undesirable side effects such as yielding incomprehension or misunderstanding of the message's meaning within the target audience, but even more so in the general population.

A model was presented that depicts the relationships between tropes, conversations, and the positive and negative effects on a campaign's outcome. In our view, this model constitutes an interesting theoretical agenda to explore the strengths and weaknesses of mass media health campaigns that try to influence the target audience through the use of tropes. However, we believe that there is more at stake than the intellectual challenge of assessing the truth-value of this model. At the outset of this essay, we referred to the South African loveLife campaign that aims to stimulate conversation on issues related to sexual health through sending messages such as "if it's not just me, you're not for me." Although loveLife claims that this campaign has been successful, Parker (2005) convincingly shows that the evaluation studies on which this claim is based are seriously flawed. He also points out that the numbers of pregnant or HIV-infected adolescents did not decrease after the launch of the loveLife campaign. Independent studies aiming to document the conversation evoking capacities of the loveLife campaign were unable to provide such evidence (Delate, 2001; Zisser & Francis, 2006). Nevertheless, 31 million U.S. dollars are spent annually on a campaign that puts its faith to a large extent in intentionally sending implicit messages to its teenage target group. Given what could be done with this amount of money to directly profit health initiatives in South Africa, assessing the validity of the reasoning behind such a campaign goes beyond merely satisfying intellectual curiosity. And until we have proof for the effectiveness of the campaign the best advice would be: no, until we know.

Note

- 1 Rhetorical figures may also have a direct effect on the audience's attitude. The studies that have been conducted on this issue were done almost exclusively on metaphors (McGuire, 2000, p. 111). In fact, the number of these studies were sufficiently large for Sopory and Dillard (2002b) to conduct a meta-analysis to assess the effects of metaphors on attitude. They report that metaphors have a significant but limited positive effect on attitude change. Their meta-analysis is restricted to comparing verbally expressed metaphors to their literal counterparts. Research on the effects of visual metaphors is much more scant (Sopory & Dillard, 2002a, p. 421). In this paper, however, we are not

so much interested in the rhetorical figures' ability to change attitudes directly but rather in their ability to spark conversations.

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