

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Persuasion in the service of good
Elaboration of Social Persuasive Messages

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1. The topic and the objectives of the thesis

This dissertation examines the processing of social advertising and, thus, its impact. Social marketing aims to raise awareness of social difficulties in society, especially among less involved but still influential individuals and groups, to shape the way of thinking, beliefs and behaviours about social issues (Donovan & Henley, 2010). One of the tools of social marketing communication is social advertising. Social advertising can present a problem whose solution has a direct interest to the recipient (e.g., health screening), a problem that affects a group in society, usually disadvantaged (e.g., abuse of women or children), or a third group of issues that require collective action by society and communities (e.g., climate change) (Sas, 2010).

In general, people are sceptical about the impact of social advertising. It is because, on the one hand, they believe that the people who should be affected by the message are the ones who do not care about it, and on the other hand, they think that a single exposure to the message cannot make a difference. However, social advertising is not intended to impact a single recipient (Sas, 2010). The global problems of our time suggest a need for persuasive messages that encourage communities to change their thinking and attitudes and take action. This thesis focuses on a comprehensive study of the elaboration of persuasive social messages. Our research falls within the field of advertising psychology within applied social psychology.

The communication of social goals can have greater legal and ethical freedom because good intentions guide it; thus, to attract attention, social advertisements use drastic presentation, and fear appeal to create an effect (Sas, 2010, 2012). Several theories deal with processing fear-appealing persuasive messages, mostly using a cognitive approach. One such approach is Rogers' (e.g., 1975) Protection Motivation Theory, which identifies components mediating response to messages. The components are perceived severity, perceived susceptibility, perceived self-efficacy and perceived response efficacy. These factors were integrated into Kim Witte's (1992) Extended Parallel Process Model, EPPM, which incorporates earlier approaches with a greater emphasis on the factor of fear. Witte considered two response routes to a persuasive message: acceptance or rejection. In a broader approach, persuasion is an attitude change process (e.g., Fennis & Stroebe, 2010), the effectiveness of which can be captured in behavioural intentions. The relationship between attitudes and behaviour is discussed in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the Reasoned Action Theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Empirical research (e.g., Witte & Morrison, 2000) has attempted to study persuasion's effectiveness, specifically fear-appealing persuasion considering personality characteristics. Some of these (e.g., Rippetoe & Rogers, 1987; Wehbe et al., 2017) have examined responses to persuasion with coping. Coping essentially focuses on responses in stressful situations (e.g., Antonovsky, 1979). Some approaches consider coping to be situation-dependent, varying from one situation to another (e.g., Folkman and Lazarus, 1980), while others (e.g., Parker and Endler, 1992) approach it as a trait and assume the presence of general behavioural tendencies underlying coping behaviour. Social problem-solving addresses the attitude towards interpersonal and intrapersonal problems (problem orientation) and the ability to solve them (problem-solving ability), issues that are in everyday life and the social environment (e.g., D'Zurilla et al., 2004). Maydeau-Olivares and D'Zurilla (1996) identified five construct dimensions: positive and negative problem orientation and rational, impulsive and avoidant problem-solving abilities. The latter two are also referred to in the literature as dysfunctional (e.g., D'Zurilla et al., 2004). Since not all problems are stressors, coping does not always imply problem-solving; this is the main difference between the constructs. However, if the situation also triggers stress, the processes described by the constructs can be integrated (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007, cited by Kasik, 2015, p. 70).

The summarised literature and empirical review are the basis for the series of studies presented in the thesis. The objective of the studies was to conduct a complex investigation of the elaboration and effectiveness of fear-arousing social messages, especially social advertising. We focused on the following relations:

- 1) The mechanism of evaluating and processing persuasive messages about social issues and social advertisements regarding emotions aroused by the messages, specifically fear.
- 2) Evaluating persuasive messages with a social purpose considering personality characteristics.
- 3) Evaluating social persuasive messages regarding behavioural intentions to solve social issues.

2. Overview of the applied methods

The thesis summarises five studies with different methodologies. Two studies can be considered as prestudies for doctoral research. The target population of the studies was young adults and adults due to the relative involvement of these age groups in advertising messages (e.g., Eaton et al., 2009). All studies were conducted with ethical approval (since an

institutionalised ethical system was in place). Only those individuals who met the inclusion criteria (e.g., age) and accepted informed consent were allowed to participate in the studies.

2.1. Studies before doctoral research

The two online questionnaire-based quantitative studies were designed to investigate the message evaluation components summarised by EPPM (Witte, 1992) concerning social advertisements' fear arousal. The RBD Scale (Witte et al., 1995) was applied to measure perceived severity, perceived susceptibility, perceived self-efficacy and perceived response efficacy. The advertisements were selected by pilot studies so that the first survey could be conducted on topics relevant to the recipients, and the second survey could be conducted on advertising messages whose topics were less relevant to the target group. The extent of fear was also determined through the prestudies, based on which advertisements were divided into high and moderate fear categories. In the two studies, 12 advertisements were applied to six social problems, each topic being studied through one highly and one moderately fear-inducing advertisement. The social issues covered were diabetes and health screening, mobile phone use while driving - transport safety, violence against women, violence against children, animal care, climate change and environmental issues in general.

The studies investigated the relations with task-, emotion- and avoidance-oriented trait coping measured by the CISS-48 instrument (Endler & Parker, 1994); the second study also included a measure of locus of control using the Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966). Furthermore, the second study measured the emotional valence evoked by advertisements on a bipolar scale, and behavioural intentions to solve social problems were also assessed. Demographic questions were also asked, mainly about gender, age, and education.

Four questionnaires were used in both studies, which allowed the measurement of the same constructs per research; the different questionnaire versions were designed to eliminate the order effect.

2.2. Qualitative study carried out during the doctoral research

The qualitative research studied lay recipients' beliefs and mental representations of social advertising. Based on the bipolar valence and discrete emotion approaches to emotion induction, we also focused on recipients' beliefs about emotion arousing and basic advertising evaluation. Due to its exploratory nature, the study consisted of 1 - 1,5 hour focal group interviews conducted in eight sessions with groups of 5-11 participants. The last two occasions were conducted online.

Following the briefing and completion of the necessary documentation, participants were asked to recall a social advertisement as an icebreaker exercise. They were then asked about the definition of social advertising and their knowledge and perceptions of advertisements (e.g., What makes a social ad sympathetic?). Later, 16 advertisements were shown, and participants could comment on them. In small groups, they were then given 20-20 ads to categorise. The advertisements used were in Hungarian and foreign languages, covering a range of emotions, not just the category of fear-inducing advertisements. Some advertisements also illustrated the creative category. We asked people to answer demographic questions as well.

2.3. Quantitative studies carried out during the doctoral research

Based on the results and critiques of previous studies, we conducted an online and paper-based questionnaire survey - without advertisements - to investigate the components of perceptions of social problems in terms of behavioural intentions to solve the issues and trait-level coping styles. Regarding its relation to coping, the research considered social problem-solving measured by the SPSI-R (Kasik et al., 2009).

In our final online questionnaire study with a summative purpose, we again studied the components of persuasive message evaluation, also known as the mediator variables and problem-solving intentions, through social advertisements. However, we now only examined the associations of variables with social problem-solving as a personality trait. Demographic data were also requested from individuals in the questionnaire.

The dissertation briefly summarises a study that can be considered a sideline of doctoral research, examining Parker and Endler's (1992) coping styles in a person-centred way. The research followed a secondary analysis of three independent, large-sample quantitative datasets from Hungarian and foreign studies. The results suggest that typical coping patterns exist. The methodology of this study inspired the methodological approach of the two last-reported questionnaire studies.

3. Theses of the results

Thesis 1: The bipolar valence of emotions and the assessment of discrete emotions complement each other, so both approaches are useful in studies focusing on emotion and fear arousal.

During the focal group interviews, we found that subjects did not necessarily review an advertisement in terms of discrete emotions (e.g., it elicits sympathy) but also evaluated it along a continuum of pleasant-unpleasant, good-bad endpoints (e.g., it elicits unpleasant feelings). Considering only one of these approaches can lead to information loss.

The research results related to thesis 1 are presented in the following publication:

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2021). Társadalmi célú reklámok értékelésének feltáró vizsgálata. *Alkalmazott Pszichológia, 21*(4), 29-52.

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Thesis 2: Lay recipients are conscious of processing advertising messages for social purposes, and their definitions and judgements of advertising contain aspects similar to those of experts. Thus, their reports can be used as reliable data in advertising research.

During the focal group interviews, we found that the respondents' definitions of social advertisements can be integrated with the expert aspects, that is, lay recipients are aware of social advertising's purpose. Their statements also showed their awareness in attributing intentions to the advertising messages (e.g., "Who is it trying to reach?"), formulating attributions about the purposes of the advertisements. In their responses, they expressed which advertisement impacted them and talked about denial and resistance, for example, by asking to skip the projected advertising.

The research results related to thesis 2 are presented in the following publication:

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2021). Társadalmi célú reklámok értékelésének feltáró vizsgálata. *Alkalmazott Pszichológia, 21*(4), 29-52.

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Thesis 3: When dealing with persuasive social communications, it is important to consider the nature of the social problem, i.e. whose interests are served by solving the issue.

According to the results of the studies, the evaluation of social issues and persuasive messages - thus, social advertisements - is related to the topic of the social problem presented in the ad. We were able to capture the impact of the nature of the problem in terms of whose interest it is to solve the problem: the individual's interest (e.g., screening for diabetes), the interest of others in solving the problem (e.g., abuse of women or children), or the interest of the community or society (e.g., environmental protection).

According to the results of several of our studies, the nature of the problems was related to each of the mediator components, especially to the subjects' perceived self-efficacy, coping styles, and social problem-solving. The nature of the issues was also related to the behavioural intentions.

The research results related to thesis 3 are presented in the following publications:

Nagy, L. Zs. (2020). A megküzdési stílus és a kontrollhely hatása a félelemkeltő reklámüzenetekre adott válaszokra. In Dobi, E. (Szerk.), *Juvenilia VIII. – Debreceni Bölcsész diákkörösök antológiája* (pp. 176-193). Printart-Press.

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2018b). Politikamentes félelemkeltő társadalmi célú reklámok hatásának vizsgálata. *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, 73(2), 133-158. <https://doi.org/10.1556/0016.2018.73.2.2>

Thesis 4: The components mediating responses to persuasive messages - perceived severity, perceived susceptibility, perceived self-efficacy and perceived response efficacy - can be measured and are useful variables for investigating social issues different from health behaviour.

In our questionnaire surveys, in addition to health-related issues, we assessed social advertisements related to vulnerable groups in society and wider social difficulties (e.g., abuse of women, extinction of animal species). We usually used items from the RBD Scale (Witte et al., 1995), with items acting as templates, reformulated according to the theme of the persuasive message. In the pilot studies of doctoral research, three items per component were formulated for a given issue. The resulting reliability indices were $\alpha_{\min} = .60$ and $\alpha_{\max} = .94$. In the two questionnaire studies of the doctoral research, the components were measured with only one item each, and no reliability index was calculated for these items. However, they were found to be useful in the calculations.

The research results related to thesis 4 are presented in the following publications:

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2018a). Félelemkeltő egészségkommunikáció és a megküzdési stílus. *Psychiatria Hungarica*, 33(2), 106–124.

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2018b). Politikamentes félelemkeltő társadalmi célú reklámok hatásának vizsgálata. *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, 73(2), 133-158. <https://doi.org/10.1556/0016.2018.73.2.2>

Thesis 5: Using a person-centred approach to trait coping style survey data, latent patterns can be identified; thereby, there are typical patterns of trait coping.

In a secondary data analysis, independent samples ($N_{\min} = 200$) from two Hungarian (Birke & Kéki-Luterán, 2021 and Kőváry et al., 2014) and one Polish study (Rogowska et al., 2020) were analysed for coping styles measured with the CISS-48 (Endler & Parker, 1994) to explore hypothesised universal latent patterns of coping. Using Latent Profile Analysis (e.g. Rosenberg et al., 2019), we identified two profiles in the Hungarian samples and four in the Polish sample, each organised into well-defined coping style patterns. Although four groups were identified in the Polish sample, they showed two variants of the patterns observed in the Hungarian samples.

The research results related to thesis 5 are presented in the following publication:

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2023). Typical coping patterns: A person-centered approach to coping. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 70, 101023.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2023.101023>

Thesis 6: Coping styles and dimensions of social problem-solving are correlated, but the latter construct is more strongly associated with behavioural intentions to solve social problems.

Social problem evaluation was examined using coping styles and social problem-solving. Task-oriented coping showed a unidirectional relationship with positive problem orientation and rational problem-solving. In contrast, emotion- and avoidance-oriented coping showed a positive association with negative problem orientation and dysfunctional problem-solving skills. The constructs were also studied in relation to intentions. Regression analyses showed that dimensions of social problem-solving had a greater effect on intentions than coping styles.

The research results related to the thesis are presented in the following publication:

Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2020). Jellemző megküzdési módok és a társadalmi problémák kezelése. *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, 75(4), 531-556.
<https://doi.org/10.1556/0016.2020.00032>

Thesis 7: Among the mediator components of fear-appealing persuasive messages, self-efficacy has the largest effect on the intention to solve social problems.

For methodological reasons, we were able to study the impact of all four mediator components on intentions in only one of the doctoral research questionnaire surveys. Regression results showed that self-efficacy had a moderate to strong positive effect on behavioural intentions regardless of the type of social problems.

The results related to thesis 7 can be found in *Chapter 4.3* of the dissertation.

Our research on COVID-19 protection behaviours, conducted beyond the scope of this dissertation, supported the findings on the relationship between self-efficacy and intentions. The research results are presented in the following co-authored publication:

Zentai, P., Nagy, L., & Balázs, K. (2021). A COVID-19 betegség járványügyi védelmi intézkedéseinek megfelelő viselkedések és háttértényezők hazai vizsgálata. *Alkalmazott Pszichológia, 21*(1), 71-94.

<https://doi.org/10.17627/ALKPSZICH.2021.1.71>

Thesis 8: A person-centred approach to social problem-solving can identify typical patterns of the construct.

In two independent studies, social problem-solving data were examined in samples of young adult subjects using Latent Profile Analysis (e.g., Rosenberg et al., 2019). Two latent groups of individuals emerged with distinct patterns in both studies. One profile was usually characterized by high positive problem orientation and high levels of rational problem-solving, while those in the other group usually showed high positive orientation and similarly high negative problem orientation and were characterised by similarly high levels of impulsivity and avoidance in addition to rationality.

The results related to the thesis can be found in *Chapter 4.2.* and *4.3* of the dissertation.

Thesis 9. Individuals with a negative problem orientation and increased impulsive and avoidant problem-solving dimensions show less behavioural intentions regarding social problems. Thus, they are considered more vulnerable, especially to problems requiring individual solutions, where they perceive themselves at risk.

The relationships between social problem-solving, evaluation of persuasive messages, and behavioural intentions to solve social problems were examined concerning latent profiles of social problem-solving. In all cases, those characterised by negative problem orientation and increased impulsive and avoidant problem-solving skills showed lower behavioural intentions. They rated problem-solving behaviours as less effective regardless of social issues, and their scores on their competence and self-efficacy were lower than those in the first profile. They rated themselves as more susceptible to diabetes as an individual problem to be solved.

The results related to thesis 9 can be found in *Chapter 4.2.* and *4.3* of the dissertation.

4. Conclusions

An important conclusion of the research findings on persuasive messages that use emotion, specifically fear appeal, is that self-reported responses can provide reliable data. However, it might be worthwhile to integrate discrete emotion and bipolar valence approaches in the future. Using methods that can objectively measure emotion induction, such as physiological tools (e.g., EEG, Baldo et al., 2022) or face analysis (e.g., Teixeira et al., 2014), are recommended. From the results of the focal group study, it can be concluded that using quantitative research methods can also give reliable results based on the awareness of lay recipients.

Considering the importance of social issues, it may be worthwhile to design and carry out in-depth studies focused on specific topics. The nature of the problems may be influenced by the degree of control that individuals have over the social issue and its solution, and it may also be worthwhile to focus research on this variable.

Our findings confirm the literature (e.g., Kasik, 2015) that the constructs of coping and social problem-solving are related but capture different aspects. For both constructs, the Latent Profile Analysis yielded useful results, which, on the one hand, shows the usefulness of the method and, on the other hand, suggests that it is worth further exploring the profiles. It may be particularly important in the case of social problem-solving to focus on those individuals who were found to be more vulnerable. Suppose these individuals are assumed to be more anxious, more distressed and experience low self-efficacy. In that case, it may be particularly relevant to identify the optimal level of fear arousal for them and to formulate messages that can enhance their self-efficacy and reduce their anxiety. The impact of self-efficacy on behavioural intentions is particularly relevant for these individuals.

The generalizability of the research results described in the dissertation is limited primarily by the age-specific characteristics of the study samples, so it would be worthwhile to extend the research to different age groups in a demographically heterogeneous population. Cultural embeddedness also limits the generalisation of the results. Nevertheless, these results alone can be used as a basis for recommendations to advertising practitioners and professionals regarding the effectiveness of advertising.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (6)

1. Zentai, P., **Nagy, L. Z.**, Balázs, K.: A COVID-19 betegség járványügyi védelmi intézkedéseinek megfelelő viselkedések és háttértényezők hazai vizsgálata.
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15. **Nagy, L. Z.:** A megküzdés és életkori sajátosságai: A COVID-19 hatása az időskori megküzdésre.

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