Health Literacy and Perception of Social Advertisement

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Abstract

Health literacy is one of a relatively new concept to health promotion that emphasizes the increasing individual responsibility for his/her health. This is one of the areas where the state can influence the attitudes of the population towards their health by means of public campaigns. The research shows that there are three key determinants of health in that field: personal, social and structural. Our paper focuses on one of the aspects, namely the social one. Specifically, the evaluation of anti-smoking social adverts by the undergraduates who were divided in two groups: smokers (N=210), non-smokers (N=150). The resulting findings have shown the differences between in perception of these adverts by smokers and non-smokers.

Keywords: health literacy; social advertisement; anti-smoking advertisement; social marketing

1. Introduction

Health literacy is conceptualized as one domain in a conceptual model of health promotion. Even though there is no uniform definition of health literacy, there is a certain consensus that health literacy focuses on increasing responsibility of individuals and groups to be able to understand and act on the health information (Berkman, Davis & McCormack, 2010; Nutbeam, 2006). The importance of paying attention to the current concept is underlined by today’s hectic times that combine positives in the form of new technologies and thus also a higher-quality life, as well as negatives in the form of more stress, civilization diseases, and so on. Health literacy shows as one of the significant components of the preparation of individuals, families and communities for health education, for responsibility of an individual to their health. In other words, we speak about increasing the individual’s ability to acquire process and understand health-related information and services necessary for making the right decisions regarding health awareness. Parts of improving health literacy are health education and communication activities in which social marketing is a major help.

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Social marketing is a specific type of marketing that does not serve primarily for commercial purposes but is of rather a teaching and educational nature aimed at socially beneficial objectives within the community. It uses similar tools and methods such as commercially-focused marketing, but its aim is not the profit or increasing sales volumes. Its aim is a certain social objective, social welfare, and it appeals on socially relevant issues.

We regard its non-commercial, apolitical and beneficent nature as the basic social marketing principles which are applied by means of social campaigns (Kaderka, 2006). By means of social campaigns we try to reach the audience’s interest in responsibility for their own health. Life and health protection (not having drunk alcohol before driving, using the safety belts during a car ride, quitting smoking), the significance of preventive medical checkups (colorectal cancer, breast cancer, cervical cancer), campaigns aimed against domestic violence and hatred on the Internet are only some of the topics which we can encounter within the field of social marketing.

Social marketing has recently become a popular form of communication as a certain form of socio-educational promotion. The objective of social marketing focused on health is often reduction of the separation between individual consumers and desired behavior in the field of health awareness. An unhealthy life-style tolerated by the community such as cigarettes in hands of the youth, alcohol tolerance, and bad diet habits are often the cause of severe health and social problems (Ondrejković et al., 2009). The aim of social marketing is to show deficiencies in the community and consequently utilization of such deficiencies in the recipient education. Often at the cost of the advertisement causing aversion and disgust (Toscani, 1996). Social marketing is closely linked to people’s needs (Lavack, 2007), their perception, emotions, moral values (Hubinková, 2008).

To attract attention of the audience, which is a prerequisite for activation of other mental processes such as perception, learning and memory, social marketing specialists use emotional appeals, mainly fear appeals. It is known that the use of emotional appeals in communication support brand and image building (Clow & Baack, 2008). Therefore we encounter a frequent effort of commercial and advertisement makers to affect the recipient’s emotions in order to supress their rationality. Intentional causing of negative emotions such as for example anxiety, fear and feeling of guilt are no exception and their aim is to convince the consumer of the must of having the advertised product and thus also getting rid of the negative emotion. Fear as a basic human emotion, from an evolutionary point of view, occurs in dangerous situations threatening human self-preservation and mental integrity (Hradiská, 1998). Fear often evokes a threat of some kind of loss, e.g. loss of property, prestige, or loss of an emotional relationship. Using fear, marketing specialists are able to portray a situation which can happen in the consumer’s life or in the lives of their dear ones if they do not possess the advertised product or if they do not behave in the desired manner. According to Weinreich (1999), in social marketing it is not sufficient to intimidate people or make them weaker, but it is important to teach them something. Fear in social marketing has an educational objective, i.e. to teach consumers to adopt certain forms of behavior (e.g. attending preventive medical checkups), to become more sensitive to certain topics (e.g. gender equality), to avoid certain behavior that harms health and life of a person (e.g. smoking, drug use, etc.). Fear increases the recipient’s interest and enhances persuasiveness of the advert. Adverts portraying lungs or other internal organs of a smoker, or bruised and destroyed human body after a car crash have the aim to cause fear in the recipient. However, their visual portraying is often too naturalistic that we mainly encounter with aversion or criticism from the public rather than with understanding.

In most cases, the effectiveness of these advertisements is questionable as the advertisements often stand on the borderline of good taste and ethics. For the fear appeals to be effective, they must address members of the target group in such a way that they accept that this portrayed situation may also well happen to them. A message evoking too much fear is often generally refused for people feel the danger cannot be averted, they mobilize their defensive reactions and they ignore such a message or they avoid it at all. Even though in some researches we learn the otherwise. Fear in advertisement combined with aversion/disgust significantly increased the effectiveness of advertised message (Morales, Wu & Fitzsimons, 2012). The influence of fear on our behavior depends on the number of variables such as for instance perceived level of fear, perceived vulnerability, threat (i.e. in what extent one feels threatened), perceived severity of the threat, perceived self-efficacy (personal beliefs in one’s abilities to change their behavior – e.g. to quit smoking) (Morales, Wu & Fitzsimons, 2012). Inducing mild stress in people evoked by fear may activate the members of the target group to the optimal setting of their cognitive processes during processing the information of the advertised message and the advert makers thus may avoid the boomerang effect. The effect when the audience’s attitude, against which the communication campaign is targeted, is enhanced. It was shown empirically that motivation on the basis of pleasure is significantly more effective than motivation.
using fear. According to Rejmánek (1996), a person accepts information very selectively and frequently refuses the information which may become a potential threat to them. An example of this is an anti-smoking advertisement seen by up to 80% of non-smoking passers-by and by only 20% of smokers. For this reason, as the author puts it, those promotional campaigns that threaten people with something unpleasant such as claims that if the audience do not obey the advertised recommendation, has only small chances to succeed. The need for different types of addictive drugs (nicotine, opiates, alcohol, etc.) is linked to the new needs that arise in people. Given needs are satisfied with accepting the substances that modify biochemical processes in the human body. By their ingesting, their arises a new need for restoring the balance that had not been present in the individual before they started using the addictive substance. In this case no advertised and sold product can become a sufficient substitution, but they directly fulfill the needs of an addicted person (Taylor, 2006).

Ultimately, the aim of marketing specialists is to influence consumers’ attitudes. The attitudes, i.e. evaluating relationships that point at what the individual considers as important, what attracts their attention, what they remember, what motivates them to a certain form of behavior, etc. In case the communication message contained in the advert concurs with the individual’s attitude towards the advertised content, it will mean an agreement in cognitive components of the attitudes, i.e. it will mean consonance. The tendency of a cognitive consonance is not related to all attitudes but only to those that meet the condition of logical connection, i.e. that one follows from the other, or when they are significant to the individual. For instance a smoker who smokes on the belief that it might be beneficial for them, or because it calms them down (a positive cognitive attitude); on the other hand they learn from their physician that they suffer from a lung cancer (a negative cognitive attitude). Cognitive dissonance becomes highly unpleasant for the subject and that is why they try to reduce the impact to reach back the state of consonance again. The reduction may be realised by a change of behavior (quitting smoking – which is often rather demanding), or they try to reach the state of consonance in such a way in which they stop attaching the importance to harmful nature of smoking and they want to forget about the counterarguments. The more they try to keep this consonance, the more they shut themselves from the knowledge that might breach the consonance. It means they are more resistant even to persuasive attempts (Grác, 1985). This internal conflict may evoke feelings of shame, guilt or fear in a smoker, and convince them in their positive attitude to smoking and thus it is possible that they will smoke even more cigarettes (Nakonečný, 2009).

According to what has been said, our aim was to determine the respondents’ attitudes towards Antismoking advertisements that conveyed the theme of fear. We were especially interested in what extent the attitudes would be different from social advertisements among smokers and non-smokers and for that reason we had set the following research question: Is there a difference in attitudes towards smoking with respect to the portrayed level of fear among smokers and non-smokers?

Based on the pre-set research objective, we set the following hypothesis:
H1 We assume that there is a differential attitude in the perception of the analyzed advertisements among smokers and non-smokers.
H1.1 We assume that smokers will evaluate the portrayed level of fear appearing in the analyzed advertisements more negatively than non-smokers.
H1.2 We assume that non-smokers will take a more active attitude towards the presented advertisements than non-smokers.
H1.3 We assume that non-smokers will refuse the Antismoking advertisements more intensively than smokers.
2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants consisted of the Slovak audience (N=360) at the age of 18-60 (AM age= 32.2) who were divided into two groups: smokers (N=210), non-smokers (N=150).

2.2. Measures

We used the semantic differential by Ch. Osgood (Urbánek, 2003) to measure the attitudes towards the presented social advertisements. We chose 24 bipolar adjectives to find locations of the selected social advertisements within the semantic space. The bipolar adjectives were chosen to represent the three basic factors:

1. Evaluation was saturated by the following adjectives: attractive - unattractive – non-repulsive, unpleasant – pleasant, interesting – boring, unethical – ethical, bad – good, esthetic – unesthetic, non-informative – informative, unaddressed – addressed.

2. Potency was saturated by the following adjectives: upsetting – non-upsetting, weak – strong, incomprehensible – comprehensible, expressive – bland, shocking – neutral, exaggerating – non-exaggerating, meaningless – meaningful, empathetic – non-empathetic.

3. Activity was saturated by the following adjectives: suggestive – unsuggestive, effective – ineffective, submissive – dominant, intolerable – tolerable, motivating – non-motivating, passive – active, thinking-stimulating – thinking-unstimulating. The semantic differential was complemented by questions regarding emotional evaluation of the advertisements and the attitude towards smoking. The data obtained were evaluated by means of the SPSS Statistics 17 statistical program.

To assess the attitude towards the social advertisements that effect the audience with the appeal of fear, we used two educational-preventive adverts of different fear levels.

The first advert is based in Slovakia (Fig. 1) and the campaign was conducted under the auspices of the Liga proti rakovine (the League Against Cancer) non-profit organization. The campaign was targeted mainly at families with children. Three significant features formed the graphics of the campaign: the first one was a plush teddy bear burning on one side and turning to ashes, wearing a friendly smile on the other side, which represented some sort of a contrast – a smiling face, legs formed by burnt cigarettes. By using a soft plush toy as a symbol of safety, home, love and childhood, the authors clearly signaled that it is children who are affected. Another distinctive feature of the campaign is its headline: Do not smoke their childhood away (smoking in the presence of children severely harms their health!), by which the visual graphics of the campaign was complemented and thus its meaning was clarified. The headline of the campaign is poignant, brief and comprehensible. The third prominent feature is the League Against Cancer giving the campaign its seriousness as well as persuasiveness. The visual graphics is predominantly in a blue colour, which is the colour of piece, fidelity, confidence and love and which can stand for parental feelings for their children. A white colour, as we mentioned in the theoretical part of the article, represents a new beginning, which in connection to smoking is also rather poignant. The main idea is expressed in a subtle way, however, a burning teddy bear may have a repulsive effect on children.

![Fig. 1. Do not smoke their childhood away (SK)](image_url)

The other Antismoking campaign comes from Australia (Fig. 2) and was conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Health in Australia and Quit Victoria – the organization helping smokers to quit smoking. The campaign
was related to passing of the Antitobacco Act in Australia – the act that bans portraying of individual cigarette producers’ logos, signs and colours on cigarette packs in order to make smoking less attractive. The campaign was aimed primarily at children’s parents, at the young people. Generally, it was aimed at all the smoking groups. Cigarette packs must be sold in an olive-green colour with graphic health warnings such as images of mouth cancer and other related diseases (Grubel, 2012). The visual graphics seen by our respondents (Fig. 2) portray individual diseases related to smoking. The pictures are rather realistic combined mainly with red and black colours that represent danger and death.

![Fig. 2. Antismoking campaign (AUS)](image)

The level of fear used in the first advertisement was lower in comparison with the other one.

3. Results

Our findings have shown a differential attitude in perception of the analyzed advertising campaigns among the smokers and non-smokers. In the advertising campaign No.1 Do not smoke their childhood away we reported a significantly differential attitude in perception of the advertisement among the smokers and non-smokers (t=2.018; p=0.035), equal findings were obtained in the other Antismoking campaign (t=2.058; p=0.041). We can therefore conclude that our hypothesis (H1) of a different attitude in perceiving the analyzed advertising campaigns among the smokers and non-smokers was confirmed.

If we look closer at the individual factors, we will find that no significant differences in the assessment of the watched adverts were revealed in the factor of evaluation. The smokers as well as the non-smokers rated the adverts with the inclination to negative adjectives. Both advertisements were rated by the smokers as well as non-smokers as repulsive, unpleasant, bad, unesthetic, though addressed and informative. We can therefore conclude that our hypothesis that the smokers were opt to rate the level of fear of the analyzed adverts in a more negative way than the non-smokers was not confirmed (H1.1).

Speaking about the Activity factor, there was a difference between the smokers and non-smokers in perceiving and evaluating the Antismoking campaign (AUS), however, not in perceiving and evaluating the Do not smoke their childhood away (SK). The non-smokers’ attitude towards the Antismoking campaign (AUS) was more proactive and unlike the smokers (t=2.218; p=0.029), they evaluated the given advertisement as more suggestive, more persuasive, more dominant. We can therefore conclude that the non-smokers in comparison with the smokers (H1.2) took rather a more proactive attitude towards the presented advertisement containing a higher level of fear.

The Potency factor differentiated the smokers and non-smokers only in evaluating the Antismoking campaign (AUS). The Do not smoke their childhood away advertisement (SK) did not impose a stronger power on neither of the groups of respondents. The Antismoking campaign (AUS) was evaluated as more powerful (t=1.978; p=0.031) by the non-smokers in comparison with the smokers. It was significantly more understandable, powerful, non-exaggerating and meaningful. Even this factor showed that in comparison with the smokers (H1.3), the non-smokers took a refusing attitude towards the presented advert containing a higher level of fear.
4. Conclusion

In the search for the answer to the research question we concluded that there is a difference in the change of an attitude towards smoking with respect to the portrayed level of fear among smokers and non-smokers. The Antismoking campaign in Australia was rated by the respondents as more negative, more powerful and more intensive than the Do not smoke their childhood away campaign in Slovakia. Being given the results relating to the change in the attitude we can conclude that an advertisement evoking a greater fear induced also a more significant tendency towards the change in the attitude towards smoking. The Antismoking campaign (AUS) was more successful in provoking the respondents' interests in quitting smoking than the Do not smoke their childhood away (SK) one. At this point we meet with depreciation of the negative features of the object evaluated by the smokers. They regarded the advertisements as less persuasive and exaggerating. The purpose of this evaluation was to re-establish the state of consonance and thus to reduce unpleasant dissonances (Nakonečný, 2009). Both the advertisements had a highly preventative effect in the group of non-smokers which reflected in higher critical judgement, refusal and non-acceptance of smoking particularly in the Antismoking campaign (AUS). Even despite the greater level of fear that was pictured in the advert, it showed that this campaign affected our respondents more intensively and also more effectively than the Slovak campaign.

Fear as a strong emotional appeal is used in social advertising particularly for its great persuasive power, and it increases the interest, persuasiveness, attention as well as memorability of advertising (Clow & Baack, 2008). When applying the appeal of fear within an advertising campaign, the application must be dealt with really carefully. It is important to consider the purpose, objective and the target group which the advert is to effect. It is important to consider the extent in which the appeal of fear will be used what emotions it will elicit in the respondents and whether this would be relevant to the objective of the advertisement incidence. The aim of social advertising is not only to point out a certain phenomenon/issue but also to eliminate negative habits (e.g. smoking, drunk driving, and so on), to make the audience to think about what they have seen and later change their attitudes or behavior. It means that the advertisement must effect on the respondents in the way in which it breaks the acquired set of attitudes and thus avoids that the recipient would close for the effect of the advertised message. It is important to have this in mind when planning social-marketing activities in the area of health promotion which becomes an essential part of health education.

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