Final Paper:

The New Hygienic Normal

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In the wake of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, people in all walks of life are learning how to live in a safer, more hygenic way. As part of this, the CDC recommends staying at least 6 feet apart from the nearest person, wash your hands often with soap and water, and to wear a cloth face cover when around others (CDC, 2020). These precautionary measures are put together for the purpose of slowing the spread of COVID-19, but a portion of the population is either not processing that messaging or just ignoring it.

The college-aged population of Lubbock, Texas in particular were not adhering to the messaging provided by the CDC, leading to the shutdown of bars in the city (Goodman, 2020). Texas Tech University, whose main campus is in Lubbock, will once again be flooded with students when the Fall semester begins. I manage hundreds of computers in numerous lab rooms in the College of Media & Communication where dozens of classes are taught, and one of the main tasks I am assigned to tackle before the start of the Fall semester is to find the optimal way to suppress the spread of COVID-19 in those computer labs.

Outside of the physical limitations that I will impose on lab usage in the Fall semester, I believe proper messaging can impart a heightened sense of hygiene on students using those computer labs. Using media theory, a message can be crafted that will increase a student's likelihood to wash their hands, wear a mask, and maintain proper social distancing.

A tried and true mechanism involved in an audience remembering the contents of a message is that involved with Identification Theory. As far back as 1957, studies show that messages are remembered more effectively when the viewer identifies with the purveyor of the message (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957).

Identification Theory began in the Psychological sciences studying children. Freud viewed identification as an unconscious process brought on by psychological pressures, and forces the identity of a child's parents to become part of their self and their super-ego. It was then extended beyond childhood development psychology by Bruno Bettelheim who took the concept beyond childhood to concentration camp victims who used identification as a coping mechanism, meaning the process of identification did not require a willing participant (Bettelheim, 1943). Richard Wollheim in a collection of essays explicated the concept of identification further to differentiate it from imitation, positing that identification is an imaginative process where a person is not simply imitating the actions of another but is mentally living in that other person's shoes with their thoughts and goals (Wollheim, 1974).

In more modern scholarly work, the theory of identification is conceptualized in communication and media studies as a process where the viewer or audience member or user experiences an increasing loss of self-awareness and is temporarily replaced by, "..heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character" (Cohen, 2001, pg251). It is believed that identification in media is something that is put in place purposely by the creator of the message with the intention of having a lasting impact on the audience.

For the purposes of increasing the hygienic cultural norms of college students using computer labs at the College of Media & Communication, identification could be used to better instill the message of washing hands, wearing masks, and maintaining social distances. Cohen (2001) talks about using identification as a form of persuasion because it brings the viewer out from behind the fourth wall and brings them into the perspective of the message. A message could be crafted that shows the student environment and student interactions that follows these hygienic norms laid out by CDC guidelines.

Short video segments could be published on the large wall-displays around the building showing students listening to lectures while maintaining 6 feet of distance from one another, or an in-between classes shot with students filing around and past one another while wearing their cloth masks over their noses and mouths. Another video could use a first-person perspective shot of a set of hands washing with soap in a sink using a recommended method and length of time.

If the crafted messages maintain an environment where these hygienic practices, which used to be seen as extreme, are portrayed as normal and expected, then the viewer will identify with the students shown in the videos and remember the message of that hygienic culture.

Identification theory may not be the only idea to hang your hat on when it comes to changing the minds and attitudes of a large group of college-aged students. Some, or most depending on the time and day of the week, of the audience may be too tired, hungry, or still feeling the effects of the previous night to properly understand the implicit message they are supposed to be identifying. There is a path for this disinterested audience, as well as a path for those who are looking for more information about the hygienic culture the College of Media & Communication is implementing.

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) was developed in the 1980's by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo. The pair outlined the ELM in the early 1980's and then repeatedly studied the effects a person's pre-existing attitudes had on the persuasive outcome of a message, including finding that a person's need for cognition significantly affected the lasting impact of a message (Cacioppo et al., 1986).

The elaboration likelihood model outlines two distinct paths or routes that a message can take on its way to a persuasive outcome: a central path and a peripheral path. Each path can lead to a persuasive message, but the two use different methods and are aimed at two different audiences (Petty et al., 1987).

The central path of the ELM consists of messaging aimed at people who are highly involved in the content of the message. Messages in the central path are often full of facts and figures aimed at an audience that is assumed to already understand the landscape of the

messaging so as to elicit critical thinking and understanding of the message. The central path of the ELM is the path that can lead to a permanent change in attitude and/or behavior.

The peripheral path of the ELM consists of messaging aimed at people who are not at all involved with the content of the message. Messages in the peripheral path are often entirely superficial, using bright lights, loud sound effects, and alluring imagery aimed at an audience that is assumed to not understand the landscape of the messaging. Messages that utilize the peripheral path are not intended to elicit critical thinking, and any change in attitude or behavior is understood to be temporary.

Multiple successful messages can be crafted with the hopes of changing the hygienic culture of College of Media & Communication students through the elaboration likelihood model. For the purpose of changing that cultural norm, utilizing both the central and the peripheral path would be best as there are sure to be students who both do and do not take the hygienic principles of the CDC seriously.

Messages using the central path of the ELM can be as simple as flyers with a list of the CDC recommendations for clearly stated facts such as amount of distance to maintain, amount of time for hand washing, how much of a person's face should be covered, etc. These flyers can be placed strategically around the building in restrooms, on desks, and taped to the monitors of computers that are not allowed to be used for the sake of maintaining social distancing. These messages placed in strategic locations will increase the

audience's involvement with the message content, triggering more critical analysis of the message and ensuring the messaging is impactful

Messages using the peripheral path of the ELM can put the large wall-displays around the building to use. These video messages can consist of shots filled with Texas Tech notables such as President Lawrence Schovanec, the Masked Rider, Raider Red, outstanding athletes, cheerleaders, coaches, etc. all wearing face coverings, washing their hands, or maintaining 6 feet of distance. These peripheral path video messages can rely heavily on camerawork, editing, and sound clips to grab an audience's attention who are not interested in hygiene. That audience might not walk away with their minds changed about masks, washing hands, and social distancing, but they will walk away thinking about those topics in the short term. Messages crafted through the ideas of Identification Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model are sure to have a lasting impact on their audiences. However, these ideas are not the holy grail of persuasive messaging and there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for leaving a meaningful impression on a large group of people. That can be especially true for a group of college-aged students who are actively studying in the College of Media & Communication where they receive first-hand experience with crafting persuasive messages.

One of the immediate limitations to messaging as described, using identification theory or either paths of the elaboration likelihood model, could be the reactivity to the messages by students because of something akin to the Hawthorne effect. The Hawthorne effect is a type of reactivity experienced in experimental studies where a subject reacts abnormally because

they are aware of the experimental parameters (McCambridge et al., 2014). The audience for these messages are the very people being taught to use this type of messaging, therefore anything aimed at this student audience is known to be just that and will cause abnormal results for the lasting impressions of the messages.

Another possible limitation of using identification theory messaging is the cognitive dissonance implicit in the messages. The messages described show what is hoped by the CDC and the College of Media & Communication administration to be the new normal as it pertains to hygiene, but the viewing audience is aware of how campus activity was before the global pandemic. This cognitive dissonance could cause the message processing in the student audience to shut down and for some of them to outright reject the messaging (Bowman, 2017).

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