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Academic Discussion

The Social Marketing Messenger is as Important as the Message: Learnings from a Case Study of Widening Participation in Australian Higher Education.

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Abstract

Widening Participation (WP) endeavours seek to increase the participation of vulnerable students in higher education. In Australia, WP has been demonstrably successful. WP outreach is predominantly people-rich, yet when faced with audience apathy and inattention, which is sometimes the case with school students, not all WP messengers are able to get cut-through. This case study explores how WP messengers' communication skills can engage students from LSES backgrounds. Qualitative data were collected from 46 university students at six universities who were from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds and who heralded from regional or remote locales. After analysing the data, it was found that the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion reflected why some WP messengers and not others were able to cut through audience apathy and inattention. The lessons for social marketers more broadly are to consider how your messengers' communication skills are helping or hindering communication of your message.

Introduction

A higher education qualification can transform and significantly shift the trajectory of people's lives, particularly people from vulnerable populations (Ma, Pender and Welch, 2016; Baum, Harris, Kelly and Mitchell, 2017). Australia's WP agenda aims to uplift aspirations and increase the participation of people from core equity groups in post-compulsory education (Cupitt et al., 2015b). People-rich delivery of WP is most common and refers to face-to-face interaction such as school workshops and campus visits (Russell-Bennett et al., 2016). People-rich message delivery has proven particularly effective and is the most common medium of WP message delivery (Gale, 2011). Despite this preponderance of people-rich delivery, there is an inclination in WP practice and literature to focus on the message content or the congruence between the WP messengers background and that of the audience. Despite well-crafted messages, WP messenger audience congruence and training, some WP messengers are more effective than others. Why is this?

Background

Most WP activity centres on the high school student audience and is during the initial, pre-access stage of the student lifecycle, focusing on familiarising school students, their parents and community with the university environment (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017). First and foremost, effective WP outreach must engage the audience (Gale, 2011). Knowing and being able to read the audience is essential with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to WP outreach not recommended (Thomas, 2001) as while the audience are united in their experience of disadvantage, with many belonging to multiple equity groups (Lim, Gemici and Karmel, 2014), they are also diverse in other aspects and require nuanced delivery to appeal to their different perspectives and circumstances (Gore et al., 2017).

People-rich delivery creates opportunities for students to interact with others in real time and receive relevant and actionable guidance (Russell-Bennett et al., 2016). These outcomes are contingent on the ability of the messenger to develop a rapport with their audiences. As non-traditional students often lack confidence in their ability to succeed at university (Thomas et al., 2012), it is essential that WP messengers are not only credible, in that they know the message content and are knowledgeable, but more importantly that they are relatable and likeable and thus possess communication skills that facilitate the creation of a safe yet stimulating and appealing environment.

Not all WP messengers, however, are equally effective in communicating with their young, high school student audiences. Aristotle's principles for effective and persuasive communication provide some direction as to why this is so. Communication is most effective when comprised of logos (message credibility), ethos (speaker credibility) and pathos (appeals to emotion) (see reprint Aristotle 1992; Moore and Bowden-Everson, 2012).

First, logos (message credibility) refers to the logical reasoning behind a message as well as the value of the words themselves (Hanrahan, 2003). Perhaps the most complex of Aristotle's principles, logos forms the basis of rational conversation (Aristotle, 1992). Essentially, logos is about persuading the audience using logical, reasonable, well-rounded arguments that are generally supported with evidence. For example, in WP this might be sharing information about higher lifetime earnings as a result of having a university qualification.

Second, in terms of ethos (speaker credibility), the visible characteristics and mannerisms of messengers uniquely influence message delivery and interpretation (Flynn, 2016). Outspokenness, confidence and enthusiasm, for example, are important factors in establishing rapport between the messenger and their audience (Ylonen, 2010). Conversely, a perception by the audience of low connectedness or questionable credibility is known to contribute to resistance (Buzeta and Velásquez, 2016). Indeed, WP representatives may not only be met with disinterest but also face resistance and objection from a small number of LSES students who do not see university as important may perceive WP outreach as a threat to their freedom to choose what they want to do after they finish school (i.e. reactance theory) (Cupitt et al., 2015b).

Third, pathos (appeals to emotion) considers how a message may spark inspiration and aspiration (Hanrahan, 2003). In marketing, endorsements from relatable and likeable celebrities held more sway than those without (Roşca, 2010), and this premise holds for WP messengers who are most effective when from a similar background to their audience (Wylie, 2007). For example, in the UK the Aimhigher WP initiative created emotional arguments to increase confidence, self-esteem and resilience (Brown, 2011). Effective pathos bypasses the core benefits of university study, emphasising the emotional and experiential aspects of the educational service (Moore and Bowden-Everson, 2012).

WP Messengers

WP messengers take many forms, including university outreach staff, school teachers, university student ambassadors, university teaching staff, university marketing staff and spokespeople from non-profit organisations such as AIME[1]. Despite the abundance of literature focussing on student ambassadors and school teachers as the keynote messengers for WP outreach, the examination of the communication qualities possessed by both these and the many other WP messengers is lacking. People who become WP messengers are agentic and are often motivated to help others like themselves conceive of a better future (Ylonen, 2010; Cupitt et al., 2015a). Colloquially known as 'true believers', WP messengers' altruistic motivations may not always translate into or be accompanied by effective interpersonal communication skills (i.e. logos, ethos, and pathos), particularly when an audience is apathetic or disinterested (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). WP messengers are often selected according to various criteria, including cultural or community background (Wylie, 2007) and their key ability to relate to their audience (Thomas et al., 2012). Establishing a personal relationship with the messenger was critical in establishing

[1] Aboriginal and Islander Mentoring Experience

credibility and likability (Buttle, 1998) as source credibility (ethos) grabs audience attention (Hanrahan, 2003). That is, an audience is more likely to act favourably towards the message of a person with perceived credibility (Bendapudi et al., 1996). Much like a halo effect, the messenger's trustworthiness, reliability and validity extend to the message they are delivering (Sweeney et al., 2008). In a WP context, effective messengers are trained to provide 'hot knowledge' (Gale, 2015), being reliable insights pertinent to the university transition (Ball and Vincent, 1998). This differs from 'cold knowledge', official statements such as graduate prospects and course availability (Ball and Vincent, 1998). While this approach piques the interest of the audience, it is often seen only as a 'taster' of what university life is like and assumes that LSES school students will undertake their own research.

In WP, logos, ethos and pathos has allowed student ambassadors and school teachers to thrive in their roles as messengers. Student ambassadors transformed beliefs and provided information and support (Cupitt et al., 2015a) through powerful testimonies which spoke from their own lived experiences to provide relevant information for prospective students (Austin and Hatt, 2005). Students perceived these ambassadors not as messengers, but as a source of inspiration and relatability (Thomas, 2013). Thomas et al. (2012) also suggested that school teachers were pivotal as advocates for WP, with Basit and Santoro (2011) finding that teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds were well-equipped to act as role models for students from similar backgrounds. In the case of student ambassadors and school teachers, both possessed a priori experience —they came from similar backgrounds and were empathetic to the experiences of their audience (Basit and Santoro, 2011). This shared, lived experience created a bond between messenger and audience, establishing messenger credibility (ethos), compassion (pathos) and message resonance through comprehension of the audience's circumstances (Opel, Diekema, Lee and Marcuse, 2009).

WP Audiences

Not all high school students from vulnerable backgrounds are receptive to the idea of going to university. Similarly, not all high school students are the same. The national WP study by Russell-Bennett et al. (2016) identified four student learner personas, each with different approaches to their post-school planning. For example, the Tasmanian Devil Learner was decided on a career path and confident about going on to study, the Bowerbird Learner liked to keep their career options somewhat open and was hesitant going on to tertiary study and the Wallaby Learner was resolute on keeping all post-school options open and thus not wanting to commit to any plans, preferring instead to stroll through life and was cautious about continuing to further study (Russell-Bennett et al., 2016). Hence, WP messengers should be aware that their audience will comprise mixed personas and that while their rational, evidence-based message (i.e. logos, message credibility) will appeal to those like the Tasmanian Devil Learner, for others like the Wallaby Learner ethos (messenger credibility) and pathos (appeals to emotion) are may be central to gaining their attention.

Method

This exploratory study collected qualitative data from 46 Queensland students enrolled at six universities who previously attended school involved in a state-wide WP initiative targeted at LSES communities, with 22(47.8%) participating in focus groups and 24 (52.2%) participating in interviews. There were more female (n = 30, 65.2%) than male (n = 16, 34.8%) participants originating from a variety of schools classified by ASGS as Inner Regional (n = 17, 37%), Major Cities (n = 24, 52.2%), Outer Regional (n = 3, 6.5%), Remote (n = 1, 2.2%) and Very

Remote (n = 1, 2.2%) respectively. Participants were recruited via university staff involved in school outreach who identified eligible students from internal university records. Data were digitally audio recorded with aliases assigned and verbatim transcripts subject to manual, thematic analysis.

Findings

It was found that fun and interactive activities were essential in countering feelings of being "talked at" rather than "talked to or "talked with". Furthermore, some participants felt some WP activities attempted to sell university to them rather than inform them. Furthermore, some participants noted that they felt their WP experiences were somewhat impersonal, and the messenger was not engaging. Participants suggested activities that were most effective was where the messenger created a positive atmosphere in the first instance, connected with students and then they would be more receptive to the message they were delivering. As one participant noted:

> *"We had a little bit of an interactive session. Then I was interested in that, so I guess that solidified me saying yep, this is exactly what I want to do, this is the course for me, for what I'm looking for." (Tracy, Major Cities, Creative Industries)*

Participants stories showed that the most effective WP messengers possessed logos, ethos and pathos. WP student ambassadors who shared their own stories in a persuasive way resonated with the experiences of high school students. In fact, participants were easily able to recall talks from the messengers.

> *"I did [talk to ambassadors] actually. They're very good. I actually work now as an ambassador at my uni and so it is good to get your opinion from other people, like to have students actually come in and tell you their story is really good." (Aria, Major Cities, Physiotherapy)*

> *"A lot of the talks were given by students that have gone through the first year ... They've had the first-year experience, and now they're in the mentoring position helping us through the transition from high school to university." (Gary, Major Cities, Biomedical Science)*

Benign envy, the notion of "if they can do it, so can I" also emerged as a common theme among participants. WP messengers took on the mantle of a role model to the audience and raised hopes and aspirations that they too can overcome barriers to go to university and in doing so live up to their full potential.

> *"It was very motivational seeing the university students telling everyone about their experience in the first year or second year. So, I thought that I might want to be one of those people one day, so I did make it now." (Grace, Major Cities, Business)*

As WP activities have increased in recent years, WP messengers are best to consider that their audience has interacted with other WP messengers and are likely to compare their effectiveness.

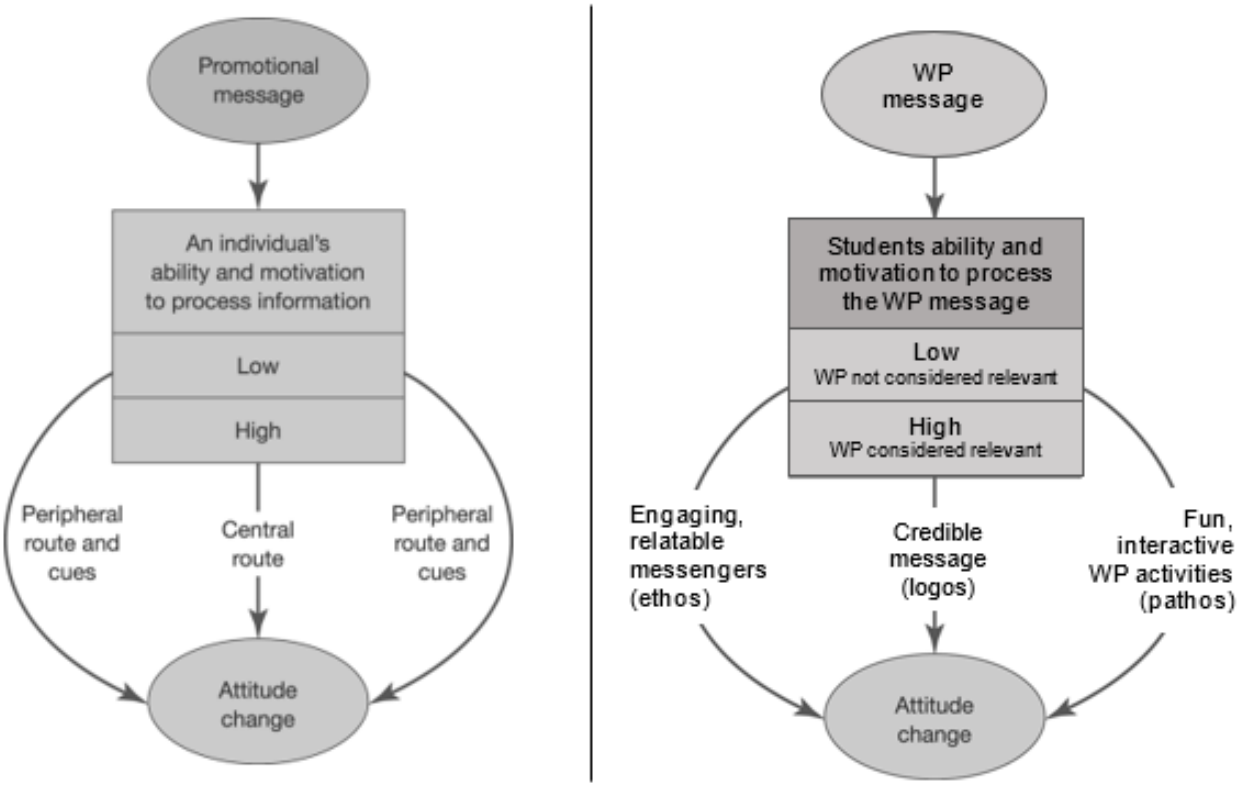
> *"I think one [messenger] that really helped was from [University X, who] came to our school and gave a big talk. [University Y] came at the same time, but [the messenger from University X] was the real standout*

one, [he] really hyped up the uni life pretty much and made everything seem real good … just really outstanding the way that he presented everything." Jericho, Regional, Engineering

Learnings

The data revealed that WP messengers who are effective in delivering messages to a young, and possibly disinterested audience both possess and apply logos, ethos and pathos to their presentations and activities. Drawing from the marketing communications literature, Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (ELMP) is a useful framework and tool for WP messenger training. Figure 1 presents an adapted ELMP for the WP context of this case study. Specifically, motivated high school WP audiences will typically engage in the deep and critical processing of the WP message, take the central route. Conversely, in a WP context, an unmotivated audience with a lower capacity to understand because they are young are more likely to take the peripheral route, relying on ethos and pathos type message qualities that are engaging, fun and interactive will encourage attitude change. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) proposed that argument strength was critical for central route persuasion (i.e. logos) while messenger credibility was a major peripheral cue (i.e. ethos and pathos). While persuasion was most enduring when on the central route to attitudinal change (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), this is not always the case in social marketing as demonstrated by this case study.

FIGURE 1: The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (right) and its application to WP (left)



Questions for social marketers

- Is your audience young, inattentive or apathetic? Has this influenced your efforts to date? Have they heard the same message before or are hearing it from multiple sources at present which has resulted in them 'switching off', challenging or generally not being receptive to your social marketing message?
- How are your messengers selected and trained? Does your messenger selection consider messengers persuasiveness capabilities? Does your training include ethos and pathos elements?

To cite

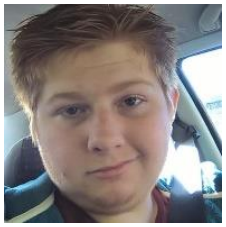
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