THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFICATION TO A SENSE OF PRESENCE

Importance of identification in shaping responses to messages

Main issue: How can "low tech" products such as books sometimes lead to a higher sense of presence than "high-tech" products? Here we propose that one of the most important factors determining a sense of presence is a person's parasocial identification with a character.

Research on the importance of a protagonist being "of the people" goes back as far back as Aristotle's *Rhetoric.* This was a concept that Aristotle called "*ethos."* Empirical research in this area dates to Hovland, some of the earliest research in communication in the 1950s. Perhaps somewhat reassuringly, Hovland's research generally supports Aristotle in showing that the protagonist is critically important in determining how powerful a message is with a receiver. Burke (1950) also proposed a theory of drama where people come to identify with a protagonist.

Empirical studies

One of the most researched areas with regard to message source is the use of celebrities. In this area, most studies support the basic tenet that celebrities are more effective than unknowns. Studies include Johnny Cash (Kahmen, Azhari & Kragh, 1975), Al Pacino Friedman, Termini & Washington, 1976); Mary Tyler Moore (Friedman & Friedman, 1979), Leonard Nimoy (Kahmins, 1989) and two other studies that used multiple celebrities (Atkin & Block, 1983 & Kahle & Homer, 1985).

WHY are celebrities so effective?

These findings raise an important and interesting question. That is, why are celebrities so effective in making a persuasive message effective? There are theoretical explanations that have been offered.

1. Source credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951-1952). This theory proposes that celebrities are generally more credibility than everyday people.
2. The attractiveness hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985) proposes that celebrities are physically attractive.
3. Kamin's (1990) "match-up hypothesis" suggests that celebrities often have some special expertise in an area, and that this special expertise adds to product evaluation
4. Cultural meaning theory (McCracken, 1989) proposes that meanings pass to celebrity to product and from endorser to consumer. However, for a social scientist, this theory raises concerns about vague predictions and

conflicting levels of analysis. That is, it's not always clear <u>when</u> this will occur and when it won't in ways that allow for falsification.

5. Parasocial *identification.* This theory proposes that people fell <u>close</u> to celebrities and that this makes them an effective spokesperson. There has been considerable previous research on *identification (*Burke, 1950; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Kelman, 1961; Bandura, 1977, 1986; Ruben, Rubin, Perse, various). According to this approach, people are more likely to imitate behaviors by people they see as similar to themselves. And celebrities can establish a "faux" intimacy, or feel like a "friend." This approach is consistent with other research which finds that friends are more effective than strangers are (Rogers, 1997). Parasocial identification theory is probably the most relevant theory to studying presence. Specifically, if people can and do feel close to a person, this can make either a drama, commercial, or interactive experience more moving (Burke, 1950).

METHOD

This presentation reports on a number of studies that tested the parasocial explanation as a power force in shaping responses to media. The research was done with three different celebrities -- Magic Johnson, Princess Diana and Mark McGwire. Across all three of these celebrities we needed to establish the sense of identification people had with these celebrities, and to compare how close different people felt to the celebrity.

MAGIC JOHNSON -- Study #1

This study was conducted in November 1991, right after Magic Johnson announced that he had contracted HIV. The sample was 391 undergraduate students. Regressions that compared the contribution of knowledge versus identification on a number of outcomes -- personal concern, perceived risk, estimates of the risk of HIV to heterosexuals, subjects' behavioral intentions after hearing the news, and their intention to get a blood test. These results show that people's knowledge of Magic Johnson was not related to any of these outcomes. Their level of parasocial identification, however, <u>was</u> a large and significant predictor of these outcomes. This suggests that it was not knowledge of Magic Johnson that shaped how effective he was as a spokesperson, but how <u>close</u> they felt to him. Therefore, feeling <u>close</u> to the person makes it seem that what is happening to them is also relevant to you.

MAGIC JOHNSON -- Study #2B

In a related study, we also dug deeper into risk literature to see that people may have two very different risk perceptions -- one for themselves, and one for everyone else. Given our theory of parasocial identification, there were two competing theories for how this event could alter risk

perceptions. Tyler & Cooks's Differential Impact Theory predicted that people who saw the event on the mass media would have increased levels of social risk perception, but not their own personal risks. The parasocial identification theory, however, predicted that this event would increase personal risk perceptions <u>regardless</u> of the medium through which the information was conveyed. So to test these theories we used 361 undergraduate students, some of whom saw the CNN mass media story, some of whom had interpersonal discussions about the news, and the remained of whom were in a control condition. The results showed that the groups who saw media message resulted in increased risk perceptions, the interpersonal discussion groups had lowered their perceptions of risk. Further, analysis of the change scores suggested that the level of parasocial identification determined the extent to which people changed their risk perceptions. Further analyses of these results using the Baron & Kenny method showed that this change was largely mediated by their level of identification with Magic Johnson. That is, these tests revealed that people's reactions <u>depended</u> on how close they felt to Magic. These results not only support the parasocial identification hypotheses, they support the exact mechanism. Therefore, it appears that it is the level of identification itself that shapes viewers' responses, and not some other artifact related to identification.

MAGIC JOHNSON -- Study #3

About a year after Magic's announcement, we conducted more research to examine whether the event appeared to have any lasting effect. The results of this study show that people's personal concern about AIDS and their behavioral intentions <u>continued</u> to hinge on their level of identification with Magic. Therefore, the results suggest that Magic Johnson continued to be an effective spokesperson for those who felt close to him. Parasocial identification with a person in a novel, radio, television, or even interactive game leads to a feeling of being in the same situation -- a sense of doom or success.

PRINCESS DIANA

Perhaps one of the largest stories in 1996 was the death of Princess Diana. We decided to study this event to see if people's grief over her death, and their blame of the paparazzi, was attributable to parasocial identification. So we used a random sample of 300 people, 300 college students, and 300 people off the Internet sample to examine people's reactions to her death. The results again showed, fairly strongly, that people's level of parasocial identification with Princess Diana determined their viewing of television stories on her life, radio programs, their intention to watch the funeral on television, and the extent to which they blamed the press for her death. These are again powerful effects that demonstrate parasocial identification is a critical factor in shaping people's involvement with events.

MARK McGWIRE

In 1998, Mark McGwire broke a hundred-year-old record for the number of home runs in a single baseball season. This story took off in the press, including coverage of his favorite cause -- child abuse, and his use of a steroid perhaps to help him achieve this feat -- androstenedione. This was an opportunity to study how parasocial identification could have both positive and negative effects on people. But again, we proposed that these effects would depend on their level of parasocial identification with him. The results again confirmed that parasocial identification could shape people's desire to imitate the behavior of others. In this case, parasocial identification was related to people's concern about and desire to speak out against child abuse, as well as their knowledge of and desire to use androstenedione. Therefore, these results also show that parasocial identification is a powerful force in shaping people's interest in, and desire to imitate other people's behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

There two general theoretical conclusions:

1. Celebrity *identification* does <u>predict</u> effects

2. Level of *identification* <u>mediates</u> effects and that these effects hinge on *identification*

These findings support the theory of *parasocial identification* in determining the effectiveness of a message, and people's involvement with a situation.

PRESENCE IMPLICATIONS

1. A sense of presence can be at least partly determined by a person's level of identification with the characters in a presence situation. That is, people are more likely to get involved in gaming, desensitization exercises, or other presence activities to the extent that there is a protagonist with whom the participant identifies.
2. This sense of presence can be a critical factor in shaping people's emotional responses to presence situations. That is, presence simulations are likely to be more involving, more powerful, and more real through the use of a protagonist that instills a sense of identification.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

1. Importance of parasocial identification

    o   How important is parasocial identification in shaping viewer sense of presence, satisfaction, and use?

- Which is the most important factor in determining a sense of presence -- parasocial identification or technological "immediacy?" That is, can a sense of parasocial identification with "low tech" products with high levels of parasocial identification lead to a higher sense of presence than "high-tech" products with low levels of parasocial identification?
- How can one best develop a sense of parasocial identification -- does it require time, realistic situations, throwing a protagonist in jeopardy, etc.?

1. Application to commercial products in presence contexts

- How can a sense of parasocial identification best be <u>created</u>?

1. Imitation of behaviors

- Will people be more likely to imitate the behaviors of dramatic and gaming characters when they instill a sense of parasocial identification?