

MASTER'S THESIS

Understanding vicarious experience: the role of self-referencing in a predictive model

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**Understanding Vicarious Experience:
The Role of Self-referencing in a Predictive Model**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

This study contrasts simulation and transportation as mechanisms of narrative persuasion. It conceptually distinguishes the two concepts by whether the message recipient puts the self empathically or sympathetically into a story. Specifically, this thesis advances a predictive model in which influences flow from self-referencing to dimensions of vicariousness and further to perception and behavioral intention.

While impacts of self-referencing have been well documented in the context of non-narrative persuasion, the role of self-referencing in narrative persuasion, however, remains puzzling. The present study intends to fit one piece into the jigsaw. That is how simulation is differentiated from transportation. More precisely, whether self-referencing makes a difference in narrative persuasion.

An experiment phrased with an anti-smoking campaign was conducted with 114 female undergraduate students manipulated into high self-referencing, low self-referencing and restrained vicariousness conditions. Findings show that during processing, self-referencing induces stronger sensory responses of empathy. Attention, immersion and sympathy are antecedences or consequences of vicarious experience and they are not influenced by self-referencing. Further, subjects under the high self-referencing condition perceive the story as more realistic and perceive themselves as more similar to the target, compared to the low self-referencing and restrained vicariousness groups.

In the follow-up analysis, a scale is developed to measure the self-referencing construct in a more comprehensive manner. Results suggest that although self-referencing enhances vicarious experience, increasing the level of self-referencing alone actually reduces the behavioural intention of resisting cigarette and the perceived risks of smoking. Only when mediated by "empathy" and "perceived realism" did self-referencing yield positive effects on persuasion. Sympathy does not mediate the effects of self-referencing on intention and perception. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: self-referencing, narrative persuasion, vicarious experience, transportation, simulation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Purpose of the study.....	2
1.2 Overview of the structure.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	5
2.1 A narrative approach to persuasion.....	5
2.2 Narrative processing as a vicarious experience	7
2.3 Factors influencing vicarious experience.....	11
2.4 Conceptualization of self-referencing.....	15
2.5 Transportation vs. simulation: Different types of vicarious experience	22
Chapter 3 Effects of High Self-referencing, Low Self-referencing and Restrained Vicarious Experiences	39
3.1 Method	39
3.2 Results.....	49
3.3 Discussion	55
Chapter 4 Additional Analyses	59
4.1 Method	59
4.2 Result and analysis.....	63
4.3 Discussion	66
Chapter 5 Conclusion and Discussion	69
5.1 Theoretical implications.....	70
5.2 Practical implications.....	76
5.3 Limitations	77
5.4 Directions for further research	79
References	82
Appendix A	95
Appendix B	97
Curriculum Vitae	98