Persuasive Storytelling by Hate Groups Online

Examining Its Effects on Adolescents

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Increasingly, hate groups have used the Internet to express their viewpoints, sell their paraphernalia, and recruit new members. This study explored the effectiveness of persuasive storytelling found on White supremacist Web pages. One hundred eight adolescents participated in a longitudinal study (pretest, Time 1, Time 2) conducted online. A 3 (receptivity: negatively inclined, neutral, predisposed) × 2 (narrative: high vs. low perceived) × 2 (message explicitness: implicit vs. explicit) factorial design found that immediately following exposure, high-narrative and implicit messages were more persuasive than low-narrative and explicit messages. Interestingly, high-narrative and implicit effects decayed, whereas low-narrative and explicit message effects endured or increased slightly over time. In addition, people’s receptivity interacted with the message factors to further mediate persuasion. For example, disagreeing individuals resisted low-narrative, explicit messages significantly more than any other condition. The article concludes with a discussion of the social implications of these findings.

In 1978, William Pierce wrote *The Turner Diaries: A Novel* (Macdonald, 1978), a fictional account of a race war that portrays the violent overthrow of the federal government to establish an “Aryan” world (DiPersio & Guttentag, 2000; Shinbaum, 1996). *The Turner Diaries* grew in popularity with far-right extremists and eventually became a key work in the White supremacist movement (Shinbaum, 1996). Found in Timothy McVeigh’s car after the Oklahoma City bombing, the novel is believed to have been the inspiration and model for McVeigh’s actions because of its remarkably similar account of bomb preparations and the destruction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s national headquarters (Ball, 1996; DiPersio & Guttentag, 2000; Pankratz, 1996; Shinbaum, 1996). Discussing the influence of his work, Pierce commented,

Fiction or drama gets much more inside the head of the person who is experiencing it because the reader or viewer identifies with a character. Seeing the reaction to the *Turner Diaries*, I then wrote a second novel, *Hunter* [Macdonald, 1989], so
Pierce’s enthusiasm for fiction displays how hate groups have begun to use narratives to influence others and to promote their vision. Although the writing and distribution of White supremacist novels remains relatively infrequent, the use and development of stories by hate groups have become more commonplace in cyberhate (Lee & Leets, 2000; McDonald, 1999).

Historically, narrators have often intended to persuade their audiences of their points of view or the legitimacy of their claims with stories (Lucaites & Condit, 1985; Sunwolf, 1999). The power of storytelling lies in its ability to make an argument without eliciting mental resistance (Friedlander, 1992). Empirical studies have supported this claim with findings that narratives elicit fewer counterarguments and less resistance to persuasion (Slater, 1990; Slater & Rouner, 1996, 1997). Narratives, especially fictional stories, may raise less scrutiny and suspicion through suspension of disbelief (Slater, 1990; Graesser, 1981) and identification with the protagonist’s mental perspective (De Vega, Diaz, & Leon 1997; Slater & Rouner, 1997).

In general, the growth of the online hate movement is of concern to legislators, educators, activists, and parents. The Simon Wiesenthal Center (2000) estimated that there are more than 3,000 Web sites containing hate, racism, terrorist agendas, and bomb-making instructions today; this number has continued to increase yearly since 1995, when only 1 such site existed. The accessibility of hate material online, coupled with the development of specialized children’s Web pages and hate groups’ tendencies to focus on and recruit school-aged youths, raises questions about children’s vulnerability (Governor’s Advisory Panel on Hate Groups, 2000; Sandberg, 1999). In the past, hate groups recruited new members through fliers, newsletters, small rallies, mailings, and interpersonal contact. Individuals who received these messages tended to subscribe to the beliefs of or were already involved in the organizations (Zickmund, 1997) and hence were predisposed to accept the messages. Former White supremacists have noted that the recruitment effort now focuses on young, White, male teenagers (Governor’s Advisory Panel on Hate Groups, 2000; Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2001). In California, most high school students have been approached or know of a friend who has been recruited by a hate group (Governor’s Advisory Panel on Hate Groups, 2000).

Adolescents are much heavier users of the Internet and all its services than their parents and younger siblings (Kraut, Scherlis, Mukhopadhyay, Manning, & Kiesler, 1996; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie 1999). Among teenagers, boys are significantly heavier users than girls, even though they have equal access to the technology at home (Kraut et al., 1996). Boys average 18.9 hours of Internet use weekly, compared to girls’ 13.9 hours online (Subrahmanyan, Kraut, Greenfield, & Gross, 2001). A recent poll found that 44% of American teenagers have seen Web sites that are X rated or have sexual content, 25% have
seen sites with information about hate groups, 14% have seen sites that teach individuals how to build bombs, and 12% have seen sites that discuss how or where to buy guns (Okrent, 1999). Although teens may be better able than younger children to distinguish between legitimate and unfounded content, some adolescents appear to take Internet content at face value, suggesting the potential for an immediate message effect.

When effects are attributed to any mass medium or message, the issue of causation is raised (i.e., x causes y). It is important to remember that media effects are usually probabilistic, not deterministic (Potter, 1998). In this complex society, many competing influences originate from within a person, from a message, and from the environment and can determine whether an effect will or will not occur. A general discussion of factors that increase the likelihood of media effects has been presented elsewhere (see Potter, 1998), and for the purposes of this study, we limit our investigation to the influence of one message factor: persuasive storytelling. The role of language in attitude change has not been examined systematically within the context of process models of persuasive communication (Burgoon, 1990; Krauss & Chiu, 1998).

To this end, our investigation examines narrative, as a language strategy, within the persuasion process. We focus on the actual effectiveness of persuasive storytelling found on White supremacist Web pages. The objective of this article is twofold: (a) to investigate teenagers’ initial responses to online hate narratives and (b) to examine the persistence of possible effects over time. The article is contextualized in the new research domain of persuasive storytelling, and two hypotheses are derived from the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). We present the findings and discuss the implications of one empirical study.

**PERSUASIVE STORYTELLING**

Persuasive storytelling is the use of narrative to persuade or convince. It encompasses rhetorical narrative as well as storytelling by individuals and groups for the purposes of socializing and convincing. Consequently, unlike other forms of narrative, the audience, context, and desired gain govern persuasive storytelling (Lucaites & Condit, 1985). In this sense, persuasion, rather than entertainment or enlightenment, remains the primary goal and ultimately guides the story. This concept constitutes a new area of study: It brings a language and social psychological perspective to the study of narrative and persuasion processes. Although scholars have examined narrative persuasion in the past, many of these studies were set in the framework of comparing the persuasive effects of narrative as a form of evidence to other types of evidence, such as statistics. There has been little systematic investigation of storytelling as a persuasive language device.

People commonly use narrative to present their arguments or viewpoints and to convince others of the validity of these claims (Berger, 1997; Fisher, 1984,
Many cultural groups also used storytelling for socialization, believing that a well-told story is remembered longer than "you should" or "you should not" statements (Bruchac, 1996). Others have argued that stories have fulfilled certain human needs, such as explanation, entertainment, and communication (Pellowski, 1977), and that given a historical advantage, a species-specific bias may exist in favor of stories over other forms of language (Fisher, 1984, 1985a, 1985b; Pellowski, 1977).

Although persuasive storytelling traces its roots back to the ancient Greeks and the oral storytelling tradition, its intellectual antecedents remain grounded in two large fields of persuasion and narrative (for a review, see Lee, 2001). With regard to this study, we limit our review to persuasion research, briefly discussing two relevant areas: the study of evidence in persuasive communication and a dual process persuasion theory, ELM.

**PERSUASIVE EFFECTS OF EVIDENCE**

Communication and psychology scholars have studied persuasive storytelling in the context of the effects of evidence, comparing the persuasiveness of narrative to other forms of evidence and language such as exposition and statistics evidence (Allen & Priess, 1997; Baesler & Burgoon, 1994; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Dickson, 1982; Kazoleas, 1993; Kopfman, Smith, Ah Yun, & Hodges, 1998; Reinard, 1988; Slater & Rouner, 1996, 1997; Yalch & Elmore-Yalch, 1984). These studies address the question of whether one type of evidence is more persuasive than others, and a clear answer has not been found (Baesler & Burgoon, 1994). Although Reinard (1988) argued that anecdotal reports may have more persuasive impact than statistics, conflicting findings exist. The pattern of findings suggests that story evidence is more persuasive than statistical evidence (Bar-Hillel, 1975; Borgida & Nisbett, 1977; Carroll, 1977; Ginosar & Trope, 1980; Hamill, Wilson, & Nisbett, 1980; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Kazoleas, 1993; Koballa, 1986; Martin, 1982; Nisbett & Borgida, 1975; Slater & Rouner, 1996, 1997; Zillmann, Perkins, & Sundar, 1992). But, some studies have supported the belief that statistical evidence is more persuasive in certain contexts (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983; Dickson, 1982; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980; Slater & Rouner, 1996; Wells & Harvey, 1977), and a meta-analysis by Allen and Preiss (1997) found that statistical evidence messages are more persuasive than narrative evidence. Furthermore, other studies have reported no significant difference between the two types of evidence (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Nadler, 1983; Reyna, Woodruff, & Brainerd, 1987; Ryland, 1973).

Several explanations have been advanced to account for these mixed findings. In particular, the persuasive effects of narrative appear to be dependent on context (Slater & Rouner, 1996; Kopfman et al., 1998). Scholars have argued that (a) the vividness of story evidence makes persuasive messages more memorable and compelling (Baesler & Burgoon, 1994; Nisbett & Ross, 1980); (b)
narratives are superior at helping message recipients judge causal relevance (Taylor & Thompson, 1982); (c) individuals are insensitive to the small sample size of stories, believing in a law of “small numbers” (Martin, 1982); (d) story structure facilitates memory (Mandler, 1984); and (e) story components often serve as simple cues, whereas statistics are often difficult to understand, necessitating comprehension of complex issues such as sampling and representativeness (Nisbett, Krantz, Jepsen, & Kunda, 1983; Taylor & Thompson, 1982). Conversely, statistical information appears especially persuasive among individuals (a) who are personally involved in the topic (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty et al., 1980) or (b) whose values are consistent with the message (Slater & Rouner, 1996).

The ELM

Dual processing theories have also been used to explain the seemingly conflicting findings on the persuasive effects of evidence. The ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty & Priester, 1994) is one of the most influential theories and is most applicable to this investigation (for a review, see Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996). This model assumes that attitude change depends on the level of mental effort; it incorporates many of the major theories of persuasion, arguing that most persuasion theories are not competitors but rather are applicable to different circumstances and situations (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty & Wegener, 1998).

The ELM posits that individuals process persuasion through one of two paths: the central or peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty & Priester, 1994). Through the central route, individuals are motivated and typically have the ability to process substantive information cognitively. Individuals systematically scrutinize messages to assess the merits of the advocated positions and integrate the information with other cognitions (Petty, Cacioppo, Sedikides, & Strathman, 1988; Petty & Priester, 1994). In contrast, when messages are processed through the peripheral route, individuals do not scrutinize them and are not motivated to attend to the issues or contents of the messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty & Priester, 1994). The peripheral route involves much more superficial, less cognizant, and more impressionistic processing of persuasive messages, with more attention paid to the incidental features of the messages than the quality of the arguments presented (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty et al., 1988). In addition, over time, these incidental features or cues may become disassociated with the messages; as a result, persuasion through peripheral processing is less enduring than persuasion through central route processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty et al., 1988; Petty & Priester, 1994).

Many factors affect the likelihood that individuals will process information through the central route. One of the most important factors affecting elaboration likelihood is the personal involvement or personal relevance of the topic to
the receiver (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b; Reardon, 1991; Slater & Rouner, 1997; Stephenson & Palmgreen, 1999). The greater the personal relevance, the greater the motivation to examine the message. The least effort principle (Allport, 1954; Chaiken, 1980, 1987), or cognitive miser concept (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), assumes that people process information superficially and minimally unless they are motivated to do otherwise. For individuals to engage in systematic forms of processing that take greater effort, they must have both the motivation and the capacity to engage in a more deliberative form of processing. Consequently, the prototypical prediction maintains that when elaboration likelihood is high, persuasion is influenced by argument quality (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984, 1986a). In contrast, when elaboration likelihood is low, peripheral cue variables, such as communicator attractiveness and expertise, and message recipients’ mood states affect persuasion (Petty, Schumann, Richman, Strathman, 1993; Schwarz, Bless, & Bohner, 1991).

**STUDY OVERVIEW**

We designed a 3 (receptivity: negatively inclined, neutral, predisposed) × 2 (narrative: high vs. low perceived) × 2 (message explicitness: implicit vs. explicit) factorial study to investigate the effects of hate Web pages’ persuasive storytelling over time.

The dependent variable, influence outcomes, is measured in two ways. One is through self-reported attitudes measured on 7-point, Likert-type scales. The other is through a thought-generation task after exposure to the stimulus material. Especially when dealing with sensitive stimuli, production tasks tend to be less prone to social desirability than assessments on Likert-type scales. Even though thought-listing procedures have been criticized for their emphasis on cognitive responses, this procedure is commonly used to measure message resistance, for central or systematic processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a, Chaiken & Trope, 1999). The task assumes that individuals are active message recipients who carefully evaluate the information provided (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981). If favorable thoughts or proarguments are generated, persuasion is assumed to have occurred. Conversely, if unfavorable thoughts or counterarguments are reported, persuasion is assumed to have been resisted. Additionally, the directionality, intensity, and focus of participants’ open-ended responses are examined.

The three independent variables are receptiveness, perceived narrative, and message explicitness. First, receptiveness is defined as openness to the advocated position of the message. Our operationalization includes three positions: negatively inclined, neutral, and predisposed. Prior receptiveness and values have been shown to play roles in the persuasiveness of narrative, often determining the effects of stories and language use (Kopfman et al., 1998; Lee & Leets, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 1996). Scholars applying the ELM have shown that
individuals’ receptivity and value agreement at times largely determine the persuasive effects of narrative (Slater & Rouner, 1997). For our study, individuals who agree or are neutral or uninvolved are more likely to process hate stories peripherally and find them more persuasive than those who disagree with online hate and process the narrative centrally. Hate groups online may gain a persuasive advantage through storytelling with a neutral Internet audience.

Second, because of the conceptual breadth of literature and multiplicity in definitions of narrative (for a review, see Sunwolf & Frey, in press), we inevitably had to narrow the definition for operational purposes. We did so by combining Polkinghorne’s (1988) and Bower and Morrow’s (1990) work. We defined high narrative as spoken or written presentations that include plots and main characters, and we defined low narrative as messages that do not link actions or events together in a meaningful way or forms of presentation and argument that do not include plots or character identification.

Third, the measurement of implicit and explicit persuasion is based on Searle’s (1975) definition of indirect and direct speech acts. Explicit messages or persuasive attempts are statements or persuasion in which the content is consistent with the speaker’s intention. Only one meaning is conveyed. Implicit messages or persuasive attempts are statements in which the speaker’s intention and the message content are at times inconsistent. Implicit statements convey multiple meanings or interpretations. Both the message recipients and the speaker can deny the speaker’s intentions. Traditionally, hate expression was explicit. In contemporary society, statements of prejudice are now considered unacceptable. Consequently, individuals are now more disguised and indirect in expressing these viewpoints (Kessler, 1999; McDonald, 1999; van Dijk, 1995). Furthermore, past empirical research has examined deprecating statements on a continuum of explicitness (Leets & Giles, 1999), finding that indirect harmful speech at times can be more harmful to minority recipients than explicit statements (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997).

The preceding literature suggests two hypotheses that examine how narrative, message explicitness, and level of receptivity influence respondents over time:

**Hypothesis 1:** When attributing the persuasiveness of online hate messages,

1. individuals’ receptivity influences the persuasiveness of narrative and message explicitness so that
   a. individuals who process the messages centrally (disagreeing or negatively inclined individuals) find implicit messages more persuasive than explicit messages and counterargue more against explicit messages than implicit messages, and
   b. individuals who process the message peripherally (predisposed and neutral individuals) find high-narrative messages more persuasive than low-narrative messages and counterargue more against low-narrative messages than high-narrative messages;
2. the directionality (for, neutral, against) of individuals’ thoughts varies depending on narrative, explicitness, and receptivity;
3. the intensity (strong and moderate vs. weak) of individuals’ responses varies depending on narrative, explicitness, and receptivity; and
4. the focus (content and source vs. issue) of individuals’ responses varies depending on narrative and receptivity.

Hypothesis 2: When attributing the persuasiveness of online hate messages over time,
1. persuasion resulting from low-narrative messages endures, whereas persuasion resulting from high-narrative messages decays;
2. persuasion resulting from explicit messages endures, whereas persuasion resulting from implicit messages decays; and
3. persuasion varies according to receptivity.

METHOD

RESPONDENTS
One hundred eight participants (62 male, 46 female) completed the experiment after being recruited by an online market research firm. The respondents ranged in age from 13 to 17, with a median age of 16. On the basis of their self-reported ethnic identities, 78.7% were Caucasian, 2.8% were African American, 2.8% were Hispanic, 13.9% were Asian American, and 1.9% were multiethnic. Non-White respondents rated their ethnic identity importance as high ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.56$ on a 7-point, Likert-type scale); White respondents rated it as moderately important ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 2.05$).

The majority of participants belonged to households whose incomes were higher than the national median of $40,816 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Over 60% (61.9%) of the study respondents’ households earned more than $50,000 per year. On the basis of their self-reported incomes, 21.4% of the participants lived in households with incomes lower than $25,000, 16.7% were from households with incomes between $25,000 and $50,000, 27.4% were from households with incomes between $50,000 and $75,000, 6.0% were from households with incomes between $75,000 and $100,000, 16.6% from households with incomes between $100,000 and $150,000, 3.6% were from households with incomes between $150,000 and $200,000, and 8.3% came from households with incomes over $200,000 a year. In addition to living in higher income households, our adolescent participants tended to be media literate and savvy ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.66$ on a 7-point, Likert-type scale).

PROCEDURE
The data collection for the study was conducted online and involved participants viewing graphics and reading text on Web pages. A market research firm
with more than 50,000 registered individuals recruited respondents to visit the investigators’ Web page to complete an online study. Teenage Internet population demographics from the U.S. Census Bureau and the United States Internet Council (2001) were used to guide recruiting. The study was presented as a Web page evaluation. Participants were warned that some offensive pages existed within the sample and that they might be asked to examine controversial commentary. Participants received the address of the investigators’ Web page and a notice that they would be paid $12 if they completed all three phases of the online study. Participants’ initial attitudes toward the issue were measured during the pretest. One week later, attitude change was measured immediately after exposure. The persistence of the effect was tested 2 weeks later because empirical evidence has suggested that attitude decay begins at that time (Watts & McGuire, 1964).

The initial Web page provided instructions and details about the study (i.e., the amount of time required and the different days the teens needed to show up for each phase). Next, participants were asked to use compliant Web browsers and then brought to an informed consent page. Both participants and their parents gave consent. Participants then completed a pretest questionnaire. One week later, participants returned to view an excerpt from a randomly selected Web page. Each participant was randomly assigned 1 of 20 messages. The participants were directed to view the stimulus material with the instruction that when finished, they should click on the survey button at the bottom of the page. Participants viewed and read the stimulus material only during this second part of the study. On submitting their questionnaire, respondents received thanks for their participation and were asked to return in 14 days for a follow-up survey. The market research firm sent out reminders to respondents to return to the study Web site to complete the second and third parts of the study. On completion of the third questionnaire, respondents were thanked for their participation and received confirmation of payment from the market research firm. Data were collected via personal home page hypertext processor scripts into a file. The collection of Internet protocol (IP) addresses prevented duplicate entries. All IP addresses were removed before data analysis to guarantee participants’ anonymity. The entire study (pretest, message exposure [Time 1], and follow-up questionnaire [Time 2]) took approximately 45 minutes to complete.

STIMULUS MATERIAL

Each respondent viewed a graphic and read 1 of 20 (5 Messages × 4 Conditions) possible passages based on actual material found on hate Web sites. The 5 messages included topics on (a) interracial dating, (b) White pride and heritage, (c) immigration, (d) joining a White supremacist group, and (e) an excerpt from *The Turner Diaries* (Macdonald, 1978; Shinbaum, 1996). The passages were chosen to represent the different narratives and persuasive attempts used by
online hate sites. To control but not necessarily eliminate the inevitable effects resulting from message variability, the messages constituted a random factor.

The first message on interracial dating was excerpted from the Web site of the newspaper *The Truth at Last*, which argues, “Inter-racial breeding threatens all” (Fields, n.d.). The particular Web page from which the stimulus material was taken deals with why the “inter-breeding of the races destroys civilization.” The page contains a number of different arguments against interracial dating, from “racial throwback” stories of “White couples having a Black baby” because of unknown “mulatto” heritage to quotations from and interpretations of the Bible that condemn racial mixing. Supplementing this Web site was information from news coverage on Hulond Humphrey, a principal who threatened to cancel the high school prom if interracial couples planned to attend (Jamieson, 1997; Saunders, 1997).

The second message on White pride and heritage was taken from one of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan’s Web sites, that of the Imperial Klans of America (2001), which was composed of an introduction to the Klan, a history of the organization, other essays, and graphics. The stimulus material used a common graphic from White supremacist sites, depicting White parents with their baby.

The third message on immigration was taken from an interview with Lisa Turner, a leader in the World Church of the Creator (WCOTC), a group that views Whites as the chosen people. The interview transcript was available online at the HateWatch (2001) Web site. This message used Turner’s description of how she became racially aware and involved in the WCOTC after a safe house for illegal aliens moved into her neighborhood while she was growing up in the San Fernando Valley in California. The high-narrative immigration messages are grouped with a photo of a White teenage girl, and the low-narrative messages are paired with a photo of a house. The photos were changed to strengthen the narrative manipulation. The photo of the girl focuses readers on the character, and the photo of the house emphasizes the issue off safe houses and immigration.

The fourth message on joining a hate group was taken from an interview with a teenage skinhead conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2001; Governor’s Advisory Panel on Hate Groups, 2000) and supplemented with information from skinhead Web sites (Ring, 1997; *The Skinhead Family*, n.d.) and personal stories from reformed skinheads (Lum, 1999).

The fifth and last message was excerpted from chapter 4 of *The Turner Diaries* (Macdonald, 1978, pp. 28-30) and describes the relationship between a man and woman involved in a militant White pride group.

All selections contained graphics that were chosen to increase external validity. These passages were manipulated to include narrative elements such as character motivations, plots, and settings for the high-narrative conditions. Persuasion explicitness was also manipulated by varying how clearly and explicitly the message was stated. For example, the explicit condition in the White pride
message stated, “To be born WHITE is an honor and a privilege,” whereas the implicit condition stated, “Rich heritage is an honor and a privilege.” It is plausible that the use of the same image containing a White couple with their baby can be construed as an equivalent message in both the implicit and explicit conditions. The five different messages were pretested for equivalence and successful manipulation of narrative and explicitness before and during the study. They were randomly assigned at exposure.

PILOT STUDIES

Two pilot studies involving 99 students (38 male, 58 female, 3 unreported) provided manipulation checks on the independent variables. Each student read the same condition for each message. Each condition was balanced for order. Students were asked six questions with 7-point, Likert-type measurement scales, where 1 was defined as not at all and 7 as definitely. Three items measured explicitness: “Was the meaning of this message clear?”; “How direct do you think this message was?” (direct to indirect); and “Some people commented that this message was racist. What do you think?” (not at all racist to definitely racist). Three items measured perceived narrative: “Do you think this message was a story?”; “Did this message contain a plot?;” and “Did this message contain a main character?” The manipulations were successful for each message on all six items.

In addition to these pilot studies, two teenagers were conveniently sampled and asked to complete the Time 2 stage of the study before the larger sample was recruited. The first author met with the students in a lab and explored how adolescents may view and perceive the messages.

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT

Independent and dependent variables were measured by pretest, exposure, and follow-up questionnaires that consisted of 2 open-ended items and 34 closed-ended items, all rated on 7-point semantic differential or Likert-type scales.

Influence Outcomes

The persuasion outcome was measured in two ways. First, through several self-report items, a semantic differential scale measured message acceptance (Oskamp, 1977). Participants were asked to rate the issues or concepts to which they were assigned using nine anchored adjectives: good/bad, beneficial/harmful, fair/unfair, strong/weak, helpful/hurtful, kind/cruel, effective/ineffective, dynamic/dull, and competent/incompetent. In addition, a self-report item asked how favorably respondents felt about the discussed concepts.
The second method consisted of a thought-generation task after exposure to the stimulus material. An open-ended question explored cognitive responses and counterarguments:

Please spend the next few minutes providing your impressions of the Web page you just read. Remember there are no right or wrong answers. It is your opinion that is important. Please write down any thoughts you have about the Web page you have just read.

Responses to this question were coded by statement. Counterarguments, or expressed opposition to the persuasive messages, served as a measure of resistance (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981; Greenwald, 1968; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Many scholars have used this measurement as an operationalization for the effectiveness or acceptance of persuasive messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a; Slater & Rouner, 1996, 1997).

Next, the directionality, intensity, and focus of the messages were recorded by adapting Roberts and Maccoby’s (1973) coding scheme. Directionality was composed of four categories: each comment was classified as (a) advocating the position stated in the page, (b) counter to or against the stated position, (c) relevant to the position but neutral (neither for nor against), or (d) irrelevant to the advocated position. The intensity variable was measured by the strength of the comment regardless of directionality; comments were judged as strong, moderate, or weak. Comments were also categorized by their focus or what they were aimed at (content, source, issue, irrelevant). Content classifications included comments that specifically pertained to the content of the Web page. Source judgments included comments that were aimed at the author or creator of the Web page. Issue classifications dealt with comments that focused on the general subject or issue (in our case, interracial dating, preferential treatment, heritage, parenting, immigration, White pride, joining a hate group, or racial awareness). Last, statements were coded as irrelevant if the focus of the sentence did not deal with the content, source, or issue of the Web page, or if the focus of the statement was unidentified.

Two coders independently coded all participants’ comments. After receiving 5 hours of training in the use of the coding form, each coder worked separately. The first author resolved disagreements. Scott’s (1955) pi correcting for chance agreement was computed for each set of categories: directionality = .95, intensity = .91, and focus = .92. During the last phase, open-ended questions also measured respondents’ thoughts about and impressions of the messages. Cognitive responses at Time 2 were also coded according to Roberts and Maccoby’s (1973) scheme, discussed above.
Receptivity

Three items, adapted from the authoritarianism (Kohn, 1972), fascist (Stagner, 1936), non-labeled fascist (Edwards, 1941), and anti-Semitism (Levinson & Sanford, 1944) scales, were used to measure prejudice and participants’ receptivity (Cronbach’s alpha = .70; Christie, 1991). No single scale was used because of the dated language and nature of many of the items.

Manipulation Checks

The six items used in the pilot studies were included in the second data collection, following message exposure, to ensure that the narrative and message explicitness manipulations were successful. The number of responses produced in the thought-generation task was used as a manipulation check for cognitive effort (central vs. peripheral).

Demographic Items

The last section of the questionnaire included standard demographic items regarding the participants’ age, sex, and ethnicity, as well as items on the personal importance of ethnic identity.

DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

The hypotheses were examined by ANOVA and frequency analyses. The factorial design consisted of three independent variables: receptivity (negatively inclined, neutral, predisposed), narrative (low-perceived vs. high-perceived), and explicitness (explicit vs. implicit). The dependent variables focused on participants’ evaluative responses to cyberhate groups’ persuasive narratives in terms of message acceptance and resistance (i.e., counterarguments) and were measured over time (immediate and delayed). In addition, log-linear analyses were conducted on the qualitative data measuring cognitive responses coded for directionality, intensity, and focus.

RESULTS

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Narrative and message explicitness were successfully manipulated. All five messages (interracial dating, born White, immigration, joining a White supremacist group, and The Turner Diaries) were found to be equivalent, $F(4, 103) =$
.23, $f = .40$, ns. Participants rated on 7-point, Likert-type measurement scales (1 = not at all, 7 = definitely) whether the Web page contained a story, plot, and main character and whether the stimuli were clear, direct, and racist. Consistent with the pilot study, the six manipulation checks were significant. Table 1 reports the specific findings.

When reporting how much cognitive effort was exerted while viewing the Web page, individuals opposed to the material processed the messages centrally ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 3.10$), compared to neutral ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.91$) and supporting individuals ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.62$), who processed the messages peripherally, $F(2, 90) = 6.48$, $\eta^2 = .13$, $p < .001$. As predicted, this suggests that disagreeing individuals scrutinized the messages and counterargued more than neutral and agreeing individuals.

**HYPOTHESIS 1: PERSUASIVENESS OF MESSAGE (AT TIME 1 WITH EXPOSURE)**

The hypothesized effects of receptivity, narrative, and explicitness on persuasiveness for Time 1 were tested with between-subjects ANOVAs and frequency analyses. We found support for Hypothesis 1.

**Message Acceptance**

In general, our respondents found the Web sites moderately persuasive ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.51$). A 3 (receptivity) $\times$ 2 (perceived narrative) $\times$ 2 (explicitness) between-groups ANOVA found main effects for receptivity, $F(2, 90) = 3.91$, $\eta^2 = .08$, $p < .01$, and narrative, $F(1, 90) = 18.77$, $\eta^2 = .17$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction effect of explicitness by receptivity, $F(2, 90) = 4.92$, $\eta^2 = .10$, $p < .001$. The receptivity main effect demonstrated that agreeing individuals found the hate sites the most persuasive ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.40$), followed by neutral individuals ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.61$) and disagreeing individuals ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.47$)
A post hoc test found a marginal difference between negatively inclined individuals and the other two groups of participants, $t(2) = 2.46, p < .10$. The narrative main effect revealed that respondents evaluated high-narrative messages ($M = 4.72, SD = 1.55$) as more persuasive than low-narrative messages ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.27$). As can be seen in Figure 1, the interaction effect illustrated that negatively inclined participants found little difference between implicit ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.70$) and explicit ($M = 3.20, SD = 1.13$) messages. This difference was much larger for neutral individuals, who found implicit messages ($M = 5.01, SD = 1.09$) more persuasive than explicit messages ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.84$). Pre-disposed individuals, unlike negatively inclined and neutral participants, found explicit messages ($M = 4.96, SD = 0.94$) more persuasive than implicit messages ($M = 4.03, SD = 1.09$). Scheffé post hoc tests showed significant differences in persuasiveness among implicit and explicit messages for neutral and pre-disposed individuals.

**Counterarguments (or resistance)**

Furthermore, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported by the counterarguments. The mean number of counterarguments generated was low ($M = 2.63, SD = 2.17$) but not unusual for this context. A 3 (receptivity) × 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) between-groups factorial design revealed a significant two-way interaction for narrative by explicitness, $F(1, 96) = 12.49, \eta^2 = .12, p < .001$, and a three-way interaction for narrative by explicitness and receptivity, $F(2, 96) = 5.01, \eta^2 = .10, p < .001$. The two-way interaction showed that participants counterargued most frequently against the low-narrative, explicit message condition ($M = 3.75, SD = 3.17$), followed by the low-narrative, implicit message condition ($M = 2.77, SD = 2.38$); the high-narrative, implicit message condition ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.82$); and the high-narrative, explicit message condition ($M = 1.88, SD = 1.65$). A Scheffé post hoc test (see Figure 2) found a significant difference between the low-narrative, explicit condition and the remaining conditions.

The three-way interaction demonstrated that counterarguing behavior remained dependent on receptivity and message type. As Figure 3 displays, the message resistance pattern for disagreeing individuals was (from highest to lowest) low-narrative, explicit messages ($M = 3.85, SD = 3.49$); low-narrative, implicit messages ($M = 3.42, SD = 2.78$); high-narrative, implicit messages ($M = 2.53, SD = 1.66$); and high-narrative, explicit messages ($M = 2.00, SD = 1.90$). In contrast, neutral individuals found little difference in low-narrative, explicit ($M = 2.50, SD = 0.58$); high-narrative, explicit ($M = 2.40, SD = 1.08$); and high-narrative, implicit ($M = 2.33, SD = 1.03$) messages, but counterargued less to low-narrative, implicit messages ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.93$). Unlike negatively inclined or neutral individuals, supportive individuals responded differently to each message. They resisted high-narrative, implicit messages most ($M = 7.00, SD = 0.94$), followed by low-narrative, explicit ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.90$) and low-narrative, implicit ($M = 2.33, SD = 1.87$) messages, and counterargued least against
high-narrative, explicit messages ($M = 1.00, SD = 0.89$). Scheffé post hoc tests revealed the following three significant differences: Negatively inclined individuals resisted low-narrative messages significantly more than high-narrative
messages, with explicitness having a small effect. For neutral individuals, low-narrative, implicit messages were significantly less resisted than other messages. Last, predisposed individuals counterargued most against high-narrative, implicit messages and least against high-narrative, explicit messages, with significant differences found for low-narrative, explicit and implicit conditions as well.

Three-way frequency analyses were performed to develop a log-linear model of characteristics of cognitive responses and persuasive strategies (narrative and explicitness). For clarity, these analyses were split by participants’ receptivity. Categorical variables analyzed were the (a) directionality (for, neutral, against, irrelevant), (b) intensity (strong, moderate, weak), and (c) focus (content, source, issue, irrelevant) of the thought responses. Two hundred eighty-five comments produced by respondents provided usable data for this analysis.

Directionality

A 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 4 (directionality) frequency analysis identified a significant Narrative × Explicitness × Directionality interaction, $G^2(3, N = 285) = 19.69, V = .35, p < .001$. Similarly, to both explicit (high-narrative and low-narrative) conditions in which respondents’ comments were primarily positioned against the advocated argument (68.7% and 76.9%, respectively), the majority of low-narrative, implicit participant responses were against (63.4%) the messages, compared to the high-narrative, implicit comments
that were more evenly distributed for, neutral about, or against the messages (33.8%, 28.2%, and 38.0%, respectively).

This pattern was repeated in comments generated by negatively inclined individuals as well. A 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 4 (directionality) frequency analysis on responses generated by disagreeing individuals identified a significant Narrative × Explicitness × Directionality interaction, $G^2(3, N = 170) = 12.85, V = .32, p < .001$. Responses from individuals assigned to the high-narrative, implicit condition were more evenly distributed (for = 27.9%, neutral = 23.3%, against = 48.8%) than the other three conditions, in which the majority of comments argued against the advocated position (high-narrative, explicit = 80.0%; low-narrative, explicit = 64.0%; low-narrative, implicit = 66.7%). For neutral individuals, frequency analysis found a significant Narrative × Explicitness × Directionality interaction, $G^2(2, N = 57) = 9.17, V = .51, p < .01$. Whereas comments generated by individuals who viewed the high-narrative, implicit messages were mainly split between for (42.9%) or against (42.9%), comments on low-narrative, implicit messages were primarily positioned against the advocated position (83.3%). In contrast, the explicit messages elicited reverse narrative effects; whereas responses to low-narrative, explicit messages were split between for (42.9%) and against (57.1%), the majority of comments to high-narrative, implicit messages were against (91.7%) the advocated position. Frequency analysis for comments generated by predisposed individuals found a main effect for narrative, $G^2(2, N = 58) = 29.03, V = .74, p < .001$. Responses from individuals who viewed low-narrative messages were much more likely to be against (63.2%) the advocated position than responses from individuals who viewed high-narrative messages. High-narrative comments were much more likely to be for (50.0%) or neutral (50.0%) in relation to the message argument.

**Intensity**

A 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 3 (intensity) frequency analysis identified a significant Narrative × Explicitness × Intensity interaction, $G^2(2, N = 285) = 10.14, V = .27, p < .001$. The majority of responses were moderate in strength (low-narrative, implicit = 58.5%; high-narrative, implicit = 46.5%; low-narrative, explicit = 52.2%), except for comments generated by individuals assigned to the high-narrative, explicit condition, which were strong in intensity (53.8%).

This interaction pattern was repeated for comments from negatively inclined individuals. A 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 3 (intensity) frequency analysis on responses generated by disagreeing individuals identified a significant Narrative × Explicitness × Intensity interaction, $G^2(2, N = 170) = 9.19, V = .32, p < .01$. Unlike the majority of responses produced by disagreeing individuals, high-narrative, explicit comments were much more likely to be strong (54.3%) than moderate (low-narrative, implicit = 57.1%; high-narrative, implicit =
A significant main effect for explicitness was found for comments produced by neutral individuals. The majority of implicit message responses were moderate (83.3%), and explicit message responses were strong (50.0%). Frequency analysis for comments generated by predisposed individuals found an interaction effect for Narrative × Explicitness × Intensity, $G^2(2, N = 58) = 19.02, V = .62, p < .001$. Agreeing individuals’ responses tended to be strong (low-narrative, implicit = 42.9%; low-narrative, explicit = 60%; high-narrative, explicit = 66.7%) or moderate (low-narrative, implicit = 50%). Yet, the majority of comments from individuals assigned to the high-narrative, implicit condition were weak (57.1%).

Focus

A 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 4 (focus) frequency analysis identified a significant main effect for narrative, $G^2(3, N = 285) = 29.05, V = .42, p < .001$. Responses to high-narrative messages were much more likely to focus on content (51.5%) than those to low-narrative comments, which tended to focus on the issues (45.0%) or sources (30.2%) of the messages.

This pattern was found again in responses generated by negatively inclined participants. A 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 4 (focus) frequency analysis identified a significant main effect for narrative, $G^2(3, N = 170) = 11.94, V = .37, p < .001$. Responses to high-narrative messages tended to focus on content (48.7%) compared to low-narrative comments, which tended to focus on the issues (44.6%) or sources (28.3%) of the messages. No significant effects were found for comments produced by neutral individuals. For responses from predisposed individuals, a 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) × 4 (focus) frequency analysis identified a significant main effect for narrative, $G^2(2, N = 58) = 25.46, V = .71, p < .001$. The majority of responses to high-narrative messages focused on content (70.0%), and the majority of comments to low-narrative messages focused on the issues (52.6%).

HYPOTHESIS 2: OVER-TIME EFFECTS

The hypothesized effects of narrative and explicitness on attitude over time were tested with mixed-model, repeated measures ANOVAs. These effects resulted from the one exposure at Time 1 and were measured 2 weeks after participants viewed the stimulus material. Hypothesis 2 was supported.

A 3 (receptivity) × 2 (perceived narrative) × 2 (explicitness) ANOVA with attitude as a withinsubject factor revealed significant interaction effects for (a) narrative by attitude, $F(1, 88) = 18.00, \eta^2 = .17, p < .001$; (b) narrative by explicitness and attitude, $F(1, 88) = 10.80, \eta^2 = .11, p < .001$; and (c) narrative by receptivity and attitude, $F(2, 88) = 7.71, \eta^2 = .15, p < .001$. As Figure 4 displays, the narrative by attitude interaction demonstrated that whereas the persuasive effects of high-narrative messages decreased slightly from Time 1 ($M = 4.72, SD =$ 44.2%; low-narrative, explicit = 64.0%).
1.55) to Time 2 (\(M = 4.29, SD = 1.37\)), the persuasive effects of low-narrative messages increased from Time 1 (\(M = 3.19, SD = 1.27\)) to Time 2 (\(M = 3.57, SD = 1.32\)). An interaction contrast comparing the difference in high- and low-narrative means at Time 1 to the difference in means at Time 2 showed a significant decrease.

The three-way Narrative × Explicitness × Attitude interaction revealed that whereas the effects of the high-narrative, implicit messages decayed from Time 1 (\(M = 5.18, SD = 1.28\)) to Time 2 (\(M = 4.11, SD = 1.78\)), the high-narrative, explicit message effects remained constant between Time 1 (\(M = 4.27, SD = 1.50\)) and Time 2 (\(M = 4.26, SD = 1.30\)), and the persuasive effects of both the low-narrative, implicit (Time 1 \(M = 3.44, SD = 1.28\); Time 2 \(M = 3.78, SD = 1.26\)) and low-narrative, explicit (Time 1 \(M = 3.34, SD = 1.28\); Time 2 \(M = 3.49, SD = 1.46\)) messages increased over time. As can be seen in Figure 5, an interaction contrast revealed that the most persuasive condition at Time 1 (high-narrative, implicit) decayed at the greatest rate, whereas the other three conditions remained constant or increased slightly over time.

Last, the three-way Narrative × Receptivity × Attitude interaction found that neutral individuals responded to low-narrative messages similarly to negatively inclined individuals, whereas they responded more like predisposed individuals to high-narrative messages. In addition, as Figure 6 displays, low-narrative effects increased consistently for negatively inclined (Time 1 \(M = 3.24, SD = 1.39\); Time 2 \(M = 3.32, SD = 1.45\)), neutral (Time 1 \(M = 3.24, SD = 1.43\); Time 2 \(M = 3.50, SD = 1.53\)), and predisposed (Time 1 \(M = 3.69, SD = 0.93\); Time 2 \(M =
4.08, \( SD = 0.92 \) individuals over time. High-narrative messages decreased consistently for negatively inclined (Time 1 \( M = 3.85, \ SD = 1.48 \); Time 2 \( M = 3.73, \ SD = 1.48 \);
neutral (Time 1 $M = 5.03, SD = 1.55$; Time 2 $M = 4.46, SD = 1.38$), and predisposed (Time 1 $M = 5.30, SD = 0.83$; Time 2 $M = 4.37, SD = 0.73$) individuals over time. An interaction contrast revealed no significant difference for negatively inclined individuals but found that neutral individuals discriminated between low- and high-narrative messages. Predisposed individuals found high-narrative messages the most persuasive at Time 1; this effect decayed by Time 2, accounting for the largest differences in this interaction.

**DISCUSSION**

The main objectives of this study were to evaluate the effects of perceived narrative and message explicitness on adolescents over time and to better understand how an individual’s receptivity may mediate these message effects. Our study constituted a conservative test of online hate’s persuasiveness and persistence over time, using higher income, media-literate, and media-savvy older adolescents. Generally, the data produced a clear pattern. Adolescents found high-narrative, implicit messages more persuasive initially. Yet, high-narrative, implicit effects decayed quickly, whereas persuasion resulting from low-narrative, explicit messages remained more stable. Receptivity mediated these effects, with agreeing and disagreeing individuals responding differently and neutral individuals at times mimicking predisposed individuals’ behavior and at other times repeating disagreeing individuals’ behavior.

Hypothesis 1 received mixed support. Parts 2 and 3 were confirmed, and parts 1 and 4 were partially supported. Part 1 specifically predicted that disagreeing individuals would centrally process messages and, as a result, be more swayed by implicit messages than explicit messages, whereas predisposed and neutral individuals would peripherally process and be more influenced by high-narrative messages than low-narrative messages. As demonstrated by the manipulation check, disagreeing individuals appeared to process centrally, whereas neutral and predisposed individuals processed peripherally. As hypothesized, individuals found high narrative more persuasive than low narrative, regardless of their receptivity. Contrary to our hypothesis, central-processing (disagreeing) individuals found little difference between implicit messages and explicit messages, whereas the largest difference was for neutral individuals, who were significantly more swayed by implicit messages than explicit messages. This finding suggests that disagreeing individuals, through expending more effort on processing, found the implicit messages racist and distasteful, although indirect. In contrast, neutral individuals who were less careful were more likely to interpret implicit messages more favorably.

It is important to recall that we used two measures (self-report and thought-listing) for Hypothesis 1. Although the self-report and counterargument measures appear to be similar assessments (equivalence reliability), they measure related but different concepts. The self-report items measured persuasiveness
through scales, whereas the thought-listing techniques measured counterarguing behavior, which is typically linked to more systematic and thoughtful processing. As a result, thought-listing techniques are not as effective in measuring persuasion that occurs through the peripheral route. Although results from the counterargument measure also disconfirmed part 1, the findings differed, showing that all three factors interacted to influence resistance behavior. Negatively inclined individuals and neutral individuals resisted low-narrative, explicit messages, whereas predisposed individuals resisted high-narrative, implicit messages. It is interesting to note that neutral individuals also acquiesced most to low-narrative, implicit messages.

Hypothesis 1, parts 2 through 4, also examined content provided in the thought-listing technique. Parts 2 (directionality) and 3 (intensity) were supported. First, for directionality, most individuals had positioned themselves against the online hate messages, but responses from high-narrative, implicit respondents were distributed more evenly for and against cyberhate. Second, for intensity, high-narrative, explicit messages appeared to elicit the strongest response. Part 4 (focus) was partially confirmed, with narrative affecting the focus of counterarguments. High-narrative respondents were more likely to focus on the content than low-narrative respondents, who were more likely to focus on the issue or source. This effect remained consistent regardless of receptivity. In general, narrative appears to moderate the effects of online hate for adolescents, making hate Web pages more acceptable. It focuses individuals on such story components as characters, plots, and narrators or authors. As a result, individuals may process persuasive storytelling by using character identification and plot development as cues or through automatic processing according to scripts and schemas.

Hypothesis 2 was confirmed through three interaction effects. Although high-narrative, implicit messages are initially more influential and accepted, their persuasive effects decay over time. In contrast, low-narrative, explicit message effects remain constant or increase slightly. With the self-report persuasion measurement, disagreeing individuals were initially persuaded by implicit messages. Yet, implicit message effects decayed, whereas the persuasiveness of explicit message effects increased slightly. Neutral and predisposed individuals found high-narrative messages persuasive immediately after exposure, following the predicted pattern. These effects decayed, however, whereas the persuasiveness of low-narrative messages increased over time. The counterargument measurement found that disagreeing individuals resisted low-narrative messages substantially more than high-narrative messages at Time 1. But, over time, resistance to high-narrative messages decayed below the resistance level to low-narrative messages. Despite some differences in effects according to individuals' receptivity, the pattern of decay remained consistent, with low-narrative, explicit message maintaining more stability and endurance than high-narrative, implicit messages. At first glance, this pattern seems counterintuitive. After all, why would low-narrative, explicit messages endure and more accepted
high-narrative, implicit messages decay? However, on closer examination, the ELM can illuminate this finding (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty & Wegener, 1998).

Although generally low, persuasion that results from low-narrative, explicit messages is more likely to occur through scrutiny and central processing. As a result, these messages are more likely to be evaluated less favorably initially but are more likely to persist over time because of careful processing and issue-relevant thinking (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a; Petty et al., 1988; Petty & Priester, 1994; Petty & Wegener, 1998). The explicitness of the message and low narrative act as triggers or motivators to systematic processing. Current research supports this view: Conditions that foster people’s motivations and abilities to engage in central processing at the time of message exposure are associated with increased persistence of persuasion (e.g., Mackie, 1987, Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). Specifically, research has found that self-generation of arguments (e.g., Elms, 1966; Watts, 1967) and autobiographical instances (Lydon, Zanna, & Ross, 1988), the use of interesting or involving communication topics (Ronis, Baumgardner, Leippe, Cacioppo, & Greenwald, 1977), more time to think about a message (e.g., Mitnick & McGinnies, 1958), greater message repetition (e.g., Johnson & Watkins, 1971), reduction of distraction (e.g., Watts & Holt, 1979), and inducement of the belief that participants may have to explain their attitudes to others (e.g., Boninger, Brock, Cook, Gruder, & Romer, 1990; Chaiken, 1980) are all tied to greater persistence.

Although high-narrative, implicit messages appear more effective in influencing individuals immediately after message exposure, these effects are short lived compared to the persuasive effects of low-narrative, explicit messages. This larger finding brings to light the need to be wary of traditional hate tactics. Surprisingly, persuasion that results from explicit online hate persists or increases slightly over time. Although it is reassuring that explicit, low-narrative messages are not terribly convincing initially, this finding points to the potentially dangerous manipulation of explicit material for greater influence. Of additional concern, neutral adolescents appear vulnerable to hate groups’ persuasive strategies. Both high-narrative and implicit message approaches swayed them, with the two strategies interacting for greater persuasion. Although these effects appear limited, the persistence and pattern of influence with greater message repetition remain unknown and potentially harmful. As a result, the effects of persuasive storytelling should not be discounted entirely. With only one exposure, the effects of implicit persuasive narratives are much less alarming because of the decay rate. Yet, with repeated exposure, the effects are likely to increase, with the strengthening of favorable associations.

We extended past research in several unique ways. First, we contributed to the growing body of empirical research investigating online hate (Lee & Leets, 2000; Leets, 2001; McDonald, 1999; Zickmund, 1997) by focusing on adolescents,
a group underexamined and susceptible to White supremacist recruitment efforts. Second, we focused on an issue previously overlooked by both persuasion and language and social psychology scholars: the influence of language strategies (such as persuasive storytelling) on persuasive outcomes. Third, we went beyond most empirical studies, which are cross-sectional and examine the effects of online hate narratives longitudinally.

Yet, this study is not without its limitations. The data stem from production tasks and self-reported responses. Self-report measures are particularly susceptible to social desirability biases, given the sensitive nature of the topic. As critiqued by Cacioppo, Harkins, and Petty (1981), the thought-listing question assumes that individuals are able to distinguish between those thoughts that are spurred by experimental messages and those that are not. In addition, the small sample size for neutral and predisposed groups raises some concern. The mortality of participants dwindled some cell sizes to the minimum requirement of 5 participants (Keppel, 1991). The sample was constrained further by the consent procedure. Even though adolescents over age 13 are allowed to consent to participate in online studies under the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, parental consent was requested and collected via a toll-free fax number. Thus, a higher socioeconomic sample resulted. Yet, it is important to note that this sampling bias mirrors the differences in computer ownership and Internet access by income. Last, the effects studied in this investigation dealt with only one exposure to hate Web sites. One exposure does not provide generalizable findings for more vulnerable teens, who are likely to visit hate sites multiple times. This smaller group needs to be studied in greater depth, taking into account message repetition. As a result, this study primarily describes the larger group of adolescents who are exposed to online hate infrequently.

Hate Web sites appear to be one of many potential pitfalls that await youths on the Internet. As Okrent (1999) noted,

The wonder and the horror of the Web is not that it takes you out into the world; on the contrary, it brings the world—in all its glorious, anarchic, beautiful, hateful variety—into your home. We’d prefer that the porn, the neo-Nazis, the violent misogynists and all the other floating trash of a cacophonous culture not wash into our living rooms. But because they do, we are at least able to know the enemy. (p. 3)

As our study showed, part of “knowing this enemy” is recognizing the sugar coating of cyberhate messages (Espinoza, 2001). Similar to sugar coatings, our findings suggest that the persuasiveness of narratives appears to be effective but short lived. Future research will need to determine whether hate narratives encourage adolescents to return for more or to swallow the bitter center. Regardless, we believe that it is crucial to identify hate group strategies, know how to defuse them, and know how to empower adolescents with the critical and media literacy skills necessary to consume such material on their own.
NOTES

1. Deterministic and probabilistic causation are two common approaches to explain causal influences. Deterministic causation has a strict social science meaning that assumes that three conditions are met before a causal relationship can be claimed: (a) There must be a relationship between the hypothesized cause and the observed effect, (b) the cause must always precede the effect in time (x must come before y), and (c) all alternative explanations for the effect must be eliminated. Most media (TV, the Internet, etc.) effects cannot meet the second and third conditions and hence are probabilistic. Probabilistic causality assumes that a factor increases the likelihood of an effect but is not exclusively responsible for it. Usually, when dealing with human behavior, many factors influence the process.

2. Although narrative in its broadest form has been defined as anything told or recounted (Polkinghorne, 1988), we use a more narrow definition: a telling or recounting of a story. Stories are distinguishable from other language in that they include a series of happenings that gain relevance or causation through their connection to one another (Mink, 1978).

3. The $f$ statistic reports observed power for ANOVAs (Cohen, 1988). A small-effect size is defined as $f = .10$, medium as $f = .25$, and large as $f = .40$. The large-effect size of $f = .40$ is consistent with $d = .80$, since $d = 2f$ (Cohen, 1988). Our finding of a large-effect size ($f = .40$) demonstrates that the nonsignificant result is not caused by insufficient power and that the messages were equivalent.

REFERENCES


