

Fantastic Visual Argument and the Food and Drug Administration's *The Real Cost* Campaign

Public health researchers agree that realism is essential to successful health campaigns (Cho & Choi, 2010). Although surrealism is prevalent in commercial advertising (Najmuldeen, 2015), unrealistic public health messaging may encourage audiences to engage in “message minimization” and dismiss such messages as “exaggerated and overstated” (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2013, p. 325; Hammond, 2011; Orazi, Theilacker, Bove, & Lei, 2016; Petraglia, 2009). Similarly, argumentation scholars analyzing persuasive campaigns have argued that “when [images] are subject to doubt, they have little persuasive power” (Riley, 2015, p. 282). Scholars have also articulated the importance of realism in the context of anti-tobacco campaigns (Farrelly et al., 2003; Mosbaek, Austin, Stark, & Lambert, 2007) and messages targeted at adolescents (Guttman, Gesser-Edelsburg, & Israelashvili, 2008; Lopez, 2014; Pechmann & Reibling, 2006; Stanley et al., 2016).

Despite the consensus about the indispensability of realism in the public health context, one of the most successful anti-smoking campaigns in recent memory relied on surreal tactics. In 2014, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) launched the “first federally funded U.S. youth-focused tobacco education campaign” (Farrelly et al., 2017, p. 50). Named *The Real Cost*, the campaign utilized television, radio, print, web resources, social media, and billboards to reach an estimated “75% of youth aged 12 to 17” (Duke et al., 2015, p. 3). The campaign sought to reduce smoking initiation rates among youth and to deter youth who have already smoked from becoming regular users.

The Real Cost campaign adopted a vastly different approach from other contemporary anti-smoking campaigns. For instance, the *truth* campaign opted for a fact-based approach that

emphasized statistics “about the death toll of tobacco” and “industry documents and memos to expose manipulative marketing practices” (Farrelly & Davis, 2008, pp. 136-137). Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s *Tips From Former Smokers* campaign adopted a “realistic and graphic” documentary style to “shock” smokers into quitting (“Shocking ads,” 2018, para. 1) by presenting visceral “smoking related suffering in real people” (McAfee et al., 2013, p. 2003). The contrast with *The Real Cost* messages, which feature surreal dramatizations depicting cigarettes as alien monsters or miniature bullies, is striking. Gregory Connolly, a tobacco control expert at the Harvard School of Public Health, remarked that he was “surprised the FDA would do this kind of messaging” and warned that “young people are smart and you never want to do messaging that insults their intelligence” (qtd in. Kotz, 2014, para. 9).

However, several compelling studies suggest the FDA’s fantastic advertisements are a potent tool in the struggle to discourage youth smoking (Duke et al., 2015, 2018; Huang et al., 2017; Kranzler et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2016). Based on a nationally representative study, Farrelly et al. (2017) argued that *The Real Cost* was responsible for the prevention of almost 350,000 youths from smoking and concluded that the messages constituted “effective health communication interventions” (p. 49). Elucidating the optimal strategies for reaching adolescents requires explaining how, despite the consensus that realism is the hallmark of effective health messaging, a campaign that uses fantastic narratives has been so successful.

While the success of *The Real Cost* campaign has been amply documented, the reason for that success remains an important question, especially since the campaign violated the basic principle that effective campaigns are based in realism. Explaining the success of the FDA’s campaign is urgent as the nation confronts a smoking crisis. Each day, “3,800 youth under the age of 18” smoke their first cigarette (Mickle, 2016, para. 9). Given that the majority of adult

smokers begin the habit at a young age (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012, p. 3), adolescence is the key period for dissuading smoking. Since smoking remains the largest cause of preventable death worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), there is a dire need for anti-tobacco messages that resonate with adolescents.

More broadly, resolving this conundrum is necessary to improve understanding of fantastic public health narratives. Narrative is now ubiquitous in the field of public health (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007), but the crucial question of which types of narratives are likely to resonate remains underexamined. Moreover, the use of fantastic imagery in anti-tobacco campaigns is expanding, as shown by the FDA's use of such imagery in the *Fresh Empire* and *This Free Life* campaigns in 2018-2019, which target the multicultural youth and LGBTQ young adult demographics, respectively (FDA, 2018). Unfortunately, existing research on the use of narrative in public health campaigns often is conducted through the prism of constructs such as "perceived realism" that are of little relevance to messages that aim to be surreal (Lee, Hecht, Miller-Day, & Elek, 2011, p. 129; Andsager, Austin, & Pinkleton, 2001; Cho & Choi, 2010; Cho et al., 2013; Fishbein, Hall-Jamieson, Zimmer, von Haeften, & Nabi, 2002; Guttman et al., 2008). Without greater efforts to understand fantastic public health messaging, scholars risk falling behind these trends.

In this essay, I demonstrate the potential of fantastic public health narratives and help answer the question: "how can messages be tailored and targeted to young adults to combat recent upward trends in smoking behaviour?" (Farrelly et al., 2003, p. i46). I argue that in cases where audiences (such as young adults) resist expert knowledge (Patterson, 1989, p. 215), emotionally-charged narratives are powerful ways of tapping into relevant values to persuade. I develop this argument in three parts. First, I outline the characteristics that allow surreal and

other fantastic narrative forms to persuade despite lacking realism. Second, I detail the enactment of these forms in *The Real Cost* messages, explaining how the campaign resonates. Third, I conclude by outlining implications derived from this analysis.

Activating Affect: How Fantastic Narratives Persuade

Some messages resonate not through realism, but because their fantastic nature encourages audiences to evaluate their content through the prism of salient values. *The Real Cost* campaign represents an acknowledgement that certain rhetorical situations, where audiences resist appeals to facts, require alternative argumentative forms. Instead of relying upon strictly rational, discursive arguments (Kauffman & Parson, 1990), these narrative forms utilize a values-based rationality. Before delineating the qualities of these narrative forms that can persuade audiences in cases where expert-based realism falters, it is necessary to define several concepts.

In referencing “discursive arguments,” I extend a typology that distinguishes discursive symbols from presentational symbols. Discursive arguments proceed “analytically in the process of reasoning from premises to conclusions” (Campbell, 1984, p. 41). By contrast, presentational arguments sometimes function outside of a propositional structure and are often nonverbal, operating visually, aurally, or performatively (Olson & Goodnight, 1994, p. 252). Furthermore, discursive argumentation is “formal” and “logical” while presentational argumentation is “emotionally expressive—like the way a symphony might elicit a feeling of joy or patriotism” (Pye, 2016, p. 10). Discursive and presentational arguments should be thought of as existing along a continuum as opposed to “mutually exclusive categories,” as most communication contains both (p. 61). The discursive/presentational typology is a useful framework for analysis of public health campaigns, as it allows the critic to illuminate both advertisements that (a) use

reasoned arguments and/or (b) utilize narrative structure and form, including surreal images, to tap into the value system of the audience. Moreover, “the distinction between the discursive and the presentational” has value because it “pushes scholars to stretch their conceptions of argumentative exchange and refutation” (Groarke, Palczewski, & Godden, 2016, p. 226). Such an argumentative analysis reveals both the limits of campaigns based exclusively in realistic argument and the power of campaigns based in surreal plot and symbolism that tap into audience values.

The weaknesses of health campaigns based in realism are evident in argumentation research on the limited power of reason in decision-making. Most people rarely “engage in the sort of critical thinking valorized in argumentation textbooks” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 95 see also: Jarman, 2018). There is a rare point of agreement among humanistic and social scientific scholars, supported by considerable research across multiple disciplines, that confirms that humans rely on values and emotions as criterion for decision-making. Lobel and Loewenstein (2005), summarizing the findings of psychologists and neuroscientists, argue that “human behavior is the product of at least two neural systems that operate according to different principles and often clash with one another” (p. 1046). In Lobel and Loewenstein’s dual system model of decision-making, the deliberative system involves a slow, “balanced weighing of costs and benefits” (p. 1049). In contrast, the second system, which they dub the affective/emotional system, involves “a more reflexive response to emotions experienced at the time of decision making” (p. 1053). Lobel and Loewenstein contend that “human behavior . . . is not under the sole control of either affect or deliberation but results from the interaction of these two qualitatively different processes” (p. 1049). Recognizing the limitations of reason as a factor in

decision-making, as argumentation scholars and social scientists have done, implies that rhetors should engage with their audiences on both the level of rationality and emotion.

Lobel and Loewenstein's typology is consonant with the research of the Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011), who explains human decision-making using two systems: System 1, which operates quickly via intuition, and System 2, which undertakes more complex mental calculations (pp. 20-21). Kahneman contends that the impulsive System 1 exerts significant influence over human decision-making, even though "the attentive System 2 is who we think we are" (p. 415). To acknowledge a distinction between affect and deliberation or intuition and complex thinking is not to elevate or denigrate either mental process. Lobel and Loewenstein (2005) present their system as a corrective to economic theories of behavior that assume "deliberative control of behavior is the norm" and fail to "take account of affective influences" (p. 1046). Moreover, these theories emphasize that "emotion and reason are entwined rather than separate" (Sinayev, 2016, p. 23).

Because dual-system models acknowledge the interdependency of affect and rationality, they are compatible with argument scholarship that holds that "audience reception can be shaped by how arguers frame and present their positions" (Mitchell, 2018, p. 101). By validating argumentation theory with social scientific research on audience reactions, I not only answer the puzzle of how *The Real Cost* campaign persuades, but also set the stage for additional research on narrative argument. More broadly, the approach demonstrates the potential of synthesizing studies of argumentation and social science research to explain audience response.

With these concepts clarified, I next outline the characteristics of narrative forms capable of breaking deadlocks created by gaps between expert consensus and public opinion. I identify three crucial strategies: (1) appeals to values that are relevant for the target audience, (2) the use

of narratives to produce an emotional response, and (3) the creation of alternative evaluative criteria for considering the message, which can add authenticity in spite of the message's surrealism.

First, arguments capable of persuading audiences when discursive reason is insufficient must invoke salient values. By "values" I refer to "shared dispositions of what is desirable and undesirable" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 595). Values can be more narrowly defined as "emotion-laden beliefs about how things *should* or *should not* be—morally, interpersonally, or aesthetically" (Westen, 2008, p. 82). In the decision-making process, values serve as "reasons" for belief or action by providing "warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice" (Fisher, 1987, p. 107). A values-based argument links a value (or values) to an issue, positing that a given action, behavior, belief, or concept is compatible or incompatible with a value to "define an issue and create an acceptable range of meanings regarding the issue" (Gordon & Miller, 2004, p. 74). The most persuasive arguments are usually those that have fidelity with "the *interests* of the group being asked to believe it" (Cloud, 2018, p. 33).

Second, in cases where expert knowledge holds little sway over an audience, narratives are a potent argumentative resource. The power of narrative stems from its capacity to trigger an "inrush of memory," creating "a match between the paradigm of the audience and that of the rhetor, bridging divisions otherwise too wide to cross" (West & Carey, 2006, pp. 382-383). Moreover, narratives often ask audiences to "assume a certain type of character and identity, and to act in a particular way," allowing them to advance arguments less intrusively (Jasinski, 2001, p. 402). Visual messages, which can render the abstract concrete and create vivid sensory experiences, are an effective means for delivering fantastic narratives. The "persuasive power" of visual argumentation "consists of its ability to recreate visual cues, which in the real world are

connected to specific emotional responses” (Kjeldsen, 2018, p. 87). According to Lobel and Loewenstein, “the affective system is . . . highly attuned to visual imagery, whereas the deliberative system is much more keyed in to the logic of costs and benefits” (p. 1057). By using potent imagery to activate the emotional decision-making system, visual messages can trigger “*networks of associations*, bundles of thoughts, feelings, images, and ideas that have become connected over time” (Westen, 2008, p. 3).

Third, narratives are most potent when they alter the frame through which audiences evaluate their content. When people confront information that contradicts a deeply-held belief, they often engage in “motivated reasoning” by conforming “assessments of information to some goal or end extrinsic to accuracy” (Kahan, 2013, p. 408). Past campaigns have been resisted by teenagers who “feel that they are ‘immortal’ or that deadly consequences could never happen to them” (Walton, 1996, p. 305). Fantastic narratives bypass this resistance by shifting evaluation away from discursive standards that are skeptical about expertise to values-based standards. The “improbability of the image” creates a sense of incongruity that “directs the [viewer] to a figurative meaning” (Callister & Stern, 2007, p. 2). Given that “stories are treated differently from scientific or logical argument” they are “held to different truth standards” by audiences that might otherwise respond skeptically (Green, 2004, p. 252). Surreal narrative elements can provide “different frames for interpretation” and invite “audiences to utilize those frames to evaluate” the message (Hahner, 2013, p. 156).

In the next section, I demonstrate that the principles linking value appeals to “narrative rationality” explain the success of *The Real Cost* advertisements, which appeal to values instead of abstract health risks (Fisher, 1985). In conducting this analysis, I treat *The Real Cost* messages as “visual arguments” (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, 2007). Just as anti-tobacco messaging has

evolved from a discursive, fact-based approach to include visual persuasion, the field of argumentation studies has developed theories of visual argument that explain the way that “visual, embodied, and multimodal forms” can tap into an audience’s values (Groarke et al., 2016, p. 217). These broadening horizons reflect a growing recognition among multiple academic communities of the unique “virtues of visual argumentation” (Kjeldsen, 2015, p. 200), including its ability to unite “the rational with the emotional” (p. 202). Thus, visual argumentation theories can be used to explain *The Real Cost* campaign’s use of striking visuals to appeal to their audiences on the level of values and emotion.

Values, Narrative, and Framing in *The Real Cost* Messages

In this section, I analyze several *The Real Cost* messages, arguing that their persuasiveness stems from their capacity to activate values-based argumentative standards. My analysis proceeds in four parts. First, I provide an overview of key campaign messages, detailing their arguments, characters, plots, and themes. Second, I explain how *The Real Cost* messages invoke values that are highly salient for adolescent audiences. Third, I describe how the messages construct fantastic narratives designed to trigger emotional associations. Finally, I outline how the messages encourage the audience to adopt alternative frames for evaluation, enhancing the campaign’s overall authenticity.

An Overview of Several *The Real Cost* Messages

To a teenager contemplating smoking because of social pressures, the usual refrain that smoking will result in long-term health consequences can sound hopelessly abstract, given that youth usually are more “concerned with dating, socializing, and their peers’ opinions” (Beaudoin, 2002, p. 133). *The Real Cost* messages articulate anti-smoking arguments through a unique interplay of narrative and “visual metaphors” (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007, p. 105), as

cigarettes don several sinister guises that frustrate the protagonists of each message and symbolize the deadly, addictive nature of tobacco. By using fantastic imagery to represent “the dangers of the toxic mix of chemicals in cigarette smoke” the FDA hopes to “motivate youth to find out more about what's in each cigarette and reconsider the harms of smoking” (FDA, personal communication, March 17, 2016).

In the messages titled *Science Class* (FDA, 2015c) and *Found It* (FDA, 2015b), smoking is represented by an alien creature which bears physical attributes borrowed from insects, crustaceans, and science fiction/horror movie monsters. *Science Class* takes place in a high school science laboratory, albeit an unusually poorly lit one (FDA, 2015c). A teacher is seen studying the alien creature, which is pinned to a table by metal restraints. Much to the alarm of the students who begin to scream and disperse throughout the room, the creature breaks free and terrorizes the classroom. *Found It* contains a similar narrative arc and takes place at night in the shadows beneath the bleachers of a sports stadium. Teenagers are seen prodding an alien creature with a pencil. A boy lets the creature crawl up his arm till it latches onto his face, prompting the group to panic. The boy falls to the ground, causing the creature to retreat into the darkness. As the boy gathers himself, he lets out a hoarse smoker’s cough. Both *Science Class* and *Found It* end with a narrator stating, “if cigarettes looked as dangerous as they are, you’d run like hell” while the alien creature withdraws into a pack of cigarettes, like a hermit crab might withdraw into a shell (FDA, 2015b; FDA 2015c).

Stay In Control (FDA, 2014b), *Bully* (FDA, 2014a), *Band Bully* (FDA, 2015a), and *Dance* (FDA, 2016) rely upon surreal imagery to argue that cigarettes threaten the independence of their users. *Stay In Control* features a young protagonist named Amanda Green, who is seen reciting a vow. Amanda’s commitment reads as such:

I, Amanda Green, at the point of my life when I'm not a kid anymore, now that I finally have freedom to define who I am, I hereby agree to be bound to you. To let you decide how I spend money. To let you set my boundaries, and to come running the instant you snap your fingers. With this contract, I relinquish part of my freedom to you. (FDA, 2014b)

Even as Amanda is pictured surrounded by carefree peers, her body language conveys discomfort. Amanda's desire to socialize and her need to smoke cigarettes are portrayed as incompatible. The key visual metaphor appears when the contract Amanda is signing magically rolls up to form a cigarette. The advertisement ends with a final shot of Amanda smoking alone, as a narrator states: "there's a contract in every cigarette—when you light up, you sign up" (FDA, 2014b). Cigarette addiction is represented as a binding obligation that restricts the freedom of users. This visual metaphor is part of a values-based appeal that challenges associations between smoking and independence by framing cigarette addiction as fundamentally submissive, refuting a common justification for smoking.

Bully (FDA, 2014a), *Band Bully* (FDA, 2015a), and *Dance* (FDA, 2016) also argue that smoking threatens independence, but use different visual metaphors to advance this claim. Cigarettes are personified in the form of a diminutive man, no more than a few inches tall, who bullies high school students. In *Bully*, this miniature man performs impressive physical feats, such as shoving a student against a locker. He is shown disrupting youth during school and while they watch television with their friends, illustrating how addiction undermines the free will of smokers. *Band Bully* argues that smoking weakens independence by showing how the protagonist's smoking habit (symbolized by a miniature bully who constantly interrupts the band mid-song) fuels dysfunction in a garage band. *Dance* argues that cigarettes impede adolescent

social life by showing a couple's romantic night at a school dance ruined by the continual interruptions of another miniature bully. All four of these videos—*Stay In Control*, *Bully*, *Band Bully*, and *Dance*—end with a narrator stating, “don't let tobacco control you” (FDA, 2014a; FDA, 2014b; FDA, 2015a; FDA, 2016). The protagonists are all failures who have sacrificed autonomy to cigarettes. In what follows, I explain that these messages discourage smoking because they invoke values that are cherished by the target demographic, activate emotional associations, and suggest alternative frames for evaluation that enhance authenticity.

Appeals to Salient Values

The Real Cost messages are tailored to invoke values that are salient with teenage audiences. Although adolescents are often unfazed by death and health appeals (Strauss, 1991, p. 46), they are receptive to appeals to the value of independence. Perhaps no value is more salient to adolescents than independence, or the state of being liberated from the authority of others (van den Berg et al., 2014, p. 239). Focus group research has established that independence is highly influential in shaping adolescent attitudes towards smoking (Siegel & Lotenberg, 2007, p. 58). Furthermore, the adolescent need for independence stems from a psychologically and culturally deep-seated desire to “defy mainstream, adult-imposed norms” and is associated with “peer approval” and sex appeal (National Cancer Institute, 2008, p. 213). Tobacco companies have long recognized the allure of independence for adolescents and tailored their advertising accordingly.

Although designers of public health messages have been slow to recognize the limitations of death appeals and have used them extensively (Henley & Donovan, 1999, pp. 301-302), *The Real Cost* departs from this strategy, elevating “the loss of control and independence as a result of smoking” as “primary message themes” (Duke et al., 2015, p. 3). *The Real Cost* messages use

a values-based rationality that emphasizes values salient to adolescents as opposed to abstract mortality risks. *Stay In Control* (FDA, 2014b), *Bully* (FDA, 2014a), *Band Bully* (FDA, 2015a), and *Dance* (FDA, 2016) reframe cigarette addiction as “a loss of control to disrupt the beliefs of independence-seeking youth who currently think they will not get addicted or feel they can quit at any time” (FDA, personal communication, March 17, 2016). Rather than lecturing that smoking is dangerous, they argue that smoking inhibits independence through visual metaphor.

Several images particularly are effective at symbolizing the loss of independence. In *Stay In Control*, the image of Amanda signing a contract (which is revealed to be the wrapping paper of a cigarette) powerfully suggests that smoking entails “selling one’s soul.” Instead of enjoying newfound freedom and popularity, Amanda makes a binding commitment to cigarettes that dictates her behavior in social situations. *Bully*, *Band Bully*, and *Dance* contain similarly impactful visual representations of cigarette addiction’s production of social alienation. The recurring image that concludes each message—of a teenage protagonist separated from his/her friends by the oppressive bully of cigarettes—serves as a concise “visual demonstration” that cigarettes are antithetical to the values that teenagers prize (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007, p. 105).

These visual metaphors cast cigarettes as coercive, arguing that smoking signifies weakness, submissiveness, and lack of willpower. This strategy is more effective than discursive appeals to health risks alone, as independence is a “transcendent value” for adolescents, an ultimate value that “can override any other consideration in assessing a narrative” (Baker, 2006, p. 154). Surreal narratives can therefore persuade even if they portray “impossible events” if they achieve “emotional realism” by invoking potent values (Hall, 2003, p. 635). In this way, surreal narratives can achieve what Fisher (1985) called narrative fidelity and probability based on their linkage to core values. The narrative structure is not realistic, but it nonetheless appeals to values

that are both real and central to the audience. Advertising always “anticipates certain critical responses of the intended audience,” but the most persuasive advertising anticipates the transcendent values that are most likely to influence the audience’s behavior (Wierda, & Visser, 2014, p. 87).

Use of Fantastic Narratives to Trigger Emotional Associations

Anti-tobacco campaigns must confront the positive associations that adolescents have between smoking and independence, rebellion, sex appeal, and adulthood; associations forged by decades of ubiquitous cigarette use in advertising, television, film, and other mediums (National Cancer Institute, 2008). Moreover, an adolescent’s decision to smoke is not rational but is instead “driven by the affective impulses of the moment” (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2004, p. 319). In such a situation, appeals to long-term health risks targeted at deliberative, System 2 faculties have inherent limitations. Instead of presuming the sufficiency of discursive appeals alone, *The Real Cost* messages appeal to System 1 in a way likely to shape the calculations undertaken by System 2. By utilizing fantastic narratives and striking imagery, the FDA’s messages “elicit an emotional reaction which subsequently causes the smoker to think harder and learn more about presented health risks,” ensuring that both the affective and deliberative systems are engaged (Sinayev, 2016, p. 23).

The Real Cost messages derive considerable power by conjuring a “a vivid, multisensory network of associations” in viewers, drawing upon well-established visual conventions found in films to provoke disgust and fear (Westen, 2008, p. 5). *Science Class* and *Found It* constitute persuasive visual arguments because they translate the long-term health risks of smoking into an impactful image that is deeply rooted in the “visual culture” of popular films that adolescents are familiar with (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, p. 7). Teenagers might not understand the science

behind emphysema, but they understand science fiction monsters; portraying cigarettes in that way reduces the complexity of the phenomenon. The two messages, by portraying cigarettes as foul alien creatures, are designed to conjure negative emotional associations, deglamorizing cigarettes in the process.

Other *The Real Cost* messages use fantastic narratives in novel ways to combat the positive emotional associations many adolescents attribute to smoking. *Bully*, *Band Bully*, and *Dance* contain a familiar plot arc involving adolescent socializing “gone wrong,” and all feature a common antagonist: a miniature bully meant to symbolize cigarettes who is characterized as unclean and controlling. The miniature antagonist of *Bully*, for example, has long, unkempt, greasy hair that resembles a mullet. His yellowed white t-shirt is wrinkled, dirty, and appears sweaty. The bully’s pants and shoes are a garish brown color, and his stomach fat implies that he is out of shape—a far cry from the glamorous characters shown in cigarette advertising.

The conclusion of *Bully* contains a vivid disgust appeal: after dragging a boy away from his friends to smoke, the bully brushes back his hair and says “pucker up” as he slides in between the boy’s index and middle finger, making clear that the visual metaphor represents a cigarette (FDA, 2014a). This greasy little bully and his injunction to “pucker up” reverses the association between smoking and sex appeal (National Cancer Institute, 2008, pp. 217-220). Importantly, this disgust appeal exploits homophobia by encouraging heterosexual male viewers to equate smoking with the act of kissing a member of the same sex. In doing so, *Bully* mobilizes “representations of same-sex sexuality” to create “spectatorial disgust,” a rhetorical move with an unfortunate history of stigmatizing LGBTQ persons (Katz, 2006, p. 239). This reading of *Bully* serves as a reminder that an effective message is not necessarily an ethical message, and that public health promotion should not come at the expense of respect for LGBTQ persons.

Although the evidence documenting *The Real Cost* campaign's persuasiveness is strong, the need for anti-smoking campaigns to influence youth of all backgrounds demands that the rhetorical choice to further the heteronormative association between queerness and disgust be scrutinized on both ethical and practical grounds.

Although *The Real Cost* messages contain a variety of scenarios and characters, they are all united by their use of vivid imagery to disrupt associations between tobacco and prized values. *The Real Cost* messages therefore function as what Olson and Goodnight (1994) label "oppositional arguments" that "block enthymematic associations" between tobacco, sex appeal, and independence (p. 250). By inverting the "valence" of cigarettes "from a social positive to a social negative," these messages deter audiences from "uncritically supplying the unspoken assumption" that cigarette use signifies rugged individualism (p. 262). Since a key allure of cigarettes is the supposed "comment" that smoking makes on the smoker's attractiveness, "inverting the traditionally positive associations" surrounding cigarettes "should dissuade some consumers who are not moved by" fact-based discursive appeals (p. 262; see also: Horwitz, 1998). Through intricate visual metaphors, the FDA's campaign takes advantage of the way that "much of our behavior reflects the activation of emotion-laden networks of association" (Westen, 2008, p. 83).

Creation of Alternative Frames

The Real Cost demonstrates the power of messages that nudge audiences into adopting different interpretive frames. By utilizing a fantastic presentational form distinct from testimonial-driven or fact-driven campaigns, *The Real Cost* encourages audiences to utilize alternative standards for evaluation. The presence of surreal imagery serves as a cue that the message should be evaluated differently than an anti-smoking message that provides statistics

about cancer deaths. This allows the audience to overlook the visual hyperbole, “opening up possibilities to accept premises different from the real world” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 266). The narrative juxtaposition of mundane settings and surreal imagery creates a sense of “contextual dissonance” to signal to viewers that the usual generic norms do not apply (Barbu-Kleitsch, 2015, p. 177). Because *The Real Cost* messages utilize a self-evidently hyperbolic visual form, audiences may feel comfortable ignoring their violations of the laws of reality.

The narrative and setting of *Science Class*, which contains horror film-style atmospherics, is demonstrative. The classroom depicted in *Science Class* is eerily dark, illuminated only by a single lamp that the teacher is holding over the cigarette monster. The teacher’s dialogue itself distinguishes *Science Class* from traditional public health messaging. As the teacher prods the creature, he lists chemicals that appear in cigarettes such as formaldehyde and nitrobenzene, warning the students that these chemicals will cause “prematurely wrinkled skin” and “stunted lung growth” (FDA, 2015c). Such information might typically be the primary focus of a message, but in *Science Class* it is mere background noise, delivered by the teacher in a bored, monotonous tone and met with disinterest by the students. While the teacher drones on, alarmed students notice the creature breaking free and shout frightenedly to capture his attention.

This narrative—featuring an oblivious teacher so engrossed in delivering a tedious lecture to a captive audience that he fails to notice a rampaging alien monster—subverts public health messaging conventions by acknowledging adolescents’ frustration with sanctimonious lectures about health risks. The message in *Science Class*, however, cannot be dismissed as adult condescension: the only adult in the scene is portrayed as incompetent, while the students are shown as alert to the true danger of the monster. Cumulatively, the novel narrative, surreal atmosphere, and alien creatures serve as “signaling devices” that let the audience know they are

not watching a typical public health message, invoking the science fiction or horror genre instead (Baker, 2006, p. 86). These narrative and visual elements therefore “index a textual instantiation of the genre in question” and “trigger a set of expectations and inferences associated with it” (p. 86).

Not only does the surrealism of *Science Class* openly flout generic norms associated with public health messaging; the message is the clearest acknowledgement by the FDA that certain anti-tobacco arguments optimally are delivered using presentational, rather than discursive, forms. *Science Class* offers meta-commentary on anti-tobacco campaigns generally, stating that the best way to convey the risks of smoking is not the rote recitation of factoids, the preferred strategy of the dull teacher who serves as a metonymic stand-in for the genre of fact-based public health messaging. Rather, illustrating “the real cost” of smoking paradoxically requires breaking from realism altogether, by utilizing visual metaphors that can clearly summarize the deleterious consequences of smoking into a single frightening image. The alien cigarette monster seen in *Science Class* and *Found It* succinctly encapsulates the cancerous chemicals found in every cigarette and is jarring enough to capture the audience’s attention. The creature’s invocation of the science-fiction/horror genre additionally encourages the audience to utilize alternative evaluative criteria while considering the message, discouraging dismissal on the basis of being unrealistic, and encouraging avoidance of tobacco through a visual metaphor that emphasizes the toxic dangers of cigarettes.

That these messages encourage the audience to adopt different frames for interpretation is crucial to their success. Given the interrelated phenomena of motivated reasoning and message minimization, smokers are adept at pointing out exaggerations in anti-smoking messages as grounds for dismissal. *The Real Cost* campaign addresses this by using surreal visual cues to

signal that these messages engage in tactical exaggeration to convey a more profound message about the risks of smoking. Although the audience is aware that the scenarios depicted are dramatized, genre cues encourage the audience to suspend their disbelief and consider the underlying argument of the message. At the level of plot and imagery, the advertisements are surreal, but in their linkage to key values prized by adolescents, the advertisements are entirely realistic.

Conclusion

Although an abundance of research describes realism as a pre-requisite to the persuasiveness of public health campaigns, studies demonstrate that the FDA's visually fantastic anti-smoking messages are "associated with a reduction in smoking initiation" and are an important means to "accelerate progress toward future tobacco-free generations" (Farrelly et al., 2017, p. 50). Paradoxically, young viewers—ever skeptical and difficult to persuade—are aware of the dramatized nature of these messages, yet still internalize their warnings. The solution to this puzzle is that *The Real Cost* worked because it (1) prioritizes appeals to values that adolescents regard as transcendent, (2) utilizes fantastic narratives designed to influence affective dimensions of decision-making, and (3) suggests alternative frames for audience evaluation designed to mitigate skepticism and enhance authenticity. This confirms that for certain audiences, "realism" is defined in relationship to both reason and affect, and to both evidence and values. The combination of these three strategies is what makes *The Real Cost* so unexpectedly effective, suggesting that future anti-tobacco messaging should continue to capitalize on the fact that "affect transforms people in fundamental ways" (Lobel & Loewenstein, 2005, p. 1087).

This essay extends previous scholarship regarding visual argument while enhancing understanding of surrealistic narratives. These findings grow in significance as surrealism becomes an established paradigm in anti-tobacco messaging. The FDA has continued its fantastic approach while expanding *The Real Cost* to address e-cigarettes and smokeless tobacco and in its follow-ups to *The Real Cost* campaign, *Fresh Empire* and *This Free Life* (FDA, 2018). The FDA is planning additional campaigns to micro-target other demographics such as Native Americans as well (Kanski, 2017). More broadly, the principles outlined in this essay provide a framework for argumentation critics to explain how messages with a surreal plot structure can move audiences by tapping into shared values. Whether or not *Fresh Empire* and *This Free Life* are able to build on the momentum of *The Real Cost* campaign may hinge on the deftness with which they tap into their audience's transcendent values, reverse positive emotional associations related to cigarettes, and produce new frameworks for evaluation. The proliferation of surreal messaging in turn points to the need for additional argumentation-centered research on campaigns that depart from the realism that has traditionally characterized the genre of public health messaging.

Fantastic and surreal argumentation emerge in a variety of rhetorical contexts and often are used to attack scientific consensus. Fortunately, the theoretical approach used in this analysis of the FDA's *The Real Cost* campaign provides an alternative means of presenting powerful arguments in cases where evidence and public opinion do not align, confirming that emotionally-driven arguments can be put to beneficial uses rather than being the sole province of demagogues and reactionary skeptics. John Adams (1770) famously said that "facts are stubborn things," but they are far more stubborn when they are tied to the audience's values and presented in conjunction with a compelling narrative.

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