

# Self-Determination and Public Messaging: Brief Autonomy Supportive Communications are Effective across Life Domains

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Public messages, slogans, social media posts, and advertisements are often meant to persuade and influence people. Thus, they tend to be directive. Autonomy-supportive communications, in contrast, tap into intrinsic goals and aim to facilitate reflective consideration of the self-congruent aspects of the message. In this talk, I use experimental evidence from both between-groups and repeated measures designs to compare autonomy-focused and controlling messaging across a range of domains – including body positivity, protective health behavior, proenvironmental behavior, and antiracism. In the first series of experiments, I show that need-conducive messaging about body acceptance promotes self-esteem, bodily agency, and positive body image, whereas pressuring people to feel body positive does not – and can sometimes feel more controlling than thinness idealization. To further illustrate the role of autonomy-supportive messaging in health outcomes, a large international experiment shows that an autonomy-supportive message conveying the importance of social distancing during COVID-19 reduces defiance relative to a controlling message. In the domain of environmental messaging, two experiments examine the importance of autonomy-focused slogans in proenvironmental learning and intentions to save electricity and water. Finally, a set of recent experiments show that antiracism messages based on intrinsic values are more effective than controlling and normative messages when motivating social justice behavior. Furthermore, by contrasting multiple types of antiracism messages, I show that individual differences in motivational orientation link to message preference – which indicates there may be value in mapping messages to individuals' motivation. Taken together, these nine studies converge to suggest that even very brief messages can promote positive

social behavior and wellbeing when they target personal agency, reflective choice, psychological needs, and intrinsic values. I discuss the prospective social benefits of extracting or “boiling down” need-supportive communications into brief slogans or media posts, in order to reach a wide audience.