Introduction
Persuasion is a ubiquitous force. We encounter persuasive messages on everything from billboards, t-shirts, flyers, websites, commercials, and social media. We are constantly bombarded with advertisements telling us what we should do, what we should believe, and who we should be. Depending on the methods and motives used, persuasion can be both beneficial and harmful to an individual and society at large. Zarouali, Boerman, Voorveld, and van Noort (2022), state:

“Algorithms that recommend certain relevant products to consumers might lead to immediate, short-term effects (i.e. buying behavior); but alternatively, algorithms that recommend news articles that mainly fit a person’s own ideological views on society might influence a person’s opinions to become more extreme (and polarized) over the long term” (p.178)

According to Dainton and Zelley (2019), there are three requirements for a message to be considered a form of persuasion. First, the message must have the intention to achieve a goal on the part of the sender. Second, communication must be the message’s means to achieve a goal. Finally, the message recipient must be of free will, being the freedom to make any decision without constraints (p. 121). This definition of persuasion emphasizes the notion that persuasion is not accidental or coincidental, but rather it is always intentional communication.

Persuasive mediums have evolved over time, with “an increase in the percentage of people using various types of new media technologies from 4% in 2008 to 36% in 2018” (Yujie, et al., 2022, p.2). People have turned to media for reasons including to be entertained, to be informed of news, to stay in contact with family and friends, or simply to pass the time of boredom (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks, 2023). “Media consumption is a deliberate choice designed to satisfy particular needs. Media don’t have uniform effects on the audience; effects vary according to the individual reasons for media use” (Griffin, et al., 2023, chp. 35). The
specific reasons that drive us to consume media provide organizations opportunities to promote their products, agenda, beliefs, etc., through “hidden” persuasion efforts on these various platforms. For example, Yujie, et.al (2022) state that “New Media Technologies refer to all kinds of web-related technologies like social networking sites, blogs, online social media networking, and other communication technology forms” (p.1). As people are mindlessly scrolling, they are being persuaded towards specific music, products, organizations, events, and people without even realizing it.

For this project, I engaged in ethnographic research, which allowed me to work directly within a specific community, take notes, and participate in their communication strategies. Ethnographic research can be described as a method that “seek[s] to understand the beliefs, values, behaviors, and social dynamics of a group through direct observation and participation in their daily life” (Hassan, 2023, Ethnographic Study section). I worked alongside a team utilizing new media to persuade participation and/or donation in a non-profit color run event with the organization, The Connecting Space. This nonprofit organization has the mission of bringing people together through connection (theconnectingspacenc.org). They do this by working with Mustard Seed Communities which works directly with Blessed Assurance, a home located in Northwest Jamaica for children with disabilities. Through partnerships and service, The Connecting Space directly impacts the lives of those in Blessed Assurance by meeting them in their current circumstances to offer assistance wherever needed.

In the following sections, I will be conducting a literature review and analysis of persuasion through media in theories such as Agenda Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm while comparing them to my personal experience. By conducting research and utilizing material from previous courses, I applied these theories in real life through various deliverables on social media and in PR packets for retail sell-through. Through trial and
error, I learned what worked well and what did not to further the chances of attracting attention for the color run non-profit event and the cause in which it is supporting.

**Literature Review**

To be effective, persuasion must be tailored to a specific intended audience, requiring an extensive understanding of the targeted group. Zarouali, et al. (2022) discuss the persuasion process as containing five underlying mechanisms. The first process of persuasion is the concept of relevance. People have to find interest in, or identify with, a message to be influenced by it. Particularly for algorithm-mediated communication, the chosen “content [must] align well with the interests and preferences of the recipients” (p.1084) for them to even come across it.

Secondly, persuasion focuses on the ability to reduce the overload of information, limiting the content options while increasing their perceived favorability. Third, social norms must be acknowledged and highly implemented into the persuasion process. People are more likely to support an initiative if they know someone else who is doing it; “studies have shown that these social cues increase the likelihood of eliciting more favorable attitudes toward specific content and generating behavioral change” (p.1084)

The fourth mechanism, automation bias, refers to the concept that people have greater trust in machines in comparison to other sources of recommendations. This gives a favorable advantage to persuasion attempts made through online mediums. The last mechanism is the ability to reinforce people’s preexisting attitudes and views. Algorithms are automatically bringing people content they like to see; therefore, persuasion can be an attempt to simply appeal to what is already there. This attitude reinforcement brings about “an increase in the likelihood of accepting or agreeing with the information included in the content” (Zarouali, et al., 2022, p.1085). With these behaviors and mechanisms in consideration, persuasion can be effectively utilized in a variety of ways.
With the rather recent influx of media users, this medium has become a desirable avenue to conduct persuasion. This raises the importance of understanding related theories and how they can be applied within this context. Agenda Setting Theory is based on the idea that “mass media determine[s] the issues that concern the public rather than the public’s views” (Schechter, 2023, 3.1 Media Influence section). Persuasion can be utilized in such a way that it doesn’t tell people what to think, but rather what they should be thinking about. Highlighting a specific topic through methods such as repetition will cause it to quickly gain attention, becoming “the issues that the public discusses, debates, and demands action on” (Schechter, 2023, 3.1 Media Influence section). Similarly, framing can determine how messages are differently constructed and therefore interpreted. “Framing is to interpretation of an issue as Agenda Setting Theory is to whether an issue is considered at all” (Schechter, 2023, 3.1 Media Influence section). How a topic is covered and brought to the intended audience affects the perception that is taken. What is being brought forth, pushed back, highlighted, or ignored, all constructs how a message is received and thus acted upon.

While Agenda Setting Theory and framing have their similarities, Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) found that the amount of needed exposure is at least one important distinction between both. They stated that Agenda Setting Theory is dependent on memory-based models, with heightened accessibility being the driving force behind effective persuasion. However, “the primary difference on the psychological level between agenda setting… and framing, on the other hand, is therefore the difference between whether we think about an issue and how we think about it” (p.14). Framing is centered around the information about the topic rather than the fact that the topic has been received and/or noticed. Looking at framing as second-level agenda setting “means making aspects of an issue more salient through different modes of presentation and therefore shifting people’s attitudes” (p.15). Bringing together these similar, but different,
concepts allow the persuader to understand the various forms in which persuasion works and how/where to direct their efforts to achieve the desired result.

Storytelling and narration are two highly effective and widely used forms of persuasion, “Fisher (1984, 1987) argues that human beings are fundamentally storytelling creatures; therefore, the most persuasive or influential message is... a narrative that convinces us of “good reasons” for engaging in a particular action or belief” (Dainton & Zelley, 2023, p.132). Five assumptions drive Fisher’s narrative paradigm, starting with the proposal that humans are uniquely distinct from other creatures because of our storytelling abilities. Dainton and Zelley state that your “values, emotions, and aesthetic preferences shape your beliefs and actions” (2023, p.133). Secondly, individuals need the ability to judge whether stories are believable or not. Opposed to pure logos, humans also depend on “good reasons” as a basis for this decision. This leads to the third assumption which is the idea that a person’s good reason depends on their culture, character, history, values, experiences, and the like (Dainton & Zelley, 2023, p.133). This alludes to the idea that people will have varying good reasons and sometimes disagree on what classifies as a good reason. Fourth is that “rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings,” and that a person’s rationality stems from their ability to create a coherent story (Dainton & Zelley, 2023, p.134). Lastly, the narrative paradigm suggests that the world is based on both cooperative and competing stories, forcing individuals to choose between these stories for themselves. In the end, a common understanding is created from the process of creating and recreating stories within each individual.

Based on a study conducted for a startup company, Naava, storytelling, and narration were used to establish who the company is, what it stands for, and who all is involved. Ala-Kortesmaa, et al. (2022) stated that for Naava, “the content of storytelling was informative, but for instance, narratives of solution provider, well-being, and forerunner did have a strong
“emotional aspect” (p.234-235). It was concluded that a rememberable organizational identity is paramount to understanding the key concepts and values of an organization they seek to promote with its products and services. In both external (image-building through narratives of the product) and internal (heroic and business stories), they found overlaps of these narratives coming together to create an identity for both a product and the company at large. These “narratives suggest that there is an attempt to create coherence, but as may be the case with many startup companies, if the more strategic narratives are the goal, they must be first recognized” (Ala-Kortesmaa, et.al, 2022, p.235). This allows the company to select the narratives they want to focus on strengthening, to ultimately avoid confusion, by dealing with coexisting narratives. This study is an ultimate example of how storytelling and narration can be used specifically for start-up companies to build their identity, and eventually gain credibility to persuade the intended audience.

**Analysis**

While working alongside the non-profit, *The Connecting Space*, I focused my efforts on persuading individuals to either participate in the fundraising color run event or to donate to the organization. I created media deliverables for the organization’s Instagram page and a physical banner to be hung at the event’s location. We also focused on making a PR packet containing multiple items like a brochure, letterhead, contact card, and advertising pricing sheet. The campaign was largely focused on social media because of the popularity and visibility of the medium. On an interpersonal level, the PR packet allowed me to personally go to stores and introduce the organization and event and ask if they would be willing to donate items or money toward our cause.

While I was not able to get exact numbers on how many people joined the race through social media or by seeing the banner, the Instagram page did get attention from followers and
supporters of the cause. When making the deliverables for the social media page I made sure to pull from my research on persuasion and take a moment to analyze who my audience is. Using Zarouali’s (2022) research on audiences, I tried to find ways to foster identification with the audience. I knew that those who use social media, specifically Instagram, would be younger than older individuals and that I would have to find a way to make them interested in what we were posting. I made sure to use colorful graphics that would draw someone's attention and include just the right amount of information to pull them into the caption, eventually leading them to the website to learn more about the event (see appendices). Following Agenda Setting Theory, the point of the graphics was not to tell audiences everything they needed to know. Rather, the purpose was to catch the attention of someone scrolling on social media and get them to visit the website where they would be able to donate and/or sign up for the color run. Another advantage to using social media is that it allows people to share our posts, which leads people to be more willing to participate in the event if they know someone else who is.

I utilized these same principles and ideas when going to the physical stores to ask for donations. Again, using Zarouali’s (2022) work, I knew that I had to create identification with the audiences. The people I spoke with had to feel a reason to care about what I was saying and to want to do something about it. While the process of going into stores to ask for donations was intimidating, I found a bit of success in the process. After the first few encounters, I learned to utilize Framing Theory by making certain aspects of the issue prominent, eliciting certain interpretations and responses. Once they began understanding the reason behind the organization more than anything else, they would feel a sense of need and want to help out, resulting in participation of some sort. Additionally, by having the physical PR packet in my hands, I was able to show them the pictures of the children and physical representations of what they would be donating for and to whom.
Storytelling and Narration were also a big part of my persuasion efforts, both in media and in person with the PR packets. As mentioned in my literature review, humans are unique in their ability of storytelling, and it is important to find a way to appeal to individuals' emotions through this process of narration (Dainton & Zelley, 2023). I was able to pull on these theories the most when interacting with people in person, as it is hard to do this within the limitations of a social media platform like Instagram. However, as mentioned above, once they get to The Connecting Space’s website from an Instagram post, we are able to use storytelling through past experiences and testimonials of the trips with the organization. When talking to someone in person, I would start by introducing myself and then go straight into what organization I was working with and directly address the issues that The Connecting Space is working to improve. This would allow time for their emotions to be pulled into the stories I was telling and then I would inform them of how they could work alongside us to also improve the issue.

As addressed in the study by Ala-Kortesmaa, et al. (2022) on the company Naava, the stories that are told create the image of a company and become what they are known for. Therefore, it was crucial for me to be careful about what I was saying and how I approached the way of asking for donations. As well, I was also conscious about the companies that I went to ask money for, knowing that those who donated would be someone we would be known as partnered with. This helped me to narrow down my choices to companies that I knew were close to the event’s location and companies that I knew had a previous good reputation for donating to nonprofits and helping those in need when possible.

**Conclusion**

Through this research paper, I have documented the use of persuasion through a partnership with a local non-profit, The Connecting Space, through various mediums. Numerous forms of persuasion were explored through theories such as Agenda Setting Theory, Framing
Theory, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm, Storytelling, and Narration. I was able to analyze the persuasive efforts that I had performed for this color run on the day of the event, April 6th, 2024. While I was not able to perform an analysis on individuals as they signed into the race, asking where they heard about the event, this would be something that I would like to try in the future. We had around 40 individuals, composed of varying ages, races, and genders, show up to run with excitement to support the cause. The organization raised around $3,600.00. Despite having been turned down by some businesses and individuals, our efforts to receive donations and participation were still effective.

In the end, we were successful in our attempt to support the residents of Blessed Assurance and send individuals on the trip to help be a part of the change happening in Mustard Seed Communities. I found it to be evident that persuasion can be extremely successful when utilized strategically through various mediums, especially media and personal interactions. As mentioned before, this was an area of study that I was familiar with, but not advanced in. However, throughout my experiences with The Connecting Space and within my personal research, I have learned and grown expediently in both my experience and knowledge of persuasion, specifically how it can be utilized to combat issues facing our world today.
Appendix A

2024 ADAMS FARM COLOR RUN
Supporting The Connecting Space,
a Greensboro 501c
theconnectingspace.org

Scan to Register

Learn more about
The Connecting Space

Appendix B
Appendix C

Show your love for others this Valentine’s Day!
Support the residents of Mustard Seed communities by making a donation or participate in the vibrant Adams Farm color run!

REGISTER NOW!
Link In Bio

Appendix D

Reminder
Have you registered to participate in the Adams Farm color run?
Don’t wait, register by 4/1 to save $10!

Okay, got it!
References


agenda. *Internet Research*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 1076–1096. *ProQuest Central*,

https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-01-2021-0049.