

Ethos, Logos, and Pathos: Effectiveness of Persuasion on College Major

Cassy Hite

WRIT 2000

University of Denver

November 20, 2017

Introduction

The idea of rhetoric, the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, has existed since the Ancient Greeks. Rhetorical appeals, what one uses to make a convincing argument, were coined by Aristotle. There are three main types of rhetorical persuasive techniques that target different aspects of the human psyche.

Ethos in Greek means “character,” (Wikipedia, 2017) which in persuasive writing refers to the character of the author. This technique is used to develop credibility for the source of a piece, and therefore the credibility of the individual who is composing it. Ethos can be used by referring to a well-known figure who gives a certain message or holds a particular view. People are more likely to trust speakers who have background in the topic, have the credible sources and uses of information, or those they are familiar with. The characteristics of a source, i.e. credibility or attractiveness, have been seen to show a positive correlation with “evaluations of an advertising message” (Feltham, 1994). Ethos is widely used in the research field, specifically relating to current research building upon previous research. The collaborative nature of business, research, and history is fueled by ethos. This is because of the role ethos plays in the foundation of facts, law, and conditions (Campbell, 1995). Ethos is also used within advertisement campaigns, by relating products to popular individuals or ideas a company can more easily persuade the public in their favor.

Logos is based on the word “logic” and appeals to the human need for something to be logical and have explicit reasoning behind it (Sproat et al, 2012). This strategy for persuasion is rooted in the basis of reason. Humans rely on “logical, direct proof” (Feltham, 1994) to make educated decisions, especially on topics they are unsure of. Logos includes “account, reason, definition, and rational faculty” in order to “provide evidence of information about a concept” (Feltham,

1994). This basis of logic and evidence is the focal point of the science discipline, which is rooted in use of tangible proof through study to explain and understand different phenomena. A focus is placed on statistical evidence and exactness of results.

Finally, pathos appeals to the most human aspect of the three, emotion. The goal of pathos is to elicit an emotional response from the audience. This rhetoric technique has been found to be effective when used in advertising. Pathos in the form of narratives about children with measles increasing “beliefs in serious vaccine side effects” (Nyhan, e841) suggests the use of pathos in situations of fear or potential audience skepticism. The mood that people are in affects their decision making, and if the argument being provided can elicit a certain mood from the audience it could result in swaying their opinion one way or another. It’s been found that television viewers are more likely to remember commercials when watching a “happy” program than when watching a “sad” program (Feltham, 1994). This technique is often used within the arts, the way a story is told is meant to excite an emotional response from the viewers or readers and in turn causes them to lean a certain way, generally in favor of the protagonist.

In this experimental procedure a survey was created to test the relationship between college major and effective persuasive technique. College major was broken down into seven main categories: sciences, business, art, history, social sciences, trade school attendees, and did not attend college. A hypothesis was created for the rhetorical technique that would be chosen by each category. Two topics were selected for testing the dependent variable, a subject of recent debate, anti-vaccination, and a casual topic of conversation, ice cream over frozen yogurt.

Hypothesis: People who major/ed in sciences or went/go to trade. will be more persuaded by a statement that’s driven by logos. While people who major/ed in social sciences such as psychology, criminology, etc. will be more persuaded by a statement driven by pathos. While people who major/ed in history and business will be more persuaded by a statement driven by ethos. Overall, the choice of passage for the hot topic will be more likely to be driven by logos or ethos because when a topic is problematic people are more likely to dig deeper to find a solution, thinking harder into the reasoning of making a choice. While the choice of passage for the casual topic will be more driven by pathos, since that is the innate driving force for simple human decision making. It is likely that an individual will not differ between persuasive technique over each topic.

Methods

To examine the comparison between college major and persuasive technique a survey was created using Google Forms. The survey was composed of six multiple choice questions. The survey included the University of Denver provided IRB statement: By completing the following questions, you are also granting consent for this information to be used as part of a research project that I am completing for a course at the University of Denver. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide may be used in a project and may be published online and/or in print, but your identity will remain anonymous. While profile information you volunteer in this survey may be included in my writing project (i.e. your age, sex, class standing, etc.), your name and identity will NOT be used or reported. If at any time you do not want to answer a question, or do not want to complete the questionnaire, you do not have to.

The first three questions worked as a collection of demographic information. They asked about gender, opinion on necessity of vaccines, and preference of ice cream or frozen yogurt. Question four regarded the independent variable that was being tested, college major of the participant. The seven categories were listed for the multiple-choice selections as well as an “other” write-in option. This lead to questions five and six which were the questions regarding the dependent variable, which rhetorical technique was most effective. The hot topic of anti-vaccination was placed before the casual topic of ice cream over frozen yogurt.

The multiple-choice selections for each topic consisted of three passages, and participants were prompted to choose which statement they agreed with the most. This wording was due to understanding that it was possible that the audience would not fully agree with any of the provided options. Each passage made the same argument using different rhetorical strategy, ethos, logos, or pathos. The argument of the hot topic was written against the popular opinion while the opinion of the casual topic was writing synonymously with the popular opinion.

This survey was posted onto my personal Facebook page on Thursday the 9th of November and was left active until the following Thursday the 16th of November. It was also posted on Sunday the 12th of November within a Reddit subcommunity that is specific to survey posting known as “/r/SampleSize”.

Below is a link to the survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdo6hpFPmocF1z3XIBIXRF5IBk7Mcwb0AxdtwbOHS9oLaySgQ/viewform?usp=sf_link

Results

There were 40 respondents to the online survey. The results of the survey were individually inputted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The overall population of the survey participants was found to be 26 females, 13 males, and one nonbinary individual. Many of the survey participants either believed (n=13) or strongly believed (n=24) that vaccines were necessary, with one participant selecting “don’t care” and two others believing they are unnecessary. Most participants (n=32) preferred ice cream over frozen yogurt, on Question 3.

The information results of Questions 4-6 are given in Table 1. There was an even number of respondents (n=10) who majored in sciences, business, and social sciences.

Across both topics the logos passage was chosen the most frequently, and the pathos passage was chosen most infrequently.

Table 1: Independent versus Dependent Variable

Shows the relationship between college major and responses to rhetorical strategy passages for a hot topic and casual topic

College Major	Total Number of Respondents	Hot Topic (Vaccination) Question 5			Casual Topic (Ice Cream) Question 6		
		Pathos	Logos	Ethos	Pathos	Logos	Ethos
	40						
Sciences	10	0	6	4	2	5	3
Trade	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Social Sciences	10	0	6	4	4	3	3
Business	10	1	3	6	2	4	4
History	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Art/Theatre	6	0	4	2	2	2	2
Did not attend	2	0	1	1	0	2	0

Discussion

The majority selections for the demographics were consistent with the arguments of the 5th question to refute popular opinion and the 6th question to pertain to popular opinion. For the hot topic the popular opinion was refuted, this chosen popular opinion was that the majority population would believe that vaccines are necessary. This was confirmed with most of the study sample (n=37) believed that vaccines are necessary. For the 6th question the popular opinion that was chosen is that individuals would choose ice cream over frozen yogurt. The sample also showed a large difference in the number who chose ice cream (n=32) over frozen yogurt.

The first portion of the hypothesis concerning those with or pursuing science degrees or having attended/attending trade school being more likely to choose a statement driven by logos was confirmed. Of the sample of 11 participants the majority chose logos on both the hot topic (n=7) as well as the casual topic (n=6). The second portion of the hypothesis was partially confirmed by the data. The sample group of ten who majored in the social sciences showed the highest selection of pathos (n=4) out of any of the college major groups for either of the topics. However, the same group showed an equal number of logos responses (n=6) to the anti-vaccine topic as the ten science majors showed (n=6). This lends to the belief addressed in the introduction that a population is more likely to think critically and look for that logical reasoning for a choice on a topic they don't believe in. There didn't show to be a difference between the effects of ethos, logos, or pathos on individuals who majored in art/theatre, with each ice cream statement receiving the same number of responses (n=2). The third portion of the hypothesis was partially confirmed as well. While the sample of ten business majors showed the highest response to ethos (n=6) on the 5th question, they showed equal responses to ethos and logos (n=4) on the 6th question. The single history major showed the exact same trend of choice of ethos on the hot topic and logos on the casual topic. Overall the vaccine topic gained the most "logos" choices between either of the topics. Pathos was under represented by any of the college major categories, especially when it came to the more pressing of the issues being addressed in the argument. Ethos was seen to have a positive relationship with business and history majors, though the numbers are not statistically significant.

There showed to be more of an inconsistency with choice of passage between the hot and casual topic, with 23 participants selecting different rhetorical strategies between the two. Logos was the technique most likely to be chosen twice (n=9).

There are many components besides college major that could be attributed to an individual's choice of passage in this case. The pathos passage of the anti-vaccine topic was the least selected of any of the six, and this may be because of the widespread discussion that has been going on concerning the lack of evidence of a connection between vaccines and down syndrome.

Therefore, the pathos in this case was not as effective. It also showed that in the case of the anti-vaccination prompt most participants (n=37) held previous beliefs for pro-vaccination, so the use of pathos based on audience skepticism was implausible.

No conclusive data can be drawn from the results of this experiment. While there did show a trend of logos as the most effective technique, it was not connected significantly to any one college major. A future study may incorporate the specific structures of the argument passages written for testable topics, because the patterns in certain arguments may result in differing effectiveness responses.

References

Campbell, Charles P. "Ethos: Character and Ethics in Technical Writing." *University Libraries Login Page*, IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Sept. 1995, ieeexplore.ieee.org/du.idm.oclc.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=406725&tag=1.

Sproat, Ethan, et al. "Welcome to the Purdue OWL." *Purdue OWL: The Rhetorical Situation*, Purdue University, 27 Apr. 2012, owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/625/03/.

Nyhan, Brendan, et al. "Effective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial." *Pediatrics*; vol. 133, no. 4; Apr. 2014. pp e835-e842.

"Ethos." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Oct. 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethos.

Feltham, Tammi S. "Assessing Viewer Judgement of Advertisements and Vehicles: Scale Development and Validation." *ACR North American Advances*, 1 Jan. 1994, acrwebsite.org/volumes/7651/volumes/v21/NA-21.

Edwards, Joel. "Doctors Against Vaccines – Hear from Those Who Have Done the Research." *Organic Lifestyle Magazine*, 21 May 2016, www.organiclifestylemagazine.com/doctors-against-vaccines-hear-from-those-who-have-done-the-research.