



*Routledge Research in Communication Studies*

# **NARRATIVES IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION**

Edited by  
Fuyuan Shen and Heidi Hatfield Edwards



# Narratives in Public Communication

This volume explores the applications of narrative and storytelling in corporate, public health, and political communications, and its implications for those fields.

Using diverse research methods including surveys, experiments, case studies, and content analyses, an international team of authors first explore conceptual and theoretical issues of narrative persuasion, then examine the impact and application of narratives in science communication, political advertising, corporate communication, and social movement before discussing the use of stories in community building, identity construction, and civic engagement.

This timely volume will be of interest to academics, researchers, and graduate students who are interested in narratives and communications, within the areas of public relations, public communication, organizational communication, strategic communication, risk and crisis communication, and political communication.

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### **Narratives in Public Communication**

*Edited by Fuyuan Shen and Heidi Hatfield Edwards*

# Narratives in Public Communication

Edited by Fuyuan Shen and  
Heidi Hatfield Edwards

First published 2023  
by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa  
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or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and  
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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Shen, Fuyuan, editor. | Edwards, Heidi Hatfield, 1966- editor.

Title: Narratives in public communication / edited by Fuyuan Shen, Heidi  
Hatfield Edwards.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2023. | Series: Routledge research  
in communication studies | Includes bibliographical references and  
index. | Identifiers: LCCN 2022061793 | ISBN 9781032437286 (hbk) | ISBN  
9781032451824 (pbk) | ISBN 9781003375760 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Communication in organizations. | Public relations. | Risk  
communication. | Communication in politics.

Classification: LCC HD30.3 .N35 2023 | DDC 658.4/5--dc23/eng/20230414  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022061793>

ISBN: 978-1-032-43728-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-45182-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-37576-0 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003375760

Typeset in Sabon  
by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xii
1 Narratives in Public Communication: An Introduction	1
FUYUAN SHEN AND HEIDI HATFIELD EDWARDS	
2 Correcting Anti-Vaccine Misinformation with Storytelling: The Effects of Narratives and Correction Placement	10
WEIRUI WANG AND YAN HUANG	
3 Are Repeated Stories a Good Strategy? Focusing on Narrative Persuasion in Digital Political Communication	31
WEITING TAO, JULIANA FERNANDES, AND YI GRACE JI	
4 The Effects and Implications of Consuming Multiple Science Narratives on Different Types of Audience Engagement	58
JESSICA GALL MYRICK	
5 Persuasive Mechanisms and Effects of Narrative Video Political Ads from the 2018 U.S. Midterm Elections on Voter Attitudes	85
JEFF CONLIN, GUOLAN YANG, AND FUYUAN SHEN	

6	Effects of Narrative-Based Corporate Message and Sponsorship Disclosure in Native Corporate Social Responsibility Advertising	107
	JIANGXUE (ASHLEY) HAN, SHANSHAN LOU, HEIDI HATFIELD EDWARDS, AND FUYUAN SHEN	
7	Understanding Crisis Narratives with Large-Scale Twitter Data: The Role of Celebrity and Emotions in the Virality of #MeToo Social Media Activism Messages	130
	XUERONG LU, YEN-I LEE, AND YAN JIN	
8	The Co-Creation of a Collective Identity Through Narrativized Sisterhood in a Women's Political Training Program	155
	STEPHANIE MADDEN AND ABBEY LEVENSHUS	
9	The Re-Enchantment of Narratives in Disaster Risk Communication: Developing a Storytelling Framework with "5C" Principles	178
	JENNY ZHENGYE HOU	
10	Constructing the Pipeline Fight Metanarrative: Micromobilizations, Participation, and Environmental Advocacy	198
	DEREK MOSCATO	
11	Once Upon a Time... A Story of Narratives in Public Communication	213
	HEIDI HATFIELD EDWARDS AND FUYUAN SHEN	
	<i>Index</i>	220

# Figures

2.1	Interaction effect of message format and correction placement on targeted misbelief and general misbeliefs	21
2.2	Interaction effect of message format and correction placement on heuristic processing	23
3.1	Narrative Message	43
3.2	Numeric Message	44
4.1	Transportation over Time	70
4.2	Identification over Time	70
4.3	Parasocial Relationship over Time	71
4.4	Science Engagement over Time	72
4.5	Trusts in Scientists over Time	72
4.6	University Attitudes over Time	73
5.1	Final Serial Moderated Mediation Model with Happiness and Transportation as Mediators	99
7.1	Evolutions of narratives over time (a) topics with most sharing and (b) topics with most comments	142
7.2	(a) Evolutions of reactive narrative over time and (b) evolutions of proactive narrative over time	144
9.1	Screenshot of Resilient Queensland Storymap	185
9.2	“5C” Principles of Disaster Storytelling Practice	188
9.3	A two-way, hybrid process of disaster narrative building	191

# Tables

2.1	Means and Standard Deviations of Targeted Misbelief, General Misbeliefs, Systematic Processing and Heuristic Processing in Different Experimental Conditions	22
3.1	Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Demographic Information ( $N = 177$ )	41
3.2	Means and Standard Deviation of Key Variables per Condition	47
5.1	Bivariate Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations	96
5.2	Multiple Regression Final Model	98
5.3	Conditional Effects of Final Model with Happiness and Transportation as Serial Mediators	100
6.1	Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables ( $N = 398$ )	117
6.2	PROCESS Results	120
7.1	Typology of Narratives	139
8.1	Interview Participants	160
8.2	Sisterhood Narrative Elements	170
9.1	A Multidimensional Template of Disaster Storytelling	190

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# Preface

Recent years saw an explosion of scholarship interest in narratives as a message strategy in a variety of disciplines. As the interest in narrative research grew over the years, we saw the need to organize a research call focusing on topics and concepts that need more scholarly attention. The call became reality after we received generous support from the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication at Pennsylvania State University. The chapters in this volume are the result of the proposals selected from more than 40 submissions we received for the call. They cover a diverse range of topics and research methods. It has been a privilege to have worked such a wonderful group of authors in getting this book ready for publication. COVID-19 caused major interruptions in our lives in the past three years, and many of our research projects were delayed. But despite the challenges we faced during the pandemic, we are pleased that the book has finally been completed.

The completion of this book would not have been possible without support and help from many individuals. Our thanks begin with Denise Bortree, director of the Page Center, for her support for our work on this volume throughout the process. We also appreciate the support we received from several other colleagues at Penn State, including Jonathan McVerry, Elaine Files, and Dorie Glunt. In preparing for the book, we relied on many scholars who reviewed the early submissions and the book chapters for us. Special thanks go to our reviewers: Jeff Conlin, Ashley Han, Jenny Hou, Yan Jin, Stephanie Madden, Derek Moscato, Jessica Myrick, Marlene Neill, Diana Sisson, Weiting Tao, and Weirui Wang. The editorial and production team at Routledge has been a pleasure to work with. Their support and suggestions have been invaluable in the past three years. Suzanne Richardson, our editor at Routledge, has been an excellent partner, instrumental in helping us successfully navigate the review and production process of the book. Finally, thank you to the anonymous reviewers of our book proposal who also provided constructive feedback and suggestions.

We hope you will enjoy the research stories in the book.

Fuyuan Shen  
Heidi Hatfield Edwards  
December 2022

# 1 Narratives in Public Communication

## An Introduction

*Fuyuan Shen and Heidi Hatfield Edwards*

In 2021, Unilever's Dove ran a campaign to raise awareness of the potentially harmful effects of social media on the self-esteem of girls. The campaign featured a narrative-based ad titled "Reverse Selfie," which showed how a young girl put on makeup, took selfies, and edited them before posting them on social media. At the end of the commercial, it urged parents to start conversations with their children about the harmful effects of social media. Dove's use of the narrative ad to burnish its image as a strong advocate for young women is an example of storytelling in strategic communications. Stories like this can be highly relatable, interesting, and effective in generate conversations and impact. Today, corporations and organizations recognize the power of narratives. Many have been using stories to connect with their audiences, raise awareness of social and political issues, and communicate corporate and brand images. It is against this backdrop that we are excited to edit this book focusing on narratives in public communication including health and corporate communication, political advertising and activism, and crisis communication.

Narratives are the stories that we encounter every day. They are the oldest and most natural form of human communications. Due to their pervasiveness and potential impact on people, scholarly research has explored the use and impact of narratives in several related disciplines including psychology, communication, and marketing (see Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Shen et al., 2015; Van Laer et al., 2014). Green and Brock (2000) defined a narrative as "a story that raises unanswered questions, presents unresolved conflicts, or depicts not yet completed activity; characters may encounter and then resolve a crisis or crises" (p. 701). Hinyard and Kreuter (2007, p. 778) referred to narratives as "coherent" stories with characters and identifiable structural features that include beginnings, middles, and endings. In general, narratives are different from rhetorical argument-based and other nonnarrative messages in distinct ways. First, narratives often present information by sharing the real or plausible experiences of individuals or characters. Second, the purpose of

## 2 *Fuyuan Shen and Heidi Hatfield Edwards*

narratives is often to entertain and inform rather than to persuade. As a result, the persuasive intent of narratives is often implicit, making them less likely to be contested or resisted by recipients (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Although narratives are similar to exemplars and testimonials, the latter are typically mere descriptions of events or individual experiences, without the details about plots or causal relationships typically seen in narratives.

Research in recent years has provided strong evidence about the persuasive power of narratives (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Shen et al., 2015). Compared to rhetorical messages, narratives persuade individuals by immersing them in the storylines and involving them emotionally. Narrative's persuasion process is different from that of a traditional persuasion message. Most of the traditional research of message effects has been conducted and interpreted within the broad framework of the dual process models of persuasion such as the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and heuristic/systematic model (HSM) (Chaiken, 1980). These models are based on the assumption that message persuasion occurs through two distinct routes: a central/systematic route or a peripheral/heuristic route (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Persuasion occurs through the central route when individuals have the motivation and ability to engage in message elaborations. Attitude change will be a result of the favorability of the subsequent cognitive elaborations generated in response to the messages. Under the peripheral route, however, individuals' attitudes will depend less on the message and more on non-message and other peripheral cues such as source attractiveness or credibility.

Narrative persuasion, however, occurs through an entirely different process. Narrative stories are thought to persuade individuals by engaging them cognitively and emotionally (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Dal Cin et al., 2004; Escalas, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000). In other words, they can involve audiences mentally by transporting them into the narrative world and arousing emotional reactions. According to Green (2006), transportation is an "integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings" (p. 164). When transported, individuals are likely to focus on the events in the story rather than engaging in message-related elaborations.

In addition to transportation, narratives' impact can also be accounted for by several other mechanisms including identification with characters, reduced counterarguing, and affective reactions. Identification refers to "the cognitive and emotional state in which the audience member is aware not of him- or herself as an audience member, but rather imagines being one of the characters" of the story (Cohen, 2001, p. 252). Vafeiadis et al. (2022), for example, studied the effects of narratives told by celebrities regarding the harm of opioid abuse. They found that for some individuals, narratives can be highly effective, and such effects were mediated by both transportation and identification.

Another important explanation for a narrative's persuasive power is the notion that narrative messages will discourage counterarguing. This is especially likely when message recipients are transported into narratives, thereby depleting them of the motivation or cognitive resources needed to engage in negative cognitive responding (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Green & Brock, 2000). Counterarguing is the generation of statements or arguments to refute the positions advocated in a message (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). It is typically measured by asking respondents to list their counterarguing thoughts or indicate explicitly the extent to which they dispute or counterargue the message in the narrative (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). Several studies provided evidence that narratives and narrative transportation suppressed counterarguing (Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 1996). In their study of a narrative TV program on teen pregnancy, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) found that identification with characters led to a significant reduction of counterarguing and increased perceived vulnerability to unplanned pregnancy.

Finally, narratives can be highly effective in changing attitudes by creating emotional connections with story characters. In their experiment, Mazzocco et al. (2010) found that compared to rational thoughts, emotions as measured by empathy were significant mediators of narrative persuasion. Hoeken and Sinkeldam (2014) found that identification with characters in a narrative can evoke strong emotions and, as a result, lead to attitude change. In addition to these above mechanisms, researchers have identified several other possible mediators of narratives. These included perceived realism of the narratives, respondents' perceived similarity to characters, reducing reactance, selective avoidance, and narrative involvement (Cho et al., 2014; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Empirical studies on narratives' impact span several distinct areas of communication. One area that has drawn significant research interest is the use of health narratives and their potential impact. A meta-analysis of experimental studies found that health narratives, when compared to nonnarratives, had a significant effect on message attitudes and other persuasion outcomes (Shen et al., 2015). In their study, for example, Greene and Brinn (2003) found that the narrative on the harmful effect of tanning had a significant impact on recipients' intention to avoid using tanning beds. Other scholars examined narratives' impact on a variety of health issues including smoking cessation (Kim et al., 2012), cancer screening (Kreuter et al., 2010), exercise (Gray & Harrington, 2011), and drinking (Braverman, 2008).

Narratives have also been found to be highly effective in changing attitudes and perceptions toward social and political issues. This is particularly true when stories appear in news reports. Journalists have long used narratives in news reporting. There is a common belief that narrative reports can make news more interesting and, as a result, attract more readership (Knobloch et al., 2004; Kramer, 2001). Research has shown

#### 4 *Fuyuan Shen and Heidi Hatfield Edwards*

that narrative news can influence the way in which we interpret social and political issues and form attitudes. In their study of news coverage of gas drilling, for example, Shen et al. (2014) found that compared to non-narrative reports, narrative-based reports on the environmental damages of gas drilling were highly effective in leading to reduced support for gas drilling. These effects were particularly strong among individuals who had strong environmental concerns (Shen et al., 2014, 2017).

Other studies have examined the role of narratives in changing attitudes toward brands and corporations. Studies have found that narrative ads could engage consumers, resulting in narrative transportation and positive product attitudes (see Escalas, 2004). Kim et al. (2017) compared narrative versus nonnarrative TV commercials and reached a similar conclusion. Within corporate communication research, Boukes and LaMarre (2021) found that narrative-based corporate social responsibility messages improved the attitudes toward the company via character identification and transportation.

Despite the growing body of literature in narrative research, many research questions remain about narratives' use and impact in public communication. In general, we consider public communication as any strategic communication attempts by individuals or organizations designed to persuade others. According to Atkin and Rice (2013, p. 3), public communication campaigns include any

purposive attempts to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specified time period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society.

Such campaigns cover domains such as health, issue advocacy, corporate communication, sustainability, and political and science communication. In this volume, scholars from around the world reported their research findings on the use and implications of narratives in health promotion, political advertising, and science and social issue communication. Each of them contributed to narrative research in their distinct ways—by either introducing new concepts, using previous underexplored methods, or extending the study of narratives to new areas.

In their chapter, “Correcting anti-vaccine misinformation with storytelling: The effects of narratives and correction placement,” Wang and Huang examine how narrative can be used to effectively debunk misinformation on vaccines. Given the public concerns about the negative influence of the anti-vaccine information we have seen, this is an important and timely topic. In conducting their research, the authors introduced another important variable, placement of stories, which was operationalized as prebunking and debunking. In other words, they

wanted to explore the extent to which narrative information can work when it is viewed before or after individuals' exposure to misinformation. This simulates the way we are exposed to misinformation as well as corrective information. Their findings provide strong evidence about the power of narratives in correcting misinformation about vaccines.

The chapter by Tao, Ferdandes, and Ji, "Are repeated stories a good strategy? Focusing on narrative persuasion in digital political communication," provide insight into the impact of message repetition, which has not been fully explored in narrative research in the past. It is well-known in the communication and persuasion literature that repeated exposures to messages can have significant implications for message effects (see Cacioppo & Petty, 1979; Pechman & Stewart, 1989; Shen et al., 2011). Tao et al. compared the effects of narrative and numeric messages about undocumented immigration when participants received varying exposure to the messages—once, three times, and five times. The dependent variable was message avoidance and counterarguing. The authors found that compared to the numeric messages, narratives indeed were less likely to lead to counterarguing at higher levels of exposures.

In a similar vein, Myrick's chapter, "The effects and implications of consuming multiple science narratives for different types of audience engagement," focuses on effects of multiple exposures to science narratives, underscoring the importance of repetition. More specifically, Myrick conducted a longitudinal survey experiment to understand how multiple exposures to science-related narratives would affect public engagement with and trust in science. Her findings confirmed the importance of narratives in communicating science. Furthermore, the study provided more nuanced interpretations of the result of exposure to multiple narratives. Taken together, the chapters by Tao et al and Myrick provided convergent evidence about the role of repetitive exposures to narratives in communication research.

Taking a slightly different approach, the chapter by Conlin, Yang, and Shen, "Persuasive mechanisms and effects of narrative video political ads from the 2018 U.S. midterm elections on voter attitudes," focuses on the effects of video narrative in political advertising, another important area in public communication. Despite the frequent use of narratives in political advertising and campaigns (see Vafeiadis et al., 2018), there has been surprisingly scant research on the effects of such narratives. Conlin et al. focuses on participants' emotional responses to narrative political ads. The ads were sampled from a midterm political election and contained a variety of negative and positive TV political ads that were either long or short. Finding from the experiment suggest that after exposure to the ads, the discrete emotion of happiness is a significant predictor of attitudes toward the ads and the sponsoring candidate. The effects of commercial lengths are negligible. These findings are surprising and clearly needs further validation by future replication studies. By using existing political

ads for their experiment, the research has strong external validity. It also has extended the research by Shen et al. (2023), which focused exclusively on the effects of print political narrative ads.

The chapter by Han, Lou, Edwards, and Shen, “Effects of narrative-based corporate message and sponsorship disclosure in native CSR advertising,” extends narrative research to corporate brand communication. Their chapter reports findings from an experiment designed to test the effects of narrative corporate social responsibility messages. In addition, they also manipulated the transparency levels of message sponsorship. This is critical as such messages often would be promoted on social media platforms. Results suggest that narratives can be effective tools in corporate communications. This is especially true when the persuasion intention is subtle.

A significant number of past research studies on narratives used experiments. It is therefore refreshing to see the big data approach used by Lu, Lee, and Jin in their chapter, “Understanding crisis narratives with large-scale Twitter data: The role of celebrity and emotions in the virality of #MeToo social movement messages.” Lu et al. collected Twitter data associated with the MeToo movement and analyzed the virality of celebrity narratives on the social media platform. The chapter inserts a new and interesting dimension in narrative research. The approach and their findings are quite intriguing and thought-provoking. This is a timely topic with a method that has high ecological validity.

The last three chapters in the volume used qualitative methods in their research. They complement well the quantitative studies discussed so far. This starts with Madden’s chapter, “The co-creation of a collective identity through narrativized sisterhood in a women’s political training program.” Madden used a case study approach as well as interviews to trace how an organization and its members created a narrative of its organizational identity. By identifying the concept of place in narrative construction, it enhanced our understanding of the critical underpinnings of identity narratives.

In her chapter, “The re-enchantment of narratives in disaster risk communication: Developing a storytelling framework with ‘5C’ principles,” Hou also used a qualitative approach to study narrative construction. Her focus is on disaster communication. Hou used a critical review and case study to illustrate the application of narrative-based storytelling in disaster risk communication. By addressing the principles and the template of storytelling in a disaster context, her paper offers important implications for crisis communications.

Finally, Moscato’s chapter, “Constructing the pipeline fight metanarrative: Micromobilizations, participation, and environmental advocacy,” focuses how environmental groups build narratives to rally support for their movement. He interviewed three campaigns’ mobilization

efforts and how they used participatory grassroots action to change agendas of publics and policymakers through collective action and civic engagement.

In summary, we are pleased with the diversity of topics and methodological approaches by chapters in this volume. All chapters focus on understanding either the effects of narratives or the process of narrative construction. They explore narrative research from varying perspectives and introduce important concepts to the practical and academic discussion. Collectively, these chapters have enhanced our understanding of narratives' impact and their applications. By bringing these chapters together in one volume, we hope they will inspire new research ideas among scholars who are interested in narrative research in public communication and beyond.

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## 2 Correcting Anti-Vaccine Misinformation with Storytelling

### The Effects of Narratives and Correction Placement

*Weirui Wang and Yan Huang*

There have been growing concerns about the negative influence of the anti-vaccine movement, especially in light of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States (Shelby & Ernst, 2013). While medical professionals and scientists support vaccination as key to curbing the prevalence of many contagious diseases, public misperceptions of the side effects of vaccines are growing as a result of the anti-vaccine misinformation and sentiment virally distributed online. Reports showed that almost half of all parents with young children have read misinformation about vaccines on social media (Boseley, 2019); more than one third of U.S. parents believe that vaccines can cause autism (Dixon et al., 2015). According to the WHO, vaccine hesitancy has become one of the greatest threats to global public health (WHO, 2019). Therefore, it is an imperative task for health communicators to explore ways to counteract the impact of the widely spread anti-vaccine misinformation.

In the present study, narratives are examined as a promising campaign tool for correcting the influence of anti-vaccine misinformation. Narratives are defined as stories that contain “a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed” (Kreuter et al., 2007, p. 222). In fact, anti-vaccine activists have frequently relied on the power of storytelling to create a substantial amount of fear and doubt about vaccines among new parents (Shelby & Ernst, 2013). Public health professionals counter the misinformation typically with statistics, facts, and research-based information. However, these types of messages may lose the battles against stories of vaccine injuries presented in the anti-vaccine misinformation, as those stories are more emotional, engaging, and memorable. Considering the psychological appeal of narratives, researchers have turned to narrative correction in hope to foster a stronger defense against the harmful impact of misinformation (Ecker et al., 2020; Huang & Wang, 2020; Sangalang et al., 2019).

Moreover, the study also examines whether correction placement matters for the efficacy of narrative correction. Prior research has studied the effectiveness of correction messages presented before (i.e., prebunking/forewarning) or after misinformation exposure (i.e., debunking/rebuttals). They are both considered useful tactics. The inoculation theory unfolds the importance of informing people about the threat of misinformation and preparing them to combat it in advance (Wang & Huang, 2021). Rebuttals after misinformation exposure have also been found to effectively change beliefs (Walter & Murphy, 2018). However, these two strategies have rarely been compared in the same research setting. Due to the prevalence of misinformation and the significant risks it poses, understanding a full course of actions, before and after misinformation exposure, to minimize its harmful impact is necessary.

The study empirically tests the influence of narrative correction and correction placement in combatting anti-vaccine misinformation through a between-subjects online experiment. Extending the current literature on narratives and misinformation correction, this research examines the effects of narrative correction in counteracting anti-vaccine misinformation and the resulting misbeliefs. Moreover, integrating theories of narrative persuasion and presentation order, it explores how the effectiveness of narrative correction is conditioned by the order in which individuals encounter the misinformation and the correction message. The psychological mechanism underlying the interaction effect is also explored.

## Literature Review

### *Challenges of Correcting Misinformation*

Misinformation refers to the incorrect information or information that makes unscientific or misleading claims (Sangalang et al., 2019). It may not only cause erroneous individual beliefs, perceptions, and actions but also adversely impact public policy decisions. Due to the prevalence of misinformation on the internet, the question of how to effectively correct misinformation and its harmful impact has raised a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (Ecker et al., 2015; Walter & Murphy, 2018). A substantial body of literature has examined different strategies for drafting and placing correction messages, including the use of expert sources (e.g., Vraga & Bode, 2017), peer recommendations (e.g., Vraga & Bode, 2018), fact-checkers (e.g., Margolin et al., 2018), two-sided messages (e.g., Wang & Huang, 2021), inoculation messages (e.g., Maertens et al., 2020), humor appeals (e.g., Vraga et al., 2019), and so on.

Despite the various ways scholars have identified to counter misinformation, empirical evidence has revealed that significant challenges exist to ensure their effectiveness (Ecker et al., 2014; Thorson, 2016;