

THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF PERSUASION

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Abstract

Multiple "routes" to persuasion have begun to appear in analyses of consumer attitudes and attitude change. In the present paper, we review our elaboration likelihood model of persuasion and we discuss the place of our central and peripheral routes to persuasion in this model. It is concluded that the various routes that have been proposed recently can be placed along a dimension of elaboration likelihood, with the interesting theoretical questions being whether the predictions made by these various models and the elaboration likelihood model actually differ, and if so, which predictions are empirically supported.

Several years ago, we outlined a framework with which to organize social psychological research on persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1980, 1981). Our purpose here is to review our elaboration likelihood model and clarify some of its subtler features.

Unlike cognitive response approaches (e.g., Greenwald, 1968), we view recipients as being neither invariantly cogitative nor universally mindless when dealing with persuasive appeals. Instead various factors, and combinations of factors, are viewed as determining people's motivation and ability to think carefully about the merits of the arguments for a recommendation. When conditions foster people's motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the elaboration likelihood is said to be high. This means that people are likely to: (a) attend to the appeal; (b) attempt to access relevant associations, images, and experiences from memory; (c) scrutinize and elaborate upon the externally provided message arguments in light of the associations available from memory; (d) draw inferences about the merits of the arguments for a recommendation based upon their analyses of the data extracted from the appeal and accessed from memory; and (e) consequently derive an overall evaluation of, or attitude toward, the recommendation.

This conceptualization suggests that, when the elaboration likelihood is high, there should be evidence for the allocation of cognitive resources to the persuasive appeal. Second, the resultant attitude is expected to be relatively enduring since the thoughts and associations upon which it is derived are central to the attitude object and, as a result of the issue-relevant thinking, the attitude is an integrated part of the schema for the attitude object. Finally, the attitude is expected to be relatively predictive of subsequent behavior because: (a) the recipients are more likely to have related the incoming information to their previous experiences with confidence in and willingness to act upon their attitudes; (b) achieved a temporally stable and accessible evaluation of the object, making it more likely that the measured attitude will be accessible at the point of behavior; and (c) considered appropriate actions regarding the attitude object across a wide range of personally relevant settings, minimizing the need for individuals to reconsider their attitude when faced with the costs of a relevant behavior.

factors in the persuasion setting reduce the recipients' motivation or ability to think about an issue—as

for example occurs when recipients by their nature tend to avoid effortful thinking (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983), view the appeal as being personally inconsequential (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), are engaged in a distracting task during their exposure to the appeal (Petty, Wells, Brock, 1976), or possess little prior knowledge on the issue (Cacioppo & Petty, 1980; Wood, 1982)—there is a reduction in the likelihood that the recipients will relate the incoming information to their prior knowledge about and experiences with the attitude object in an effort to evaluate the merits of the arguments for the recommendation. The notion is that when elaboration likelihood is low, recipients will either conserve their cognitive resources (e.g., skipping personally inconsequential advertisements) or expend cognitive resources on another task (e.g., daydreaming during exposure to the advertisement). If the elaboration likelihood is low, recipients are more likely to adopt a strategy wherein they attempt to derive a "reasonable" attitude based on existing schemata and superficial analyses of the recommendation. That is, when elaboration likelihood is low the acceptance or rejection of the appeal is not based on the careful consideration of issue-relevant information and a consequent restructuring of schemata, but rather it is based on (a) the issue or object being associated with positive or negative cues, which have no intrinsic link to the attitude stimulus (e.g., although an attractive beauty production, it would more likely be a peripheral cue for an oven—cf. Gorn, 1980); or (b) the recipients draw a simple inference based on various cues in the persuasion context (e.g., the more arguments for a recommendation, the better it must be—cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

We have suggested that there are "central" and "peripheral" routes to persuasion, with the "central route" representing the processes involved when elaboration likelihood is high and the "peripheral route" typifying the processes operative when elaboration likelihood is low. As Chaiken (1982) has noted, the central route encompasses here systematic view of persuasion whereas the peripheral route encompasses here heuristic views of persuasion, although the latter "is not synonymous with the peripheral route since the peripheral label is also used to refer to classical and operant conditioning models of attitude change as well as persuasion approaches which focus on motivational orientations not addressed by the heuristic/systematic framework" (p. 6).

It should be apparent, although perhaps it is not, that the central and peripheral routes represent positions on a continuous dimension ranging from high to low elaboration likelihood rather than two mutually exclusive and exhaustive "types" of message processing. When elaboration likelihood is high, issue-relevant thinking tends to be the most direct determinant of the recipient's reactions to the recommendation, whereas when elaboration likelihood is low, the more important determinant of persuasion tends to be cues that, although perhaps peripheral to the personal merits of the appeal, allow the recipient to attain a reasonable position without diligently considering the merits of the specific recommendation. Note that the specific stimulus or factor to which a subject is responding may be the same (e.g., a long list of strong arguments); the critical

manner in which an individual relates this incoming information to his or her prior knowledge.

Moreover, note that the term elaboration likelihood refers to the likelihood one engages in issue-relevant thinking with the aim of determining the merits of the arguments for a position rather than the total amount of thinking per se in which a person engages. It follows, therefore, that the profile rather than the total number of cognitive responses can be expected to change predictably as the elaboration likelihood regarding a given recommendation increases (cf. Cacioppo & Petty, 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In addition, evidence for elaboration likelihood increasing can be found in recipients' increasingly discriminating between strong and weak arguments (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty et al., 1976), increasing correspondence between issue-relevant thinking and attitudes (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), increasing perioral electromyographic activity (cf. Cacioppo & Petty, 1981), and reports of increasing cognitive effort (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 1983; Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980).

An analogy may help to clarify the distinction we wish to draw between the processes involved when traveling the central versus peripheral route to persuasion. Consider first the case of a student who has studied diligently for an exam. The student knows the material over which he is being tested, reads each test question and set of answers, relates this incoming information to what he remembers about the material, attempts to integrate these various data, and selects the option that is judged to be the most veridical. This manner of processing the material corresponds to the message processing we have suggested is invoked when elaboration likelihood is high in a persuasion context. There is no guarantee that the student's response will be correct or that his attempts to relate the material from the test question to the prior knowledge he has about the topic will necessarily be logical. However, the student's responses are more likely to be reliable (enduring) and correct than if his answers were based on a simpler, more peripheral analysis of the question. Note, too, that the student's comprehension of the question and prior knowledge of material relevant to the topic are distal rather than proximal mediators of his response to the question; these factors affect how the student interprets, elaborates upon, and evaluates the incoming information, but it is the nature of the topic-relevant thinking that is viewed here as being the most immediate determinant of the student's response to the question.

The responses of this student, who went through the effortful process of culling through data to evaluate the merits of the various options, can be contrasted with the reactions of a student who, either because he doesn't care (i.e., low motivation) or didn't study (i.e., low ability), reads each question and set of answers but fails to retrieve from memory information that is related specifically to the topic in question. The responses of this latter student generally are not random, but rather they are more likely to reflect the operation of simple and oftentimes specious decisional rules evoked by peripheral cues, such as the position of the answer within the set of answers (e.g., "a" is seldom the correct answer) or previous responses (e.g., "b" was marked twice previously, so I'll try "c"). Note that the incoming information may still be related to prior knowledge, but this body of knowledge is largely irrelevant to the true merits of the person's various options. Thus, as the student's elaboration likelihood decreases, obvious features in the testing (or persuasion) setting that signal which option is likely to be acceptable or correct are more likely to be used to cue them regarding the option to adopt—even though all of the externally provided information may well be comprehended and recalled.

Evidence in social psychology supports the view that different processes are involved under high and low elaboration likelihood conditions. For example, the quality of the arguments contained in a message has a greater impact on persuasion under conditions of high than low issue involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981) and for individuals high than low in need for cognition (Cacioppo et al., 1983). Conversely, peripheral cues such as the expertise or attractiveness of the communicator have a greater impact on persuasion under conditions of low than high involvement (Chaiken, 1980; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). There is also evidence in consumer psychology that is consistent with this analysis. Wright (1974), for example, exposed people to an ad for a soybean product under high and low involvement conditions and measured the number of source comments (derogations) and message comments (counter-arguments) generated after exposure. Wright (1974) predicted that involvement would increase both kinds of comments; instead, consistent with the present analysis, he found that more message comments were made under high than low involvement, and more source comments were made under low than high involvement conditions.

Finally, we have recently found that when the conditions in a persuasion setting suppress the elaboration likelihood, then the number of arguments for a recommendation can serve as a simple cue (e.g., "the more reasons the better the recommendation"), but when the existing conditions in the persuasion setting foster a high elaboration likelihood, the number of arguments serves as fuel for careful, effortful deliberations regarding the merits of the recommendation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). This contrasts with the view that the number of arguments generally leads to more message processing (see Chaiken, 1980). In our study, subjects were exposed to either three or nine arguments for a counterattitudinal appeal that was personally consequential (high involvement) or inconsequential (low involvement). In addition, half of the subjects read strong arguments for the recommendation, and the remaining subjects read weak arguments for the recommendation.

Results revealed that the attitudes of subjects who believed the appeal was unimportant and, hence, unworthy of extensive issue-relevant thought were influenced by the simple number of arguments. The attitudes of subjects who believed the appeal was important, however, were influenced by the quality of the message arguments; indeed, the provision of nine arguments, if anything, tended to fuel subjects' discrimination between the strong and weak versions of the persuasive communication.

These data support the predictions from the elaboration likelihood model, highlighting the importance of the manner in which people relate appeals to their prior knowledge in achieving susceptibility or resistance to persuasion. In light of these data, it is interesting to speculate that the "multiple routes to persuasion" that have been proposed by various authors be viewed as falling along a single process-oriented dimension of elaboration likelihood. The interesting theoretical question then becomes whether the predictions made by these various models and the elaboration likelihood model actually differ, and if so, which predictions are empirically supported.

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