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ISSUE INVOLVEMENT AS A MODERATOR OF THE EFFECTS ON ATTITUDE OF ADVERTISING CONTENT AND CONTEXT

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Abstract

Two persuasion experiments were conducted manipulating the personal relevance of the message, the quality of the arguments employed, and the characteristics of the message source. The results suggested that the effects of message source are more influential than source characteristics under high involvement conditions. The reverse tends to occur under low involvement.

The Involvement Concept

Persuasion researchers within both social and consumer psychology have recently emphasized the need to distinguish between high and low involvement situations (cf., Petty, Cacioppo, & Hassin, 1981, 1976). Although there are many specific definitions of "involvement" in both disciplines, there is considerable agreement that in high involvement situations, the persuasive message under consideration has a high degree of personal relevance to the recipient, whereas in low involvement situations, the personal relevance of the message is rather trivial. In social psychology, this view is best represented by the work of the Sheriffs who have argued that high involvement occurs when the message has "intrinsic importance" (Sheriff & Hovland, 1951, p. 197) or "personal meaning" (Sheriff et al., 1973, p. 112). In consumer psychology this view is well-represented by Holman and colleagues who defines involvement as the number of "personal references" or "connections that recipients make between the message and their own lives" (p. 155).

Despite the widespread agreement that involvement was something to do with the personal relevance of a message, there is little agreement on the research operations employed in studying involvement. Some of the research on involvement conducted by both social (e.g., Hovland, Harvey, & Sheriff, 1957) and consumer (e.g., Weaman & Bollich, 1979) psychologists has investigated existing groups that differed in the extent to which an issue or product was personally important to them. These studies have employed designs allowing subjects to assign themselves to high or low involvement groups. These methods, which are characteristic of the social psychology literature, are confounded with all other existing differences between high and low involvement groups. Consumer psychologists (e.g., Lavie & Severance, 1970) and consumer psychologists (e.g., Lavie, 1970) have defined involvement in terms of the specific issue or product under consideration. This procedure, of course, confounds involvement with aspects of the issue or product that are immaterial to their personal relevance. Finally, some researchers have studied involvement by varying the medium of message presentation. Interestingly, however, some investigators have argued that television advertising is more involving medium than is print (Guerbel et al., 1975). Other researchers have argued just the opposite (Grunbaum, 1967). A preferable procedure that keeps recipient, message, and medium characteristics constant for high and low involvement conditions was introduced by Petty, Cacioppo, & Sears (1968) and is the method employed in the studies reported here. In this procedure subjects are randomly assigned to high and low involvement conditions and receive the same message via the same medium, but high involvement subjects are led to believe that the issue or product has some personal relevance whereas low involvement subjects are not.

In addition to the methodological differences that have plagued the involvement concept, another area of disagreement concerns the effects on persuasion that involvement is expected to have. The Sheriffs have argued that increased involvement is associated with increased resistance to persuasion (cf., Sheriff, Sheriff & McLaughlin, 1963). Others have argued that on many given issues, highly involved persons exhibit more positive evaluations of a communication because of high involvement. Thus, involving subjects in high involvement issues are thought to have an enhanced probability of being rejected because they are more likely to fall within the unacceptable range of a person's implicit attitude continuum. This view has received considerable acceptance within social psychology (e.g., Early & Janis, 1966; Greenwald, 1980). Krugman (1965) has proposed an alternative view that has achieved considerable acceptance within consumer psychology (e.g., Ray, 1974; Robinson, 1979). Under this second view, increasing involvement does not lead to increased resistance to persuasion, but instead shifts the underlying involvement impact. Krugman argues that under high involvement conditions, communication affects cognitions, then attitudes, then behavior. Whereas under low involvement a communication affects cognitions, then behavior, and then attitudes. The focal goal of the present paper is to present and test a third view of how involvement affects persuasion.

Involvement as a Determinant of Content-based Persuasion

Elsewhere we have proposed that the level of involvement directs the focus of the subject's thoughts about a persuasive communication (Petty, Cacioppo, & Strack, 1991). Specifically, we have suggested that under high involvement, specifically, the focus of thought is on the content of the persuasive message, whereas under low involvement conditions, the focus of thought is on non-content cues. Thus, under high involvement, if the communication presents arguments that are subjectively cogent and compelling, the recipient's thoughts will be primarily favorable and persuasion will result. If the communication presents arguments that are subjectively specious and subject to counterargumentation, resistance to persuasion (and perhaps boomerang) will be the result. Contrary to the Sheriffs' view, increasing involvement is expected to lead to either enhanced or reduced persuasion depending upon the quality of the arguments presented in the message.

In contrast to this focus on the content of a message under high involvement conditions, we have suggested that subjects who are not involved are more likely to focus on such cues as the source of the message, the credibility, or power of the communication's source, and the status of others who advocate a certain position. Focusing on such cues rather than on the message content allows a person to evaluate a message or decide what attitudinal position to adopt without engaging in any extensive cognitive work relevant to the issue or product under consideration. As Miller et al. (1976) noted: "It may be irrational to scrutinize the plethors of counter-attitudinal messages received daily. To the extent that one possesses only a limited amount of information processing time and capacity, one's strategy would disengage the thought processes from the exigencies of daily life" (p. 623). Thus, when a

person is not highly involved with a persuasive message (i.e., when the message has no personal consequences), we propose that the person relies on a short-cut means of evaluation. Although, like involvement, we are proposing that there are separate involvement and credibility components, we believe that the sequence of involvement impact is the same—compositions, attitudes, and behaviors. The difference between the two processes is that in the first, the conditions are affected—cognitions dealing with issue-relevant argumentation (high involvement), or conditions dealing with non-content features of the involvement situation (low involvement).

**Empirical Tests of the Involvement Concept**

In an initial test of our two-process model of involvement (Petty & Cacioppo 1981), subjects heard a counterintuitive advertisement for a new soap. The advertisement was presented under conditions of either high or low involvement. As expected, increasing involvement enhanced the production of counter-arguments to the weak arguments and increased the production of favorable thoughts to the strong arguments. Consistent with this finding, increasing involvement increased the persuasiveness of the strong arguments, but decreased the persuasiveness of the weak arguments. Although the results of this initial study did support the view that subjects do more thinking about the content of a message under high involvement than under low, it did not directly address whether subjects are more attentive to content-irrelevant cues under low involvement than under high.

Next, we report two experiments designed to test the full two-process model of involvement. In each study, subjects were exposed to a persuasive communication. In Experiment 1, conducted in collaboration with Rachel Goldman, the message was presented on audio tape and concerned a change in a J&J's regulation. In Experiment 2, the message was presented in print form and concerned a new consumer product. The following variables were manipulated in each study: (a) the personal relevance of the message (high and low involvement), (b) the quality of the arguments which subjects heard or read in support of the advocated conclusion (strong and weak arguments), and (c) a characteristic of the source (high or low credibility). In Experiment 2, Experiment 1, high or low credibility source. Experiment 2. The two-process model of involvement would expect that under high involvement conditions, persuasion would be affected most by the quality of the message arguments employed; but that under low involvement conditions, persuasion would be affected most strongly to the credibility or attractiveness of the message source.

**Experiment 1**

One hundred forty-five male and female undergraduates at the University of Missouri participated in order. The design was a 2 (issue involvement: high or low) X 2 (argument quality: strong or weak) X 2 (source credibility: high or low) factorial. Subjects were run in groups of 3 to 16 in cubicles designed so that no subject could have visual or verbal contact with any other subject. Upon arriving at the laboratory, subjects read that they would be rating tapes for their sound quality. After reading these instructions, subjects heard one of four tapes over headphones. After listening to the appropriate communication, subjects completed the dependent variable booklets, and were then debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

**Independent Variables**

**Argument Quality.** All subjects heard a communication that advocated that seniors be required to pass a comprehensive exam in their major area as a requirement for graduation. The strong version of the message provided persuasive evidence (statistics, data, etc.) in support of the

exam (e.g., institution of the exams has led to a reversal in the declining scores on standardized achievement tests at other universities). In contrast, the weak version of the message consisted of a single sentence and personal opinion and existed to support a counterargument. The author's major avowal took a comprehensive exam. The strong and weak versions took a comprehensive exam. The strong and weak versions taken from a pool that had elicited primarily favorable thoughts in a pretest, and the weak arguments were taken from a pool that had elicited primarily counterarguments.

**Issue Involvement.**

Subjects in the high involvement condition heard the speaker advocate that the comprehensive exams should begin in the 1979-1980 academic year at their university (in which case they would all be affected directly by the proposal). In the low involvement condition, the speaker advocated that the exams be initiated in the 1982-1980 academic term.

**Source Credibility.**

The high credible source was described as a professor of education from Princeton University who had conducted a study of comprehensive exams nationally. The low credible source was a junior at a local high school who had prepared a term paper on the topic.

**Dependent Variables**

After hearing the tape, subjects completed two measures of opinion about the topic. First, subjects rated the counterargument's comprehensiveness on a four-point semantic differential (favorable-unfavorable) that was anchored to form a general measure of evaluation. Next, subjects responded to an 11-point Likert-type scale concerning their extent of agreement with the speaker's proposal. The responses to these two attitude measures were converted to standard scores and averaged to form an index of communication acceptance.

Following the key attitude measures, subjects completed seven manipulation check measures and other ancillary questions. Hence, they were given 4 minutes to list as many counterarguments as they could in response to the communication as they could. Similar statements of the same argument were only counted once. Disagreements between judges were resolved by consulting a third judge.

**Results**

Analyses on the manipulation check measures indicated that the three independent variables were successfully varied. The high involvement condition was significantly higher than the low involvement condition ( $F(1,137) = 4.36, p < .05$ ). Also, subjects hearing the strong arguments rated their quality as being significantly higher ( $M = 8.9$ ) than subjects exposed to the weak arguments ( $M = 6.9$ ) ( $F(1,137) = 51.02, p < .001$ ). Finally, subjects in the high involvement condition rated the likelihood that the University of Missouri would institute comprehensive exams during their stay as higher ( $M = 5.5$ ) than subjects in the low involvement conditions ( $M = 2.7$ ).  $F(1,137) = 5.12, p < .05$ .

The means for each cell on the measure of communication acceptance are presented in Table 1. The high involvement condition had a significant main effect for communication quality ( $F(1,137) = 6.06, p < .05$ ). Indicated that the high credibility communicator induced more acceptance ( $M = .21$ ) than the low credibility communicator ( $M = -.21$ ). A main effect for argument quality revealed that the strong arguments produced more agreement with the position advocated ( $M = .36$ ) than did the weak arguments ( $M = -.36$ ).  $F(1,137) = 20.35, p < .001$ .

Of great interest are the two interactions, however. An overall  $X$  argument interaction ( $F(1,137) = 109, p < .02$ ) demonstrated that the strong arguments were significantly more persuasive than the weak only under conditions of high personal involvement. Also, an involvement  $X$  credibility interaction ( $F(1,137) = 3.92, p < .05$ ) revealed that the high credibility speaker produced significantly more persuasion than the low only under conditions of low personal involvement.

**TABLE 1**

**EFFECT OF INVOLVEMENT, ARGUMENT QUALITY, AND SOURCE CREDIBILITY ON ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS**

	High Involvement		Low Involvement	
	high cred.	low cred.	high cred.	low cred.
Strong Arguments	.62 <sup>bd</sup>	-.58 <sup>bd</sup>	.38 <sup>bc</sup>	-.14 <sup>ac</sup>
Weak Arguments	-.40 <sup>ac</sup>	-.61 <sup>a</sup>	.25 <sup>bc</sup>	-.65 <sup>a</sup>

Note.—Means without a common subscript are significantly different at the .05 level by the Newman-Keuls procedure.

Finally, an analysis of the argument recall scores indicated that subjects were able to recall more of the strong ( $M = 4.2$ ) than the weak ( $M = 3.2$ ) arguments,  $F(1,137) = 14.91, p < .001$ , but involvement did not affect argument recall.

**Discussion**

The present study provided evidence for the view that the level of involvement is one determinant of whether content or noncontent factors are important in persuasion. When the issue was of high personal involvement, subjects' manipulation of argument quality had a significant impact on attitudes, whereas the effect of source credibility was small and not significant. Under low involvement conditions, however, the reverse occurred—source credibility had a large effect on persuasion, but argument quality had little impact. This pattern of results provides strong support for the view that high issue relevance motivates diligent processing of the content of a message. When the issue is relatively uninvolved, however, subjects appear to be unwilling to engage in the effortful cognitive work necessary to evaluate the quality of the arguments.

Under low involvement conditions, subjects were content to form their attitudes on the basis of who said it, rather than on the merits of what was said. In the second experiment, a conceptual replication of Experiment 1 was conducted employing advertising stimuli.

**Experiment 2**

The hundred and forty undergraduates at the University of Missouri participated in a study entitled "Evaluations of Advertising." and received extra credit in an introductory psychology course. The design was a 2 (product involvement: high or low) X 2 (source credibility: high or low) X 2 (sex of subject). Fifteen subjects were run in each cell of the design in groups of 4 to 8.

Upon arrival at the laboratory, the subjects were told that they would be evaluating a variety of advertisements and providing their impressions of them. Each subject was given a booklet containing six magazine ads. Five of the ads were for cigarettes, but relatively unimpressive products (e.g., Lux cigarettes, Rolux watches), and one of the ads was for

a fictitious product (Vilance shampoo). The fictitious ad was first in the booklet of six and was prepared specifically to test the two-process model. The subjects were told to turn through the booklet and rate the persuasiveness of each ad to the experimenter when they had finished evaluating the ads. Following personal evaluation of the ads, subjects completed a dependent variable booklet, and were then debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

**Independent Variables**

**Product Involvement.** Preceding each ad in the booklet was a brief description of the purpose of the ad. All subjects read the same descriptions for the real ads, but the description for the bogus Vilance shampoo ad differed for subjects in the high and low involvement conditions. Subjects in the low involvement condition read:

The product you are about to see is being put out by the Europa Collection based in Vienna, Austria. Their main interest lies in introducing the product to the rest of Europe. Before launching a new European campaign, they have distributed their advertising materials to journalism schools in the U.S. This is in order to determine if the ad has enough basic appeal to make it worth pursuing. The psychology department is assisting the journalism school in this evaluation.

Subjects in the high involvement condition read a similar description except that they were told that the company was interested in introducing the product to the United States.

The University of Missouri has been chosen for research purposes. It is for this reason that the product will soon be introduced in the Columbia area. Since you will soon be able to purchase this product in Columbia, the company is asking University students to evaluate their proposed advertisement.

**Source Attractiveness.** Four different advertisements for Vilance shampoo were created. Each advertisement contained a male and female in their early 20s giving the reasons why they liked Vilance shampoo. In the high attractiveness ad a photograph of a couple that previously had been rated as "extremely attractive" was used, and in the low attractiveness ad a photograph of a couple that previously had been rated as "somewhat unattractive" was used. An "attractive" stimulus was not used because it did not prove plausible in pilot testing.

**Message Quality.** In the strong argument conditions, the photograph presented arguments for the shampoo that previously had been rated as compelling and persuasive (Vilance shampoo). In the weak argument conditions, the photograph presented arguments that were rated as unconvincing and unpersuasive (Vilance shampoo). In the weak argument conditions, the text presented arguments that previously had been rated as unpersuasive (e.g., Vilance has a down-to-earth brown color that makes us feel natural).

**Dependent Variables**

Subjects were asked to answer a number of questions about each product for which they had seen an ad. Different questions about the advertisements were asked posed to subjects depending on the involvement condition. Subjects in the high involvement condition were asked to rate the persuasiveness of the message, the attractiveness of the product, and the attractiveness of the source. Subjects in the low involvement condition were asked to rate the persuasiveness of the message, the attractiveness of the product, and the attractiveness of the source. The persuasiveness of the message was measured on a 5-point semantic differential (favorable/unfavorable, high quality/low quality).

**Results**

The means for each cell on the measure of attitude toward

7. Allance shampoo are presented in Table 2. A 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 analysis of variance was used on main effects for interaction effects of source and subject variables on this will not be discussed further. A main effect for the argument quality (F(1,223) = 35.41, p < .0001) indicated that strong arguments produced more favorable attitudes toward the product (M = 9.6) than did the weak arguments (M = 8.3). A main effect for the attractiveness variable, F(1,223) = 8.46, p < .005, showed that the high attractiveness models induced more acceptance of the product (M = 9.3) than did the low attractiveness models (M = 8.7).

Of most interest in the analysis, however, was a significant two-way interaction, F(1,223) = 10.84, p < .001. This interaction revealed that increasing the personal and the attractiveness of the advertisement enhanced the impact of the message content in affecting attitudes. The attractiveness of the ad was increased, subjects responded more favorably to the ad with strong arguments, but less favorably to the ad with weak arguments. The interaction X source interaction was not significant this time though the means were directionally consistent with the findings of Experiment 1.

TABLE 2  
EFFECT OF INVOLVEMENT, ARGUMENT QUALITY, AND SOURCE ATTRACTIVENESS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD AN ADVERTISED PRODUCT

	High Involvement		Low Involvement	
	MEAN	SE	MEAN	SE
Strong Arguments	9.1	7.0	6.9	3.4
Weak Arguments	.9	-1.2	4.1	1.4

Experiment 2 replicated the finding from Experiment 1 that involvement (personal relevance) is an important determinant of the extent to which content-based persuasion will occur. When the advertisement was high in personal relevance to the subjects, the quality or cogency of the arguments presented in the ad had a much greater impact on attitudes toward the advertised product than when the ad was of low relevance. The study did not find strong support for the view that source factors were more important when the ad was low rather than high in personal relevance, however. In retrospect, this effect may have been strong in this study because positive arguments have been viewed as more persuasive than negative arguments for some subjects. In other words, the specific product employed (shampoo), the attractiveness of the models (especially their hair) may have served as persuasive testimony for the effectiveness of the product.

The Role of Involvement in Persuasion

Taken together, the results of the two studies strongly indicate that under high involvement, message content is the prepotent determinant of persuasion that occurs. Less strongly, the results suggest that under low involvement, source factors such as the credibility or attractiveness of the message source are more important. Thus, the present studies provide some evidence that attitude change is determined by different factors under high and low involvement conditions.

In another paper (Petty & Cacioppo 1981) we have argued that a persuasive message can induce attitude change via one of two routes. Under the first, or central route, thinking about issue-relevant information is the most

direct determinant of the direction and amount of persuasion produced. Attitude changes induced via this route tend to be relatively permanent and predictive of subsequent behavior. Under the second, or peripheral route, attitude change is the result of non-content cues in the situation. Changes induced via this route tend to be relatively temporary and are not highly predictive of subsequent behavior (see review by Chaiken et al., 1981).

According to this framework, involvement is a prime determinant of whether or not an attitude change is induced via the central or the peripheral route. The experiments reported here as well as the results of other recent studies are consistent with the view that under low involvement conditions, persuasion may typically be governed by such peripheral cues as source characteristics, concerns about desirable self-presentation, and/or one's social role. Whereas under high involvement, persuasion may be governed more by message content factors such as the message quality and/or accuracy of the message (see Chaiken et al., 1981; Cacioppo & Petty 1980; Chaiken 1980; Chaikini et al. 1976).

The level of involvement is not the only determinant of the route to persuasion, however. In addition to having the necessary motivation to think about issue-relevant information, the message recipient must also have the ability to process the message if change via the central route is to occur. Thus, if involvement is high (and the person is motivated to think about the message content), but the arguments are too complex for the person to understand, or if too many distractions prevent issue-relevant thought, then the central route cannot be followed.

Finally, we note that attitude change via the central route is a very difficult way to change a person's attitudes. First, the message must have some personal relevance to the recipient. Second, the person must have the ability to process the message content. Third, the message must present arguments that elicit primarily favorable thoughts. If the recipient is able to counterargue the message, then increasing involvement will not facilitate persuasion. If a change can be produced via the central route however, the benefits are clear—the attitude change will tend to persist and be predictive of subsequent behavior. An alternative strategy is to induce attitude change via the peripheral route. Since this path is less demanding, it may be easier to change the one (e.g., attractive source) upon which the person's attitude is based. Lutz (1979) provides the example of a person who drives Hertz Rent-a-Cars, not because the person has thought about the attributes of the company (central route), but only because he has been constantly reminded that O. J. Simpson endorses the company (peripheral route). If the favorable attitude about Hertz had been based on a full consideration of the positive features of the company, the favorable attitude would likely persist on its own. Since the favorable attitude was based on a positive peripheral cue however, the favorable attitude persists only so long as the repetition. Such counterarguing through peripheral cues may be sufficient to get a person to purchase the advertised product. Interestingly, once a person has tried the product, it may become more personally involving and may make the person more likely to think about the content of future advertisements about the product. In this manner a peripheral change can lead to a central one.

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