

Hidden Effects of Persuasion

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In persuasion research, an ad is assumed to be effective to the extent that it changes the valence or extremity of a person's attitude, as reported on a rating scale. The present research argues that when people appear to have resisted persuasion (or an ad appears to have failed) according to traditional measures, there might actually be some important yet previously hidden effects on the target attitude. We apply two different paradigms in an attempt to understand whether resisted persuasive messages might under some conditions have hidden success.

First, based on recent advances in research on automatic evaluations, we test whether attitude change that is not apparent on direct self-report measures might be captured by indirect automatic measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Recent research suggests that automatic evaluations are sometimes sensitive to experimental treatments even when explicit measures have not shown the same influence (e.g., Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Maison, Greenwald, & Bruin, 2001; Olson & Fazio, 2001). In Experiment 1 of the present research, we examine the possibility that automatic evaluations can be affected by advertising even when self-report measures fail to evince any persuasive impact.

A second intriguing possibility is that when an ad fails to change the valence or extremity of a target attitude, it might have an impact on the underlying certainty with which that attitude is held. Tormala and Petty (2002) recently demonstrated that when people perceive that they have resisted persuasion, and feel that they have done a good job in this capacity (e.g., they resisted a strong attack), the certainty with which they hold the target attitude can *increase*. However, there may be some situations in which people resist persuasion yet perceive that they have not done such a great job (e.g., they resisted, but could only generate specious counterarguments). Experiment 2 tests the possibility that under such conditions, "failed" persuasive communications might actually reduce attitude certainty, which would make the target attitude less predictive of behavior and potentially more vulnerable to later change (see Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995).

Experiment 1

Seventy-nine undergraduates were placed in a high elaboration context and asked to read a neutral (control) message or a strong persuasive advertisement in favor of vegetable consumption. Following the message, participants reported their attitudes toward vegetables on a series of scales. Implicit attitudes were also assessed using the IAT (Greenwald, et al., 1998). Explicit and implicit attitude data were standardized and then submitted to a 2 x 2 mixed ANOVA, with type of measure (explicit or implicit) and type of message (ad or control) as the within- and between-participant factors, respectively. As expected, there was a significant interaction between these variables. Although explicit attitudes were unaffected by message condition, participants did show more favorable *implicit* attitudes toward vegetables when they had read the ad rather than control message. Thus, the traditional self-report measure did not reveal any persuasive impact of the advertising, but the implicit assessment clearly suggested that it had a hidden impact. Although we did not explore the moderating conditions of

this effect, we suspect that it is particularly likely when elaboration is high and the ad contains relatively strong arguments.

Experiment 2

Thirty-five participants were exposed to a counterattitudinal persuasive message. Before reading the message, participants reported their initial attitudes and attitude certainty. Following the message, participants were instructed to generate as many counterarguments as possible, after which they reported their post-message attitudes. Participants then received false feedback that their counterarguments were either strong or weak, after which they again reported attitude certainty. We conducted 2 x 2 mixed ANOVAs with time of measurement (pre or post) and counterargument feedback (strong or weak) as the within- and between-participants variables, respectively. Analysis of the attitude data suggested that attitudes were not affected by the message.

The certainty data revealed a different picture. There was no main effect for counterargument feedback, but there was an effect for time of measurement. Participants became significantly less certain of their attitudes following the message. This effect was qualified, however, by a significant interaction. Specifically, the decrease in certainty was confined to the weak counterargument feedback condition. When participants were led to believe their counterarguments were strong, certainty did not decrease. Also relevant, attitudes became less predictive of behavioral intentions when they were held with lower rather than higher certainty. In short, although conventional measures suggested the message did not affect attitudes, it actually weakened those attitudes under some conditions, thus revealing a hidden effect of the message.

Discussion

In 2 experiments, we found that when the impact of a persuasive communication appears to be nil, there might actually be some important yet previously hidden persuasive effects. Experiment 1 demonstrated that although an ad did not affect explicit self-report measures of attitudes, it did produce attitude change as assessed with an implicit measure. Experiment 2 revealed that although a persuasive communication failed to impact the valence or extremity of an attitude, it significantly reduced the certainty with which that attitude was held under specifiable conditions. On the surface, these effects seem very different. Indeed, one is based on automatic associations and stored cognitive representations, whereas the other is based on a higher order metacognitive kind of reasoning. However, these effects could ultimately prove related. What is clear is that when persuasion appears to have failed by conventional standards, there can be important effects worth exploring. Specifically, it appears that under some conditions at least, seemingly resisted persuasive messages can have a greater degree of success than was previously known.

References

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