

The Role of Self-Affirmation in Consumer Persuasion

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers are often motivated to resist changing. Resistance to persuasion is influenced by many individual and situational factors related to both the ability and the motivation of consumers. For example, although much is known about characteristics of attitudes that make them resistant to change (e.g., Petty and Krosnick 1995), less is known about factors that influence individuals' motivation to resist persuasion (e.g., Briñol, Rucker, Tormala and Petty 2004; Wheeler, Briñol and Hermann 2004).

Contemporary research on self-affirmation processes has provided one perspective to understand how consumers' attitude-defensive repertoires can be undermined. In general, self-affirmation involves the reinforcement of the self on an important personal aspect, such as a person's values (e.g., honesty, Steele 1988). Because our attitudes are part of the self, a persuasive message can be a potential threat against the self. By expressing a personally important value, the threat may be diminished, reducing the need to resist the new information and, as a consequence, increasing attitude change by reducing resistance (e.g., Cohen, Aronson and Steele 2000).

Consistent with this logic, recent research has found evidence for self-affirmation inducing an "open minded" mind set in which people are less resistant to persuasion when they are self-affirmed (e.g., Sherman, Nelson and Steele, 2000; Cohen et al. 2000, Reed and Aspinwall 1998, Steele and Liu 1983). Although the dominant explanation for this phenomenon is that affirming oneself decreases the need to defend one's attitudes, leading to increased vulnerability to persuasion, alternative mechanisms are possible. For example, self-affirmation could increase persuasion by producing positive mood or by trivializing the importance of the attitude object as a source of personal identity (see, e.g., Correll, Spencer and Zanna 2004).

The present research suggests a new explanation based on the idea that self-affirmation lead to confidence, and this confidence can increase or decrease persuasion depending on the circumstances. Specifically, we predict that self-affirmation, and the confidence it induces, can reduce information-processing activity when people are affirmed prior to a message, but it can increase the perceived validity of cognitive responses to a message when people are affirmed after message-exposure.

Experiment 1

Sixty-eight university undergraduates participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to the self-affirmation condition (in which they had to write about previous episodes in which they behaved consistent with an important personal value, Zuwerink and O'Brien 2004) or to a control group. Following this induction, participants received a strong or weak version of an advertisement promoting a new cell phone. Argument quality was varied to examine the extent of information processing (see Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). After reading the ad, participants listed their thoughts and reported their attitudes toward the product.

We predicted and found a significant interaction between self-affirmation and argument strength revealing that self-affirmation

influenced advertising effectiveness by affecting the amount of thought devoted to the ad. Specifically, self-affirmation reduced message processing. As a result, self-affirmation increased consumer attitude change only when the arguments contained in the ad were weak. In contrast, self-affirmation reduced persuasion for compelling arguments. Thus, self-affirmation induced prior to the ad can increase or decrease persuasion depending on the quality of the arguments contained in the ad.

Experiment 2 addresses what happens when self-affirmation is induced after a message has already been processed. In this case, self-affirmation could not affect how much processing was done, but we expected it to influence confidence in the thoughts produced. If this occurs, self-affirmation should produce the opposite interaction with argument quality as was found in Study 1.

Experiment 2

Seventy-one undergraduate students were first exposed to a persuasive message in favor of a new program of magnetic cards containing either strong or weak arguments. Argument quality was varied in this study to manipulate the dominant thought in which participants would have high or low confidence (see Petty, Briñol and Tormala 2002). After participants read the message and wrote their thoughts about the proposal, they were asked to write about a personally important value (self-affirmation condition) or not (control group). Following the self-affirmation manipulation, all participants reported their attitudes toward the message proposal.

We expected and found self-affirmation to interact with argument strength in predicting participant's attitudes. Specifically, when the arguments elicited mostly favorable thoughts toward the proposal (strong message condition), self-affirmed participants reported more positive attitudes than control individuals. In contrast, when participants generated mostly negative thoughts (weak message condition), there was more resistance in the self-affirmation than in the control group. Thus, when self-affirmation follows rather than precedes the message, it influences consumer persuasion by affecting the confidence that people have in the validity of their thoughts.

Discussion

The present research provided initial evidence in support of a new explanation for the persuasive effect of self-affirmation based on the idea that self-affirmation leads to confidence. Confidence can play different roles in consumer persuasion, affecting attitude change by different psychological mechanisms. In study 1, when people were self-affirmed before receiving an ad, self-affirmation influenced advertising effectiveness by affecting the amount of information processing consistent with prior work inducing confidence prior to a message (e.g., Tiedens and Linton 2001). Alternatively, in study 2, when people were self-affirmed after processing the message, self-affirmation affected persuasion by influencing thought-confidence, consistent with prior work inducing confidence after a message (e.g., Briñol, Petty and Tormala 2004; Petty et al. 2002; see also, Briñol, Petty and Falces 2002).

While this research offers compelling initial support for our predictions, there are a number of conceptual issues that need to be

addressed with future research. First, the timing of the self-affirmation manipulation should be manipulated within the same experiment and using the same arguments. Furthermore, future research should collect more process data demonstrating the link between self-affirmation and confidence. Third, it would be desirable to replicate the obtained findings with different manipulations of self-affirmation and other more comparable, control groups. Finally, since the present research has used relatively personally irrelevant messages, it would be interesting to explore the postulated mechanisms for more threatening, personally relevant messages (Correll et al. 2004; Sherman et al. 2000).

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