

Persuasion and Social Influence

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Persuasion is a ubiquitous communicative function. Merchants hope to persuade consumers to buy their products, politicians hope to persuade voters to vote for them, communities hope to persuade residents to participate in recycling programs, physicians hope to persuade patients to follow medication regimens, blood banks hope to persuade people to donate blood, charities hope to persuade people to donate time or money, attorneys hope to persuade juries or judges, and so on.

Understandably, then, persuasion has been a subject of longstanding attention, dating back at least as far as classical treatments by philosophers such as Aristotle. And as the social sciences blossomed in the 20th century, persuasion was naturally a topic of inquiry.

But social-scientific research about persuasion is scattered across a variety of academic fields. Relevant work appears in a great many of the social sciences (including communication, psychology, political science, economics, and sociology) and in fields concerned with applied endeavors in which social-scientific methods can be useful (public health and medicine, advertising, marketing, and so on). This work is not organized by any single conceptual framework, and indeed efforts at integration or unification are rare. An understanding of the landscape of persuasion theory and research will thus want to include an acknowledgment of the varied sources of insight into persuasion.

Background

Persuasion involves influencing the audience's mental states. Even when the persuader's eventual aim is some behavioral effect (buying a product, voting for a candidate, conserving home energy), that effect is achieved by means of influencing what the audience thinks. Although a number of different mental states are potentially of interest in persuasion, research attention has especially focused on attitudes. An attitude is a person's general evaluation of an object in the broadest sense—a policy, proposal, product, person, action, and so forth. Attitudes plainly influence conduct: What products we buy, what policies we favor, what hobbies we pursue—all are affected by our attitudes.

Hence a good deal of the social-scientific work relevant to persuasion has concerned attitude change. As will be seen, any number of other mental states are also potentially targets for persuasive efforts. Attitude, however, is *primus inter pares* in persuasion theory and research.

The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy.

Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Robert T. Craig (Editors-in-Chief), Jefferson D. Pooley and Eric W. Rothenbuhler (Associate Editors).

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect067

Theoretical perspectives

Social-scientific work on persuasion has been informed by three general kinds of theories: theories of attitude and psychological processes, theories of voluntary action, and theories of persuasion and social influence proper. Although each general approach has something distinctive to offer, there is a common underlying thread: the importance of adapting (tailoring, adjusting) persuasive messages to their audiences. As persuasion situations vary, so will the kinds of messages likely to be most effective. Different theoretical approaches concretize this idea in different ways, but the key role of audience adaptation is widely recognized.

Models of attitude and psychological processes

Because attitude change can be central to persuasion, theories concerning the nature and structure of attitudes (and related psychological processes) have provided useful insights into persuasion. A convenient example is provided by *belief-based models of attitude* (for a classic example, see Fishbein, 1967). These models describe one's attitude toward an object as arising from one's salient (prominent, top-of-the-head) beliefs about the object, such as beliefs about the object's characteristics. Each belief has some associated evaluation (reflecting the perceived desirability of the characteristic) and is held with some degree of strength or certainty (reflecting the perceived likelihood that the object has the characteristic). Thus a person's overall attitude toward an object is a joint function of the evaluation of each salient belief and the strength with which that belief is held.

This belief-based analysis thus identifies three general alternative strategies for changing attitudes. First, a persuader might change the evaluation of an existing salient belief; for example, a persuader might increase the perceived desirability of some attribute of the object, thereby making the attitude more positive. Second, a persuader might influence the strength (perceived likelihood) of an existing salient belief; for instance, a persuader might make it seem implausible that the object has some undesirable characteristic, thereby making the attitude more positive. Third, the set of salient beliefs might be changed—either by adding a new belief of the appropriate valence or by changing the relative salience of existing beliefs, such as by reminding the audience about a positive attribute that the audience had forgotten, thereby making the attitude more positive.

Correspondingly, this belief-based framework can be useful in identifying appropriate foci for persuasive messages, that is, identifying what kinds of appeals will be most likely to be successful for a given audience. For instance, in large-scale persuasive efforts such as advertising campaigns, a persuader can survey those favoring and opposing the persuader's viewpoint so as to learn how the strength and evaluation of their beliefs differ. For example, suppose that regular exercisers and non-exercisers have similar evaluations of the health benefits of exercise, but differ in the perceived likelihood that exercise produces such benefits. In such a circumstance, messages aimed at persuading non-exercisers should address the likelihood of obtaining those benefits rather than their desirability. Expressed abstractly: A belief-based model of

attitude provides a systematic way of adapting persuasive messages to audiences by identifying the most useful foci for those messages.

Functional analyses of attitude provide another example of an attitude model that can illuminate persuasion (for a review, see Carpenter, Boster, & Andrews, 2013). The central idea of these approaches is that attitudes can serve various psychological functions (do various psychological jobs), such as expressing one's values, organizing information about the attitude object, defending one's self-image, and so forth. A number of different typologies have been offered as means of identifying and distinguishing such functions, but there is unfortunately no consensus yet on any one particular scheme. However, nearly all functional attitude classification systems offer a broad distinction between symbolic and instrumental attitude functions. Attitudes that serve symbolic functions are based on the symbolic associations of the object (the values the object expresses, the moral beliefs it symbolizes); attitudes that serve instrumental functions are focused on the intrinsic properties of the object (assessing the object in terms of intrinsic properties or consequences). For instance, a person's attitude toward a given model of automobile might serve mainly instrumental functions (and so be based on beliefs about crashworthiness, reliability, etc.) or mainly symbolic ones (and so be based on beliefs about what sort of identity is projected by ownership, how driving the car makes one feel, etc.).

Individual differences can play a role in influencing attitude function, at least in the realm of consumer products. Some people ("high self-monitors") are generally more concerned than others ("low self-monitors") about the image they project, and, unsurprisingly, their attitudes are more likely to have symbolic bases. Attitude function is also influenced by the nature of the attitude object. For example, attitudes toward air conditioners generally have instrumental bases, whereas attitudes toward perfume are more likely to have symbolic bases. But some objects, such as automobiles, can easily accommodate either sort of attitude function—and for such objects, the effects of self-monitoring variations will be especially marked.

From a functional perspective, the key to successful persuasion is the matching of persuasive appeals to the functional basis of the attitude—which represents another concretization of the general idea that persuasive effectiveness requires audience adaptation. In a number of studies of consumer product advertising, instrumentally oriented appeals (emphasizing intrinsic qualities of the product) have been found more persuasive than symbolically oriented appeals (emphasizing image-based considerations) when the recipient's attitude has an instrumental basis; by contrast, with attitudes that have a symbolic basis, symbolically oriented appeals have been found more effective than instrumentally oriented appeals.

Cognitive dissonance theory is another framework with applications to problems of persuasion (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). Unlike belief-based or functional attitude models, dissonance theory is not focused specifically on attitudes, but rather on psychological processes associated with the general desire for cognitive consistency. The central idea is that persons seek to maximize the internal psychological consistency of their cognitions (beliefs, attitudes, etc.). Dissonance—cognitive inconsistency—is taken to be an uncomfortable state, and hence persons strive to avoid it (or, failing that, seek to reduce it).

Dissonance theory has been a fruitful source of ideas about various aspects of social influence processes. Two specific applications can serve as illustrations: selective exposure and hypocrisy induction.

Dissonance theory naturally leads to an expectation that people will selectively expose themselves to information. Specifically, people will prefer to be exposed to information that is supportive of (consonant with) their current beliefs rather than to nonsupportive information, which presumably could arouse dissonance. Considerable research evidence has confirmed this hypothesis: Given a choice, people will indeed prefer information that is congenial with their current beliefs and attitudes over uncongenial information. This can obviously pose a challenge for persuaders, who may face the task of getting receivers to attend to their messages. But the research evidence also shows that the strength of the preference for supportive information varies, and it is even possible for people to sometimes prefer unsupportive information. For example, the perceived usefulness of information can powerfully affect people's exposure, such that useful information will be sought out even if it is nonsupportive.

Hypocrisy induction is a means of social influence based on arousing dissonance that then is reduced by the person's undertaking the desired action. This approach is well adapted to circumstances in which people already have the desired attitudes but are not acting consistently with those attitudes. For example, people often have positive attitudes about exercise, energy conservation, recycling, and so forth, but fail to act accordingly. Persuaders can exploit such inconsistency: Making the discrepancy between attitudes and actions salient to the person can arouse dissonance, which then is reduced through behavioral change—altering the behavior so as to make it consistent with the existing positive attitude. For example, in one study, households had pledged to reduce home energy consumption but were failing to do so; households who had this inconsistency made salient to them (by reminding them of their pledge and showing them feedback about their energy consumption) subsequently reduced their energy consumption significantly more than did other households (those who received only a reminder, or only feedback, or no treatment).

These various theories of attitude and psychological processes do not directly address questions of persuasion or communication. But they plainly do provide insight into elements central to how persuasion works and hence have proved useful frameworks for exploration of questions about persuasion.

Models of voluntary action

A second group of relevant theories is also not directly concerned with persuasion but rather aims at identifying factors that influence voluntary action. These theories offer insight into persuasion indirectly, because the factors influencing behavior are natural foci for persuasive efforts.

Reasoned action theory (which has taken various forms and labels, such as the theory of planned behavior) begins with the idea that the proximal determinant of voluntary action is intention (so, for example, the proximal determinant of voting for a given candidate is intending to do so) and so focuses attention on what influences such intentions. (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, provide a general treatment.)

Reasoned action theory identifies four factors as general determinants of behavioral intention. The first is the person's attitude toward the behavior in question, the person's general evaluation of the action. The second is the person's injunctive norm, the person's perception that others who are important to the person desire the performance or nonperformance of the behavior (assessable with a questionnaire item such as "Most people who are important to me think I should/should not do X"). The third is the person's descriptive norm, the person's perception of whether other people engage in the behavior ("Most people do X," "Most people in my community do X," etc.). The fourth is the person's perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy), the person's perception of whether it is easy or difficult for them to perform the action. These four factors can vary in their impact on intention, and reasoned action theory correspondingly recognizes that these factors might be weighted differently across persons or situations. For example, attitudinal considerations might outweigh normative ones for one behavior but not for another; some people may be generally more influenced by descriptive norms than are other people; and so on.

Persuaders can use reasoned action theory to identify useful targets for persuasive messages. For example, if adolescent tobacco use is especially strongly influenced by descriptive-norm perceptions, then interventions can be designed to specifically focus on that factor. Each of the four determinants of intention represents a distinctive influence target, at least in the sense that different kinds of approaches (messages, interventions) may be appropriate for each. For influencing attitude toward the behavior, familiar kinds of persuasive appeals may be useful, and theoretical models of attitude can also be helpful here. Similarly, influencing certain descriptive norms might be accomplished by simply conveying relevant information ("here's the average monthly energy consumption in households like yours in this neighborhood"). By comparison, influencing a person's injunctive norm may require influencing the views of relevant referent others; for example, if persons' exercise intentions are affected by what they think their physician thinks they should do, then persuaders will want to encourage physicians to make corresponding exercise recommendations to their patients.

Perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy) is an especially noteworthy possible target for persuasion. People can have positive attitudes and norms about a given behavior, but not intend to engage in the behavior because of low perceived behavioral control: "Yes, regular exercise is a good thing, and my family and doctor think I should exercise more, and a lot of people I know do exercise regularly. But I can't—I don't have time." In such circumstances, stressing the advantages of the behavior is unlikely to be especially persuasive; instead, persuaders will need to address the audience's perceived self-efficacy. This might be accomplished by various mechanisms: providing appropriate information (e.g., potential voters may need to learn the location of their polling place), creating opportunity for behavioral practice (e.g., having adolescents role-play conversations with sexual partners about condom use), or displaying examples of others successfully performing the behavior (e.g., having others model how easily exercise can be fit into one's schedule).

Even when people have the desired intentions, however, they might not necessarily perform the desired behavior. That is, sometimes the challenge faced by persuaders is that of getting people to translate their good intentions into action. In

such circumstances, various strategies might be considered by persuaders (including hypocrisy induction, discussed earlier). But one notable approach is to have people explicitly plan their behavioral performance. For example, in one study, people who wrote down when and where they would take a vitamin supplement were subsequently more likely to do so. This effect appears to arise because explicit planning encourages the development of “implementation intentions,” subsidiary intentions (“I intend to take the vitamin tablet in the bathroom in the morning”) related to the realization of an more abstract intention (“I intend to take the vitamin tablet”).

Reasoned action theory offers a general model of the determinants of voluntary behavior—general in the sense that the four determinants of intention have been found to be broadly useful (in predicting intention) across a variety of behaviors. But specialized versions of this approach have been developed for particular contexts, by identifying context-specific influences on intentions and behaviors. For example, the “technology adoption model” added perceived usefulness (of a technology) as a distinct influence on the adoption of new technologies.

One notable specialized model is *protection motivation theory*, which concerns the factors underlying protective behaviors, that is, actions (such as using seat belts or wearing sunscreen) meant to protect against some possible threat (Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 2000). Protection motivation theory identifies two broad determinants of protection motivation: threat appraisal (assessment of the potential threat) and coping appraisal (assessment of the recommended protective action). Threat appraisal is based on perceived threat severity (one’s perception of how undesirable the threatened negative outcome is) and perceived threat vulnerability (one’s perception of how likely the threatened outcome is). Coping appraisal is based on perceived response efficacy (one’s perception of whether the recommended action is effective in coping with the threat) and perceived self-efficacy (one’s perception of one’s ability to perform the recommended action).

Thus persuasive messages aimed at encouraging a protective behavior might potentially focus on four underlying elements: threat severity (“skin cancer is really bad”), threat vulnerability (“you’re prone to get skin cancer”), response efficacy (“sunscreen really works”), or self-efficacy (“it’s easy to use sunscreen”). Once again, one can see how persuaders might use such a framework to tailor messages to particular recipients and circumstances. If an audience believes that the threat is severe but believes themselves to be invulnerable to it, different kinds of messages will be needed than if the audience recognizes a severe threat to which they are vulnerable but believes that the recommended action is ineffective.

Models of persuasion and social influence

A third group of theories is directly concerned with persuasion and social influence. These are of two varieties: general models meant to potentially apply in nearly any persuasion context (here exemplified by social judgment theory and by the elaboration likelihood model) and narrower models meant to be context-specific (illustrated here by the transtheoretical model).

Social judgment theory emphasizes that reactions to persuasive messages are centrally influenced by how the message recipient judges the position being advocated (the classic presentation is Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965). On any persuasive issue, different possible positions (points of view) are potentially available. For example, with respect to an issue such as gun control, views can range from believing that there should be few (or no) restrictions on citizens' possession of firearms to believing that almost no ordinary citizen should be permitted to possess firearms (with a great many intermediate positions possible, reflecting different degrees of restriction).

A person is likely to have different assessments of these possible positions. Positions found to be acceptable constitute what is termed the person's latitude of acceptance (which includes the person's own most-acceptable position); the latitude of rejection is composed of those positions found to be objectionable, and the latitude of noncommitment is composed of positions judged to be neither acceptable nor objectionable. On any given issue, the structure of these judgmental latitudes will vary from person to person; the views that one individual finds acceptable might fall in another person's latitude of rejection.

Social judgment theory suggests that the structure of the judgmental latitudes systematically varies depending on the person's degree of ego-involvement with the issue—the extent to which the issue is personally significant for the person, the degree to which the person's sense of self (ego) is tied up with that position, the importance of the issue for the person, and so on. As ego-involvement increases, the size of the latitude of rejection increases, and the sizes of the latitudes of acceptance and noncommitment decrease. Thus on a given issue, highly involved people paradigmatically have a narrow range of positions they accept, and a narrow range of positions toward which they are noncommittal, but a large number of positions that they find objectionable.

Recipients' reactions to a persuasive message are seen by social judgment theory to centrally depend on how the recipient assesses the position advocated by the message. There is thus a two-step process involved, in which first the receiver decides what position the message is advocating, and then (on the basis of that judgment) reacts positively or negatively to the message.

A person's judgment about what position is being advocated can be subject to perceptual distortions called assimilation and contrast effects. An assimilation effect is said to occur when the receiver perceives the message to be advocating a position closer to his or her own position than it actually does; a contrast effect is said to occur when the receiver perceives the message to be advocating a position farther away from his or her position than it actually does. In these perceptual distortions, the receiver either minimizes (assimilation) or exaggerates (contrast) the difference between the receiver's position and that of the message.

Broadly speaking, messages advocating positions in the latitude of acceptance are prone to being assimilated; those advocating views in the latitude of rejection are prone to be contrasted; in the latitude of noncommitment, both assimilation effects and contrast effects are possible. And as ego-involvement increases, the degree of perceptual distortion (assimilation or contrast) increases. When such perceptual distortions occur, the perceived position of a given message can be very different for persons who have

different views on the issue. But such distortions can be minimized by messages that make it clear just what view is being advocated.

The recipient's perception of what position is being advocated by a message is seen by social judgment theory to be the central determinant of the recipient's reaction and hence of the message's persuasiveness. Briefly, the expectation is that messages perceived as advocating positions in the latitude of acceptance or the latitude of noncommitment will produce attitude change in the advocated direction, but those perceived as advocating positions in the latitude of rejection will produce no attitude change or perhaps boomerang change, in the direction opposite that sought by the persuader.

This analysis thus suggests a particular picture of how attitude change is related to discrepancy, that is, the discrepancy between the message's position and the receiver's position. A persuader might advocate a highly discrepant position (asking for a great deal of change) or an only slightly discrepant view (asking for only a little change). Social judgment theory suggests, and the research evidence confirms, that with increasing discrepancy, more favorable attitude change will occur—but only up to a point, namely, the latitude of rejection. And beyond that point, further discrepancy will not only not be helpful to the persuader, it may encourage negative (boomerang) reactions.

This analysis nicely illuminates why highly ego-involved receivers can be especially difficult to persuade: Not only do they typically have small latitudes of acceptance and noncommitment (thus rejecting many possible alternative positions), they are also prone to have distorted perceptions of incoming communications—assimilating those in the latitude of acceptance and contrasting those in the latitude of rejection. Persuading highly involved recipients thus characteristically requires seeking only small amounts of change (so as to avoid the latitude of rejection) with especially clear messages (so as to minimize perceptual distortion).

Social judgment theory identifies some important ways in which, to be effective, persuasive messages need to be adapted to their audiences. A persuader will want to know not only the audience's most preferred position but also the structure of their judgmental latitudes (so that, if possible, the persuader can avoid advocating a view that falls in the audience's latitude of rejection). Because highly ego-involved receivers can pose special persuasion challenges, persuaders will plainly find it useful to attend to the audience's level of ego-involvement and tailor their messages accordingly.

However, social judgment theory is manifestly incomplete as an account of persuasion. Recipients' reactions to persuasive messages are certainly influenced by their perception of the message's advocated position, but many other aspects of the message—not to mention other variables such as attributes of the communicator—can also make a difference. Even so, social judgment theory has unquestionably contributed some valuable insights into persuasion processes.

The *elaboration likelihood model* (ELM) is another general model of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It suggests that two different "routes to persuasion" exist, a central route and a peripheral route; which one is activated depends on the degree of elaboration (issue-relevant thinking) in which the receiver engages. When elaboration is high, central-route persuasion processes are engaged, and the effects of persuasive messages are the result of the receiver's thoughtful consideration of issue-relevant material such as the arguments and evidence in the message. When elaboration is low,

peripheral-route persuasion processes are activated, and persuasion outcomes arise from less thoughtful processes. Peripheral-route persuasion is exemplified by receivers' use of heuristics—simplifying decision rules—to guide their decision-making; instead of carefully examining the arguments and evidence, a receiver might be guided by the peripheral cues such as communicator's credibility ("She's an expert"), the communicator's likability ("He seems like a nice guy"), or the reactions of other people to the message ("Everybody else seems to think this is right").

The central and peripheral routes are best understood not as two mutually exclusive categories but as representing the ends of an elaboration continuum. At intermediate levels of elaboration, some combination of central-route and peripheral-route processes is to be expected. Thus the ELM emphasizes that persuasion can occur at any point along the elaboration continuum; that is, persuasion can occur even if the receiver is not especially engaged with the message contents. But how persuasion works varies depending on the degree of elaboration.

Many factors can influence a receiver's likely amount of elaboration. Some of these factors concern elaboration motivation, such as the personal relevance of the topic to the receiver (greater personal relevance means greater elaboration) and certain individual differences (such as "need for cognition": some people enjoy thinking more than others do). Other factors concern the receiver's elaboration ability, such as the extent of the receiver's knowledge about the topic (greater knowledge enables greater elaboration) or the degree to which the setting permits the receiver to pay close attention to the message (when distractions are present, elaboration ability is reduced). The greatest elaboration is to be expected when both elaboration motivation and elaboration ability are high.

As elaboration (and thus the route to persuasion) varies, so will the key factors influencing persuasive outcomes. Under conditions of high elaboration, the outcome of persuasive efforts depends most centrally on the predominant valence (evaluative direction) of the receiver's elaboration—whether the receiver's issue-relevant thoughts are generally favorable or unfavorable to the position advocated. The favorability of the receiver's elaboration is naturally influenced in part by the view advocated by the message (everything else being equal, proattitudinal messages—those advocating views already favored by the receiver—understandably get a more favorable reception than counterattitudinal messages). But elaboration valence is also influenced by the quality of the message's arguments—their cogency, evidence, and especially the perceived desirability of the consequences (of the advocated action or policy) that are invoked by the message's arguments. Argument quality thus emerges as a potentially important variable under conditions of high elaboration; when receivers are carefully scrutinizing the message's arguments, the strength of those arguments becomes a key determinant of persuasive success.

By contrast, under conditions of low elaboration, variations in argument quality will not make so much difference to persuasive outcomes. Instead, receivers will be more influenced by peripheral considerations that are prominent in the persuasion setting. For example, factors such as perceived communicator expertise and communicator likability play greater roles in influencing persuasive outcomes under conditions of low elaboration than under conditions of high elaboration.

Although persuasion can occur at any point along the elaboration continuum, the nature of persuasive effects can be expected to vary depending on the degree of elaboration (that is, the route to persuasion). Attitudes shaped under conditions of high elaboration (compared to those formed under conditions of low elaboration) are likely to be more persistent over time (less likely to decay on their own), be more resistant to counterpersuasion (less likely to yield to subsequent opposing messages), and exert a stronger influence on intentions and actions (be more directive of behavior). In a sense, one might describe central-route persuasion as yielding stronger attitudes than does peripheral-route persuasion.

The ELM emphasizes that a given variable might play different roles in persuasion in different circumstances. Broadly, a variable might influence the degree of elaboration (and so affect whether central- or peripheral-route processes are engaged), serve as a peripheral cue (and hence activate heuristics when peripheral-route persuasion is occurring), or influence elaboration valence (and hence influence attitude change when central-route persuasion is occurring). For example, a communicator's attractiveness might draw attention to the message (and so encourage closer processing, that is, greater elaboration), might operate as a peripheral cue (triggering the use of a heuristic based on liking the communicator), or might conceivably in some circumstances amount to an argument (e.g., for beauty products) and so influence elaboration valence. There is not yet a good basis for predicting when a given variable will serve in one or another role, but this analysis draws attention to the mistake of thinking that a given variable can influence persuasion in only one way.

One appealing aspect of the ELM is that it offers the possibility of reconciling what might otherwise appear to be inconsistent research findings. For example, it easily accommodates the finding that communicator likability does not always enhance persuasive effectiveness. Liking for the communicator might enhance persuasion under conditions of low elaboration, through the activation of a liking-based heuristic; as elaboration increases, however, liking will be less likely to serve as a peripheral cue.

Both social judgment theory and the elaboration likelihood model offer relatively general models of persuasion, in the sense of not being focused on any specific persuasion context. But context-specific models also exist. A leading example is the *transtheoretical model* (TTM), which is focused on changing undesirable health behaviors such as smoking (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). The TTM seeks to integrate a number of different theories of psychotherapy and behavior change, by placing them in a larger ("transtheoretical") framework. The TTM is a stage model, that is, a model that depicts behavioral change as involving progression through a sequence of distinct stages. Movement from one stage to the next is influenced by different factors depending on which stages are involved. Thus, people at different stages need different kinds of messages or interventions to encourage movement to the next stage. Other stage models have been offered as bases for understanding other specific contexts. For example, the "hierarchy of advertising effects" model describes a sequence of desired effects of advertising—to make the consumer aware of the product, to convey information about the product, and so forth—that corresponds to the set of stages through which a consumer is said to pass en route to purchasing the product.

From the perspective of the TTM, behavior change (e.g., quitting smoking) is not a singular event. Instead, behavior change involves movement through a sequence of five distinct stages: precontemplation, contemplation, planning, action, and maintenance. In the precontemplation stage, the person is not considering a change in behavior; for example, a smoker in precontemplation is not even thinking about quitting. In the contemplation stage, the person is thinking about the possibility of change; a smoker in contemplation is considering quitting. In the planning stage, the person is actively making preparations for behavior change; a smoker in this stage might, for example, choose a date for quitting. In the action stage, the person has started behavioral change; in this stage, the (former) smoker has stopped smoking. In the maintenance stage, the person continues the new behavior; the ex-smoker in the maintenance stage remains an ex-smoker.

The TTM does not claim that stage movement always happens in a completely linear way. The model acknowledges that people might backslide, cycle back and forth between stages before moving forward decisively, and so on. But the expectation is that no stage can be skipped entirely, and hence these five stages are taken to represent a general sequence for behavior change.

As is probably apparent, different kinds of interventions (messages, treatments) should be effective for people at different stages. A smoker who is not even thinking about quitting (and so is in the precontemplation stage) presumably needs a different intervention than does a smoker who is already making plans to quit. Expressed abstractly, stage-matched interventions are expected to be more effective than mismatched (or unmatched) interventions.

However, as attractive as the TTM approach is in the abstract, it has proved very challenging to redeem these ideas empirically. Concerns have been raised about stage definition (how to conceptually distinguish different stages), stage assessment (how to tell, in valid and reliable ways, which stage a person is in), stage movement (whether there is good evidence that people do move sequentially through the stages), and so on.

In particular, several reviews examining the effectiveness of stage-matched interventions have raised doubts about whether TTM-based stage-matched interventions are any more effective than nonmatched interventions. As one illustration, consider the question of the best timing for interventions focused on the person's self-efficacy for adopting the new behavior—interventions aimed at enhancing people's perceptions of their ability to adopt or perform the new behavior. The TTM suggests that self-efficacy interventions are not well adapted to people at earlier stages such as precontemplation; self-efficacy interventions are expected to be useful only once people have become convinced of the desirability of the new behavior (and so have, for example, entered the planning stage). But a number of studies have found that self-efficacy interventions can be effective even for people at early stages—people for whom the intervention is putatively mismatched.

Even if the TTM is imperfect, however, the broader concept of a stage model is surely appealing. The idea that behavior change in a given context involves progression through a sequence of distinct stages seems naturally quite plausible. But it has turned out to be surprisingly challenging to concretize this approach in satisfactory ways.

Variable-based research

Although some research about persuasion is guided by the theories already discussed, many persuasion studies are not motivated by any general theoretical framework but instead are aimed at investigating the effects that various variables have on persuasive outcomes. Much of this research consists of experiments in which participants are randomly assigned to one of two versions of a message, where the versions differ only with respect to some specific property of interest. For example, the two messages might be attributed to different communicators, might vary the nature of the arguments presented, and so forth. If, following appropriate statistical analyses, the two versions differ dependably in the amount of attitude change evoked, then presumably that difference can be attributed to the property that was experimentally varied. But dependable generalizations about such effects require replications, so caution is needed in interpreting the results of any single study. Such research can usefully be organized by whether the variable being studied is a property of the communicator, the message, or the receiver.

Communicator variables

Credibility (that is, perceived credibility) refers to the judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator. Credibility can be decomposed into two distinct sorts of judgments: expertise (that is, perceptions of whether the communicator is in a position to know the truth, by virtue of experience, training, and so forth) and trustworthiness (perceptions of whether the communicator will tell the truth—whether the communicator is honest, sincere, and so on). These two dimensions of credibility are conceptually distinct; for example, an individual might know the truth but be unwilling to tell the truth, as in the case of the stereotypical used-car salesperson. The conjunction of expertise and trustworthiness yields high credibility.

The effects of credibility variations on persuasive outcomes are complex, in at least two ways. First, how much difference credibility variations make to persuasive outcomes (that is, how much high- and low-credibility communicators differ in persuasiveness) varies from circumstance to circumstance. In particular, as the personal relevance of the topic to the receiver increases, variations in the communicator's credibility make less difference to persuasive effects (as expected by the ELM, discussed earlier). Second, high-credibility communicators are not always more persuasive than (or at least equally persuasive as) low-credibility communicators. Although higher-credibility sources have an advantage when advocating positions that are counterattitudinal for the message recipient, the advantage is reversed when the advocated position is one toward which the receiver initially feels at least somewhat favorable (a proattitudinal message); proattitudinal messages appear to evoke more favorable elaboration when coming from low-credibility communicators than from high-credibility communicators.

The effect of *liking* for the communicator on persuasion is perhaps foreseeable: In general, liked communicators are commonly more persuasive than disliked communicators. But this general principle masks a number of complexities concerning the role of liking in persuasion. For example, the persuasive effects of liking variations are

weaker than those of credibility variations; with counterattitudinal messages, it may be more valuable for a persuader to be thought credible than to be liked. And, as with credibility, the effects of liking diminish as the personal relevance of the topic to the recipient increases; expressed in terms of the ELM, as personal relevance increases, a liking heuristic becomes less likely to be activated.

It seems natural to suppose that the greater the *similarity* that recipients perceive with a communicator, the more persuasive that communicator will be. But the relationship of perceived similarity (between audience and source) is exceedingly complicated. Perceived similarity does not seem to affect persuasive outcomes directly, but rather does so indirectly by virtue of its effects of credibility and liking. Hence a clear picture of similarity's effects requires separate treatment of those two pathways of influence.

Liking for the communicator can be influenced by one particular sort of perceived similarity, namely, perceived attitudinal similarity (having similar attitudes, as distinct from having similar background or traits or skills). Perceived attitudinal similarities generally lead to greater liking. Hence when message recipients perceive that the communicator has attitudes similar to theirs—even on subjects wholly unrelated to the subject of advocacy—such perceived similarities can engender greater liking and hence potentially influence persuasive effectiveness.

Perceived similarities can also affect the receiver's perception of the communicator's credibility, but in complex ways. At a minimum, only similarities that are relevant to the topic of advocacy are likely to influence perceived expertise; knowing that a person likes the same television programs as you do may make them more credible where movie recommendations are concerned, but not where foreign policy is the subject. And some perceived dissimilarities might enhance credibility, as when, for example, the communicator is dissimilar by virtue of having more relevant experience.

Other communicator characteristics (besides credibility, liking, and similarity) function in the same fashion as similarity does; that is, other characteristics appear not to influence persuasive outcomes directly, but instead do so indirectly by means of their relationships to credibility and liking. For example, the communicator's physical attractiveness might influence liking (because better-looking people are generally better liked) or, in rare cases, might influence perceived expertise and hence indirectly affect persuasion. Similarly, the communicator's cultural background might, depending on the topic and audience, affect perceived similarity or credibility and thereby influence persuasive outcomes.

Message variables

One common way of persuading people is by invoking the consequences of the advocated action: "If you exercise regularly" (or buy this car or use this toothpaste), "then you'll reduce your risk of heart disease" (or get great gas mileage or whiter teeth). Perhaps unsurprisingly, persuasion is enhanced as the *perceived desirability of the consequences* increases (O'Keefe, 2013). Although this effect may be obvious, it points to the importance of adapting appeals to what the audience values—and this will not necessarily always be apparent to persuaders. For example, persuasive messages about skin protection behaviors (such as sunscreen use) often invoke health-related

consequences such as skin cancer, but at least some people are more persuaded by appeals invoking appearance-related consequences. As another example: Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine can prevent both sexually transmitted infections and cancer, but not all recipients are equally persuaded by these two consequences.

A *gain-framed message* emphasizes the advantages of performing the advocated action (“if you brush regularly, your risk of cavities will be lower”); a *loss-framed message* emphasizes the disadvantages of not undertaking the advocated action (“if you don’t brush regularly, your risk of cavities will be higher”). Because negative information commonly has a disproportionate impact on decisions compared to otherwise-equivalent positive information, one might expect loss-framed appeals to be more persuasive than gain-framed appeals, but the results from several hundred experiments have revealed that there is no overall difference in persuasiveness between these two kinds of messages. Research has thus sought to identify moderating factors, that is, factors that might make gain-framed appeals more persuasive in some circumstances but loss-framed appeals more advantageous in others. Although a number of possible moderators have been explored (including whether the behavior is a disease-prevention behavior or a disease-detection behavior, various receiver differences such as mood and personality characteristics, the nature of the consequences invoked, and so on), thus far research has not yet provided a basis for confident identification of any such moderating factors. (For some reviews, see Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012; O’Keefe & Jensen, 2006.)

Persuaders have two general possible ways of dealing with opposing arguments. A *one-sided message* ignores such arguments and presents only supporting arguments; a *two-sided message* both presents supportive arguments and discusses opposing arguments. There is no general difference in persuasiveness between one- and two-sided messages—but complexities emerge when one appreciates that there are two different kinds of two-sided message. A refutational two-sided message discusses opposing arguments by attempting to refute them. A nonrefutational two-sided message acknowledges opposing arguments but does not try to undermine them; instead, a nonrefutational two-sided message characteristically tries to overwhelm the opposing considerations with supportive arguments. Refutational two-sided messages are generally more persuasive than their one-sided counterparts, but nonrefutational two-sided messages are, on average, slightly less persuasive than one-sided messages. So persuaders should meet opposing arguments head-on, by refuting them, rather than ignoring them or merely mentioning them. (For some reviews, see Eisend, 2006; O’Keefe, 1999.)

Persuaders may face a choice between directly stating the message’s overall point (offering an *explicit conclusion*) or leaving that conclusion unstated and thus letting the audience draw the conclusion themselves (an *implicit conclusion*). Although one might think that implicit conclusions would be more persuasive (because the audience will have reasoned their own way to the conclusion), in fact explicitly stating the message’s conclusion is generally more persuasive than leaving that conclusion unstated. The explanation for this effect is not yet entirely clear, but it may be that omitting the conclusion encourages misunderstanding of the persuader’s position (perhaps through assimilation and contrast effects, discussed earlier).

A *narrative* is a story, a depiction of a sequence of events. Instead of trying to persuade by overtly making arguments, a persuader might instead use a story as a device for

conveying persuasive information. The potential persuasive power of narrative has been demonstrated in a number of studies in which narrative messages were found to be more persuasive than nonnarrative messages. However, narratives are not always more persuasive than nonnarratives, and it is not yet clear when a given narrative form will be more (or less) persuasive than a given nonnarrative form.

The persuasiveness of narrative messages varies depending on at least two factors (for a review, see Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). One is the degree to which the recipient identifies with (one or more of) the narrative's characters; greater character identification enhances the persuasive effects of narrative. A second factor is the degree to which recipients are "transported" by the story—so immersed in the story that they are carried away by it; greater narrative transportation is associated with greater narrative persuasiveness. These two factors might be independent influences on narrative persuasion or might be related in some fashion (in particular, character identification might enhance transportation), but the evidence to date is too slim to permit confident conclusions.

Entertainment-education (EE), which is the purposeful design of entertainment media specifically as vehicles for education, represents a notable application of narrative persuasion (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004). For example, in developing countries, radio and television dramas have been created for the express purpose of conveying health information on topics such as HIV/AIDS and family planning. Successful EE programs strike a balance between being entertaining (which attracts the audience) and being informative (which is the purpose of the program), but this can be quite challenging to accomplish.

Threat appeals (also called fear appeals) are messages aimed at encouraging adoption of protective behaviors, that is, behaviors meant to protect against a possible threat (actions such as seat-belt usage, sun avoidance, and regular exercise). Threat appeals have two parts: material depicting the threatening event or outcome and material describing the advocated protective action. For example, a threat appeal might recommend regular flossing as a way of avoiding the horrors of gum disease. As described earlier, protection motivation theory has identified several key determinants of the adoption of such protective actions, including perceived threat severity.

Much research has addressed the persuasive effects of variations in the depiction of threat severity in messages; the contrast of key interest is between a message containing intense, vivid, explicit depictions of the threatening consequences and a message containing a less intense, toned-down depiction. Although there is much complexity in the research findings, it seems clear that messages with more intense contents do generally arouse greater fear and are generally more persuasive. However, more intense threat appeals are unlikely to be more persuasive than less intense ones if the recipients' fear level is already high or if the recipients do not positively assess the recommended action (e.g., if the recipients believe the recommended action is ineffective).

That latter circumstance is addressed specifically by the extended parallel process model, which suggests that threat appeals can activate two parallel processes: danger control (reflecting a desire to control the danger posed by the potential threat) and fear control (concerning the feeling of fear). When people perceive a significant threat but do not believe they have a suitable way to control that threat, fear-control processes will be engaged: people might avoid thinking about the threat or might reevaluate the

threat so as to diminish it and thereby control their feelings of fear. (For some reviews, see Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Witte & Allen, 2000.)

Some social influence situations involve the influence agent making a request (e.g., to donate money, answer a survey, etc.). Researchers have examined two *sequential-request strategies* for enhancing compliance with such requests. In these strategies, the request of interest to the persuader (the target request) is preceded by a different request. The question is how the receiver's reaction to the first request might influence the success of the second (target) request. (For a general discussion, see Cialdini & Guadagno, 2004.)

The foot-in-the-door (FITD) strategy consists of initially making a small request of the receiver, which is granted. Then a second, larger (target) request is made, in the hope that having (metaphorically) gotten one's foot in the door, the receiver will be more likely to grant the second request. This strategy can indeed boost second-request compliance, but several moderating factors have been identified. For example, FITD effects are larger (that is, there is a bigger increase in the compliance rate) when the requests are prosocial requests (charities, civic groups, and the like) than when the requests are nonprosocial (e.g., from businesses) and when there is no obvious external justification for first-request compliance (e.g., being paid for granting the first request). FITD effects are not influenced by whether the same person makes the two requests or by whether the second request immediately follows the first. The best explanation of FITD effects is based on self-perception processes. The idea is that first-request compliance leads people to make inferences about themselves—that they're helpful, cooperative, and the like—and these inferences then increase the likelihood of compliance with the second request.

The door-in-the-face (DITF) strategy is in some ways the reverse of the FITD strategy. In the DITF strategy, the persuader makes a large first request which the recipient declines, and then a smaller second (target) request is made. This strategy can boost target-request compliance, but the size of the increase varies depending on several moderating factors. For example, DITF effects are larger if the requests are prosocial requests, if the same person makes both requests, and if there is little or no delay between the two requests. Several explanations have been offered for DITF effects, but the best explanation seems to combine aspects of reciprocity (reciprocating the requester's concession of having reduced the size of the request) and guilt (first-request refusal generates guilt, which is then reduced by second-request compliance).

Recipient variables

A number of different recipient characteristics have been studied for their effects on persuasion. These may usefully be grouped as relatively stable individual differences such as personality traits, more transient recipient states such as moods, and induced states that increase or decrease susceptibility to persuasion.

Stable *individual differences* among message recipients can affect persuasion in two possible ways. First, such differences may be relevant to the specific topic of advocacy in some way. For example, as people age, their motivations for volunteering appear to change (motivations based on career benefits decline, while those based on interpersonal relationships increase); this suggests that persuasive messages aimed at

encouraging volunteering might be varied depending on the audience's age. Similarly, individuals raised in individualistic cultures (such as the United States) and collectivist cultures (such as China) might differ in how persuasive they find corresponding appeals; a watch advertised as "helping you stand out" might be more persuasive in the former case, but an appeal based on "helping you fit in" might be more effective in the latter.

Second, individual differences might exert a more general influence on persuasion processes. For example, as mentioned earlier, individual differences in need for cognition (variations in how much people enjoy and engage in thinking) will produce corresponding differences in general elaboration motivation and hence influence the likelihood that central- or peripheral-route persuasion processes will be engaged.

Various *transient receiver states* can also be relevant to persuasion. For example, the recipient's mood can influence persuasive outcomes—though not in quite as simple a way as one might suppose. At a minimum, it's not the case that positive moods enhance persuasion and negative moods diminish it. Rather, receivers in (at least some varieties of) negative moods are more likely to engage in closer message processing than those in (at least some kinds of) positive moods. Expressed in terms of the ELM (discussed earlier), mood influences elaboration likelihood, such that more positive moods are associated with reduced elaboration (and hence a greater likelihood of peripheral-route persuasion).

Another transient receiver state is reactance, a motivational state that is aroused when a person's freedom is threatened. When reactance is evoked, the person is motivated to restore that freedom in some way (such as by acting in opposition to the pressure). Counterattitudinal persuasive messages naturally have the potential to arouse reactance; in such cases, reactance will be a combination of anger (an emotional state) and counterarguing (against the message)—which of course reduces persuasiveness. Directive or forceful language seems especially likely to provoke reactance.

Sometimes advocates want to decrease people's susceptibility to persuasion (to make people resistant to opposing messages), and sometime they want to increase susceptibility (make people less resistant to the advocate's messages). These two goals require different approaches.

A number of different means of *reducing susceptibility to persuasion* have been explored empirically. One approach is inoculation. Just as people can be inoculated against certain disease viruses through exposure to a weakened dose of the virus (which stimulates the body's defenses), so people can be made resistant to counterattitudinal messages by exposing them to a weak attack on their current attitudes and then refuting that attack. Showing people refutations of weak counterarguments makes them more resistant to persuasion by subsequent attack messages than they would have been otherwise. Moreover, such inoculation treatments make people resistant not only to attack messages using the arguments that were refuted, but also to messages using entirely different arguments.

Another means of reducing susceptibility to persuasion is simply warning people of an impending counterattitudinal message. Such warnings appear to stimulate counterarguing in the audience. When receivers are not willing or able to counterargue, however, the effects of warnings are correspondingly weakened.

A specialized approach to reducing susceptibility has focused on training people to refuse unwanted offers. Specifically, the thought has been that children and adolescents are often unable to refuse offers of illegal drug, tobacco, or alcohol—and hence teaching refusal skills will be a means of preventing substance use. Although there is good evidence that such refusal skills can indeed be taught effectively, such refusal skill programs are generally not very effective in preventing or reducing drug, alcohol, or tobacco use.

Enhancing susceptibility to persuasion is an especially important challenge in circumstances in which persuasive messages are likely to evoke defensive avoidance—where recipients do not want to attend to the message, want to avoid thinking about the topic, and so forth. Defensive avoidance motivation can be seen to arise from the general desire to maintain a positive view of the self; smokers may want to avoid information about their smoking risks, so as to keep a positive self-image. Such avoidance tendencies can be reduced, however, by self-affirmation treatments, which affirm (support, confirm) the person's positive attributes or central values. For example, study participants have been asked to describe instances in which they behaved in a kind way toward others. Such active affirmation of some positive aspect of the self has been found to permit people to be more receptive of information that might otherwise be threatening.

SEE ALSO: Argumentation Theory; Attitude; Festinger, Leon; Hovland, Carl I.; Marketing; Narrative; Psychology, Social; Rhetoric

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