

PERSUASION

Defining Persuasion

Persuasive communication is any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another or others.¹ Such responses are modified by symbolic transactions (messages) which are sometimes, but not always, linked with coercive force (indirectly coercive) and which appeal to the reason and emotions of the target. Generally, *persuasion* refers to such communicative activities that are mediated. Those that are face-to-face are called *compliance-gaining*.² Persuasive communication can be targeted at

- **Cognition.** Persuasion can be used to change individuals' beliefs about an object or an issue, which includes attributes, interpretation, definition, outcome, etc.
- **Attitude.** Persuasion can be used to change individuals' attitude toward an object or an issue, which refers to the categorization of an object or an issue along an evaluative dimension (from negative to positive).
- **Behavior.** Persuasion can be used to change individuals' behavior, which is the overt actions regarding an object or an issue.

Persuasion vs. Propaganda

Propaganda is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient come to "voluntarily" accept the position as if it were his or her own.³ In addition to the pejorative flavor, propaganda has some essential and distinctive features:⁴

- Propaganda has a strong *ideological* bent.
- Propaganda is *institutional* in nature.
- Propaganda involves *mass* persuasion.
- Propaganda tends to rely on *ethically suspect* methods of influence.

Persuasion vs. Manipulation

There are elements of manipulation and coercion implied in persuasion. However, persuasion is ethically neutral.

- It is the motives of the persuader that determine if a given persuasive attempt is good or bad.
- Persuasion also serves a defensive, anti-manipulation function.

1 Miller, G. R. (1980). On being persuaded: Some basic distinctions. In M. Roloff, & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Persuasion: New directions in theory and research*, 11–28. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

2 Wilson, S. (2002). *Seeking and resisting compliance: Why people say what they do when trying to influence others*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

3 Pratkanis, A. & Aronson, E. (1991). *Age of propaganda: The everyday use and abuse of persuasion*. New York: W. H. Freedman & Company.

4 Gass, R. & Seiter, J. (2006). *Persuasion, social influence, and compliance gaining*, 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson.

- Individuals' free will and free choice are intact in persuasion. They are able to make informed decisions as to if they comply with the persuasive messages or not.
- Persuasion is symbolic, which is generally more ethical than influence via nonverbal or behavioral means.

Means of Persuasion

SOURCE CREDIBILITY

The impact of source credibility on persuasion can date way back to ancient Greece (ethos). Social scientific research in persuasion showed that there are two major dimensions in source credibility: *expertise* and *trustworthiness*, although dynamism, liking, similarity and physical attractiveness might also influence source credibility.^{5,6}

Information and Source Credibility:

- A means to enhance expertise: Information on background, formal training, education, personal experience, and knowledge on the subject.
- A means to enhance trustworthiness: legitimacy, speaking against one's own interest, endorsement.

Non-Verbal Communication and Source Credibility:⁷

- Features that enhance expertise: fluency, facial pleasantness/smiling, facial expressiveness.
- Features that enhances trustworthiness: facial pleasantness/smiling, facial expressiveness.

Message Delivery and Source Credibility:⁷

- Features that enhance credibility: pitch variation, citation of sources
- Features that diminish credibility: filled pauses, response latency

Maximizing the Impact of Source Credibility on Persuasion:

- Personal relevance minimizes the impact of source credibility
- Positioning of the source at the beginning maximizes impact

RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Attitude is based upon, or generated from, three general classes of information: cognitive, affective, and (past) behavioral.⁸ Research is rapidly accumulating empirical evidence that persuasion is the result of both cognitive and affective processes.^{9,10} Hence, there are two general means to persuasion: rational

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- 5 Berlo, D. K., Lemert, J. B., & Mertz, R. J. (1969). Dimensions for evaluating the acceptability of message source. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 33, 563–576.
- 6 McCroskey, J. C. & Teven, J. (1999). Goodwill: A re-examination of the construct and its measurement. *Communication Monographs*, 66, 90–103.
- 7 Burgoon, J., Birk, T. & Pfau, M. (1990). Nonverbal behaviors, persuasion, and credibility. *Human Communication Research*, 17, 140–169.
- 8 Zanna, M. P. & Rempel, J. K. (1988). Attitude: A new look at an old concept. In D. Bar-Tal & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *The social psychology of knowledge*, 315–334. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- 9 Nabi, R. (2002). Anger, fear, uncertainty, and attitudes, a test of the cognitive-functional model. *Communication Monographs*, 69, 204–216.
- 10 Stephenson, M. T. (2003). Examining adolescents' responses to antimarijuana PSAs. *Human Communication Research*, 29, 243–369.

appeal and emotional appeal. A rational appeal uses logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade individuals that the advocacy is viable and likely to result in the obtainment of goals. An emotional appeal is designed to arouse emotions among the recipient and use the emotions as bases for persuasion.

- **Persuasion via rational appeal:** The cognitive response tradition of persuasion posits that the persuasive effectiveness of a message is a function of the individual's cognitive responses to the message.^{11,12,13} If the overall cognitive response is positive, there will be persuasion; otherwise, the persuasive attempt fails or even boomerangs. Generally speaking, the success of a rational appeal thus depends on the strength and quality of arguments in the message, given that the recipient is able and motivated to process the message. Factual evidence can be in the form of statistics or personal testimonies. There is no evidence showing the advantage of one over the other.¹⁴ If either ability or motivation to process the message is low, recipients are less likely to scrutinize message arguments, but tend to be influenced by non-content features of message, for example, message modality, channel, source credibility, etc.
- **Persuasion via emotional appeal:** The most widely applied emotional appeal in persuasion is *fear appeal*. The term is sometimes interchangeable with the term *threat appeal* when the emphasis is on the informational content of the message, rather than the arousal it activates among the recipients. Meta-analyses have demonstrated strong evidence for the effectiveness of fear appeals.^{15,16} There is also evidence that *guilt appeal* is persuasive.¹⁷
- **Fear appeal:** A typical fear appeal message has two components: the threat component and the recommendation component. The threat component should present the risk information: the *severity* of the risk and the individual's *susceptibility* to this particular risk. The recommendation component presents the recommended behavior to cope with the risk: the *response efficacy*, which refers to the effectiveness of the recommendation in removing the threat, and *self-efficacy*, which refers to the individual's capability to enact the recommended behavior.
- **Guilt appeal:** A typical guilt appeal message has two components: One presents materials to evoke guilt through drawing attention to some existing inconsistencies between the recipients' standards and actions, the other describes the recommended behavior or viewpoint, which is meant to offer the prospect of guilt reduction.

RESISTANCE TO PERSUASION

- **Psychological reactance:** When individuals perceive the messages as a restriction on their freedom to hold a particular attitude or to engage in certain behavior, they might experience psychological reactance and reject the message.^{18,19} Message features that could lead to reactance include: intention to persuade, illegitimacy, and language intensity.

11 Albarracin, D., McNatt, P., Ho, R., Klein, C., Mitchell, A., & Kumkale, G. (2003). Persuasive communication to change actions: An analysis of behavioral and cognitive impact in HIV prevention. *Health Psychology, 22*, 166–177.

12 Eagle, A. H., & Chaiken. S. (1993). *The psychology of attitudes*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

13 Petty, R. E., Ostrom, T. M., & Brock, T. M. (1981) (Eds.), *Cognitive responses in persuasion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

14 Hornikx, J. (2005). A review of experimental research on the relative persuasiveness of anecdotal, statistical, causal and expert evidence. *Studies in Communication Sciences, 5*, 205–216.

15 Boster, F. & Mongeau, P. (1984). Fear-arousing persuasive messages. In R. N. Bostrom, & B. H. Westley (Eds.), *Communication year-book 8*, 330–375. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

16 Witte, K., & Allen, M. (2000). A meta-analysis of fear appeals: Implications for effective public health campaigns. *Health Education & Behavior, 27*, 591–615.

17 O'Keefe, D. (2002). Guilt as a mechanism of persuasion. In J. P. Dillard, & M. Pfau (Eds.), *The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice*, 329–344. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

18 Dillard, J. P. & Shen, L. (2005). On the nature of reactance and its role in persuasive health communication. *Communication Monographs, 72*, 144–168.

19 Fogarty, J.S. (1997). Reactance theory and patient noncompliance. *Social Science & Medicine, 45*, 1277–1288.

- **Inoculation:** Resistance to persuasion can also be strategically induced to guard against counter-persuasion. There is evidence that a simple forewarning induce resistance to persuasion.²⁰ The inoculation model.²¹ suggests that forewarning of possible future attacks on one's attitude make individuals recognize the vulnerability of their attitude and motivate them to resist influence. Another component of inoculation is refutational pre-emption: It identifies possible counter-arguments, supplies refutations against possible attacks, and provides an operational model of attitude defense.

COMPLIANCE-GAINING

Persuasion also occurs in interpersonal settings, which is mainly compliance gaining. Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin²² identified 14 compliance-gaining strategies:

1. **Ingratiation:** Actor's offer of goods, sentiments, or services precedes the request for compliance.
2. **Promise:** Actor promises goods, sentiments, or services in exchange for compliance.
3. **Debt:** Actor recalls obligations owed to him or her as a way of inducing the target to comply.
4. **Esteem:** Target's compliance will result in automatic increase of self-worth.
5. **Allurement:** Target's reward arises from persons or conditions other than the actor.
6. **Aversive stimulation:** Actor continuously punishes target, making concessions contingent upon compliance.
7. **Threat:** Actor's proposed actions will have negative consequences for the target if she or he does not comply.
8. **Guilt:** Target's failure to comply will result in automatic decrease of self-worth.
9. **Warning:** The target's noncompliance could lead to circumstances in which other people become embarrassed, offended, or hurt.
10. **Altruism:** Actor requests the target to engage in behavior to benefit the actor.
11. **Direct request:** The actor simply asks the target to comply.
12. **Explanation:** offer reasons for asking for the compliance.
13. **Hinting:** Actor represents the situational context in such a way that the target is led to conclude the desired action or response.
14. **Deceit:** Actor requests compliance by intentionally misrepresenting the characteristics of the desired response.

20 Benoit, W. L. (1998). Forewarning and persuasion. In M. Allen, & R. W. Preiss (Eds.), *Persuasion: Advances through meta-analysis*, 139–154. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.

21 Pfau, M. (1997). Inoculation model of resistance to influence. In G. A. Barnett & F. J. Boster (Eds.), *Progress in communication sciences: Advances in persuasion*, 13, 133–171. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

22 Wiseman, R.L. & Schenck-Hamlin, W. (1981). A multi-dimensional scaling validation of an inductively-derived set of compliance-gaining strategies. *Communication Monographs*, 48, 251–270.

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

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