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The role of certainty (and uncertainty) in attitudes and persuasion

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Psychological certainty plays a key role in shaping people's thoughts, judgments, attitudes, and behaviors. This article provides an overview of recent work on *attitude certainty*, which has been the subject of considerable attention in the social and consumer psychology literatures. In particular, this article describes the consequences of feeling certain or uncertain of an attitude, outlines the metacognitive appraisals that shape people's feelings of certainty or uncertainty, and highlights recent developments suggesting that strategically inducing uncertainty during message processing can enhance message impact. In essence, whereas uncertainty can stimulate processing and create a desire for information, certainty helps give an attitude durability and impact.

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Psychological certainty is a core aspect of the human experience. It plays a fundamental role in shaping people's thoughts, decisions, attitudes, and behaviors [1,2]. People think differently, make different decisions, form different evaluations, and act in different ways when they feel certain as opposed to uncertain. Within the social and consumer psychology literatures, one form of certainty that has been the subject of particularly intense scrutiny is *attitude certainty* [3,4]. Indeed, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in attitude certainty over the past two decades. This surge initially was driven by the discovery that attitude certainty is an easy to measure yet profoundly important aspect of people's attitudes, and that there are specifiable actions people can take to augment or undermine their own or others' certainty. Very recently, however, a second wave of research has emerged focused on the possibility that there can be an upside to uncertainty that gives it considerable utility as a persuasive device. This article aims to review recent work on attitude certainty to offer a basic understanding of what it is, where it comes from, and what it does.

Attitude certainty

Whereas an attitude refers to one's evaluation of something — for example, the extent to which one favors a brand, likes a product, or supports a political candidate — attitude certainty refers to the subjective sense of confidence or conviction one has about an attitude [3,5]. In essence, attitude certainty is a metacognitive tag reflecting the degree to which one feels that an attitude is correct and/or clear in one's mind [1,6]. Importantly, this feeling can be independent of the attitude itself. That is, certainty is conceptually and empirically distinct from attitude valence (whether the attitude is positive or negative) and extremity (whether the attitude is somewhat or very positive or negative). Two diners could report the exact same attitude toward a new restaurant, for instance, yet differ dramatically in how certain they are if they believe their attitudes are based on varying degrees of personal experience. Indeed, recent work even highlights circumstances in which extreme attitudes (e.g., 8 on a 9-point scale) can be held with less certainty than their more moderate counterparts (e.g., 6 on a 9-point scale) [7].

Although attitude certainty is inherently subjective, it is a crucial dimension of attitude strength [8]. Generally speaking, the more certain one is of an attitude, the stronger — that is, the more durable and impactful — the attitude is [4,5]. For example, attitudes held with certainty are more resistant to persuasive attack and other forms of influence than are attitudes held with uncertainty [6,7,9,10]. Even in the absence of attack, attitudes held with high rather than low certainty tend to persist longer over time [11]. In addition, attitude certainty plays a key role in attitude-behavior correspondence such that attitudes held with high (versus low) certainty are more predictive of behavior [12–15]. Finally, a growing body of work suggests that attitude certainty is a crucial determinant of attitudinal advocacy: As people become more certain of their attitudes, they become increasingly willing to talk about their attitudes, share their opinions with others, sign pro-attitudinal petitions, and even persuade others to adopt their views [16–20].

An appraisal-based framework for certainty

Given the importance of attitude certainty in guiding the current and future life (and influence) of an attitude, it is perhaps unsurprising that considerable research has been directed toward illuminating its antecedents, or origins. Where does attitude certainty come from? As Rucker *et al.* [3] recently argued, the antecedents of certainty can be organized around a core set of metacognitive appraisals that underlie how certain or uncertain people feel about

their attitudes, and how this feeling of certainty or uncertainty can be shaped by contextual factors (see also [5^o,21]). More specifically, Rucker and colleagues identified both informational and experiential inputs to certainty, and organized these inputs into a finite set of appraisals that people use to gauge and adjust their own certainty levels with respect to a particular object or issue. These appraisals, outlined below, can be viewed as a set of questions people ask themselves when assessing how certain they are (see Figure 1).

How complete is one's information?

One key appraisal dimension concerns people's perceptions of how complete their information is in a particular domain or topic area. In general, the more complete an individual perceives her information to be, the more certain she will feel about her attitude. For instance, the sheer amount of information one has about something can affect one's attitude certainty. All else equal, the more information people believe they have (and the less missing information they think there is), the more certain they tend to be of their attitudes [22–24]. Similarly, people sometimes evaluate their own thoughtfulness as an input to certainty [25]. Even holding actual thought constant, the more people *perceive* that they have thought about an object or issue, the more certain they tend to be of their attitudes toward it ([17,23,26], but see [27]). Of course, completeness perceptions also depend on the type of information one has or the type of thinking one believes one has done. For example, when people perceive that both sides of an issue have been considered — such as when they perceive that they have weighed both the pros and cons of a product — they typically feel more certain of their resultant attitudes [28,29].

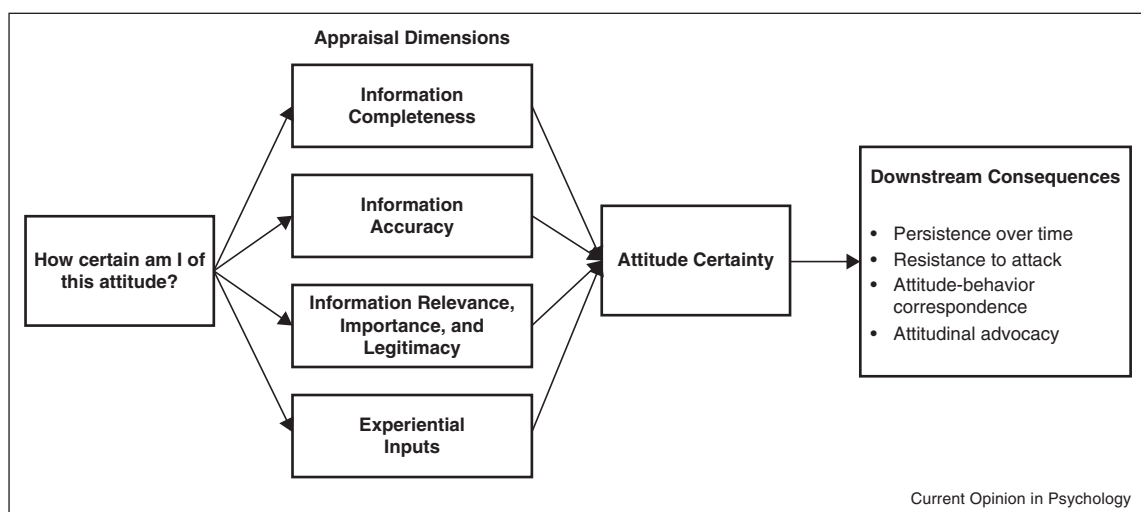
How accurate is one's information?

People also appraise their attitudes for accuracy. The more accurate people believe the information underlying an attitude is, the more certain they feel about that attitude. As a classic example, perceived social consensus affects attitude certainty. Unless uniqueness goals are particularly salient in a given situation, people generally feel more certain of their attitudes when they believe that others share them [6^o,30,31], and when they believe that others share their individual thoughts and perceptions of attitude-relevant information [32^o,33]. In essence, learning that others' attitudes, thoughts, and perceptions match our own, or that we are in the majority, provides social validation and fosters a feeling of attitude correctness [6^o].

Relatedly, attitude certainty can be affected by the consistency of the information people have about a topic. All else equal, people are more certain of their attitudes when their attitude-relevant information is consistent rather than contradictory [23,34^o,35,36], presumably because consistency helps build people's confidence in the accuracy of the information.

Finally, accuracy appraisals can be affected by perceptions of personal experience. For instance, people hold their attitudes with greater certainty, and are more willing to act on and defend those attitudes, when they have direct personal experience with the attitude object (e.g., when they have tasted a food versus read about the taste) [13^o,37]. Likewise, people feel more certain of their attitudes when they receive attitude-relevant information from a source with high rather than low expertise [38], presumably because experts have more knowledge and

Figure 1



Appraisal-based model of attitude certainty.
Adapted from Rucker *et al.* [3^o].

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