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Original article

Attitudes toward health-messages: The link between perceived attention and subjective strength



Attitudes à l'égard des messages de santé : rapport entre attention subjective et intensité des attitudes

A. Cancela^a, B. Requero^a, D. Santos^a, M. Stavraki^b, P. Briñol^{a,*}

^a Department of Psychology, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Campus de Cantoblanco, Carretera de Colmenar, Km. 15, 28049 Madrid, Spain

^b Department of Psychology, Universidad de Castilla La Mancha, Ronda de Calatrava, 3, 13071 Ciudad Real, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Many efforts are invested in promoting healthy attitudes and behaviors; nonetheless there is no clear, definitive evidence of sustained effectiveness of those efforts in all cases.

Objective. – The present study examined the role of perceived attention in changing attitudes toward vegetable consumption as well as the perceived stability and resistance of those changes (attitude strength).

Method. – Participants were randomly assigned to read a strong or weak health communication arguing in favor of vegetable consumption. After reading the message, participants reported attitudes toward this health issue, the perceived attention, and the perceived strength associated with their evaluations.

Results. – Participants who reported high (vs. low) perceived attention showed a greater effect of argument quality on persuasion. Furthermore, such participants also reported stronger attitudes compared to those who reported low perceived attention.

Conclusion. – This study showed that attitudes toward vegetable consumption can be changed after reading a persuasive message, and that the extent of perceived attention moderated the extent to which those changes were perceived as stable and resistant (stronger attitudes).

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RÉSUMÉ

Introduction. – On ne ménage pas les efforts pour promouvoir les attitudes et les comportements de santé ; il n'y a pourtant aucune preuve à l'appui de leur efficacité sur le long terme.

Objectif. – Cette étude examine le rôle de l'attention subjective dans l'évolution des attitudes envers la consommation de légumes, ainsi que la persistance et la résistance de cette évolution.

Méthode. – Les participants ont d'abord dû lire un rapport de santé qui vante les bienfaits des légumes ; certains recevaient un rapport peu convaincant, les autres des arguments plus puissants. Tous ont ensuite rendu compte de leurs attitudes envers cette question diététique en précisant la portée, selon eux, de leurs évaluations.

Résultats. – Les participants démontrant une attention subjective élevée (par opposition à faible) à la lecture du rapport ont aussi produit les arguments les plus persuasifs. De plus, les attitudes de ces mêmes participants ont été plus assurées par rapport à ceux qui démontraient une faible attention subjective.

Conclusion. – Cette étude montre que les attitudes envers la consommation de légumes peuvent être modifiées par la lecture d'un message fort, et que leur persistance et leur résistance est fonction de leur degré d'attention subjective.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ana.cancela@uam.es (A. Cancela), blanca.requero@uam.es (B. Requero), david.santos@uam.es (D. Santos), maria.stavraki@uclm.es (M. Stavraki), pablo.brinnol@uam.es (P. Briñol).

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in promoting healthy habits. These efforts have focused on positive outcomes such as improving eating habits, increasing exercise, and intake of vegetables and fruits (Batista, Lima, Pereira, & Alves, 2014; Bayer, Nehring, Bolte, & von Kries, 2013; Denney-Wilson, Robinson, Laws, & Harris, 2014). Most of the resources allocated to encouraging healthy habits are spent in campaigns including the promotion of favorable attitudes toward those behaviors (Magallanes & Morales, 2014; Vartanian, Spanos, Herman, & Polivy, 2015).

Despite the efforts designed to promote these healthy attitudes and behaviors, there is no clear evidence of sustained effectiveness producing positive effects, at least not in all cases. In fact, sometimes health campaigns are associated with null or even adverse effects. Therefore, there is a variety of potential outcomes that can be summarized next.

First, some communication campaigns are effective in achieving the desired outcome (Flynn et al., 2007; Pettigrew & Pescud, 2012; Rodgers et al., 2016; Sacks, Swinburn, & Lawrence, 2009). For instance, Epstein et al. (2001) found that family-based interventions with the goal of increasing the intake of fruits and vegetables produced effective behavioral changes.

Second, other campaigns are not so successful in promoting healthy attitudes and behaviors. In some instances, research has concluded that particular intervention strategies are ineffective, producing virtually no changes in important outcomes (Derzon & Lipsey, 2002; Noar, 2006; Snyder & Hamilton, 2002). As an example of this category, Jones, Sinclair, Rhodes, and Courneya (2004) examined the effectiveness of a persuasive message on exercise in college students and could not find significant effects in any of the psychological (i.e., attitudes and intentions) or behavioral variables assessed.

Finally, some campaigns have been shown to have unexpected adverse effects. That is, some health communication campaigns backfire increasing (rather than decreasing) the number of undesirable health-related attitudes and behaviors (Lorenz & Oliver, 2013). These reverse effects of health campaigns can be explained via several mechanisms (boomerang effect), such as an unwanted exaggeration of the social desirability of thinness (Puhl & Heuer, 2010) and psychological reactance (Puhl, Luedicke, & Peterson, 2013).

Faced with such disparate results and interpretations, it is difficult to anticipate whether, when, and for whom food-related health campaigns will be effective, ineffective or even detrimental. Even when health communications produce the desired outcomes in the short-term, it is still challenging to make predictions regarding the resistance and stability of the induced changes in the long-term. In fact, Gill, King and Catterson (2005) reviewed a large number of health campaigns and found that interventions aimed at preventing obesity could sometimes produce changes in the short-term but rarely produced long-term effects. In one of the exceptions, Huhman et al. (2007) found that the more children saw a campaign that encouraged physical activity, the more positive were their attitudes toward physical activity, and that those effects remained stable even two-years after the intervention (see also Epstein et al., 2001).

1.1. Immediate and long-term consequences of health communication

Understanding when (and when not) health communication leads to long-term consequences depends in part on the consideration of the psychological processes that are relevant for the effects of public communication campaigns (Salovey & Wegener,

2003). One of the psychological mechanisms that can be used to understand these effects is elaboration of the received information.

Elaboration is a core construct in the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Briñol, 2007, 2012), one of the earliest dual process theories that distinguishes thoughtful from non-thoughtful determinants of judgment. The term “elaboration” is used in social psychology to describe the action of people adding something of their own to the specific information provided, for example, in a persuasive communication (Petty & Briñol, 2009).

This term of elaboration as a determinant of persuasion was introduced to overcome the previous persuasion models that relied both on the equivalence between learning and persuasion and the passive view of the message’s recipient. For instance, one of the earliest assumptions of theories of persuasion was that effective influence required a sequence of steps. According to McGuire’s (1985) persuasion matrix model, attitude change required a sequence of steps, such as exposure, attention, interest, comprehension, acquisition, yielding, memory, retrieval, decision, action, reinforcement, and consolidation. According to this view, attention played a critical role, and the recipient must attend to the information presented for persuasion to occur. Although this is an intuitive model, it is now clear that some of the steps postulated in the sequence might be completely independent from each other, rather than sequential. For example, although a person’s attention was often thought to be an important causal determinant of and prerequisite to persuasion, subsequent evidence has accumulated to support the view that message attention and message learning is not a necessary step (Greenwald, 1968). Rather, the existing evidence shows that message attention and learning can occur in the absence of attitude change, and that a person’s attitudes can change without attending and learning the specific information in the communication. That is, a person might be able to attend and to comprehend all the intended information perfectly, but not be persuaded either because the information is counter-argued or seen as personally irrelevant. For example, a message using erotic images and violence would presumably get attention (Lull & Bushman, 2015) but people might not be necessarily persuaded if they find them threatening or if they perceive the arguments contained in the message to be weak. On the other hand, a person might not attend the information (reporting zero attention) or might get the information all wrong (scoring zero on a knowledge test) but think about the attitudinal object in a manner that produces the intended change. Therefore, attention is not the same as persuasion.

The cognitive response theory (Greenwald, 1968; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981) and the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) were developed originally to account for the low correlation between message attention (a step of learning) and persuasion observed in many studies, and for the processes responsible for yielding to message. In contrast to the traditional view that acceptance of a message depended upon learning the message content, the cognitive response approach contends that persuasion depends on the extent to which individual articulate and rehearse their own idiosyncratic thoughts to the information presented. The cognitive response perspective maintains that individuals are active participants in the persuasion process relating message elements to their existing repertoires of information. According to this framework, an appeal that elicits issue-relevant thoughts that are primarily favorable toward a particular recommendation would be expected to produce agreement, whereas an appeal that elicits issue-relevant thoughts that are predominantly unfavorable toward the recommendation would be expected to be ineffective in achieving attitude change.

Unlike previous models of persuasion, the ELM proposes an active view of the message’s recipient. According to that view, attitudes, as well as other judgments, can be modified by processes

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