

# Attitude accessibility and message processing: The moderating role of message position <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Past research suggests that pre-message attitude accessibility can influence the amount of processing of persuasive messages (with highly accessible attitudes eliciting higher levels of processing than attitudes lower in accessibility). The current research suggests that the previous conclusions are only partly true—effects of accessibility on message processing are moderated by the extent to which the persuasive message is proattitudinal versus counterattitudinal. In two experiments, pre-message attitudes and attitude accessibility were measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Study 2) prior to receiving a strong or weak persuasive message. When messages were counterattitudinal, increased pre-message accessibility was associated with greater message processing (as in past research). However, when messages were proattitudinal, increased pre-message accessibility was associated with decreased message scrutiny. Potential underlying mechanisms and implications are discussed.

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Over the past two decades, an emphasis on strength-related properties of attitudes has resulted in significant advancements in the study of attitudes and attitude change. Although many strength-related dimensions have been distinguished (see Petty & Krosnick, 1995, for a review), perhaps the most widely researched is the extent to which attitudes are automatically activated in the presence of attitude objects (i.e., attitude accessibility). Attitude accessibility has been hypothesized to indicate the associative

strength between the mental representation of the attitude object and evaluation of the object along a continuum of favorability (for a review, see Fazio, 1995). Consistent with this associative strength hypothesis, compared to less accessible attitudes, highly accessible attitudes are more stable over time (e.g., Hodges & Wilson, 1994), more predictive of behavior (e.g., Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982), and more resistant to change (Bassili, 1996; Bassili & Fletcher, 1991).

One possible reason for this pattern of effects is that high levels of accessibility have also been shown to lead to high levels of information processing (which have also been linked to the creation of strong attitudes, Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). For example, in two studies, Fabrigar, Priester, Petty, and Wegener (1998) found that high levels of pre-message attitude accessibility were associated with higher levels of message processing. That is, when pre-message attitudes were measured as or manipulated to be highly accessible, persuasion by the subsequent messages

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was greater when the message contained strong (compelling) rather than weak (specious) arguments. When pre-message attitudes were low in accessibility, however, the quality of arguments had little effect on post-message attitudes. These findings suggest that the efforts of persuasion practitioners would often benefit from repeated activation of message recipients' attitudes prior to receipt of persuasive messages (assuming that arguments are strong).

High levels of accessibility were originally understood as increasing message processing because accessibility increases (a) the extent to which the attitude object is perceived to be important or personally relevant (e.g., Krosnick, 1989; Roese & Olson, 1994; but see Bizer & Krosnick, 2001) or (b) the activation, or accessibility, of attitude-relevant knowledge (e.g., Wood, Rhodes, & Biek, 1995). This approach suggests that accessibility effects on processing should occur regardless of the direction of the message (see Fabrigar et al., 1998).

However, we believe that accessibility could also work in concert with the direction of the message to influence motivations to process message content. That is, people with accessible attitudes may be especially likely to perceive a counterattitudinal message as negative or wrong, as threatening to their attitude, or as threatening to their sense of self (cf., Cacioppo & Petty, 1979; Edwards & Smith, 1996). These possibilities are consistent with the fact that previous accessibility effects on processing have been found primarily when the persuasive message was counterattitudinal (as in most persuasion studies).<sup>1</sup>

High levels of accessibility might work differently, however, when the message is proattitudinal. There is little reason for people to perceive a proattitudinal message as threatening one's attitude or one's sense of self. People with highly accessible attitudes might believe that they "already know" what is being communicated and that the message requires little scrutiny. In contrast, when people hold inaccessible attitudes, the supportive nature of the message may increase motives to process the message. Past research manipulating attitude accessibility has also shown that low levels of accessibility are associated with relatively low levels of attitude confidence (Holland, Verplanken, & van Knippenberg, 2003). According to attitude theories such as the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM; Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989), people should process message content in an effort to create sufficient confidence in their attitude (see Bohnet, Rank, Reinhard, Einwiller, & Erb, 1998). Thus, people with inaccessible (uncertain) attitudes should process at high levels when message processing is likely to increase confidence, but not when processing

would fail to increase confidence. Because a proattitudinal message supports one's current attitude, processing the message is likely to be viewed as increasing confidence. However, because the counterattitudinal message is providing information inconsistent with the person's current attitude, processing of the counterattitudinal message should often be viewed as less likely to increase attitude confidence.

These ideas suggest a rather different conceptualization of the relation between pre-message attitude accessibility and message processing. If true, they also suggest that the persuasion practitioner would not be well served by always seeking to repeatedly activate attitudes before the persuasive message. If accessibility effects are due to overall accessibility differences in perceived attitude importance or accessibility of attitude-relevant knowledge, then accessibility effects on message processing should be relatively constant across proattitudinal and counterattitudinal messages. However, if attitude accessibility and message direction work together to influence motives to process the message, then effects of accessibility on processing should be quite different across proattitudinal and counterattitudinal messages. High levels of processing might be most likely with high levels of attitude accessibility when messages counter the pre-message attitudes of message recipients, but might be most likely with low levels of accessibility when messages support pre-message attitudes.

To test whether message position moderates the link between attitude accessibility and message processing, we conducted two studies. Accessibility and favorability of pre-message attitudes were either measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Study 2) prior to receipt of strong or weak message arguments.

## Study 1

### *Method*

#### *Participants and design*

Two hundred eighty-three Purdue University undergraduates participated in exchange for partial course credit in their introductory psychology classes. The experiment measured the favorability and accessibility of pre-message attitudes and manipulated the quality of message arguments (weak vs. strong).

#### *Procedure*

One to seven participants arrived for any single session and were asked to sit at a computer station. Participants were told that the study served as an assessment of "readability" of written communications. Prior to message presentation, the accessibility and favorability of participants' attitudes toward nuclear power plants was measured. Participants then completed a filler task (i.e., evaluating a trait description of a person) and were then presented with a message consisting of either strong or weak arguments against the development of nuclear power plants in the United States. After reading the message, participants

<sup>1</sup> In Fabrigar et al. (1998), a majority of Study 1 participants initially opposed the position of the message (i.e., 85 vs. 56) based on the dichotomous pre-message attitude accessibility measures. In Study 2, a marginal interaction suggested that accessibility effects on processing were strongest when pre-message attitudes were opposed to the message. Because the interaction was unexpected and the sample was small when message position was taken into account, however, the interaction had to be taken with caution.

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