

# Social Psychology

## Lecture 8: Persuasion

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Our previous discussion focused on the methods and techniques that people use to get others to comply with requests. Also, we navigated the "darker side" of social influence. This included a deep dive into Milgram's experiments, which revealed the chilling extent to which individuals will obey authority even at the cost of their own moral judgment. We concluded by examining the psychological defense mechanisms of reactance, exploring the internal triggers that cause us to push back and assert our autonomy when we feel our freedom is being threatened.

We are moving into a new dimension of social influence: the study of persuasion. Here, we focus on the methods used to deliberately influence and change a person's core attitudes and behaviors. Our lesson will cover the following topics: Routes to Persuasion, Elements of Persuasion and When Shouldn't We Resist Persuasion?

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Define persuasion and distinguish it from conformity and obedience.
2. Name the two paths to persuasion and describe the cognitive processing involved in each.
3. Identify and describe the key elements of persuasion.
4. Identify instances in which persuasion serves a beneficial role and should not be resisted.

### **Persuasion**

- The process by which a message induces a change in beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors.
- It is neither inherently good nor bad; it is usually the persuasive message's content that elicits our judgments of good or bad.
- The bad we call "**propaganda**".

- The good we call “**education**”.
- Attitude change follows a series of stages:
  1. attend the message
  2. comprehend the message
  3. accept the message

### How it Differs from Conformity and Obedience?

Social Influence	Type of Pressure	Source of Influence	Status of Influencer	Core Motivation
<b>Persuasion</b>	Explicit arguments & appeals	Anyone (friend, media, speaker)	Lower, equal, or higher	Agreement with the message
<b>Conformity</b>	Implicit, unspoken social norms	A peer group or crowd	Equal status	Desire to fit in or be right
<b>Obedience</b>	Explicit, direct commands	An authority figure	Higher status	Respect for authority or fear of punishment

## ROUTES TO PERSUASION

### The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

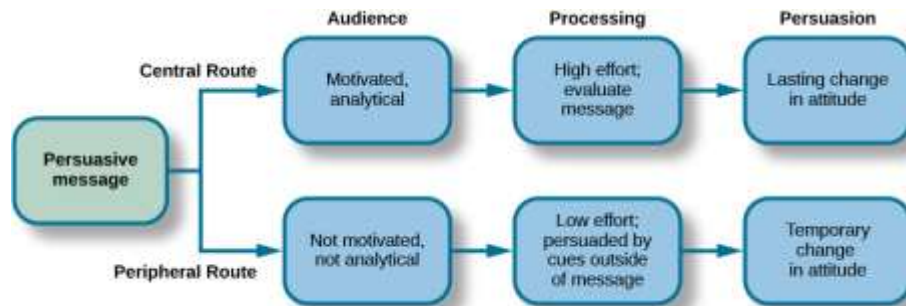
- a dual-process theory describing how individuals process persuasive messages.
- Two routes to persuasion:
  1. **Central Route** – High-effort processing; focuses on facts, logic, and message quality. It occurs when people are motivated and able to think about an issue and respond with favorable thoughts.

**Example: Booking a Vacation**

- Researching the best competitive rates.
- Reading multiple user reviews

- ☑ Evaluating specific amenities and value.

2. **Peripheral Route** – Low-effort processing; influenced by surface-level "cues" (e.g., attractiveness, celebrity, or music). It occurs when people focus on cues that trigger automatic acceptance without much thinking. People use simple rule-of-thumb heuristics such a “trust the expert”.



Source: Myers, D. G. & Twenge, J. M. (2021). *Social Psychology 14th ed.* McGraw-Hill Higher Education

## ELEMENTS OF PERSUASION

### Yale Communication Model

- Proposed by Carl Hovland and colleagues in 1949.
- This framework proposes that message persuasion is contingent upon three primary variables: the source (communicator), the substance (content), and the target (audience).

### 1. THE COMMUNICATOR

- Who is saying something affects how an audience receives it.
- A source whose credibility is low provides a discounting cue that can result in rejection of the message.
- ***What makes a communicator more persuasive than others?***

#### A. Credibility

- Perceived expertise – knowledgeable and well-informed regarding a specific topic

- Speak confidently and fluently – speaker who avoids hesitations (like "uh" or "um") and speaks with conviction
- Perceived Trustworthiness – being honest, objective, and sincere

B. **Attractiveness and Liking** – having qualities that appeal to an audience.

C. **Similarity** – in background, values, associations, appearance, or other factors.

**Experiment:** Mackie and colleagues (1990) conducted an experiment to test how social identification affects how we process information.

**Task:** Student participants were asked to read a persuasive essay on an environmental issue written by either a fellow schoolmate or a student from another university.

**Result:**

When participants believed the essay was written by a fellow student from their own university (the in-group), they engaged more deeply with the arguments. However, when the same essay was attributed to a student from a rival or different university (the out-group), participants were less likely to be persuaded, often dismissing the arguments regardless of their actual strength.

### **The Sleeper Effect**

- a message's impact increases over time, even if it was initially dismissed or discounted.
- This often occurs when the message is accompanied by a "discounting cue," such as a source that lacks credibility.
- **How it Works:**
  - Initially, the discounting cue (unreliable source) weakens the message's impact.
  - Over time, people may remember the message itself but forget or dissociate it from the discounting cue.
  - As a result, the message's persuasiveness increases because the negative association with the source is weakened.

- People are less likely to be influenced by the sleeper effect if they know who is speaking before the message begins, rather than finding out the source at the end.
- **Example:** Political "Smear" Campaigns
  1. An anonymous flyer makes a claim about a candidate. You ignore it because the source is suspicious.
  2. Time Passes: You forget you ever saw that specific flyer.
  3. Two months later, you remember the "fact" from the flyer, but because you forgot the source was unreliable, you now accept the information as true.

## 2. THE MESSAGE

- It matters not only who says something but also what that person says.
- Two main characteristics:
  - a. **Message content** – refers to the tactics that may be used to communicate a concept to an audience (the actual words or images used in the message).
  - b. **Message construction** – refers to how the message is put together (how information should be placed in a message, how long the message should be, and how often the message should be repeated).

### Reason Vs Emotion

- Well-educated or analytical people are more responsive to rational appeals than are less educated or less analytical people.
- When people's initial attitudes are formed primarily through emotion, they are more persuaded by later emotional appeals.
- When the initial attitudes are formed primarily through reason, they are more persuaded by later intellectual arguments.

### The Effect of Good Feeling

- **Good Moods:** Increase susceptibility to persuasion. Positive emotions signal that "all is well," leading to less critical, effortless thinking.

- **Unhappy Moods:** Lead to greater rumination and skepticism. Unhappy individuals are more likely to scrutinize and reject weak arguments.

### **Experiment:**

- Researchers: Janis, Kaye & Kirschner (1965).
- Hypothesis: An "extraneous gratification" (eating food) during a message will increase its acceptance, even if the food has nothing to do with the message or its source.
- Participants: 216 male college students.
- Conditions:
  - o Group A: Read 4 persuasive messages while eating "desirable food" (peanuts and Pepsi).
  - o Group B: Read the same 4 messages with no food present.
  - o Group C (Control): Was not exposed to any messages.
- Findings: Group A showed significantly more opinion change in favor of the messages compared to those in the no-food condition.

### **The Effect of Arousing Fear**

- Messages can also be effective by evoking negative emotions.
- Ex. Cigarette packaging
- Nearly 80% of young people in Canada reported that the inclusion of graphic warning labels made smoking appear significantly less appealing.
- After research by Claude Levy-Leboyer (1988, cited in Myers & Tewenge, 2021) demonstrated that graphic imagery effectively shifted the attitudes and behaviors of French youth regarding alcohol, the French government integrated these high-impact visuals into their national television advertisements.
- In a 1995 study by Banks and Salovey, women who had previously skipped screenings watched educational videos with different emotional "frames."
  - o Positive message: "Early detection saves lives." → 50% compliance
  - o Fear-framed message: "Skipping a mammogram can cost your life" → 67% compliance
- Displaying ultraviolet (UV) photographs that reveal hidden sun damage such as premature freckles and aging spots significantly increases sunscreen usage. For

many, the fear of losing physical attractiveness is a more powerful motivator than the fear of developing skin cancer (Williams et al., 2013)

- **How to maximize fear appeal?**

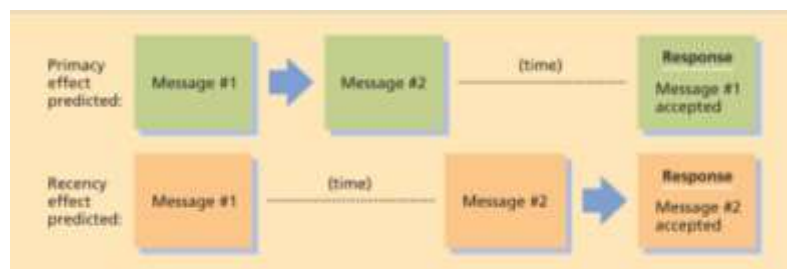
1. Highlight the seriousness of the threat.
2. Provide a clear, actionable solution the audience feels capable of doing.

### Two-Sided Appeals

- Most effective for people who are well-informed or who are going to hear counterarguments in the future.
- Two-sided messages are more effective in persuading those who initially disagree.

### Order of the Message: Primacy vs. Recency

- Time between messages will influence whether primacy or recency effects are strongest.
  - **Primacy effect** – information presented first usually has the most influence.
  - **Recency effect** – information presented last sometimes has the most effect.



Source: Myers, D. G. & Twenge, J. M. (2021). Social Psychology 14th ed. McGraw-Hill Higher Education

- Election: Candidates benefit from being listed first (primacy effect) on the ballot (Moore, 2004)
- When two persuasive messages are back-to-back and the audience then responds at some later time, the first message has the advantage (primacy effect).

- When the two messages are separated in time and the audience responds soon after the second message, the second message has the advantage (recency effect).

### **Repetition**

- Repeating a message increases its persuasive power.
- Frequent exposure of an initially positive or neutral object will increase liking
- Burnout may occur with overexposure.

### **3. THE MEDIUM / CHANNEL**

**Channel of communication** – the way the message is delivered – whether face-to-face, newspaper, movies, word of mouth, billboard advertisements, radio, internet, mail, television and magazine.

### **Personal versus media influence**

- **Two-step flow of communication** – from media to opinion leaders to everyday people.

### **Comparing Media**

**Persuasiveness Hierarchy:** The more "lifelike" the medium, the more persuasive it is:

1. Live (Face-to-face)
  2. Video
  3. Audio
  4. Written
- While video is most persuasive for simple topics, written text is best for comprehension and recall of complex information.
  - Study by Chaiken & Eagly (1983):
    - **Easy Messages:** Most effective via **Video** (focuses on peripheral cues like attractiveness).

- **Difficult Messages:** Most effective via **Writing** (allows readers to process at their own pace).

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#### 4. THE AUDIENCE

- Two important characteristics:

1. **Age** – people tend to have different social and political attitudes depending on their age.

Two possible explanations for age differences:

- **Life cycle explanation** – attitudes change as people grow older.
- **Generational explanation** – attitudes do not change; we largely hold onto the beliefs we adopted when we were young.

#### 2. Cognitive engagement

- If audience are forewarned about a message, they are less likely to be persuaded by it.
- Persuasion is also enhanced by a distraction that inhibits counterarguing.
- Study: Participants who read a message while also watching a video were less likely to counterargue (Jeong & Hwang, 2012).

#### WHEN SHOULDN'T WE RESIST PERSUASION?

- Example: Getting tested for HIV or doing self-breast examinations
- Effectiveness of a health message depends on Message Framing:
  - **Gain Frame** – what is gained by acting (e.g. Peace of mind and a longer life)
  - **Loss Frame** – what is lost by failing to act (e.g. the danger of a late-stage diagnosis)

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