The Influence of Source Physical Attractiveness on Advertising Effectiveness: A Functional Perspective

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High and low self-monitors heard either a physically attractive or unattractive source promote a new product with either strong or weak arguments. High self-monitors were persuaded by the physically attractive source only when she presented strong arguments. In contrast, low self-monitoring individuals were persuaded by the physically attractive source regardless of argument strength. Neither high nor low self-monitors were persuaded by the physically unattractive source, regardless of the quality of the arguments she offered. Cognitive response and recall data suggest that high self-monitors may have been systematically processing the physically attractive source's message and low self-monitors may have been more heuristically processing her message. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for advertising strategies.

Traditionally, source physical attractiveness has been thought to play an important role in determining the effectiveness of persuasive communications. In general, a litany of research had suggested that, all else being equal, a message delivered by a physically attractive source will tend to be more persuasive than a similar message delivered by a less physically attractive source (for a review, see Chaiken, 1986). However, the specific part that source physical attractiveness plays in the persuasion process (i.e., the process by which a physically attractive source makes a message more persuasive), has yet to be satisfactorily delineated (Chaiken, 1988). Indeed, the role assigned to source physical attractiveness seems to shift as a function of predominant theoretical orientation of the times. For example, earlier, more stimulus-response models (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), portrayed source physical attractiveness as serving as an incentive for attitude change. Other more motivational approaches (e.g., Kelman, 1961)

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1This research was supported by an Internal Educational Fund grant from Union College to Christine Telesea. The authors are grateful to Shirley DeBono, Hugh Foley, and Carol Weisse for their comments on an earlier version of this manuscript and to Lauren Feuerman for her assistance in conducting this research. Portions of this research were presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Buffalo, NY, 1988.

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have speculated that source physical attractiveness is effective because it may satisfy identification needs for individuals.

More recent, cognitive, models of persuasion (Chaiken, 1987; Eagly & Chaiken, 1984; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b) have suggested that the role source physical attractiveness plays is a multifaceted one. At times, particularly under conditions of low personal involvement, source physical attractiveness is thought to have a direct impact on the effectiveness of a persuasive message. When an issue is of little importance to individuals, they tend to use, via heuristic (Chaiken, 1980, 1987) or peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b) processes, the physical attractiveness of the source to decide the validity of the message (Chaiken, 1986). As a consequence, people are more likely to agree with a physically attractive source than with a physically unattractive source regardless of the strength of the arguments used (e.g., Pallak, 1983).

By contrast, when an issue is more personally involving, source physical attractiveness tends to have little, if any, direct impact on the persuasiveness of a message. Rather, individuals more systematically process the message, often basing agreement on the cogency of the arguments used regardless of the source's physical attractiveness (Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b).

Importantly, the functional or motivational bases of individuals' attitudes may also moderate the effects of source physical attractiveness. Functional theories of attitudes (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956) suggest that attitudes fulfill certain interpersonal needs and that these needs may vary across individuals. Recent research has suggested that the construct of self-monitoring (cf., Snyder, 1987) may identify individuals for whom attitudes play either a social adjustive or a value expressive function3 (DeBono, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, 1987, 1989).

For high self-monitors, attitudes appear to play a social adjustive function. That is, the attitudes of high self-monitors seem to be formed on the basis of how well they allow the expression of beliefs appropriate for a given social situation and how well they allow for the projection of appropriate self-images. An important manifestation of the social adjustive nature of their attitudes is the emphasis high self-monitors impart to physical attractiveness. In particular, studies of interpersonal relationships and the psychology of advertising have demonstrated that, for high self-monitors, the physical attractiveness of entities ranging from dating partners to consumer products is quite important and engaging.

In contrast, the attitudes of low self-monitors may play a value-expressive

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3 Other functions that have been proposed for attitudes include the ego-defensive and knowledge or object-appraisal function.
function (DeBono, 1987; Herek, 1987). That is, their attitudes may be formed on the basis of how well they reflect important personal values and beliefs. One consequence of this functional orientation is that the physical attractiveness of entities appears not to be as engaging or as important as it is for high self-monitors (DeBono & Snyder, 1989; Snyder, Berscheid, & Glick, 1985).

The preceding characterization suggests that physical attractiveness may be differentially involving for high and low self-monitors. For high self-monitors, physical attractiveness clearly represents an important and involving aspect of their social lives. As a consequence, they may find a situation (e.g., an advertisement) in which a physically attractive source is delivering a persuasive message particularly involving. This heightened involvement may, in turn, motivate them to spend the cognitive effort and energy to analyze what the source is saying in a systematic manner. As a result, they may base agreement on the cogency of the arguments presented. Indeed, previous research examining the relations between source factors, attitude functions, and message processing has suggested that high self-monitors are particularly likely to process systematically the message of a socially attractive source, agreeing with the source only if strong arguments are presented (see DeBono & Harnish, 1988).

By contrast, to the extent that low self-monitors tend not to view physical attractiveness as particularly important or motivating, they may not find a persuasive message from a physically attractive source particularly personally involving. Thus, they may be relatively unwilling to spend a good deal of cognitive energy and effort to process the source's message in a careful and systematic manner. As a result, they may be likely to process the message more peripherally, basing agreement on the perceived physical attractiveness of the source rather than the strength of the arguments presented. This hypothesis is supported by research suggesting that low self-monitors appear to process heuristically the message of a socially attractive source, agreeing regardless of argument quality (but will more systematically process the message of an expert source, see DeBono & Harnish, 1988).

In the present investigation we exposed high and low self-monitors to an advertisement featuring either a physically attractive or unattractive source promoting a new product with either weak or strong arguments. We expected that the attitudes of high self-monitors toward the product would be a function of argument quality when the message was delivered by the physically attractive source (i.e., more favorable when she offered strong arguments), but would not differ as a function of argument quality when the spokesperson was physically unattractive. In contrast, we expected low self-monitors' attitudes toward the product not to differ as a function of argument quality in either source condition. Rather, we expected their product attitudes to be more favorable when the message was delivered by the physically
attractive source than when delivered by the physically unattractive source regardless of the quality of the arguments presented. In addition, we expected indices of cognitive processing (e.g., cognitive responses, recall data) to support the notion that high self-monitors were systematically processing the message of the physically attractive source and low self-monitors were more heuristically processing her message.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty-three spring-term undergraduates were paid $3 each for their participation. On the basis of a median split of their scores on the 18-item Self-Monitoring scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986), 66 were classified as high self-monitors and 57 were classified as low self-monitors.

Procedure

Upon arriving at their experimental sessions, we informed participants that a new suntan lotion, “Savage Tan,” was being introduced to the area and that its promoters were in the process of pretesting advertisements for the product. We further informed participants that they would be asked to preview and evaluate one of the advertisements for the product. To reinforce the cover story, before observing the advertisement we asked participants to complete a questionnaire that inquired about their sun-tanning habits (e.g., the type of lotion, if any, that they use, the protection factor they preferred, where they liked to tan, etc.).

The advertisement contained two parts. The first, the visual, was a slide of either a darkly tanned, physically attractive woman or a slide of the same woman made to look relatively unattractive. For all participants we described the woman as a local model. She was pictured standing in front of a painting of a sunset holding a container of “Savage Tan.” The second part of the advertisement was a voice-over played for participants on a cassette recorder. For some of the participants ($n = 61$), the voice-over contained rather strong arguments for using the product. They were told that the lotion was scientifically designed and proven to protect the user from harmful ultraviolet rays and contained special ingredients to help prevent premature aging and wrinkling of the skin. For the remaining participants ($n = 62$), the voice-over contained weak, rather specious, arguments in favor of the pro-

4This was accomplished by changing the woman’s hairstyle and style of dress and by having her wear glasses.
duct. Participants were told that the lotion was silky smooth and easy to apply and it came in a newly designed container that had an easy-to-grasp handle.\textsuperscript{5}

Following exposure to the advertisement, we had participants complete a three-part questionnaire. The first part, in service of the cover story, asked for their reactions to the advertisement itself (e.g., will it be successful?, will it cause consumers to switch brands?, etc.). Included in this section as a manipulation check was a question asking participants to rate the attractiveness of the model on a 10-point scale with 1 = very attractive and 10 = very unattractive. The second part, the prime dependent variable, asked participants to evaluate the product. In particular, we asked them to rate the product on two 7-point semantic differential scales, worthless-valuable, and weak-strong. We then asked participants to write down all the thoughts that they had about the product and its presentation while they were observing the advertisement and to code their thoughts by placing a "+" next to those thoughts that were favorable toward the product and its presentation, a "−" next to those that were unfavorable, and a "0" next to those that were neutral.

After completing the questionnaire, we asked participants to recall, if they could, three things about the presentation: who promoted the product, and the two arguments that the spokesperson used.

Following this, we informed participants that the study was over, but asked if, since there was extra time in the session, they would mind helping another researcher who needed to collect questionnaire data. All participants agreed to help and were administered the Self-Monitoring scale.

Results

Manipulation Check

We submitted participants' scores on the manipulation check to a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (source attractiveness, argument quality, self-monitoring propensity) analysis of variance. This analysis revealed a highly significant main effect for source attractiveness, $F(1, 114) = 414.38, p < .00001$, such that participants in the attractive source condition rated the model as significantly more attractive than participants in the unattractive source condition ($M = 4.13$ vs. $M = 8.43$, respectively).

Postadvertisement Attitudes

For the sake of clarity and the ease of presentation, we will discuss the results of high and low self-monitors under separate subheadings.

\textsuperscript{5}We had 10 people rate the strength of the arguments on a 7-point scale (1 = very weak, 7 = very strong). As expected, people rated our strong arguments ($M = 5.9$) as significantly stronger than our weak arguments ($M = 1.75$), $F(3, 27) = 66.93, p < .001$. 


High Self-monitors

We predicted that high self-monitors who listened to the attractive source would form favorable attitudes toward the product only when she offered strong arguments. By contrast, we expected high self-monitors not to be influenced by the unattractive source regardless of argument strength. To assess attitudes toward the product, responses to the semantic-differential items were used. As these two measures were significantly correlated, \( r = .69, p < .01 \), responses were added to form a composite index. The means for this composite for high self-monitors are presented in the upper half of Table 1. The scale was created so that higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes toward the product. A \( 2 \times 2 \) (source attractiveness, argument strength) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction, \( F(1,62) = 5.12, p < .03 \). Post hoc analyses using Duncan's (1955) multiple-range test\(^6\) indicated that, as expected, high self-monitors who listened to the physically attractive source formed more positive attitudes toward the product when she delivered strong arguments than when she delivered weak arguments. In contrast, their attitudes did not differ as a function of argument quality when the source was unattractive. In both argument strength conditions, their attitudes toward the product tended not to be overly favorable nor overly unfavorable.

Table 1

Mean Post-advertisement Product Attitudes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-monitoring propensity</th>
<th>Argument strength</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>7.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive source</td>
<td>6.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>8.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive source</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Higher sources indicate more favorable product attitudes. Possible range: 2–14.

\(^6\)All subsequent post hoc analyses were conducted using Duncan's multiple range test. In all cases, alpha was set at .05.
Low Self-monitors

The mean postmessage attitude scores of low self-monitors are presented in the lower half of Table 1. A $2 \times 2$ (source attractiveness, argument strength) ANOVA revealed, as expected, a significant main effect for source attractiveness, $F(1,53) = 6.73, p < .02$, such that low self-monitors formed relatively more favorable attitudes toward the product after hearing the physically attractive source ($M = 8.05$) than after hearing the physically unattractive source ($M = 6.04$). The lack of a significant interaction, $F(1,53) = .33, ns$, suggests that the physically attractive source was more persuasive than the physically unattractive source in both argument quality conditions.

Taken together these results suggest that high self-monitors may have been systematically processing the physically attractive spokesperson's message. They appeared to be responsive to the quality of the message arguments, forming relatively more favorable attitudes after exposure only to the strong arguments. By contrast, low self-monitors appeared to have more heuristically processed the physically attractive source's message as they tended to form relatively favorable attitudes toward the product regardless of the quality of the arguments she used.

Cognitive Response Analysis

If indeed high self-monitors were systematically processing the physically attractive source's messages and low self-monitors were heuristically processing her message, then certain differences should emerge on the thought-listing measure. In particular, high self-monitors should have a significantly higher proportion of favorable thoughts (relative to total thoughts) in response to the strong message than to the weak message when the source is physically attractive, but low self-monitors should show no difference. When the source is unattractive, however, there should be no differences in the proportion of favorable thoughts as a function of argument strength for either high or low self-monitors.

High Self-monitors

The mean proportions of favorable thoughts for high self-monitors are displayed in the upper half of Table 2. A $2 \times 2$ (source attractiveness, argument strength) ANOVA revealed, as expected, a significant main effect for source attractiveness, $F(1,53) = 6.73, p < .02$, such that high self-monitors formed relatively more favorable attitudes toward the product after hearing the physically attractive source ($M = 8.05$) than after hearing the physically unattractive source ($M = 6.04$). The lack of a significant interaction, $F(1,53) = .33, ns$, suggests that the physically attractive source was more persuasive than the physically unattractive source in both argument quality conditions.

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Table 2

Mean Proportions of Favorable Thoughts

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<tr>
<th>Self-monitoring propensity</th>
<th>Argument strength</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive source</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive source</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.22</td>
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argument strength) ANOVA revealed, as predicted, a significant interaction, $F(1,58) = 11.48, p < .002$. Post hoc analyses indicated that high self-monitors listed a significantly higher proportion of favorable thoughts in response to the strong arguments than to the weak only when the source was physically attractive. For the unattractive source, there was no difference in the proportion of favorable thoughts as a function of argument strength.

Low Self-monitors

The mean proportions of favorable thoughts generated by low self-monitors are displayed in the lower half of Table 2. A $2 \times 2$ (source attractiveness, argument strength) ANOVA revealed no significant effects, suggesting, as predicted, that the thoughts low self-monitors had while listening to the message were unaffected by either the source or argument quality.

Recall Analysis

We predicted that high self-monitors would be able to recall more of the physically attractive source’s message than the physically unattractive source’s message (regardless of argument strength), but that recall would not differ as a function of either source attractiveness or argument strength for low self-monitors.

High Self-monitors

The mean numbers of items recalled by high self-monitors are displayed in the upper half of Table 3. A $2 \times 2$ (source attractiveness, argument strength)

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8Two subjects left this measure blank. Given that this could indicate either no recall or simply missing data, we elected to treat their lack of response as missing data.
ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for source attractiveness, $F(1,60)=10.2, p < .003$, such that high self-monitors were able, overall, to recall significantly more of the physically attractive source’s message ($M = 2.18$ for physically attractive source vs. $M = 1.43$ for physically unattractive source).

**Low Self-monitors**

The mean number of items recalled by low self-monitors are displayed in the lower half of Table 3. A $2 \times 2$ (source attractiveness, argument strength) ANOVA revealed no significant effects, suggesting that the amount that low self-monitors could recall was not significantly influenced by either the attractiveness of the source or the strength of the arguments she used.

**Discussion**

The results of the present study suggest that to understand the impact of a physically attractiveness source on the persuasiveness of an advertisement, it is essential to account for the functional underpinnings of the target audience’s attitudes. That is, it appears as though attitude functions are related to individuals’ reactions to, and subsequent processing of, messages from a physically attractive source. For those individuals for whom attitudes serve a social adjustive function, a physically attractive source seems to represent a cue to process the message in a systematic fashion. In particular, in this study, high self-monitors were influenced by the strength of the arguments used by the physically attractive source, agreeing only when she had strong arguments, but were not influenced by the unattractive source regardless of

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Argument strength</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-monitoring propensity</strong></td>
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</tr>
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<td>High</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive source</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unattractive source</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive source</td>
<td>1.25</td>
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</table>

*Note.* Maximum recall possible was three items.
argument quality. In addition, the thoughts that high self-monitors had while listening to the message reflected argument strength only when the source was physically attractive and finally, high self-monitors were able to recall significantly more of the message when it was delivered by the physically attractive source.

By contrast, for individuals for whom attitudes serve a value-expressive function, the physical attractiveness of the source seemed to serve as a peripheral cue indicating the validity of the communication. In particular, low self-monitors were influenced by the physically attractive source, but not by the physically unattractive source, regardless of the strength of the arguments presented. In addition, the thoughts that low self-monitoring individuals had while listening to the message did not vary significantly as a function of the strength of the arguments used in either source condition. Lastly, the amount low self-monitors could recall did not significantly vary as a function of either source attractiveness or argument quality.

The pattern of results that emerges from this study meaningfully expands upon that of previous research examining the relations between attitude functions and information-processing strategy. In particular, DeBono and Harnish (1988) found that high self-monitors tend to process systematically the message of a socially attractive source (e.g., a student leader), but tend to process more heuristically the message of an expert source. By contrast, they found that low self-monitors are likely to process heuristically the message of a socially attractive source, but tend to more systematically process the message of an expert source. Our present research demonstrates the generalizability of these findings, suggesting that the physical attractiveness of a source has, essentially, the same relation to attitude functions and information-processing strategy as does a source's social attractiveness and, perhaps most importantly, the applicability of these findings. Our results suggest that the relations between attitude functions, source factors, and persuasion extend to the advertising domain and may have important implications for advertising strategies.

For example, an ostensibly interesting implication of our results is that, to make maximum use of a source's physical attractiveness, it may be more effective to target an ad to an audience for whom the source is not "functionally relevant." Overall, low self-monitors were more persuaded by the physically attractive source than were high self-monitors. It mattered little to low self-monitors what the attractive model said whereas high self-monitors were only persuaded when she had strong arguments.

The soundness of this strategy, however, may be a function of the advertising campaign goals. That the physically attractive source seemed to elicit differing processing strategies for different people may also have implications for the duration of the attitude change engendered by an advertisement and
the likelihood that the attitude change will translate into behavior change. In particular, research has suggested that attitude change induced via systematic, or central route, processes tends to be of a longer duration than attitude change resulting from peripheral route processes (Petty, Cacioppo, Haugtvedt, & Heesacker, 1985) and is more likely to be related to behavior (Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schuman, 1983).

Therefore, although individuals were more persuaded by a nonfunctionally relevant source, this attitude change was most likely short lived and not behaviorally related. Hence, a strategy of using a nonfunctionally relevant source in an advertisement may be ultimately effective if one only desires relatively short-term attitude change. By contrast, to the extent that one is interested in more long-term, behaviorally related attitude change, a more likely scenario in the context of advertising, a functionally relevant source may be more effective, given that the source has convincing arguments.

In any event, the results of the present study underscore the importance of taking into account the motivational bases of individuals' attitudes for a complete understanding of the effects of source physical attractiveness in the advertising process. For some individuals, source attractiveness seems to represent a peripheral cue; for others, it appears to represent a cue to engage in systematic processing. That the functional underpinnings attitudes may influence the extent to which individuals will engage in arduous processing of advertisements is consistent with the growing body of literature demonstrating the theoretical and practical utility of addressing questions of persuasion and attitude change from a functional perspective (DeBono, 1987; Herek, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, 1987, 1989; Shavitt, 1989).

References


