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Limits of Credibility: The Case of Political Persuasion

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ABSTRACT. The present study explores the interactive effects of three major variables affecting message acceptance: source credibility, recipients' involvement, and locus of control. Statements representing a political party's views on the causes of a negative economic situation were evaluated by 381 Canadian students for degree of acceptance. They also evaluated the party's credibility and assessed their personal involvement in the economic situation. Contrary to the predictions of the Petty and Cacioppo (1979) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the results show that credibility had an impact on message acceptance in situations of both low and high involvement, but high involvement enhanced message acceptance, confirming ELM and contradicting Sherif's social judgment theory. Externally controlled recipients proved to be more sensitive to the effects of credibility.

POLITICAL PARTIES, as well as public and nonprofit organizations, often strive to enhance their credibility in order, they assume, to improve the acceptance of their messages. Recent studies have shown that the effects of credibility vary according to two factors at least, neither of which a communicator should neglect: the degree to which the receiver of the message is involved in the issue and personal characteristics of the receiver, such as locus of control (LOC). The purpose of the present study was to propose a model relating credibility and message acceptance (MA) as mediated by two variables, issue involvement and LOC. There are two reasons for carefully considering the problem of credibility. On a practical level, it is important

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to determine the kinds of issues for which credibility is a concern and to identify the type of public for whom credibility is a significant tool of persuasion. On a theoretical level, it is important to define an integrative model that clarifies the relationship among the various concepts involved in this question—attitude toward the source, issue involvement, personality (LOC), and MA—and to explain contradictory results obtained in previous studies by looking at the role of mediating variables.

**Main Effects**

**Effects of credibility.** Previous research has consistently shown that credibility enhances MA. Trustworthiness and expertness, which, according to Kelman (1961), represent the cognitive component of source credibility, bring about more immediate attitude changes (Miller & Baseheart, 1969; Shulman & Worrall, 1970). Affective characteristics of the source, in particular attractiveness, have also been found to have positive effects on attitude change when there is a similarity between source and receiver (Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970). It was hypothesized that credibility increases MA (Hypothesis H1).

**Effects of involvement.** Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall (1965) proposed a social judgment theory to explain the negative relationship between level of involvement and MA. Highly involved individuals are likely to have precise thoughts and ideas on issues that are important to them, so that the interval of MA is narrower in such cases. Results from studies by Eagly and Manis (1966) and Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) have supported the social judgment theory. However, contrary to social judgment theory, Pallak, Muller, Dollar, and Pallak (1972), Petty and Cacioppo (1979), and Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981) have found a positive relationship between involvement and initially favorable attitudes. Receivers with high involvement are easier to persuade. Petty and Cacioppo (1979) proposed that involvement triggers information processing. This proposition has been made in studies by Cialdini, Herman, Kozlowski, and Petty (1976), Craik and Lockhart (1972), and Miller, Maruyama, Beaver, and Valone (1976).

The contradiction in these results needs to be resolved. Petty and Cacioppo (1979) and Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981) focused on an issue that was intrinsically involving: American students were exposed to a message about a comprehensive examination that was a prerequisite for graduation. In both studies, the relationship between issue involvement and MA was found to be positive. In another study, however, a negative relationship was found: “Involved subjects were more skeptical of the product than were less involved subjects” (Petty et al., 1983, p. 141). In this case, students were exposed to a message about a much less involving issue—
razor blades. Similarly, Sherif, Kelley, Rodgers, Sarup, and Tittler (1973) based their conclusions on a study about messages not likely to be involving, namely, the merits of an historical figure—General Von Hindenburg—and the probability of the success of an unknown comedian named O'Keefe. Razor blades, General Von Hindenburg, and an unknown comedian are likely to be less involving issues than graduation to most students. Hence, some issues are intrinsically more involving than others, and there is no evidence that phenomena brought about by lower involvement issues are isomorphic with those brought about by higher involvement issues. Because in this research the issue (i.e., economic crisis and its consequences—unemployment, inflation, etc.) is highly involving for most respondents, it was hypothesized that higher involvement increases MA (Hypothesis H2).

**Effects of LOC.** Several studies have established the relationship between LOC and persuasion: Chebat and Picard (1984), McGinnies and Ward (1974), Perreira and Austrin (1980), and Weigly (1977) have shown that externally controlled individuals are more persuasible than those who are internally controlled. Internally controlled individuals feel that they are in charge of their destinies, whereas those who are externally controlled feel that they are at the whim of outside forces. MA was hypothesized to be increased by external LOC (Hypothesis H3).

**Interactive Effects**

*Credibility × Involvement.* Petty et al. (1983) found that source credibility enhances MA only if involvement is low. This finding, which has been confirmed by other studies (Johnson & Scileppi, 1969; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty et al., 1981; Rhine & Severance, 1970), is the basis for Petty and Cacioppo's (1979) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). They propose two routes that lead to persuasion: the central route, which is operative under conditions of high involvement, and the peripheral route, which is operative under conditions of low involvement. In the first case, persuasion depends on intrinsic arguments in the message; in the second, it is mediated by cues exterior to the message, including source credibility. Under conditions of low involvement, message receivers use cues such as credibility in forming their attitudes toward the message. Following Petty and Cacioppo, it was hypothesized that low involvement increases the effects of credibility, whereas high involvement reduces these effects (Hypothesis H4).

*Credibility × LOC.* Few studies have focused on the interactive effects of LOC and credibility on MA. Hester (1977) found that internally controlled individuals attributed significantly more credibility to the source than externally controlled individuals, \( r(178) = .84, p < .001 \). McGinnies and Ward
(1974) showed contradictory results: Whereas externally controlled subjects from the United States and Japan were more influenced by a highly credible source than internally controlled subjects, the reverse was true for Australian subjects.

It was reasoned that internally controlled individuals construct an integrated perception of the source and the message. They are assumed to be less sensitive to external pressures (such as the source’s prestige, expertness, competence, trustworthiness) than externally controlled individuals; consequently, a highly credible source would elicit less defensive reactions from internally than from externally controlled subjects. Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt (1978) showed that a "moderately credible source induced a more positive attitude toward the issue than the highly credible communicator" (p. 258). Respondents who feel external pressure would react defensively vis-à-vis a highly credible source; they would feel "less inclined to engage in this cognitive work (to bolster support for a position advocated by the message)" (Sternthal et al., 1978, p. 259). These results, which support the cognitive response theory, can be related to the mediator function of LOC: It was hypothesized that externally controlled respondents, who are more sensitive to external pressure, would react more defensively toward a highly credible source and its message; conversely, those who are internally controlled would not feel threatened by a highly credible source and would be more likely to have consonant attitudes toward the source and toward the message (Hypothesis H5).

Involvement × LOC. Petty et al. (1983) stress that "a diligent consideration of issue-relevant information requires not only motivation to think but also the ability to process the information" (p. 143). Involvement is a necessary but not sufficient condition to process message content, because cognitive ability is also required. It was hypothesized that internality reinforces the effects of high involvement: Both increase the effects of the argument presented (Hypothesis H6).

Model and Hypotheses

The hypothetical relationship between variables in the model of persuasion we have named Message Acceptance Through Credibility, Involvement, and Locus of Control (MACIL) is summarized in Figure 1. The first three hypotheses focus on the main effects of the dependent variables; the other three focus on interactive effects:

H1. MA is increased by credibility attributed to the source by the receiver.
H2. MA is increased by a higher level of receiver involvement in an issue.
FIGURE 1. MACIL (Message Acceptance through Credibility, Involvement, and Locus of Control).
H3. MA is increased by an external LOC.
H4. The effects of higher credibility on MA are reduced by higher involvement and increased by lower involvement.
H5. The effects of higher credibility on MA are increased by an internal LOC.
H6. MA is increased by the interactive effects of an internal LOC and high involvement.

Method

Sample
The sample consisted of 424 undergraduate marketing students at the University of Quebec at Montreal (age range, 19 to 43 years; 52% male, 48% female); 381 questionnaires were used.

Dependent Variable
We drew 12 statements that were typical of their explanations for economic problems from the speeches of several ministers of the Department of Finance, Economic Development, and Revenue of the province of Quebec. The economic crisis was attributed to various environmental factors, including the worldwide crisis, interest rates, inadequate Canadian federal economic policy, and other variables over which the provincial ministers exercised no control. Six-point Likert scales were used to measure level of agreement, ranging from totally disagree to totally agree.

Independent Variables
LOC. Respondents were required to complete the full-length Rotter (1966) questionnaire.

Credibility. In line with Kelman (1961), we conceptualized credibility as a two-dimensional concept incorporating a cognitive component (expertness and trustworthiness) and an affective component (attractiveness and prestige). The credibility of the provincial government was assessed on each of these four dimensions. For each of these dimensions one 6-point Likert scale was designed (ranging from totally agree to totally disagree) to measure respondents' assessment of expertness, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and prestige of the government. A global score of credibility was obtained by averaging the four individual scores.

Involvement. Three indicators were used to assess respondent involvement:
1. Motivation to process information—the interest that respondents showed in understanding the causes of the economic crisis on a cognitive level (two 6-point Likert scales).
2. Personal relevance—the degree to which the economic crisis affected respondents' social status, self-image, and relations with others (two 6-point Likert scales).

3. Capacity to act—the degree to which respondents felt they were able to solve personal problems resulting from the crisis (two 6-point Likert scales).

Involvement was operationalized as the average score on the 6-point Likert scales mentioned above.

Messages

Twelve sentences were chosen from speeches that reflected the same basic idea in a different rhetorical fashion: Responsibility of the economic crisis was attributed to the federal government. Four of these messages are presented below. The average score of MA measures the degree of acceptance of the common basic idea:

1. The federal government's monetary decisions have caused three times as many lost jobs in Quebec as in the rest of Canada.
2. The Quebec government should fear future actions from the federal government because the future will resemble the past.
3. Through its monetary, economic, and fiscal policies, the federal government endangers the public finances of Quebec.
4. All economists have observed that the federal government is unable to create jobs.

Statistical Analysis

To test the relationships among source credibility, involvement, LOC, and MA, a series of multiple regression analyses was conducted. Because of the predefined role of each variable within the conceptual framework (see Figure 1), MA was defined as the criterion (Y), credibility and involvement as two predictors (x1 and x2), and LOC as a quasi-mediator (z) because of its direct effect on MA and its moderating role on the other two predictors. Consequently, a moderated regression analysis (MRA) was conducted. MRA allows one to measure the influence of predictors on the criterion, as well as to identify the presence of either a pure or a quasi-mediator (Sharma, Durand, & Gur-Arie, 1981; Zedeck, Cranny, Vale, & Smith, 1971). For the problem at hand, six regressions were performed:

\[ Y = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 \]  
\[ Y = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_1x_2 \]

1. A quasi-mediator is defined as a variable acting both as a predictor and a pure moderator on another variable (Sharma et al., 1981).
The analysis focuses mainly on regression coefficients. If $b_1$ and $b_2$ are statistically significant, it means that $x_1$ and $x_2$ are actual predictors. If $b_3$ is significant, it means that there is a significant interaction between the two predictors. If $b_4$ is significant and $b_5$ is not, $z$ is not a moderator variable but simply another predictor. If $b_4 = 0$ and $b_5 \neq 0$, $z$ is a pure moderator on $x_1$. In the same manner, if $b_4 = 0$ and $b_6 \neq 0$, $z$ is a pure moderator on $x_2$ (and if $b_7$ is also $\neq 0$, $z$ also acts as a pure moderator on the interaction term). But if $b_4 \neq 0$ and $b_5 \neq 0$ and/or $b_6 \neq 0$, then $z$ is a quasi-moderator on either $x_1$ or $x_2$, or both (Sharma et al., 1981, p. 293). Applied to our data, this analytical procedure resulted in the following set of regression equations (asterisk = not significant at $p \leq .05$):

\[
Y = 3.66 + 0.44x_1 + 0.16x_2 \\
Y = 3.66 + 0.44x_1 + 0.16x_2 - 0.007x_1x_2^* \\
Y = 3.66 + 0.44x_1 + 0.16x_2 - 0.009x_1x_2 + 0.02z^* \\
Y = 3.65 + 0.43x_1 + 0.15x_2 - 0.008x_1x_2^* + 0.02z^* \\
Y = 3.65 + 0.43x_1 + 0.16x_2 - 0.009x_1x_2^* + 0.02z^* - 0.01zx_1x_2^* \\
Y = 3.65 + 0.43x_1 + 0.16x_2 - 0.009x_1x_2^* - 0.02z^* - 0.01zx_1x_2^*
\]

$R^2 = 21.66\%$ (1a)  
$R^2 = 21.65\%$ (2a)  
$R^2 = 21.38\%$ (3a)  
$R^2 = 23.33\%$ (4a)  
$R^2 = 21.38\%$ (5a)  
$R^2 = 21.38\%$ (6a)

From these equations we may conclude the following:

1. Source credibility ($x_1$) and involvement ($x_2$) are predictors of MA ($Y$), because $b_1$ and $b_2$ are significant coefficients. The overall explaining power is over 20%. But credibility contributes more to MA than involvement (0.44 vs. 0.16 for their respective standardized coefficients).

2. There is no significant interaction between credibility and involvement ($b_3$ in Equation 2a is not a significant coefficient).

3. LOC acts as a pure moderator on the effects of source credibility on MA: More precisely, externally controlled individuals prove to be more sensitive to the effects of credibility on MA. This is not true for involvement (as indicated in Equations 4a, 5a, and 6a: $b_5 = 0.15$, whereas $b_4$, $b_6$, and $b_7$ are not significant).

The actual model based on these results is pictured in Figure 2. The numbers in this figure are the standardized regression coefficients, indicating the magnitude of the causal relationships.
Discussion

Results confirmed the significant association of credibility with MA: There was a clear alignment of attitudes toward the source (credibility) and toward the message. As expected, high involvement enhanced MA, confirming ELM and previous studies (e.g., Chaiken, 1980) but contradicting Sherif's social judgment theory. This contradiction can be explained by looking at the level of intrinsic issue involvement. On the basis of our literature review, we suggested that when respondents are exposed to messages related to issues with important personal consequences—comprehensive examinations for graduation (Petty et al., 1981), mixed-sex visitation hours for university students (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), or, in our case, the economic crisis—they make greater cognitive efforts to assimilate the message. Conversely, if the issue is not intrinsically involving, like soap (Chebat & Picard, 1985) or razor blades (Petty et al., 1983), the amount of thought the message provokes is likely to be lower. Petty et al. (1981) have observed "the longstanding tradition of persuasion researchers to employ messages that are low in
personal relevance” (p. 853). This research tradition may account for those studies that have validated a negative relationship between involvement and MA: Low involvement issues do not warrant considerable cognitive effort. Miller et al. (1976) assert:

It may be irrational to scrutinize the plethora of counter-attitudinal messages received daily. To the extent that one possesses only a limited amount of information processing time and capacity, such scrutiny would disengage the thought processes from the exigencies of daily life. (p. 623)

Our results show no significant interaction of credibility and involvement; this contradicts our hypotheses derived from ELM. Credibility and involvement individually affected MA, but no combined effects were evidenced. ELM maintains that credibility effects are significant only if involvement is low. Our results demonstrate that credibility is equally effective under conditions of low and high involvement. Consistent with the results of Hester (1977) and those of McGinnies and Ward (1974) with their Australian sample, our results show that internally controlled respondents’ attitudes toward the communicator and the message are more consistent than externally controlled respondents’ attitudes.

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