

Effects of Rhetorical Questions on Persuasion: A Cognitive Response Analysis

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A cognitive response analysis was applied to the use of rhetorical questions in persuasion. College students heard a counterattitudinal message in which the major arguments were summarized in either statement or rhetorical forms. The personal relevance of the issue and the quality of the arguments employed in the message were also varied. The use of rhetorical questions was found to either increase or decrease the cognitive elaboration of a message depending on the personal relevance of the communication. When the message was of low personal relevance and recipients were not naturally processing the statement form of the message diligently, the use of rhetorical questions enhanced thinking: A message with strong arguments became more persuasive, and a message with weak arguments became less persuasive with rhetorical questions. On the other hand, when the message was of high personal relevance and recipients were already highly motivated to process the statement form of the message, the use of rhetorical questions disrupted thinking: A message with strong arguments became less persuasive, and a message with weak arguments became more persuasive with rhetorical questions. This three-way interaction was expected from the cognitive response analysis, but not from competing formulations.

Eagly and Himmelfarb (1978) have attributed much of the social psychologists' renewed concern with persuasion research to a widely shared interest in information processing models of attitude formation and change. The traditional information processing view of persuasion stemmed from the pioneering work of Carl Hovland and his colleagues (cf. Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) and emphasized how source, message, receiver, context, and modality factors affected attention to, comprehension of, yielding to, and retention of the information pre-

sented in a persuasive appeal. In this model, attention and comprehension were viewed as essential prerequisites to yielding. McGuire (1969, 1972) has provided excellent reviews, applications, and extensions of this general information processing approach.

More recently, researchers identifying with an information processing view of persuasion have documented the importance of an additional step in the information processing sequence—the cognitive *elaboration* of the persuasive appeal. Greenwald (1968) noted that the recipients of a persuasive message have access to a vast store of information beyond that contained in the message itself. A communication was hypothesized to elicit subject-generated cognitive responses that could either support or contradict the external information presented. In other words, people were viewed as active contributors to the persuasive messages that they received rather than mere passive recipients of them (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964; Weiss, 1968). The more favorable cognitive responses that the recipient generated to the information

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presented (i.e., the more the message led the person to think of positive implications of the advocated position for the self and significant others), the more favorable the person would become to the advocated position. But the more negative cognitive responses (counterarguments) that the message elicited, the less favorable the person would become (cf. Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981).

In our own program of research (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), we have generally focused on how the traditional independent variables in persuasion affect the elaboration of a communication when the preliminary steps of attention and comprehension are held constant. We have found that some variables generally decrease a person's *ability* to cognitively elaborate a message (e.g., distraction—Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976), whereas others generally increase it (e.g., message repetition—Cacioppo & Petty, 1979). Some variables generally decrease a person's *motivation* to elaborate a message (e.g., increasing the number of persons responsible for message evaluation—Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980), whereas others generally increase the motivation to elaborate (e.g., increasing the personal relevance of a message—Petty & Cacioppo, 1979).

The independent variables examined to date have been ones that either consistently increased (e.g., message repetition) or decreased (e.g., distraction) the likelihood that the message would be thought about. In the present article we examine a variable—the use of *rhetorical* or *tag* questions—that we hypothesize has the unique feature of being able to both increase and decrease the likelihood of message elaboration depending on whether the recipient is naturally thinking about the arguments presented in the communication. The major goal of this article is to present this cognitive response analysis and to test it against an earlier view of how rhetorical questions affect persuasion.

An Operant Conditioning Hypothesis

Zillmann (1972) reported the first investigation of the effect of rhetorical questions on persuasion. In his study, undergraduates were asked to assign a prison sentence to a juvenile who was charged with second degree

murder. The subjects first received some background information about the defendant that led them to adopt either an initially favorable, unfavorable, or neutral attitude toward him. Then they heard the defense attorney's closing arguments, which were presented either completely in statement form or with 10 argument-condensing persuasive statements transformed to rhetorical form (e.g., "Johnny was a peaceful boy," to "Johnny was a peaceful boy, wasn't he?"). Subjects with initially unfavorable attitudes toward the defendant recommended longer prison sentences than subjects who were initially favorable or neutral. More interestingly, though, subjects hearing the rhetorical version of the speech recommended shorter prison sentences than subjects hearing the statement version, without regard to their initially favorable or unfavorable attitudes.

Zillmann (1972) presented an operant conditioning interpretation of these results. He argued that in natural conversation or debate, a speaker is most likely to elicit a respondent's admission of agreement or concession in response to a particularly good argument. Rhetorical questions would not be used with poor arguments, since an overt response to the question would likely result in disagreement and thus would have undesirable consequences for the persuader. Through socialization, the continued pairing of agreement questions with good arguments would eventually lead to a state in which the rhetorical agreement question came to "mark relatively powerful arguments" (Zillmann, 1972, p. 164). Thus, a speaker who used rhetorical questions would generally be more persuasive than one who did not, because his arguments, through prior conditioning, would appear to be stronger.

A Cognitive Response View

A cognitive response analysis provides an alternative explanation for the Zillmann study. What if subjects, when confronted with a rhetorical question from the defense attorney, thought about the question and then responded to it covertly? If the defense attorney had presented strong, compelling arguments in his presentation, it is likely that further thought about these arguments (elic-

ited by the rhetorical questions) would lead to more favorable thoughts and enhanced persuasion. On the other hand, if the defense attorney had presented weak, refutable arguments, further thought about these arguments would likely lead to more negative thoughts and reduced persuasion. This cognitive response hypothesis—that the use of rhetorical questions enhances thinking about the content of an advocacy and can result in either enhanced or reduced persuasion depending on the quality of the arguments constituting the persuasive message—can account for the Zillmann findings if it is assumed that the defense attorney presented mainly compelling evidence.¹ The operant conditioning and cognitive response hypotheses can therefore be tested by varying the quality of the arguments presented in the message in conjunction with the style of the message (statement or rhetorical).

Another point to consider, however, is that according to a cognitive response view, the use of rhetorical questions should be most effective in enhancing message elaboration when recipients are not naturally devoting much effort to thinking about the message. If the message were naturally eliciting a great deal of thought, it would be unlikely that the use of rhetorical questions could enhance elaboration further. Under these conditions, rhetorical questions might have no further effect on elaboration and persuasion, or the use of rhetorical questions might actually interfere with subjects' thought processes and reduce the overall level of argument elaboration. Pilot work on the effects of rhetorical questions led us to favor the latter possibility. In this preliminary work, all subjects heard a message that elicited considerable thought in the statement form. In the rhetorical form, however, subjects reported that although they were trying very hard to think about the message, the questions asked by the speaker disrupted their chain of thoughts. In other words, if a subject was already thinking about some favorable (or unfavorable) implications of the speaker's arguments, the use of rhetorical questions caused these "naturally elicited" thoughts to be disrupted as the subject attempted to think about the particular question posed by the speaker. Because the amount of thought elicited naturally by an

advocacy might alter the effects of rhetorical questions on message elaboration, it was deemed important to include a manipulation of the amount of thought subjects would devote spontaneously to processing the message. One way to manipulate the amount of thought that people naturally engage in about a persuasive message is to vary the personal relevance of the communication. Previous research has shown that people do considerably more thinking about messages of high than low personal relevance (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979).

In the present study, therefore, three variables were manipulated to test the cognitive response hypothesis against the operant conditioning view: message style (statement or rhetorical), argument quality (strong or weak), and personal relevance of the message (high or low). The cognitive response analysis would expect a three-way interaction of the following form on the attitude and cognitive response dependent measures: (a) Under low personal relevance conditions,

¹ In a later study employing the same independent variables, Zillmann and Cantor (1974) found a significant interaction between the subjects' initial attitudes toward the defendant (favorable or unfavorable) and the grammatical form (statement or rhetorical) of the defense attorney's recommendation. In this study, the use of rhetorical questions increased persuasion for those with an initially favorable attitude but decreased persuasion for those with an initially unfavorable attitude. Zillmann and Cantor attributed this result, which differed from the two main effects found in the earlier study by Zillmann (1972), to the fact that they used different rhetorical questions in the two studies.

The cognitive response hypothesis would contend that the different results from the two studies have more to do with the different persuasive materials used in each. Zillmann and Cantor report that there were substantial differences between the studies "with respect to the critical facts presented in the attorney's summations." Specifically, in the second study "changes were made mainly to make the circumstances of the crime appear more ambiguous and the fact-disclosing argumentation less decisive" (p. 229). If the defense attorney's summation was more ambiguous and less decisive in the second study, then a manipulation that enhances thought would likely enhance thought in the direction of one's initial biases, since the information presented in the persuasive message was relatively uninformative. Thus, when presented with an ambiguous message, favorable subjects would likely become more favorable with more thought, and unfavorable subjects would likely become less favorable with more thought. Tesser (1978) provides data and an extended justification in support of this reasoning.

where the use of rhetorical is expected to enhance message elaboration, subjects' attitudes and cognitive responses to the strong and weak messages should be more extreme when the arguments are presented in rhetorical rather than statement form. (b) Under high personal relevance conditions, where the use of rhetorical is expected to disrupt message elaboration, subjects' attitudes and cognitive responses to the two messages should be more extreme when the arguments are presented in statement rather than rhetorical form. The operant conditioning hypothesis would expect a main effect on the key dependent measures: The use of rhetorical should generally enhance susceptibility to influence.²

Method

Subjects

One hundred sixty male and female undergraduates at the University of Missouri participated to earn extra credit in an introductory psychology course. The design was a 2 (high or low issue involvement) \times 2 (strong or weak argument quality) \times 2 (regular or rhetorical form) factorial, with 20 subjects randomly assigned to each condition. Subjects participated in group sessions containing 8 to 14 members. The groups were tested in a language laboratory equipped with cubicles constructed so that no subject could have visual or verbal contact with any other subject. During any one session, all eight experimental conditions were conducted.

Procedure

Subjects were told that each year the psychology department assisted the school of journalism in evaluating radio editorials that were sent in by colleges and universities throughout the country and that their task would be to provide ratings of the broadcast quality of the editorials. Following these instructions and the signing of an informed consent document, subjects read some introductory remarks about the editorial they were about to hear and then heard one of the taped communications over headphones. After listening to the appropriate 4-minute communication and completing the dependent measures, subjects were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed. Three subjects failed to complete one or more of the dependent measures and were eliminated from the analyses of those measures.

Issue involvement manipulation. Before hearing one of the four versions of the message advocating that seniors be required to pass a comprehensive exam in their declared major prior to graduation, subjects read a brief background paragraph about the editorial. For subjects in the high involvement conditions, the paragraph explained that as a result of a recent academic re-evaluation, the president of their university (Missouri) had

recommended a number of changes to begin the next academic year. The editorial would describe one of those changes that would personally affect each of the students. In the low involvement conditions, the background paragraph explained that the editorial would concern a proposal that the president of a distant university (North Carolina State) had recommended be instituted at his institution in 10 years. Thus, none of the students present would be affected personally by the proposal.

Argument quality manipulation. The communication in favor of senior comprehensive exams that subjects heard contained either 8 major arguments that were logically sound, defensible, and compelling or that were open to skepticism and easy refutation. The strong arguments were selected from a pool that elicited primarily favorable thoughts in a pretest, and the weak arguments were selected from a pool that elicited mainly counterarguments in a pretest. The specific arguments employed in the messages were taken from the "strong" and "very weak" communications described in Petty et al. (1980).

Message style manipulation. Each of the major arguments in the regular version of the strong and weak messages ended with a summary sentence in the form of a declarative statement (e.g., "Thus, instituting a comprehensive exam would be an aid to those who seek admission to graduate and professional schools," or

² Others have suggested that the use of rhetorical questions might affect persuasion by affecting perceptions of the source of the message. For example, posing an argument in rhetorical form might make the speaker appear more polite (Bates, 1976) and thus more persuasive. Alternatively, people who use rhetorical questions might be perceived as less confident (Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979), rendering them less persuasive. Like the operant conditioning hypothesis, explanations based on source perceptions would tend to predict that the use of rhetorical would have a main effect on persuasion—either increasing or decreasing it. An anonymous reviewer of this article noted that an explanation based on source perceptions could explain the three-way interaction pattern anticipated by the cognitive response analysis if it were assumed that different source perceptions were elicited by the different conditions in the study. For example, when rhetorical are paired with low involvement and strong arguments (or high involvement and weak arguments), the source may appear particularly polite, but when rhetorical are paired with low involvement and weak arguments (or high involvement and strong arguments), the source may appear particularly unconfident.

We did not measure source perceptions in the present study because we could not generate a plausible theoretical framework from which to derive this (or another) source perception hypothesis that could account for the predicted three-way interaction. In the same vein, it could be argued that a more complicated operant conditioning hypothesis than that proposed by Zillmann (1972) could explain a three-way interaction. In our view, the complex three-way interaction pattern makes theoretical sense from the cognitive response perspective and does not (at least at present) from the others.

"Thus, whatever educational value the exams have for graduate students would also benefit undergraduates"). In the rhetorical versions of the strong and weak messages, six of the eight argument-summarizing statements were transformed into rhetorical questions (e.g., "Wouldn't instituting a comprehensive exam be an aid to those who seek admission to graduate and professional schools?" or "Wouldn't whatever educational value the exams have for graduate students also benefit undergraduates?"). The other five questions in the rhetorical versions of the strong and weak messages began with, "Don't you agree that . . ."; "Doesn't this show . . ."; "Isn't it true that . . ."; "Isn't it clear that . . ."; and "Don't you think that . . ."

Dependent Variables

Attitude measures. On the first page of the dependent variable booklet, subjects read: "Because your own views on the desirability of instituting a comprehensive exam may influence the way you rate the broadcast quality of the editorial, we would like to obtain a measure of how you feel about the idea of a comprehensive exam." Two measures of opinion about senior comprehensive exams were included. First subjects rated the concept *comprehensive exams* on four 9-point semantic differential scales (good-bad, beneficial-harmful, wise-foolish, and favorable-unfavorable) that were summed to obtain a general measure of evaluation. Next, subjects responded to an 11-point Likert-type rating scale regarding their agreement with the comprehensive exam proposal. On the scale, 1 indicated that the subject "did not agree at all," and 11 indicated "agreed completely." The subjects' responses to the two attitude measures were converted to standard scores and averaged for an index of communication acceptance. The correlation between the two measures was .81.

Cognitive response and ancillary measures. After completing the attitude scales, subjects were given 2.5 minutes to list the thoughts they had while listening to the tape (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1977). Twelve 8-in. (20.32-cm) horizontal lines each approximately 1 in. (2.54 cm) from the one above created the boxes in which subjects were to write their ideas, one per box. After recording their thoughts, subjects were instructed to rate their ideas as either + (in favor of senior comprehensive exams), - (opposed to senior comprehensive exams), or 0 (neutral or irrelevant). Two judges blind to experimental condition and the subjects' ratings scored the thoughts in a manner analogous to that described in Petty et al. (1976). The two judges showed high agreement on the three types of thoughts (favorable, $r = .99$; unfavorable, $r = .99$; neutral, $r = .98$). The average of the judges' ratings also showed considerable agreement with the subjects' ratings (favorable, $r = .85$; unfavorable, $r = .71$; neutral, $r = .61$). The average of the two judges' ratings of the thoughts was used as the dependent measure of cognitive responses. Next, subjects completed some ancillary questions about the quality of the tape recordings and a question asking how distracted they were from thinking about the message. Finally, subjects were given 3 minutes to attempt to list as many message arguments as they could remember. Each booklet was rated by 2 judges ($r = .95$) who were blind to

the involvement and message style manipulations. An argument had to correctly summarize one of the arguments that appeared in the appropriate message to be counted. Repetitions of the same argument were not counted. The average of the ratings by the two judges was used as the dependent measure of message recall.

Results

Attitudes and Cognitive Responses

Preliminary analyses on each of the dependent measures including sex of subject as a factor produced no significant main effects or interactions involving sex. Thus, this variable was ignored in all subsequent analyses. A 2 (involvement) \times 2 (message style) \times 2 (argument quality) analysis of variance on the standardized attitude index produced a significant main effect for argument quality, $F(1, 149) = 28.08, p < .0001$, indicating that subjects hearing the strong arguments ($M = .36$) showed more agreement with the comprehensive exam proposal than subjects hearing the weak arguments ($M = -.36$). On the measure of counterargumentation, a main effect for argument quality revealed that more counterarguments were generated in response to the weak ($M = 3.09$) than to the strong ($M = 1.62$) arguments, $F(1, 151) = 29.83, p < .0001$, and a main effect for the involvement manipulation showed that subjects generated more counterarguments to the exam proposal when the speaker advocated that it be instituted at their own university ($M = 2.73$) rather than at a distant university ($M = 1.97$), $F(1, 151) = 7.68, p < .006$. On the measure of favorable thoughts, a significant main effect for argument quality showed that subjects generated more favorable thoughts in response to the strong ($M = 1.81$) than in response to the weak ($M = .92$) arguments, $F(1, 151) = 17.36, p < .0001$.

More importantly, these main effects were qualified by the predicted three-way interactions on the attitude, $F(1, 149) = 14.18, p < .0001$; counterargument, $F(1, 151) = 5.01, p < .03$; and favorable thought, $F(1, 151) = 3.58, p < .06$, measures. The three-way interaction on the attitude measure is graphed in Figure 1, and the means for all three measures are presented in Table 1.

Two contrasts were computed on each of

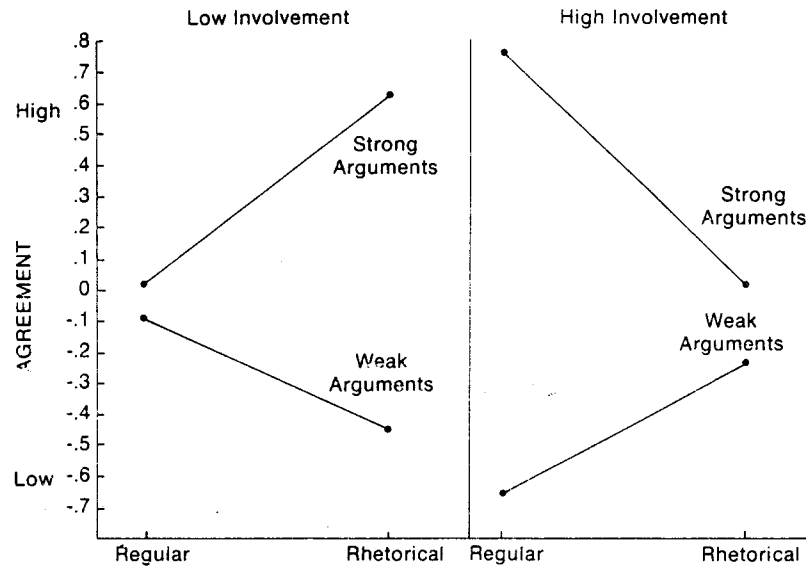


Figure 1. Mean level of agreement in relation to argument quality and use of rhetorical questions for high and low involvement messages.

the measures to test the specific form of the three-way interaction. The first contrast examined the low involvement conditions and tested whether attitudes and thoughts in response to the strong and weak messages were more extreme with the rhetorical than with the regular versions of the advocacy. This

contrast was reliable for the attitude, $F(1, 149) = 5.92, p < .02$; counterargument, $F(1, 151) = 2.86, p < .05$, one-tailed; and favorable thought, $F(1, 151) = 3.91, p < .05$, measures. The second contrast examined the high involvement conditions and tested whether responses to the different arguments were more extreme with the regular than with the rhetorical versions of the message. This contrast was reliable for the attitude, $F(1, 149) = 8.59, p < .01$, and counterargument measures, $F(1, 151) = 3.18, p < .05$, one-tailed, but not for the measure of favorable thoughts.

Table 1
Attitudes and Cognitive Responses in Relation to Involvement, Argument Quality, and Message Style

Measure	Regular		Rhetorical	
	Strong arguments	Weak arguments	Strong arguments	Weak arguments
Low involvement				
Attitude	.04	-.10	.61	-.46
Counter-arguments	1.60	2.52	.85	2.92
Favorable thoughts	1.71	1.25	1.78	.80
High involvement				
Attitude	.75	-.66	.05	-.24
Counter-arguments	1.47	3.52	2.55	3.39
Favorable thoughts	2.35	.70	1.40	.94

Ancillary Measures

One significant effect emerged on the measure of argument recall. An argument quality main effect, $F(1, 151) = 7.57, p < .007$, revealed that subjects recalled more of the strong ($M = 4.67$) than of the weak arguments ($M = 3.93$). There was no tendency for the use of rhetorical questions to increase message learning as has been suggested in some previous research (cf. Zillmann & Cantor, 1973). None of the interactions on this measure approached significance (all $F_s < 1$). Table 2 presents the average within-cell correlations among the attitude and cog-

nitive measures. Consistent with a growing body of research (cf. Cacioppo & Petty, 1979; Insko, Lind, & LaTour, 1976), the subject-generated cognitive responses (counterarguments, favorable thoughts) allowed reliable prediction of subjects' attitudes, but the subjects' ability to recall message arguments did not.

Analyses of the ancillary measures of tape quality, speaker delivery, enthusiasm, and so on produced no significant differences among groups. However, an analysis of the question assessing the extent to which subjects felt distracted from thinking about the message produced two interesting effects. First, subjects reported more distraction when listening to the bad ($M = 5.27$) than when listening to the good ($M = 4.39$) arguments, $F(1, 151) = 4.27, p < .04$. This finding is consistent with the good arguments being more memorable than the bad. If subjects generally did more thinking about the good arguments than the bad, then according to a "depth of processing" view of memory (cf. Craik & Lockhart, 1972), the good arguments should be more memorable. The second effect to emerge on the distraction measure was a highly significant Involvement \times Message Style interaction, $F(1, 151) = 8.78, p < .004$. This interaction represented the fact that under low involvement conditions, subjects reported that the rhetorical questions reduced the amount of distraction experienced ($M = 4.37$) in comparison to the regular version of the advocacy ($M = 5.05$); but that under high involvement conditions, subjects reported that the rhetorical questions increased the amount distraction experienced ($M = 5.87$) in comparison to the regular version of the advocacy ($M = 4.03$). This, of course, is exactly what

would be expected if the use of rhetorical questions enhanced thinking about the message under low involvement but disrupted message elaboration under high involvement.

Discussion

The present data provide strong support for the cognitive-response view of the effects of rhetorical questions on persuasion. Under low involvement conditions, when subjects were not naturally motivated to process the message extensively, rhetorical questions enhanced the amount of message-relevant thought. Thus, with rhetorical questions, subjects were more susceptible to the argument quality manipulation than they were without rhetorical questions. The increased thinking with rhetorical questions, as indexed by the more polarized profile of cognitive responses under the rhetorical than under the regular versions of the advocacy, apparently enhanced subjects' ability to realize the virtues of the strong message and the flaws in the weak one. On the other hand, under high involvement conditions, when subjects were already motivated to engage in considerable message-relevant thought, the rhetorical questions appeared to distract subjects from the normal thoughts that they would have been thinking. Thus, with rhetorical questions, subjects were less susceptible to the argument quality manipulation than they were without rhetorical questions. The decreased thinking with rhetorical questions, as indexed by the less polarized profile of cognitive responses under the rhetorical than under the regular versions of the advocacy, apparently reduced subjects' ability to realize the virtues of the strong message and the flaws in the weak one.

Not only do the three-way interactions on the attitude and cognitive response measures and the within-cell correlations (Table 2) provide support for the cognitive-response hypothesis, so do the subjects' own reports of their ability to think about the message under the various conditions. Under low issue-involvement, subjects reported feeling less distracted from thinking about the communications when rhetorical questions were present, but under high issue-involvement, subjects reported feeling more distracted from thinking when rhetorical questions were used.

Table 2
Average Within-Cell Correlations Among Attitudes, Cognitive Responses, and Recall

Measure	Counter-arguments	Favorable thoughts	Recall
Attitude Counter-arguments	-.40	.51	-.05
Favorable thoughts	—	-.37	.19
Recall	—	—	-.05

Effects of Involvement on Persuasion

There is now a growing body of evidence that the persuasion process under high and low involvement (personal relevance) conditions may be quite distinct. For example, sources of high and low credibility produce differential persuasion under low but not under high involvement conditions (Johnson & Scileppi, 1969; Rhine & Severance, 1970). Also, it has been shown that when people anticipate hearing about or discussing an issue of high involvement, attitudes become more extreme, but when people expect to hear about or discuss an issue of low involvement, attitudes become more moderate (cf. Apsler & Sears, 1968; Cialdini & Petty, 1981). Of course, in the present study, the divergent effect of rhetorical questions on agreement under high and low involvement conditions was very striking (see Figure 1).

The fact that an independent variable can have quite different (and even opposite) effects on persuasion depending on whether the attitude issue is of high or low personal relevance is consistent with the view that there are different motives governing persuasion in each instance. In low involvement conditions, social motives may be generally more salient, whereas under high involvement, informational motives may be more salient (cf. Cialdini, Levy, Herman, Kozlowski, & Petty, 1976; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Thus, under low involvement and nonrhetorical conditions, persuasion may typically be governed more by such peripheral cues as the expertise or attractiveness of a source, concerns about desirable self-presentation, or one's social role, whereas under high involvement and nonrhetorical conditions, persuasion may be governed more by message content factors such as the number, quality, or accuracy of the message arguments presented (Cacioppo & Petty, 1980; Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, 1981). In the present study, then, the use of rhetorical questions modified the operation of these processes, motivating more attention to processing the message content under low involvement conditions when normally there would have been little argument processing, but disrupting the normal processing of the

message information when involvement and thinking were already at a peak.

Conclusions

Finally, it is important to note that we do not wish to completely rule out the possibility that the use of rhetorical questions could influence persuasion through prior conditioning or by affecting content-irrelevant perceptions in some instances. For example, if a communication were on a very esoteric or unfamiliar topic for which the audience had few or no pre-existing message-relevant beliefs, it would be unlikely that the use of rhetorical questions could affect message elaboration. For such issues, to the extent that the use of rhetorical questions made the speaker or the arguments appear more favorable (e.g., Bates, 1976), more agreement might result, and to the extent that the use of rhetorical questions made the speaker or the arguments appear less favorable (e.g., Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979), less persuasion might result. On the other hand, for the great majority of communications that people receive daily, and for which they are likely to have many pre-existing beliefs and ideas, the present study indicates that the use of rhetorical questions may enhance or reduce message elaboration depending on whether the person is naturally motivated to process the message. For such issues, the extent and nature of message elaboration is the most direct precursor of message acceptance.

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