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## **When Counterarguing Fails: Effects on Attitude Strength**

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT** - Popular models of persuasion suggest individuals can process information in either an objective or a biased manner (see Petty & Wegener, 1999). Objective processing is data-driven (i.e., individuals generate whatever thoughts naturally come to mind). Biased processing, however, refers to focusing specifically on either rejecting or accepting a message (e.g., focusing on generating negative or positive thoughts). In the present research, we examine the consequences of biased processing involving a goal to counterargue a message versus a goal to simply think about the message carefully.

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# When Counterarguing Fails: Effects on Attitude Strength

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Popular models of persuasion suggest individuals can process information in either an objective or a biased manner (see Petty & Wegener, 1999). Objective processing is data-driven (i.e., individuals generate whatever thoughts naturally come to mind). Biased processing, however, refers to focusing specifically on either rejecting or accepting a message (e.g., focusing on generating negative or positive thoughts). In the present research, we examine the consequences of biased processing involving a goal to counterargue a message versus a goal to simply think about the message carefully.

Prior research suggests a biased processing goal to counterargue a message is never good from the perspective of a persuader. For example, several lines of research have shown invoking a resistance goal in individuals leads to reductions in attitude change relative to objective processing goals (Petty & Cacioppo, 1977; Killeya & Johnson, 1998).

Recent research has suggested that a resistance goal can even increase certainty in one's initial attitude. Tormala and Petty (2002) found that when participants successfully counterargued a message perceived to be strong, their initial attitudes were held with more certainty compared to individuals whose attitudes also did not change because they did not receive any message. Tormala & Petty (2002) suggested people become more confident in their attitudes after successfully counterarguing a strong message because they can attribute success to the validity of their attitudes (e.g., "I counterargued strong arguments, so my attitude must be right!").

Thus, a survey of prior research leads to the conclusion that attempting to counterargue a message often leads to less persuasion, or even enhanced confidence in one's initial attitudes. This leads to a fairly simple conclusion that counterarguing is never advantageous. However, this conclusion is based on an incomplete empirical picture because past research has focused on situations in which counterarguing has been successful. Past research has neglected consequences associated with failed counterarguing.

The present research uses very strong arguments to ensure counterarguing fails to prevent the attitude from changing. We examine whether attitudes following a failed attempt to counterargue a message are different from attitudes that result from just thinking. Our hypothesis is that changing one's attitudes as a consequence of failed counterarguing will open the gates to inferences that do not accompany comparable attitude change associated with relatively objective message processing. For example, just as inferences people make regarding success might strengthen one's initial attitude (Tormala & Petty, 2002), inferences associated with a failure to counterargue may lead to a strengthening of a person's new (changed) attitude compared to a comparable change brought about without attempting to counterargue. Specifically, failure may increase individuals' certainty in their new attitude because they can conclude that they really have no negative thoughts about the advocated message. A person may think, "I tried to think of counterarguments against the message, but I really couldn't think of any. Now that I know I have no negative thoughts, I'm sure my new attitude is correct!" Individuals who processed the same message objectively, however, may not make this inference, having not aggressively considered the drawbacks to the message. They would simply be aware of their positive reactions to the strong arguments

without realizing that there are no drawbacks. Implications for behavior are also examined.

## Procedure

In two experiments, participants were exposed to an advertisement for a novel aspirin. In both experiments, there were three conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to either (1) provide attitudes in the absence of a message (control), (2) to focus on their thoughts about the aspirin, or (3) to focus on their negative thoughts about the aspirin. Participants in treatment conditions received a message containing very strong arguments that had been pre-tested to elicit few negative thoughts. In experiment 1, participants' attitudes, attitude certainty, and behavioral intentions were assessed. In experiment 2, the mediator of the hypothesized strength effects was examined.

## Results

*Experiment 1:* Compared to the control group, participants exposed to the message had more positive attitudes about the product. However, the attitudes of the message groups were identical regardless of whether they were instructed to focus on their thoughts or negative thoughts. Of primary interest, a significant main effect emerged such that individuals instructed to generate negative thoughts exhibited more certainty in their attitudes than individuals instructed to generate thoughts. Finally, even though participants instructed to generate negative thoughts showed the same amount of attitude change as those instructed to generate thoughts, the new attitudes of participants directed to generate negative thoughts were more predictive of intent to behave than were the new attitudes of participants who simply generated thoughts.

*Experiment 2:* Experiment 2 replicated the findings of Experiment 1. Specifically, participants showed identical attitude change relative to the control condition, regardless of whether they attempted to generate general thoughts or negative thoughts. However, participants who had attempted to generate negative thoughts reported being more certain of their attitudes. Furthermore, we found that participants' perceived negative reactions (i.e., the number of negative thoughts they believed they had) mediated the observed certainty differences in the following manner. Individuals instructed to generate negative thoughts inferred they possessed fewer negative thoughts about the product compared to individuals instructed to generate thoughts.

## Discussion

This research makes a new contribution to understanding attitude change and strength. We demonstrate that attitudes following exposure to a compelling message, although equivalent in valence, can differ in strength depending on people's motives in processing the message. When people attempted to counterargue the message, their attitudes were held with more certainty compared to attitudes formed through relatively objective processing. An important consequence of this certainty is that the new attitudes are more predictive of behavior. Finally, our results suggest that this increased certainty is due to participants' metacognitions about the number of negative thoughts they think they have. Aggressively considering drawbacks to a product, but finding none, allows individuals to conclude they truly have few negative thoughts,

which increases attitude certainty. Individuals who objectively process a message have not aggressively considered the faults, and therefore are not as certain.

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