

The Factors that Influence Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

Persuasion is a form of social influence in which an audience is intentionally encouraged to adopt an idea, attitude, or course of action. There are several factors that can influence the persuasiveness of a message. Mindfulness can be invoked in people to sway their reaction to the persuasive message. Incentives can be used to create motivation, along with both a rational and emotional appeal to reason. Offering a choice or information of value can also be used as an incentive, as agency and fulfilling curiosity are both intrinsically motivating. A lot of these factors are affected by the Law of Approach and Avoidance, which states that people approach environments where they sense positive feelings and avoid those that invoke negative feelings. The ideal persuasive message to create a long-lasting change should be directed towards a mindful audience, utilizing an incentive - which could be offering agency or satisfying curiosity - to induce mindfulness.

Introduction

Persuasion is a form of social influence in which an audience is intentionally encouraged to adopt an idea, attitude, or course of action. Politics, legal decisions, mass media, news, and advertising are all influenced by the power of persuasion and influence us in turn. People often believe that they are immune to persuasion, but every person has likely been led to purchase something they didn't need or believe something untrue due to the power of persuasion. Knowing the key factors that can be used to persuade is crucial in our social and personal lives because it allows people to take actions that will actually be in their benefit, despite any mental roadblocks they might have that prevent them from doing so.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an important factor that can be used as a persuasion tool. Langer 1989 [1] describes mindfulness as bringing one's full resources to a cognitive task by using multiple perspectives and attending to context, which creates novel ways to consider the information. Those who bring all their cognitive resources to a task tend to be more open to new information and are not hesitant to reconsider, while those with a mindless approach often adhere strictly to previous biases and beliefs. Mindlessness entails mental shortcuts, associative inferences, and heuristics. The majority of influence techniques can be conceptualized as creating mindlessness by inducing a sense of time sensitivity and not allowing decision-makers to use metacognition – people's self-reflection regarding their thoughts. A study conducted by Luttrell et al. 2014 [2] finds that an audience with a mindless approach is more convinced by increasing numbers of weak arguments than a mindful audience. This suggests that a mindless approach leads to a higher likelihood of falling prey to companies and individuals who want to persuade others for their own benefit. Importantly, the conclusions reached from mindless thought are often unstable and more prone to change than those reached from mindful thought. This means that, in order to leave a long-lasting impact on the opinions of the audience, one must provoke a mindful approach in their audience while persuading. We next consider how to invoke mindfulness in others.

Incentives

One important factor for fostering mindfulness and amplifying the effects of persuasion, is an incentive. An incentive is a reward or punishment that motivates one to do or believe something. Giving an incentive can provoke a mindful approach because they increase motivation and cognitive control – the process by which goals or plans influence behavior. This encourages people to bring all their cognitive resources to the task. Even young children with little experience with complicated decision-making are able to make mindful decisions when given an incentive to do so. This is reflected in a study conducted by Kidd et al. 2012 [3]; one group of young children were shown that their instructor was reliable prior to the study, and the other group was shown that their instructor was unreliable. Both groups were given a choice: eat a marshmallow immediately or wait 15 minutes for the instructor to get them 2 marshmallows. The results show that the group with the reliable instructor waited twice as long as the control, who did not have any prior information on their instructor. The group with the unreliable instructor waited half as long as the control. These results demonstrate that even young children can make mindful decisions using prior information when given an incentive to do so. Incentives work differently depending on the emotion they evoke. This is also where the Law of Approach and Avoidance comes into play. The law states that people will approach environments where they feel positive emotions and avoid environments where they feel negative emotions. This shows that rewards, provoking positive emotions, are useful to motivate someone to start doing something, while punishments, provoking negative emotions, are useful for persuading someone to stop doing something. Hershberger 1986 [4] conducted a study where chicks were placed in a box and had to walk away from their food in order to obtain it. All organisms approach positive rewards, thus the chicks were unable to walk away from their food. This demonstrates that the value of incentives is intrinsic and evolutionary, as baby chicks with no prior experiences in life were still motivated to approach incentives. A study by Armellino [5] reflects the value of rewards to motivate others to start doing things. In the study, healthcare workers were incentivized to wash their hands through a board that displayed collective hand washing rates. The number increasing when a person washed their hands was a motivating factor, spiking hand hygiene rates and keeping them high sustainably. It is possible that the reward motivated the workers to think mindfully to assess the incentive and remember to wash their hands before entering a patient’s room. Another study that proves that a positive impact on the person is a good motivator to complete a task is the one conducted by Genevsky 2015 [6]. This study focuses on what factors influence people to lend money. The results indicate that attempts to create positive arousal in the potential lenders leads to higher lending rates.

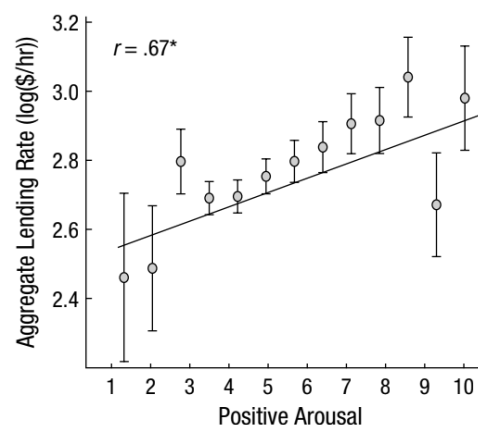


Figure 1. Scatterplot in illustrating the correlation between aggregate lending rate and positive-arousal ratings of borrowers' photographs [6].

“Happy” was the only emotion that was found to correlate with lending rates, making them significantly higher. In fact, positive arousal even led to a higher lending rate than a \$100 decrease in the requested funds. People took their bodily sensation of feeling happy to mean that they were certain about their decision to lend, which offset the impact of potential losses. Positive arousal is linked to high activity in the Nucleus Accumbens activity which was shown to be increased in those who were very willing to lend. Specifically, willingness to lend depended on how intensely the positive effect evoked brain activity in the Nucleus Accumbens. Thus, positive arousal, or a reward, can be used as a motivational tool to increase the willingness of others to complete tasks that they would not have done otherwise.

Rationality and Emotions

Another key to persuading effectively is appealing to both rationality and emotion. Rational appeals persuade their audience to purchase or act by appealing to their sense of reason or logic, usually by offering quantitative, objective measures, such as statistics, quality, and price. Emotional appeals offer a way for the audience to process information in a similar way as the subject by synchronizing brain activity via emotions. This effect depends on the valence an emotion evokes. Barsade, 2015 [7] explains that negative emotions are associated with more synchronization and a better emotional appeal than positive emotions, because negative emotions tend to be more consistent among individuals due to the conserved evolutionary process of fight-or-flight. Good decision-making uses both logic and emotion. People often buy on impulse off their emotions, and later justify their actions with logic. A message solely based on emotion will set off alarms on the logic side, while a message devoid of any emotion will be significantly less persuasive. Using both a rational and emotional appeal to reason in a persuasive point will be more likely to convince people to alter their prior beliefs.

Agency

Agency can also be used as a tool to aid with persuasion. Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Increasing agency can serve to amplify the effects of persuasion by allowing individuals to relate to and become more invested in an idea by aligning their own goals with those proposed. This is demonstrated in a study done by Koster 2015 [8]; they studied the IKEA effect, which is the idea that people value things they create themselves more than the exact same items created by someone else. Participants were initially asked to price a shoe, and then they were able to either watch the creation of the shoe, or alter certain things to “create” the shoe themselves. After this process, they were asked to value the shoes again. The results show that the majority of people valued the shoes they thought they created themselves more highly than shoes they watched the creation of. This was true even when they simply believed they created the shoe, and they didn't in reality. This suggests that if a person can be led to believe their goals align with those who proposed the idea, they are likely to value the idea more. Choice itself can also be a motivating factor. In the study by Voss 1970 [9], rats are put in a maze in which they could either go down a straight path to the end, or go down a path which gives them the choice between 2 ways. All paths were equal in length, and would lead to the end, meaning no option was really different from the other. The results found that rats chose the side of the maze which gave them a choice the majority of the time. The perception of having a choice was enough for the rats to choose one path over another, which provides evidence that choice has intrinsic value. There are several reasons that the need to retain agency is an intrinsic response: outcomes that we select ourselves would theoretically suit us better than those selected for us by someone else and people don't like to be overruled and

have their opinions disregarded – a risk with a delegator. We also like when we get rewarded for our own choices because it promotes learning; evolutionarily, we know we can do the same action in the future to potentially get a reward again. Agency is so valuable that it is essentially a reward in itself, meaning people view choice as incentivizing. This means choices encourage people to bring all their cognitive resources to a task, motivating a mindful approach. However, this depends on the valence of the emotion that the choice provokes since choices conform to The Law of Approach and Avoidance. This means that people will want agency when making a choice can invoke a positive outcome, and delegate the choice when it can lead to a negative outcome, so as to avoid feelings of regret or guilt. Therefore, agency when making a choice regarding positive outcomes can be used as an incentive to amplify the effects of a persuasive message.

Curiosity

Curiosity can also be used as a tool to enhance the effects of persuasion. Humans neurobiologically and intrinsically value information, even when it is of no use. Evolutionarily, information can lead to rewards and avoiding harm, which makes information intrinsically valuable to us. In an experiment conducted by Bromberg-Martin and Hikosaka [10], monkeys are given different options that all lead to the same rewards, except one gives them information of the rewards a few seconds in advance and the other doesn't. Monkeys consistently chose the option that gave them advanced information about the reward, even though all rewards were the same. They were unable to influence the reward in any way with their choice, making a few seconds of information about the impending reward essentially useless to them, yet it was still highly valued. This demonstrates that information, like agency, can be used as a reward to motivate action, or prompt a mindful approach. Niv and Chan [11] show that people are happy to pay up to 40% more to know if they're pregnant just 1 day earlier, further demonstrating the high value of even slightly advanced information. They concluded that information is encoded by the same habenula and dopamine neurons that encode rewards, demonstrating that information is a reward in the brain. Information that agrees with peoples' prior beliefs is especially desirable. Beliefs generate utility because beliefs are involved in people's moral judgment and they assist in decision-making. This utility increases when the belief becomes certain, giving value to the information that confirms one's beliefs. Curiosity is also valenced, meaning people will want to know positive information, and may not want to know negative information. Charpentier [12] conducted a study in which people could win or lose money. They had a certain chance of winning money or winning nothing in a gain trial, and the same chance of losing nothing or losing money in a loss trial. In each stage of a trial, participants could choose to either find out or ignore the result of the trial. Participants rated their desire to know the outcome of the trial higher on gain trials than on loss trials. They were more likely to choose knowledge the higher the expected value was on the gain trials, and more likely to choose ignorance the higher the expected loss on the loss trials. The explanation for this boils down to The Law of Approach and Avoidance. People tend to want advanced information on rewards, but delayed information on punishments or pain. This is due to anticipation, which may even cause people to want to delay rewards. People want early information on rewards because the anticipation leading up to it is a reward in itself. The value of a reward in the future with advanced knowledge is higher due to this 'savoring'. Generally, the further in the future the reward with advanced information is, the higher the value of the reward. However, this comes with a limit as anticipation is bound, and people will not want to delay rewards very far into the future. The reason that delayed information on punishments is desirable is due to the negative anticipation. Just as people enjoy the positive emotions that the anticipation of a reward brings, people don't enjoy the negative emotions associated with the anticipation of pain, like dread. This leads people to want to get punishments over with as quickly as possible. This can be used as a tool for persuasion as the effect of incentives can be enhanced

by setting a reward a little into the future and telling people about them beforehand, making it more likely for them to recognize the incentive as valuable. Blanchard et al. 2015 [13] finds that the orbitofrontal cortex, or the OFC, is an important part of the brain that is involved with processing rewards. The OFC regulates information seeking in response to internal states like uncertainty or curiosity.

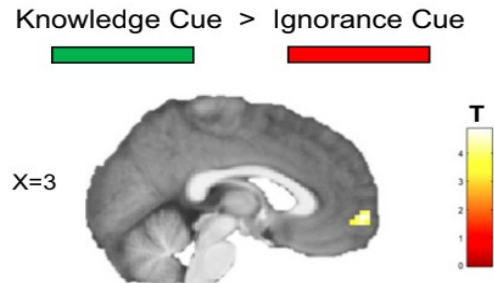


Figure 2. Knowledge signal in OFC. Medial OFC cluster showing increased BOLD response during delivery of knowledge cues relative to ignorance cues [12].

The OFC does not account for valence, meaning it processes information at an early stage of decision-making. Information, and the anticipation of positive information can be used to incentivize, and therefore aid in the persuasion process.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the most important factors that influence the persuasiveness of a message. Utilizing the Law of Approach and Avoidance is a key in all of these factors and invoking positive arousal seems to be the most critical component to motivating one to adopt an idea, attitude, or course of action. The most impactful persuasive message will induce mindfulness through different forms of incentives, including offering agency and information. It will also include both rational and emotional appeals to reason. There is still much more to learn about how these factors interact with each other, and what other factors can be influential. Further studies can study which persuasive strategies can be influential under different circumstances, illustratively a business corporation convincing their customers may involve different factors or approaches than a parent convincing their child.

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