The Mediating Role of Arousal in Brand Commitment

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This article identifies arousal as the key motivating variable that helps high commitment consumers generate more counterarguments. Further, the change in arousal when high and low brand commitment subjects were or were not allowed to elaborate the message was examined in two studies. When insufficient opportunity to process the message was present, high commitment participants continued to have a high level of arousal. However, when sufficient opportunity to process the message was provided, high commitment subjects behaved like low commitment participants and displayed a decreased level of arousal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
A well-documented finding in the commitment literature is that high brand-committed consumers show greater resistance to attitude change by generating greater number of counterarguments against negative brand information (e.g., Ahluwalia et al. 2000). This article helps us understand the motivational reasons that make committed consumers counterargue negative information and resist attitude change. Arousal is implicated as the motivating factor. This article also extends the motivational argument to suggest that arousal is affected by the ability or inability to successfully counterargue the negative message.

It was argued that high brand commitment consumers experience greater arousal compared to low brand commitment consumers when presented with negative brand information. Further, it is argued that the high arousal would decrease to more normal levels for high commitment consumers when the opportunity to counterargue the negative message was present. Study 1 tested whether arousal differed between the high and the low commitment consumers and identified the role played by arousal in affecting counterarguments and resistance to change. Study 2 and 3 tested arousal reduction when counterarguments were successful in preventing attitude change.

In study 1, participants read a counterattitudinal news article about their committed brand. The results of this study showed that arousal (self-report scale) was significantly greater in the high commitment participants than for low commitment participants. Analysis of the cognitive responses revealed that participants who were more committed counterargued to a greater extent than participants who were less committed to the target brand. A mediation analysis indicated a partial mediation by arousal of commitment effects on counterarguments. Finally, the brand attitude data showed that high commitment subjects were able to resist attitude change more successfully than less committed subjects.

Study 2 was conducted to identify the role of counterarguments in reducing the felt arousal. It is argued that successfully counterarguing negative information seems to achieve the goal of resisting attitude change. Therefore, if high commitment subjects were given sufficient opportunity to generate counterarguments and defend their attitude, arousal should decrease as the threat to the attitude is handled. On the other hand, if they were not given sufficient opportunity to generate counterarguments, the goal of defending the attitude would be incomplete and the arousal should continue to remain at the elevated level. In contrast, low commitment subjects experience lower arousal and are willing to change their attitude more readily after seeing a negative message. Thus, their arousal is mitigated without the need to resort to substantial counterargumentation. For this reason, whether they have or do not have enough opportunity to counterargue should make little difference to these subjects.

High and low commitment subjects were randomly assigned to a sufficient opportunity or insufficient opportunity condition and provided a negative news article about the target brand. Physiological measurement (skin resistance) was used as an indicator of arousal in this study. As expected, within high commitment subjects, insufficient opportunity subjects had a greater level of arousal than sufficient opportunity subjects. On the other hand, low commitment subjects did not reveal any significant differences between the time conditions. Further, high commitment subjects in the insufficient opportunity condition had a significantly higher level of arousal than low commitment subjects, while high commitment subjects in the sufficient opportunity condition did not differ in their level of arousal compared to low commitment subjects.

The brand attitude data revealed an unexpected result where high commitment subjects in the truncated time condition showed a lack of attitude change even though they did not have sufficient time to counterargue the negative message. This result seems to indicate that counterarguments act as the primary route to resist attitude change only when provided the opportunity to process the message, but when opportunity to process the message was limited, high commitment subjects seemed to be using source derogation as the mechanism to avoid attitude change. Therefore, it seems that committed consumers use a variety of tools to protect their attitude. However, simply dismissing a source does not seem to reduce their arousal as much as being able to argue against a message.

The main purpose of study 3 was to gain a better understanding of the process by which attitude change was resisted even when high commitment subjects did not have sufficient opportunity to counterargue the negative message. The design was changed to include only the two high commitment conditions (sufficient and insufficient) and as a control group, the sufficient condition for low commitment. In addition, cognitive responses and source credibility were measured. The arousal and brand attitude results were identical to those found in study 2. Analysis of the source credibility data revealed that high commitment insufficient opportunity participants used source derogation as a means to maintain their brand attitude when not provided the opportunity to elaborate on the negative message. The cognitive responses further supported this finding.

There are three fundamental theoretical contributions of this research to the commitment literature. First, this research addresses the question of why committed consumers behave in a certain way when faced with counterattitudinal communication. By providing a motivational explanation for the earlier research findings, our research nicely complements existing research on brand commitment.

Second, the finding that high commitment subjects experience reduced arousal after counterargumentation is a relatively unique finding in this literature. The evidence that arousal reduces with increased opportunity to elaborate on the negative message implies a motivational basis for commitment effects and adds confidence in implicating arousal as a mediating variable between commitment and counterarguments and attitude change.

Finally, a third important finding in this article is that high commitment subjects resist attitude change even when not given the opportunity to process the message sufficiently. They appear to find other ways of discrediting the message (e.g., source derogation). Interestingly, while source derogation preserves one’s attitude, it is not effective in reducing the arousal experienced by a committed individual. This finding implies that high commitment consumers may have multiple goals when faced with negative brand information. The primary goal seems to be to protect the attitude from change. The secondary goal seems to be removing the source of the threat and reduce arousal. It is likely that by counterarguing, both goals are met, but when opportunity to counterargue is limited, source derogations seem at best to protect the attitude without removing the source of the threat.
REFERENCES