Integral Affect and Attitude Strength in Health Communications

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An ongoing goal of practitioners and academics interested in health communications has been to improve their effectiveness. A variable that has been relatively little explored in this context is the role of integral affect. The current research examines two research streams (the Elaboration Likelihood Model versus the affective heuristic and two-systems theory) with respect to the role they each assign to integral affect in the processes of attitude formation. A series of experiments examines how integral affective responses influence important persuasion-related variables such as attitude formation and attitude strength, as well as examines methodological alternatives for strengthening affectively-based attitudes.

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Integral Affect and Attitude Strength in a Health Communications Context
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An ongoing goal of practitioners and academics interested in health communications has been to improve their effectiveness (Keller and Lehmann, 2008). Research on the message effectiveness of health communications has largely focused on two major types of influences: 1) message characteristics such as positive versus negative framing, vividness, presentation of statistics, argument strength, and source effects; and 2) individual difference variables such as race, gender, need-for-cognition, regulatory focus, and involvement (Keller & Lehmann working paper). A variable that has been explored on a relatively limited basis in comparison to these other factors is the role of affect, and integral affect in particular, in influencing attitudes to health communications.

This is in spite of the contention by researchers that integral affect should be a relatively important influence in the context of health-related attitudes and decisions because of the very personal and potentially serious consequences associated with health behaviors (Slovic et al. 2005, Luce 2005). Research directed towards improving the effectiveness of health communications has explored the influence of affect in two primary ways. The majority of research on affect in this area has examined how antecedent mood states influence individuals’ responses to health communications (Keller et al. 2003). A second stream of research has explored how the emotional presentation of information, such as the use of fear appeals or the vividness of the message (Keller 1999, Rothman and Salovey 1997), influence subsequent reactions to and perceptions of the message. With respect to information processing, Schwarz and Clore (1996) suggest that the role of affect can be framed in terms of two general streams: 1) an experiential approach that postulates an informational role of subjective experiences, including moods, emotions, bodily sensations, and cognitive experiences; and 2) a cognitive approach, which explores the impact of affective states on the content of thoughts rather than on the actual experience of thinking. Within the first stream, relatively little research has been directed towards improving our understanding of the hardwired, automatic (also called “somatic”) processes that reflect affect. Within the somatic processes, the influence of affect includes not only emotion states stimulated by bodily processes, but also includes affect triggered by features of a stimulus that in turn activate schematic structures linked through conditioning to particular emotional responses (Pham 2004). The affect that is stimulated within an individual in response to an object or message can be termed integral affect. It is this internally-generated affect that is of interest in the current research.

The current research examines two research streams with respect to the role they each assign to integral affect in the processes of attitude formation. The first stream of research, based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, has found that processing dominated by affect produces relatively weak attitudes compared to more cognitive processing. The second stream of research, based on the affect heuristic and two-systems theory, has determined that integral affective responses may be particularly important in situations where the decision to be made is extremely important and personally-relevant, or when the information presented is very complex and unfamiliar, as is frequently the case in the context of health-related choices (Slovic et al. 2005). Given these conflicting perspectives and a lack of empirical research that specifically investigates the strength of affectively-based attitudes, there appears to be a need for further exploration of how integral affective responses influence important persuasion-related variables such as attitude formation and attitude strength.

A series of laboratory experiments conducted with undergraduates at a major public university explored differences in affectively- and cognitively-based attitudes developed in response to health-related advertising. These differences were examined in measures of intention to engage in the advocated behavior; two measures of attitude strength (persistence and resistance), and three measures of attitude: overall attitude, and the affective and cognitive components of attitude.1 Affectionately-based attitudes were shown across studies to be stronger than cognitively-based attitudes for the measures of overall attitude and the cognitive component of attitude. The affective attitude component did not change significantly over time or in response to an attack, regardless of whether the attitude was initially formed based on affect or cognition. This suggests that the affective component of attitude is particularly stable when compared to overall attitudes and the cognitive component of attitude. In general, intentions to seek out information about or engage in the behavior advocated by the ad were more favorable for individuals in the affectively-based attitude condition. Together these results can be interpreted as supporting the contention of this research that affectionately-based attitudes are more persistent over time and resistant to change and that intentions will be more favorable among individuals who hold affectively- than cognitively-based attitudes.

An additional methodological contribution of this research was to test a promising but relatively unproved experimental method for strengthening affectionately-based attitudes (Peters and Slovic 2007). Elaboration tasks intended to strengthen the cognitive basis of an attitude, such as thought listings, have been well-validated (Petty et al. 1995), but few options have existed for similar strengthening of an affectionately-based attitude. The goal of the silent feeling elaboration task employed in this study was to reduce disruption of affective processes underlying affectionately-based attitudes, thus allowing for the maintenance of the affective basis of the attitude. Preliminary

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1This separation of attitude into three components is consistent with Crites et al. (1994), Fabrigar and Petty (1999), Verplanken et al (1998), and Peters et al. (forthcoming), and the methodology used to measure and analyze these components was also consistent with these authors.