

# “If You Can’t Dazzle Them with Brilliance, Baffle Them with Nonsense”<sup>1</sup>: Extending the Impact of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe Technique of Social Influence

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Three experiments extended earlier findings on the impact of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) technique on compliance. This technique is comprised of a subtle, odd element in a typical scripted request, the “disruption,” followed by a persuasive phrase, the “reframing.” Based on the thought-disruption hypothesis (Petty & Wegener, 1999), we argue that its impact is generalizable across situations and that disrupting a conventional sales script not only increases the impact of the new reframing, but also increases susceptibility to influence resulting from other (congruence-based) persuasion techniques embedded in the influence setting. Three experiments provided support for our expectations. Specifically, the DTR technique reduced the extent of counter-argumentation to a sales script and boosted the impact of two other persuasion techniques: the continued questions procedure and message–goal congruence. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Imagine that the doorbell rings, and that upon answering the door, a neighborhood schoolboy starts a pitch to persuade you to buy postcards for a local charity club. His influence attempt proceeds as expected until he oddly states the price in pennies before giving his punch-line. Would you comply? According to Davis and Knowles (1999), the chances you would are considerably greater than they would be if the price had been stated only in dollars. Davis and Knowles recently identified and tested a rather subtle social influence tactic, which they termed the *Disrupt-Then-Reframe* (DTR) technique. This technique is characterized by a small “twist,” or odd element, in a typical scripted request, the “disruption” (e.g., “they’re 200 pennies, ... that’s \$2”), followed by a persuasive phrase that concludes the script, the “reframing” (e.g., “it’s a really good deal”). Thus formulated, a request is posited to be more than 1.5 times as “powerful” in gaining compliance

than its conventionally stated counterpart (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Knowles, Butler, & Linn, 2001).

Notwithstanding its persuasive potential, research on this technique is still in its infancy. To our knowledge, no research apart from the two publications by the original authors has examined the generalizability of the phenomenon or the factors that mediate or moderate it. Hence, there is a clear need for further study. Our research extended the original research by examining the processes underlying the effectiveness of the DTR technique and its generalizability across various types of compliance behaviors and across differing types of persuasion settings. More specifically, we focused on the question of *how* the DTR technique “works,” whether it works in gaining compliance for both commercial and nonprofit purposes, and whether it can function as a “booster” of additional persuasion techniques that are present in the influence situation.

In the following section, we briefly review the limited empirical evidence on the DTR procedure and the theoretical assumptions underlying it. Next, we discuss related theory and research in the fields of compliance and persuasion that is relevant to the object under study. Finally, we report three studies that test the generalizability of the DTR construct and its implications for the persuasiveness of several other influence techniques.

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<sup>1</sup>The title of this article is a well-known sales representative’s adage, adapted from Kardes (2002).

## RESEARCH ON THE DTR TECHNIQUE

In a series of four studies, Davis and Knowles (1999) demonstrated that disrupting a sales script, followed by a reframing, significantly enhanced purchase rates. In all studies, sets of note cards were sold door-to-door by confederates who claimed to be associated with a nonprofit organization for disabled children and adults, the “Richardson Center.” Each study followed the same scenario. The note cards were presented and it was said they had been made by clients of the center. After a general introduction of the sales person, the Richardson Center, and the note cards, the prospective buyer was asked whether he or she wanted to know the price. Then, in some conditions, a disrupting phrase was inserted. This phrase consisted of a small but unexpected element, stating the price in pennies rather than dollars. After presenting this odd element, the confederate paused for 2 sec before stating the price in dollars and the reframing. The DTR condition would thus read: “This package of cards sells for 300 pennies. ... That’s \$3. It’s a bargain!” The original studies found purchasing rates to be more than 1.5 times and in several instances twice as high in DTR as opposed to control conditions.

Davis and Knowles (1999) provided evidence that both the disruption and the reframing were necessary conditions to increase compliance. The DTR technique was tested against various control conditions, such as price only (“They’re \$3”), reframe then disrupt (“It’s a bargain. ... They’re 300 pennies. That’s \$3”), and reframe only (“They’re \$3. It’s a bargain”). In all these instances, DTR conditions yielded significantly higher purchase rates than any of these control conditions. In addition, the DTR technique was tested against a disruption-only control condition (“They’re 300 pennies. ... That’s \$3”). Hence, the original research included a systematic comparison between the full social influence technique (the DTR script: “They’re 300 pennies. ... That’s \$3. It’s a bargain!”) and a control script that was identical except that the concluding persuasive phrase (“It’s a bargain”) was omitted (hence, the disruption-only condition stated: “They’re 300 pennies. ... That’s \$3”). Again, compliance rates proved significantly higher in the DTR condition than in the disruption-only condition.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The attentive reader might note that in the original research (Davis & Knowles, 1999), there is some overlap in the conceptualizations of the various control conditions with regard to information about the price. Most notably, the reframe-only (“They’re \$3. It’s a bargain.”) and the disruption-only (“They’re 300 pennies. ... That’s \$3.”) conditions are not mutually exclusive in that the price in dollars is present in both conditions. A strict disruption-only condition would have to state the price in pennies but not in dollars. This stricter version of the disruption condition has not been run yet. In our studies, all conditions closely mirror the ones as defined by Davis and Knowles (1999) for reasons of generalization (although we have relabeled the equivocal “reframe-only” control condition into a “no-disruption” control condition).

## Original Theoretical Accounts

Ericksonian confusion techniques (Erickson, 1964) and especially action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987) have been suggested to explain the phenomenon (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Knowles et al., 2001). Erickson, pioneer in the field of clinical hypnosis, used unexpected elements in his interaction with clients to reduce resistance to foster hypnosis. He proposed that his techniques engaged the mind of the client, thus diverting it from maintaining resistance in order to the hypnotic attempt. He found that confusion increased compliance with any of the hypnotic suggestions that immediately followed.

On a more theoretical level, Davis and Knowles (1999) used action identification theory to explain the DTR effect. The theory proposes that individuals always have available some conception of what they’re doing. These conceptions can be defined at different hierarchical levels, ranging from low-level characterizations that pertain to specific details of the behavior to high-level qualifications that include the goals and broader implications of the actions. For instance, the behavior of our schoolboy in the opening example can either be defined in terms of what he is actually saying or at a higher level in terms of his motives and goals for selling the postcards. Action identification theory predicts that a disruption in the sales-script shifts the recipient’s focus from the higher level meanings ascribed to the schoolboy’s behavior, and indeed the meaning of the entire dyadic encounter, to a more concrete lower level focus. This attention to the details of the action brought about by the disruption would then make the recipient susceptible to influence presented by the reframe (the punch-line of the sales script). As an example, Davis and Knowles (1999) referred to research by Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, and Arps (1984) in which individuals were set off-balance because they were instructed to drink coffee from a cup with lead in its base, whereas the control participants drank coffee from a normal cup. Those who drank from the heavy cup were more susceptible to social influence attempts than those who drank from the normal cup. In this article, we present a more comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the DTR effect that will yield additional hypotheses not necessarily following from Ericksonian confusion principles or action identification theory.

## THEORY AND RESEARCH ON RELATED COMPLIANCE TECHNIQUES

The DTR procedure can be considered a variation of the so-called Pique Technique (Santos, Leve & Pratkanis, 1994). In the Pique Technique, a request is made in an unusual way, which is assumed to foster compliance. For instance, Santos et al. (1994) had a confederate panhandler approach passersby asking for money, either conventionally (e.g., “can you spare

any change”) or in an unconventional way (e.g., “can you spare 17 cents”). Participants in the odd conditions were significantly more likely to give money. Both the DTR and the Pique technique make use of what Kardes (2002) called “the confusion principle” (p. 260) and both aim at disrupting a salient refusal script on the part of the target consumer, with the Pique Technique being employed in panhandling situations and the DTR in unsolicited (door-to-door) selling situations. However, the Pique Technique is assumed to do so by making the request in such an unusual manner that the target’s interest is evoked (piqued) and he or she is “induced to think positively about compliance” (Santos et al., 1994, p. 756). This type of disruption is postulated to be rather blunt to evoke a shift from mindless refusal to mindful attention (see also Brown & Ryan, 2003; Langer 1989, 1992; Pollock, Smith, Knowles, & Bruce, 1998). Findings in support of this notion indicated that employing the technique stimulated the target consumer to ask more questions and to report more thoughts about the reasons for the request (Santos et al., 1994). In contrast to the Pique Technique, the disruption brought about by the DTR technique is posited to be much more subtle (Davis & Knowles, 1999) and does not assume these deliberative cognitive responses. In fact, Davis and Knowles suggested that the DTR technique primarily operates under mindless conditions. That is, the disruption gently confuses the target consumer without brutally “awakening” him or her into a state of careful scrutiny of the sales script. This assumption was not directly tested in the original studies, but will be examined in the present research.

The assumption of mindlessness is compatible with research on the role of automaticity in compliance as put forward by Cialdini (2001) and others (e.g., Bargh, 2002; Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001). Many compliance-gaining techniques are assumed to be effective under mindless conditions because they trigger a fixed action pattern, leading to giving in to the request. As a classic example of this principle, consider the research by Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978). They showed that people are much more willing to yield to a request when the requester provides a reason for doing so. In this research, people aligned for a copying machine were approached by a confederate asking them the favor of letting him or her go first in using the machine. Significantly more participants were willing to accommodate the confederate if he or she provided a reason for the request, regardless of whether that reason was legitimate (“because I’m in a rush”) or nonsensical (“because I have to make some copies”). These results underscored the mindlessness of the compliance behavior, triggered by the presence in the request of a “because heuristic.”

Recent research suggests that mindlessness is also a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the “That’s-Not-All” technique (Pollock et al., 1998). In the That’s-Not-All technique, people are presented with an offer (e.g., a cupcake for 75 cents). Before the target can respond, the deal is made more attractive by including more or upgraded items (e.g., “if you

buy this cupcake today for 75 cents, you will get two chocolate-chip cookies free of charge!”). In their study, Pollock et al. (1998) had confederates sell small and cheap boxes of chocolate or big and expensive ones, accompanied by no reason, a placebic reason, or a valid reason for buying the chocolate. Results showed that the technique was effective, but also indicated that the higher price fostered mindfulness, which led to a careful scrutiny of the reasons offered, and limited the effectiveness of the That’s-Not-All technique. Thus, participants were most affected by the technique under mindless (low price) conditions. In sum, these studies demonstrate that not just the DTR technique but a host of other compliance-gaining procedures rest on the assumption of mindlessness, which underscores its pervasiveness throughout the social influence literature.

## ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Strongly related to the concept of mindlessness is the notion of limited processing on the part of the target consumer. Although Davis and Knowles (1999) suggested that their findings might well be the result of peripheral or heuristic processing on the part of the target individual, they have not explicitly considered a dual-process framework (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) as an explanatory construct for their findings. Nevertheless, based on dual-process reasoning, we argue that the disruption may well function as a distracter, reducing the ability of the target individual to produce counter-arguments to the sales script (cf. Harkins & Petty, 1981; Petty & Wegener, 1999; Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). Hence, based on this thought-disruption hypothesis, the disruption in the DTR may foster lower levels of processing and the reframe could have an impact on compliance to the extent that it functions as a heuristic or peripheral cue. This notion is explicitly tested in our research.

In fact, recent research suggests that the reframe may indeed be considered as such in these circumstances. In a series of studies, Howard (1997) showed that familiar phrases (e.g., “don’t put all your eggs in one basket” or “Rome was not built in a day”) can function as peripheral cues in situations where the target individual’s motivation or ability to process information is limited. Of particular interest for our reasoning is evidence that familiar phrases are especially persuasive under conditions of message distraction. These findings mirror the conditions for a DTR effect to occur; that is, a disruption (in this case a simple distraction) followed by a reframe (in this case a familiar phrase). Thus, the distraction condition in Howard’s study appears to be highly similar to a typical “disruption” in that both reduce cognitive capacity to carefully scrutinize the sales message. Furthermore, Howard (1997) argued that for familiar phrases to affect persuasion, their meaning and value must be quickly and easily understood. It is precisely this quality that Davis and Knowles

(1999) assumed to underlie the effectiveness of reframing (“it’s a bargain”) in gaining compliance. Hence, we propose here that the reframe in the DTR technique serves the role of a peripheral cue and affects persuasion only when accompanied by the disruption, which decreases the recipient’s ability to carefully scrutinize the sales script. This proposition is tested in Study 1.

The thought-disruption concept yields predictions that are not directly implied by either Ericksonian confusion techniques or action identification theory. That is, if the disruption reduces the recipients’ ability to counter-argue and consequently fosters mindless acceptance through heuristic processing of the reframe, this implies that *any* peripheral cue present in the influence situation will be more effective under DTR conditions than it will be when the DTR technique is absent. This would imply that the type of influence technique used (DTR vs. control) would moderate the impact of additional persuasive elements on consumer compliance. This hypothesis is tested in Studies 2 and 3.

Because we cannot possibly test the plethora of possible heuristics, we restricted ourselves in our research to a specific class of persuasive elements, governed by the principle of congruence (see Lee & Mason, 1999). According to this principle, people prefer things to be compatible, congruent, and consistent rather than incompatible, incongruent, and inconsistent. That is, in comparison to incongruent stimuli, congruent stimuli are less arousing and result in a mild positive evaluation based on familiarity (Mandler, 1982; see also Campbell & Goodstein, 2001). This principle applies to a host of phenomena.

For instance, in a recent study on the relation between social labeling and compliance, Gueguen (2001) found that participants were only likely to yield to a request when the nature of that request was congruent with the nature of the label that was ascribed to it. In addition, research on the impact of vivid content elements in persuasive messages (Smith & Shaffer, 2001) showed that vividness affects persuasion primarily when the vivid elements are congruent with the theme of the message itself. Finally, research on brand effects (e.g., Aaker, 1999) demonstrates that brands are evaluated more positively when they are congruent with salient personality traits of the target consumer. In summary, the congruence principle fosters persuasion across a broad range of influence settings, and given the fact that congruent stimuli are less arousing (Mandler, 1982), it seems plausible to assume they exert their largest influence under limited processing conditions acting as simple heuristics.

In our research, two specific types of congruence-based influence strategies were examined. Study 2 focuses on the “continued questions procedure” (Burger, 1999) in which the congruence between a series of small first requests and the target request is examined in conjunction with the DTR technique. In Study 3, we assessed the relation between the DTR and the congruence between type of sales message and the nature of the request. If it can be demonstrated that the DTR

technique moderates the impact of both types of congruence-based persuasive elements, this will support the idea that both act as persuasive “heuristics” similar to the reframe and that the DTR can also augment or “boost” their persuasive impact.

To summarize, our research extended previous studies of the impact of the DTR technique of social influence. Following predictions based on the thought-disruption hypothesis, we examined whether the effectiveness of the DTR technique is mediated by reduced counter-argumentation (Study 1). Furthermore, we test whether additional, congruence-based persuasive elements present in the influence setting function as peripheral cues and affect compliance in a manner similar to the reframe in the DTR script (Studies 2 and 3).

## STUDY 1

The first study was designed to assess the processes underlying the effectiveness of the DTR technique. The thought-disruption hypothesis (Petty & Wegener, 1999; Petty et al. 1976) states that distracting individuals from processing issue-relevant arguments increases the power of simple cues in the persuasion context. We propose that this thought-disruption hypothesis provides an explanation for the impact of the DTR technique. Hence, we expect a disruption in a sales script to function as a distracter and a concluding reframe to function as a peripheral cue. We hypothesize that the DTR will be more effective in gaining compliance than a control condition. Moreover, we expect this effect to be mediated by the extent of counter-argumentation on the part of the recipient. We tested our predictions in a commercial dyadic sales encounter, where an attempt was made to sell subscriptions to an existing (nonfictitious) commercial lottery either using the DTR technique or employing a control condition.

### Method

#### *Overview and Participants*

The study employed a between-subjects single-factor design (DTR vs. no disruption). A female confederate, acting as salesperson, approached passersby on a market square in the center of a large city with a request to participate in a commercial lottery. Individuals were counted as participants if they stopped and listened to the entire sales script. Following this procedure, a total of 113 persons participated in the study. The salesperson introduced herself, the commercial organization she was affiliated with, and then proceeded with the appropriate sales script.

#### *Conditions*

To permit a clear replication and assessment of the generalizability of the DTR technique, both versions of the sales request closely mirrored the original DTR statements (cf.

Davis & Knowles, 1999). In her introduction, the confederate indicated she worked for a commercial organization, stating: "I am with Dayzers. Are you familiar with Dayzers? Then you know it is an officially registered lottery that doesn't award millions of Euros to just one winner, but grants many smaller prizes to millions of winners! You are now invited to join the lottery for 8 weeks for the price of only 4 weeks!"

**Influence technique.** Participants were randomly assigned to the DTR script or the no-disruption control condition. In the DTR condition, the salesperson presented the participant with a subtle disruption, followed by a reframe, stating: "Now is your chance to try your luck for 350 Eurocents a week [approximately 350 pennies] ... that's 3 and a half Euros. It's a bargain!" In the no-disruption condition, the disruption was omitted and the price was simply stated in Euros: "Now is your chance to try your luck for 3 and a half Euros a week. It's a bargain!"

### Dependent Measures

**Message processing.** Message processing was measured by assessing the amount of counter-arguments on the part of the recipient. The confederate recorded the number of explicitly stated objections or critical comments and questions in response to the sales script.

**Compliance.** The confederate waited until the participant responded to her offer. A subscription to the lottery was recorded as complying with the sales request (cf. Davis & Knowles, 1999). Regardless of any subscription made, all participants were thanked for their time and interest before the confederate terminated the interaction.

## Results and Discussion

In total, 34% of the participants subscribed to the lottery. Results of the analysis using logistical regression showed a significant impact of the DTR technique in that 43% of participants exposed to the DTR bought the lottery ticket, whereas only 25% of the individuals in the no-disruption condition did so,  $Wald(1) = 3.76, p < .05$ . In addition, an analysis of variance of the number of counter-arguments revealed a significant effect of the DTR technique,  $F(1, 111) = 6.49, p < .01$ . Results indicated that, although the extent of counter-arguing was generally modest throughout the sample used, individuals exposed to the DTR technique reported fewer counter-arguments ( $M = .46$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M = .70$ ). To determine whether the extent of counter-arguing indeed mediated the impact of the DTR technique on compliance, we performed a mediation analysis (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986). Logistic regression analysis showed that, as expected, the effect of the number of counter-arguments on compliance proved highly significant,  $Wald(1) = 26.31, p < .001$ . In addition, an analysis of the impact of the DTR technique on compliance using the number

of counter-arguments as a covariate, reduced the impact of the DTR technique to nonsignificance,  $Wald(1) = .02, ns$ , whereas the mediator retained its significance,  $Wald(1) = 25.73, p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup>

These results replicate and extend earlier findings concerning the DTR technique indicating that employing a subtle "twist" in an otherwise conventional sales script increases compliance rates among participants. Participants complied more often with the request to subscribe to the lottery in the DTR condition than they did in the no-disruption condition. Although, in absolute terms, the percentage of compliance was rather low (34%), it is noteworthy that the technique still proved effective despite the considerable price for subscription to the lottery. Furthermore, our findings underscore that the DTR technique is more robust than its architects have assumed because it also affects compliance in commercial settings, in addition to the nonprofit type of requests examined by Davis and Knowles (1999).

Moreover, the findings support our hypothesis that the DTR technique lowers the ability (rather than the motivation) to process the sales message: more counter-arguments to the sales script were reported in the control condition than in the DTR condition. These results thus demonstrate that mere distraction from the dominant negative thoughts implied by a refusal script in response to an unsolicited sales pitch can increase the susceptibility for this type of social influence. This is noteworthy when we realize that such refusal scripts may have been learned by our participants over a long period of frequent and similar unsolicited encounters (see Bargh et al., 2001).

More unequivocal support for our hypothesis was derived from the mediation analysis, which showed that the impact of the DTR technique on compliance was mediated fully by the extent of counter-argumentation, as witnessed by the finding that the impact of the DTR on compliance was rendered nonsignificant by entering the extent of counter-argumentation as a covariate in the logistical regression analysis. These findings demonstrate that the disruption acts as a distracter inhibiting issue-relevant thinking about the sales script, hereby increasing the effect of the reframe (cf. Howard, 1997). This supports the conception of the impact of the DTR procedure as a relatively mindless phenomenon, which sets it apart from the processes underlying the effectiveness of the more mindful Pique technique (see Santos et al., 1994).

<sup>3</sup>An alternative account of these findings is that participants who refused to comply felt socially obligated to give a reason for their noncompliance. This would imply that compliance mediates the effects of the Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) technique on counter-argumentation, rather than vice versa. Both interpretations were plotted against each other using structural equation modeling. Results of these analyses revealed that the sequence  $DTR \rightarrow$  counter-argumentation  $\rightarrow$  compliance fitted the data substantially better,  $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = .041, p = .98, GFI = 1.00, AGFI = .99, RMR = .001$ , than the alternative model with the sequence  $DTR \rightarrow$  compliance  $\rightarrow$  counter-argumentation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 5.27, p = .07, AGFI = .90, GFI = .98, RMR = .01$ . Moreover, the results indicated that the former model fit the data very well, whereas the latter model fit the data quite poorly.

In summary, Study 1 supports our hypothesis that the DTR technique is effective because the disruption functions as a distracter for processing message-relevant thoughts and the reframe functions as a peripheral cue. This thought-disruption hypothesis also predicts that the effect of any *additional* peripheral cue present in the same influence context would be moderated by the DTR technique (i.e., this technique is proposed to boost the effect of any heuristically operating influence tactic). The latter proposition was examined in the following two studies in which the impact of two different congruence-based influence tactics is assessed. In addition, these two studies contribute to the issue of generalizability of the DTR phenomenon on varying types of compliance. In contrast to the first study, which featured the subscription to a commercial lottery as the key dependent compliance measure, Studies 2 and 3 focused on the willingness on the part of participants to support the cause of an interest group.

## STUDY 2

To examine whether the distraction brought about by the DTR technique affects the effectiveness of other persuasive elements embedded in the influence context, we tested the impact of a compliance procedure akin to the so-called Foot-in-the-Door technique, and termed the *Continued Questions Procedure* (Burger, 1999; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Kamins, 1989). In this procedure, participants are asked if they are willing to answer a few (simple) questions, to which the answer is almost invariably “yes.” After having finished the last question, the target request follows (typically a larger request). Essential for the procedure is that the target request is perceived by the participant as a logical continuation of the first (i.e., they need to be semantically related). Thus, the first series of questions and the target request must be *congruent*. The technique is said to work because it induces the need for consistency in participants (Cialdini et al., 1995): having said yes to the first series of questions induces the need to say yes to the target request. Burger (1999) suggested that in contrast to self-perception phenomena (Bem, 1972), consistency needs may function as a cue under mindless circumstances to affect compliance. Thus, tactics inducing such needs should be particularly effective under less intensive processing conditions. Hence, it is expected that the impact of the Continued Questions Procedure will be larger under DTR conditions than under control conditions. Study 2 provided a test of this hypothesis.

### Method

#### *Overview and Participants*

In this study, a male, instead of a female, confederate was employed to rule out the possibility that the earlier results were gender specific. He pretended to act on behalf of a fictitious student interest group and approached students on a college campus to argue for an *increase* in college tuition fees

and requested participants to sign a petition in support of this proposed raise. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a conventional script advocating the raise and requesting support by signing the petition. The other half was exposed to a DTR message. In addition, half of the participants were presented with the Continued Questions Procedure and the other half was not. Consequently, the study employed a 2 × 2 (Continued Questions Procedure: Present vs. Absent × Influence Technique: DTR vs. No Disruption) between-subjects factorial design. A total of 120 students served as participants in this study (60% women, 40% men). The male representative approached participants, introduced himself and the pressure group, and proceeded with the appropriate script.

#### *Conditions*

The four versions of the request started identically with an introduction by the confederate of himself, the pressure group on whose behalf he said he was acting, and the advocacy of an increase of college tuition fees to attain certain university-related goals. Then, depending on the conditions, the confederate continued as follows.

*Continued questions procedure.* When exposed to the Continued Questions Procedure, participants were asked a series of three simple questions before introducing the target request. In this condition, the representative first asked the target if he was allowed the opportunity to elucidate why the pressure group argued for an increase in tuition fees. After the participant agreed, he or she was presented with two statements—both congruent with the final target question—and asked to indicate whether he or she agreed with each of the statements. The statements read: “To improve the quality of academic education, more financial means need to be rendered available,” and “High-quality scientific research is necessary to better understand and solve important societal issues and problems.” The script then continued to stress the importance of the increase in tuition fees to improve the quality of the scientific research and education and thus the need to argue for such an increase with the government. In the control condition, both the opening question and the two statements were omitted from the script.

*Influence technique.* Following the introduction and the presentation of the Continued Question Procedure or its control condition, the scripted influence technique was presented. In the DTR condition, participants were informed that the pressure group argued for a 75 Euro (approx. \$ 75) increase in annual college tuition fees. In these conditions, participants were exposed to the subtle disruption, the 2-sec pause, and the reframe in the following way: “College tuition fees need to be raised by 7,500 Eurocents [approximately 7,500 pennies] ... that’s 75 Euros. It’s a really small investment!” In the no-disruption condition, the disruption was omitted. In this condition, the script simply stated “College

tuition fees need to be raised by 75 Euros. It's a really small investment."

### Compliance

In line with Study 1, signing the petition was recorded as complying with the request made by the male representative confederate. All participants were thanked for their time and interest before the interaction was terminated.

### Results and Discussion

Overall, 46% of the participants agreed to sign the petition. A logistic regression analysis of compliance as a function of the continued questions procedure (present vs. absent) and influence technique (DTR vs. no disruption) indicated that the DTR technique again proved to affect overall compliance rates. That is, the proportion of participants who complied with the request was significantly greater when they were exposed to a disruption (63%) than when they were not (28%; Wald[1] = 14.65,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, a greater proportion of participants agreed to sign the petition when they were exposed to multiple questions than when they were not (63% vs. 29%; Wald[1] = 14.63,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, however, this latter difference was significantly greater when participants had been exposed to the DTR procedure (90% vs. 37%) than when they had not (37% vs. 20%; Wald[1] = 4.19,  $p < .05$ ). Tukey post hoc comparison tests confirmed this differential effect. That is, the first difference was significant ( $p = .001$ ) but not the second ( $p = .44$ ).

These findings again demonstrate the effectiveness of the DTR technique in gaining compliance. This result is even more interesting given the fact that the type of request involved a cause (a raise in tuition fees) that was likely to be unpopular and evaluated unfavorably by the target group (students). Our findings also replicate earlier findings (Cialdini et al., 1995; Kamins, 1989; Patch, 1988) on the Continued Questions Procedure. Participants more often complied with the request when they were first asked to answer several initial questions congruent with the final request than when these initial questions were omitted. More important, however, is the fact that the effectiveness of the latter procedure was boosted by the DTR technique. Accordingly, our results underscore the notion that the effectiveness of the Continued Questions Procedure is especially large under limited processing conditions (cf. Burger, 1999). This finding supports our hypothesis that the disruption in the DTR technique reduces participants' ability to scrutinize the sales pitch and promotes mindless acceptance through heuristic processing of not just the reframe, but also of other persuasive elements present in the influence situation.

To test whether this facilitating role of the DTR technique can be generalized further, and extends to other persuasive elements present in the influence setting, we finally examined the impact of the DTR technique in conjunction to a different

congruence-based influence technique, which will be described in the next section.

## STUDY 3

Higgins (1999) suggested that the effectiveness of a persuasive message that is framed in terms of prevention versus promotion focus is dependent on the congruence between the goal advocated by the message and the reasons provided for pursuing it. This study tested the contingency of the impact of message-goal congruency on the DTR technique. Similar to Study 2, the current script advocated a raise in college tuition fees to advance several university-related goals and asked passersby on a college campus (students) to sign a petition in support of the proposed raise. According to Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1998, 2002), this advocacy should be considered a promotion goal, as a plea for an increase vis-à-vis the status quo as a means of advancing several university-related goals has a *positive* reference value, and a desired end state as a reference point. Thus, it triggers the need to *attain* the end state (promotion goal) rather than to avoid an undesired end state (prevention goal; Higgins, 1999, p. 506). Consequently, arguments that bear on the desirability of attaining this goal (promotion-focused arguments) are more effective than arguments that bear on the negative consequences of not attaining the goal (prevention-focused arguments). Hence, promotion-focused arguments are congruent to the promotion goal, whereas prevention-focused arguments are not.

In this study, the goal-congruent message thus emphasized the positive outcomes of attaining the goal (i.e., improvement of academic education and research). In contrast, the goal-incongruent message was framed in terms of the negative consequences of not attaining the goal (failure for education and research quality to improve). According to Higgins (1999), the congruent message should have a larger impact on compliance than the incongruent one. This proposition is tested in this study. In addition, given the assumption that, compared to incongruent stimuli, congruent stimuli are less arousing and yield a mild positive evaluation based on familiarity (Mandler, 1982), it is plausible to assume that the impact of message-goal congruence is larger under relatively mindless conditions. Consequently, this study tested the hypothesis that the impact of message-goal congruence will be larger under DTR conditions than under control conditions.

### Method

#### Overview and Participants

A total of 120 passersby on a college campus acted as participants in this study (77% women, 23% men). A female confederate acted as a representative of the same student interest group as employed in Study 2. This study employed a

slightly different type of control condition compared to the other two studies to increase generalizability (i.e., amount only, similar to the price-only conditions employed by Davis & Knowles, 1999). Hence, the design of the study was a  $2 \times 2$  (Message–Goal Congruence: Congruent vs. Incongruent  $\times$  Influence Technique: DTR vs. Amount Only) between-subjects factorial. The confederate again approached participants to sign the petition advocating a raise in college tuition fees. In line with the other two studies, the representative introduced herself and the pressure group, and proceeded with the appropriate scripted request.

### Conditions

The confederate approached students as they were walking through campus. After introducing herself and the interest group for whom she was supposedly working, the confederate told participants that the group had approached the government to argue “for a raise of college tuition fees to attain several university-related goals.”

Then, in the *goal-congruent message* condition, the confederate went on to stress the positive outcomes, stating that “if college tuition fees are raised, academic education and research will certainly improve.” In the *goal-incongruent message* condition, the confederate’s statement stressed the adverse effects of not attaining the goal, that is, “if college tuition fees are not raised, academic education and research will certainly not improve.”

**Influence technique.** Following the manipulation of message–goal congruence and in line with Study 2, participants were informed that the pressure group argued for a 75-Euro (approximately \$ 75) increase in annual college tuition fees. More in particular, in the DTR condition, participants were exposed to the subtle disruption, the 2-sec pause, and the reframe in the following way: “College tuition fees need to be raised by 7,500 Eurocents [approximately 7,500 pennies] . . . that’s 75 Euros. It’s a really small investment!” In the amount-only condition the disruption was again omitted, as was the concluding persuasive phrase. In this condition, the script concluded with the amount of money that the interest group wanted the fees to be increased: “College tuition fees need to be raised by 75 Euros.”

### Compliance

Similar to Study 2, signing the petition was recorded as complying with the request made by the female confederate. Regardless of whether the target signed or not, all participants were thanked for their time and interest before the interaction was terminated.

## Results and Discussion

Overall, 47% of the participants agreed to sign the petition. Logistical regression analyses similar to those employed in

Study 2 indicated that 62% of the participants exposed to the DTR procedure complied with the request as opposed to only 32% of participants in control conditions;  $Wald(1) = 10.50, p < .001$ . In addition, 57% of the participants exposed to the congruent message signed the petition, whereas 37% of the participants in the incongruent message condition did so;  $Wald(1) = 4.75, p < .05$ . However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction,  $Wald(1) = 6.84, p < .01$ , which indicated that the effect of message–goal congruence on compliance was significantly greater when the DTR technique was employed (83% vs. 40%) than when it was not (30% vs. 33%). Tukey post hoc comparison tests revealed that only the first difference was significant ( $p = .001$ ) but not the second ( $p = .93$ ).

These findings replicate and extend earlier findings, showing the effectiveness of the DTR technique in gaining compliance. Similar to Study 2, the willingness of participants (students) to sign a petition aimed at increasing college tuition nearly doubled when the confederate added the small twist “7,500 Eurocents” to her script and reframed it after a short break, as compared to the control condition. Our findings also support Higgins’ (1999) proposition that the effectiveness of persuasive messages depends on the congruence between the goal advocated by the persuasive message and the reasons supporting this goal in this message. In this study, participants more often complied with a persuasive message stressing the desirability of attaining the goal (promotion-focused arguments) than with a message stressing the negative consequences of not attaining the goal (prevention-focused arguments). This main effect of message–goal congruence was qualified, however, by an interaction between DTR and message–goal congruence, indicating that—as expected—the effectiveness of message–goal congruence was much greater when the DTR technique was employed. These findings support our hypothesis that this congruence-based persuasive strategy will be particularly effective under relatively mindless conditions. Notwithstanding this support, an alternative interpretation of these findings cannot be excluded. That is, message complexity, rather than message–goal congruence, may have affected the extent of counter-argumentation under DTR conditions. It can be argued that the goal-incongruent message was more complex than the goal-congruent message because the former contains a double negation and the latter does not. If participants are disrupted and, therefore, are prevented from thinking carefully, they may be less likely to counter-argue the goal-congruent message as we have argued, and so it will have a positive effect on compliance. However, by the same token, they may also be *less* likely to comprehend the more complex goal-incongruent message (with its double negation) and so this may have negatively affected compliance.

Note that this alternative explanation (i.e., that these differences are due to message complexity and not to message–goal congruence per se) only remains viable to the extent that our thought-disruption hypothesis holds. That is, if



the goal-incongruent message were simply more difficult to process due to a double negation, this would only have a negative effect on compliance when people have limited capacity to process (i.e., under conditions of relative mindlessness) and not when people are keen on carefully scrutinizing the message (cf. Chaiken & Eagly, 1976).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research replicated and extended earlier findings on the impact of the DTR technique of social influence on consumer compliance. Our studies support the findings reported by Davis and Knowles (1999) that adding a simple odd element in an otherwise conventional sales script can have an impressive impact on various types of compliance behavior. The DTR technique appears to be a very robust phenomenon. It is about twice as effective as a conventional scripted request in the case of a nonmonetary request (Studies 2 and 3) and over 1.5 times as effective when the “stakes are higher” (i.e., when a purchase, involving a considerable investment is required). In addition, the technique was found to work also for commercial purposes, which broadens the domain of application beyond the nonprofit purposes for which the technique was originally designed. In the next sections, we discuss the implications of our findings for the proposed mechanisms underlying this subtle social influence technique and provide some suggestions for future research.

### Mechanisms Underlying the DTR Effect

Why then is the DTR technique so effective? The architects of this technique, Davis and Knowles (1999), forwarded action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985) as an explanatory framework, suggesting that the disruption makes people vulnerable to an alternative identification of the situation they are involved in (i.e., the sales encounter). Our findings suggest a more comprehensive account of the DTR effect, rooted in dual-process reasoning (Chaiken & Trope, 1999), which suggests that the DTR technique decreases resistance to the unsolicited persuasive attempt, thus making participants more susceptible to all kinds of persuasive elements, as long as they do not require too much cognitive effort. It was argued that the introduction of an odd element in a sales script—the disruption—would reduce participants’ ability (rather than their motivation) to scrutinize the merits of the proposed request. This reduced ability, in turn, would make consumers more susceptible to low-effort persuasion strategies. Based on this thought-disruption hypothesis, then, the essence of the reframe (“It’s a bargain!”) simply functions as a persuasive element (i.e., a heuristic or peripheral cue). The findings of Study 1 provide direct evidence for this contention. The effect of the DTR technique on compliance was mediated by the amount of counter-arguments generated

by participants. Participants in the DTR condition thus processed the sales script less systematically than control participants, and consequently, were more receptive to the reframe to subscribe to a commercial lottery. Studies 2 and 3 extended this reasoning. In these studies, an interaction between DTR and two different congruence-based persuasion techniques was observed. In Study 2, the DTR technique was found to foster the effectiveness of the Continued Questions Procedure. In Study 3, the impact of a goal-congruent message was increased under DTR conditions. Hence, the reported effects of the DTR technique can all be accounted for by our more parsimonious theoretical account of this creative and simple social influence strategy.

Nevertheless, the results of Studies 2 and 3 permit other interpretations as well. The interaction effects obtained in both studies demonstrate that compliance as a result of various persuasive strategies in dyadic sales encounters is indisputably a multiplicative, not an additive phenomenon. Although our reasoning posits that the DTR technique boosts the impact of other persuasion techniques, and the results are compatible with this notion, from a technical point of view, causal relations between independent variables cannot be distilled from an interaction effect (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). Hence, it cannot unequivocally be established whether the DTR technique boosts the other congruence-based techniques, whether both reinforce each other, or whether the other techniques primarily boost the impact of the DTR technique. Notwithstanding these ambiguities, the results of Study 1 and previous research (Davis & Knowles, 1999) showed that the DTR technique produces compliance independently of any other persuasive technique that might be present in the influence setting.

One possible concern in research on social influence is the employment of confederates and hence the possibility of experimenter bias. This could open the door to possible confounds, because it cannot be ruled out that confederates may have become aware of the hypotheses. Nevertheless, we have good reasons to believe that this was not a serious problem in our research. First, the confederates were not trained. Thus, the sales scripts of the different confederates were only standardized as to what they would have to say, but otherwise were not void of various idiosyncrasies. Second, it seems less likely that any such unconscious idiosyncrasy has *systematically* distorted our findings. Indeed, this assumption would require that certain unconscious encouragements (e.g., a smile) should have systematically accompanied certain types of scripts but not others (e.g., the DTR scripts, but not the regular scripts). This is unlikely to be the case. Finally, in the original studies by Davis and Knowles (1999), the issue of experimenter bias was addressed, showing robust DTR effects regardless of whether confederates were aware or unaware of the hypotheses and regardless of whether confederates presented all experimental scripts or only one script (without knowledge of the other scripts in the study).

In sum, our findings and account of the observed results seem to fit quite elegantly with the well-established theoretical and empirical principle of automaticity in compliance research (Cialdini, 2001). This states that many influence techniques (e.g., the “That’s-Not-All” technique or the “because heuristic”) are particularly effective under mindless conditions and trigger a fixed behavioral pattern leading to giving in to the request. Thus, by gently confusing the consumer, the DTR sows the seeds of compliance by reducing rejection responses and fostering mindless acceptance through heuristic processing of the reframe and of any other congruence-based persuasion technique present in this influence setting.

Moreover, we demonstrated this impact across various types of compliance behavior, various types of DTR messages, various control conditions, and various sales people. The dual-process account of the DTR technique also ties our studies to research on the Pique Technique, as discussed earlier (Santos et al., 1994), and suggests that confusing a consumer to foster compliance can work along two lines: bluntly baffling him or her may increase susceptibility to influence as a result of the cogency of the arguments in the sales pitch (as in the Pique Technique), whereas gentle confusion fosters compliance as a function of the persuasiveness of simple heuristics present in the influence context.

#### Future Directions in DTR Research

Although paralleling the findings reported by Davis and Knowles (1999), our results also suggest a boundary to the effectiveness of the DTR technique. From our results, it appears that the differential impact of the DTR technique versus a conventional scripted request is somewhat smaller when the participant is asked a more considerable favor (money) than simply signing a petition. Thus, it might well be that when compliance requires a more substantial “sacrifice” or investment on the part of the target consumer, the impact of the DTR may shrink to nonsignificance compared to a conventional request. Such findings have been reported in a classic study, conducted by Langer et al. (1978), which showed that if compliance with a request (to make copies) was more “costly” in terms of the inconvenience it would cause (to make a considerable amount of copies), participants only complied if the explanation for interrupting was valid (“because I’m in a rush”), not when it was nonsensical (“because I have to make copies”). In addition, this assumption would be compatible with the dual-process notion that a more substantial request would increase the personal relevance (outcome involvement; see Johnson & Eagly, 1989) on the part of the target person and, as a result, the impact of relatively mindless persuasion strategies would be expected to decrease. This should constitute an interesting subject for future study.

Second, the studies thus far have employed similar types of disruptions, where the price was stated in cents before it

was stated in Euros to provide a fair replication of the original study by Davis and Knowles (1999). This does raise the question, however, whether the impact of the technique is restricted to this type of disruptions, or whether alternative distracters might prove less, evenly, or even more, effective. For instance, one could wonder whether the disruption should constitute an integral part of the sales script. If so, a car horn or a cell-phone ringing would not be effective in inducing compliance. This should constitute an interesting domain for future research.

Similarly, given the limited reservoir of studies on the DTR technique, several alternative conditions remain open for testing. For example, a sales script that simply *ends* with the unusual element, that is, stating the price in pennies (e.g., “They’re 300 pennies!”) without spelling out the amount in dollars, has not been run yet. This script (a stricter version of the disruption-only script) bears close resemblance to the typical Pique script (Santos et al., 1994), which also ends with the unexpected element (e.g., asking for 17 cents as opposed to any spare change). Hence, it may be that this condition may foster mindfulness, which in turn may affect compliance, just like the Pique technique does.

A final thought pertains to our thought-disruption account of the DTR technique. Could it perhaps be that the DTR technique does not decrease cognitive capacity—as we posit—but actually increases motivation from utter mindlessness to enough mindfulness to at least consider the request? This reasoning implies that the DTR technique may stimulate message processing to some extent, and this—in turn—would result in increased susceptibility to the other congruence-based techniques. Thus formulated, the relation between mindfulness and compliance might be curvilinear. Total and absolute mindlessness would then result in noncompliance, as does utter mindfulness. Most compliance would then occur in the “intermediate zone.” In this study, although evidence was provided that supported our reduced cognitive capacity account of the DTR effect, additional evidence is desirable. Future research may benefit from including various manipulations of cognitive capacity and processing motivation, thus providing a more direct test for the mechanism proposed here. Also, the inclusion of other persuasion strategies that have been identified as systematic (i.e., argument quality) or heuristic (i.e., source characteristics) should provide an additional test of the ideas reported here.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Matthijs Lodder, Alexander van der Kooi, Alle de Herder, Jorinde van Toor, and Elisa Bleijswijk for their input and assistance in data collection. We gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers in the preparation of this article.

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Received: May 9, 2003

Accepted: October 17, 2003

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