

RESISTANCE TO PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATIONS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE DISTRACTION HYPOTHESES¹

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In studying the effects of distraction on attitude change, Festinger and Maccoby hypothesized that individuals would change their attitudes more if distracted during the presentation of a persuasive communication, since the active process of counterargument was inhibited. McGuire noted that a learning-theory approach would predict opposite results since distraction should inhibit reception of the persuasive material. In an experiment manipulating both visual and behavioral distractions in a persuasive communication it was found that less attitude change occurred in the distraction conditions. Distracted Ss were also less able to recall arguments presented in the persuasive communications. The results were interpreted as supporting a learning-theory approach to distraction and attitude change.

Two opposite hypotheses have been suggested regarding the effect of distraction on the persuasive impact of a communication. Festinger and Maccoby (1964) suggested that when a person is exposed to a persuasive communication attacking his belief while his attention is distracted by irrelevant tasks, the persuasive impact of the communication is enhanced. They predicted this enhancing effect of distraction on the assumption that it interferes with the active process of counterargument while listening to a persuasive communication. In short, the distracted individual is caught with his defenses down. McGuire (1966) noted that a learning-theory approach would expect the opposite results. Distractions presented during a persuasive communication should interfere with the learning of a new attitude, the persuasive argument, thus lessening attitude change.

In their experiment, Festinger and Maccoby (1964) presented a recording of a speech arguing against fraternities to a group of fraternity men. In the no-distraction condition the fraternity members were at the same time shown a movie of the speaker presenting the speech; in the distraction condition the speech was accompanied by a completely unrelated silent movie of an amusing nature. The experiment was carried out in three universities with significant, although slight, differences in two of the experiments, such that more attitude change occurred in the distraction condi-

tion. The distraction hypothesis was suggested by a reinterpretation of an earlier study on forewarning by Allyn and Festinger (1961), although this earlier study does not directly support a distraction interpretation.

Freedman and Sears (1965) included forewarning and distraction in the same design, further testing the hypothesis that distracting subjects from the content of a communication will decrease resistance to influence. They found trends were in the direction predicted by Festinger and Maccoby, but the differences were not statistically significant. Gardner (1966) explored the impact of divided attention on attitude change produced by a persuasive marketing communication. His results indicated that distraction interfered with the reception and understanding of the persuasive communication as predicted by McGuire. In addition, Gardner found recall of points in the persuasive communication seriously inhibited by distraction.

The varied results from these previous distraction studies call for further clarification. The present study tests the adequacy of the distraction hypothesis for both behavioral and visual distraction, using both recall and attitude-change data as dependent variables. The experimental design was a 2×2 factorial replicated for pro and con messages.

METHOD

Subjects and Design

Subjects ($N = 244$) were male and female students enrolled in classes in introductory psychology and

¹ This research was partially supported by CURF Grant 231 from the University of New Hampshire.

business administration. Measures of attitudes on several current political problems were obtained from the students who were told that the questionnaire represented an initial attempt to devise new methods of measuring attitudes. The items included the Poverty Program, the Headstart Program, the Apollo moon project, the war in Vietnam, Medicare, air pollution, etc. Embedded among these items was one item related to voting age: Do you favor the lowering of voting age to 18? (7-point scale from strongly in favor to strongly oppose). This questionnaire was administered to students 5 weeks prior to the distraction study.²

Based on the premeasure on the attitude questionnaire, those in favor of reducing the voting age were assigned at random to one of the four conditions with the con message. Those who were against reducing it were assigned to one of the four conditions with the pro message.³ The experimental manipulation consisted of visual and behavioral distractions presented during a persuasive communication.

Persuasive Messages and Distractions

Two persuasive communications—one arguing strongly *against* reducing the national voting age (con message) and another strongly *in favor* of reducing it (pro message)—were prepared by the WENH-ETV station⁴ in the form of black-and-white video tapes, about 10 minutes in length. The pro and con messages were made as similar as possible in format and number of arguments. There was an initial “billboard” which identified the video as part of a WENH series, and then a young professor⁵ appeared who, after identifying himself by name only, proceeded to argue in favor of or against reducing the voting age (straight version).

A second set of two video tapes was also prepared to present the same pro and con persuasive communications under visual distraction conditions. A rather humorous film (*Overs and Outs*) was superimposed on these tapes, creating the visual distraction version of the video tape.

² Twelve subjects, who are included in all the analyses, answered this questionnaire approximately 10 days before the experiment.

³ Individuals who had checked 1, 2, or 3 in the prequestionnaire were classified as “pro,” and individuals who had checked 5, 6, or 7 were classified as “con.” There were 12 individuals who were classified as “neutral” toward this issue. Six of them were assigned to pro-message conditions, and the remaining six were assigned to the con-message conditions. A similar procedure was used for the control group.

⁴ The authors are grateful to WENH Television, University of New Hampshire; Keith Nighbert, manager, and Bruce St. George, production manager, for cooperation in producing the video tapes.

⁵ The authors are grateful to William Gilsdorf, of the Speech Department, University of New Hampshire, for preparing and delivering the persuasive communications in the video tapes.

The behavioral distraction was manipulated by having the subjects in the no-distraction condition watch the video without being engaged in any task, while the distracted-condition subjects were required to fill out a questionnaire which contained easy multiple-choice items and a page of semantic differential terms while watching the video presentation. These subjects were told to proceed at their normal speed and that the reason for this distraction was to simulate the real life conditions of watching programs such as the “National Drivers Test” where viewers circle the right answers, mark true-false answers, or write short opinions.

The visual distraction manipulation was very similar to that used in the Festinger and Maccoby (1964) study where an interesting and amusing film was shown visually, while the subjects listened to the unrelated persuasive communication. The behavioral distraction task used in the present study was somewhat similar to that of Allyn and Festinger (1961) and Freedman and Sears (1965), although the distraction used here may have been less related to the persuasive communication. The behavioral distraction used by Gardner (1966) involved more complex motor behavior and was probably more severe.

Procedure

The experimental sessions, eight in all, were conducted at the University of New Hampshire—from 2 P.M. to 4 P.M. on the same day. Through the educational television station at the University the videos were broadcast by closed-circuit television. Two rooms were used at the same time, one television in each room, with the broadcasts scheduled 30 minutes apart. This allowed a behavioral distraction condition and a no behavioral distraction condition to be run at the same time. The first two showings were the straight versions, one with the pro message and the other with the con message; the later two showings were the visual distraction versions.

In each room the subjects were given identical verbal instructions by two graduate research assistants in business administration who were unaware of the distraction studies or of the nature of the hypotheses. The subjects were told that they were going to see a segment of a video tape prepared for a television network that was being pilot tested and that the experimenters would appreciate their close attention since they would want to ask them some questions about it later.

Following the video, subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The first page of this questionnaire was similar to the pretest questionnaire, which contained several opinion questions including the one on voting age. The second page contained questions asking the subjects to recall two arguments advocated in support of the position in the communication they had heard. In addition, two questions, similar to those used in the Festinger and Maccoby (1964) study, were asked measuring the extent of rejection of the speaker. Attitude change was meas-

TABLE 1
MEAN ATTITUDE SHIFT FOR DISTRACTION
CONDITIONS (D SCORES)

Behavioral condition	Visual condition	
	No visual	Visual
No behavioral	1.89 (56)	1.27 (65)
Behavioral	1.03 (61)	0.65 (62)

Note.—Numbers in parentheses represent *N* for each cell.

ured as a difference score between the pre- and post-test questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attitude-Change Effects

There was a clear relationship between amount of attitude change and conditions of distraction in the persuasive-communication situation when change was analyzed disregarding the direction of argument. As can be seen in Table 1, the greatest shift of attitude occurred in the no-distraction condition (no visual, no behavioral), and the least attitude change occurred in the double-distraction condition (both behavioral and visual). These results are in accord with the McGuire (1966) prediction and are opposite to those expected from the Festinger and Maccoby (1964) hypothesis. A simple 2×2 analysis of variance comparing behavioral distraction present versus absent and visual distraction present versus absent indicated that each type of distraction significantly reduced attitude change.⁶ A similar picture emerged when the pro- and con-message conditions were analyzed separately. In the pro-argument condition, attitude change was significantly less when behavioral distraction was compared with no behavioral distraction ($F = 4.75$; $p < .05$) and when visual distraction was compared with no visual distraction ($F = 8.84$; $p < .05$). There was no significant difference for the behavioral component in the con-argu-

⁶ The data were analyzed by an unweighted-means solution for unequal group size (Winer, 1962). Subjects were run in eight groups, rather than individually, so the use of the individual subject as the unit of sampling may have slightly inflated the significance levels.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY TABLE: 2×2 ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR
DISTRACTION CONDITIONS (UNEQUAL *N*)

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Behavioral (A)	27.48	1	27.48	9.88**
Visual (B)	15.45	1	15.45	5.56*
A \times B	9.16	1	9.16	3.29
Error	668.66	240	2.78	

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

ment condition, but there was for the visual ($F = 4.03$; $p < .05$).

A control group ($N = 30$) was tested shortly after the experiment. This group consisted of randomly selected subjects who had participated in the pretest but did not participate in the experiment. For people who were originally against, there was a very slight shift toward a more favorable attitude ($-.14$), and for those who were originally favorable there was a slight negative change (.69) as would be expected from a regression tendency.

Source Rejection Effects

The measurement of speaker rejection yielded results similar to those of Festinger and Maccoby (1964), with significantly greater rejection in conditions where no visual distraction occurred ($F = 4.64$, $p < .05$, for pro message; $F = 7.06$, $p < .01$, for con message). The correlation between amount of attitude change and rejection of speaker for each condition is shown in Table 3. Festinger and Maccoby found a high negative correlation between speaker rejection and attitude change in their visual distraction condition.

TABLE 3
CORRELATION BETWEEN AMOUNT OF ATTITUDE
CHANGE AND REJECTION OF SPEAKER
WITHIN EACH CONDITION

Direction of argument	Distraction type			
	Nonbehavioral-Nonvisual	Behavioral	Visual	Behavioral + Visual
Pro	-.33*	.02	-.18	.02
Con	-.18	-.08	-.61*	-.16

Note.—A negative correlation indicates that the more an attitude was changed, the less the speaker was assumed to be biased.

* $p < .05$.

The comparable visual condition in the present study yields similar results for the con message, but not for the other distraction conditions with the con message, however, nor for any distracting conditions with the pro message, though a similar negative relationship was found for the no-distraction condition with the pro message.

Recall Effects

Results regarding the recall of arguments provide some interesting data. When comparing the no-distraction groups with the distracted group on recall of arguments (whether they recalled zero, one, or two arguments), the no-distraction groups recalled significantly better ($\chi^2 = 20.55$; $p < .01$). The results of this study thus lend support to a simple learning-theory approach to the problem of persuasive communication and attitude change. To the extent that persuasion involves learning, factors such as distraction should inhibit attitude change. In the present study, those subjects who were not distracted at all were influenced the most, and those who were distracted both behaviorally and visually changed their attitude least. Similar results were found when the pro and con conditions were analyzed separately, indicating that direction of argument and type of distraction are relatively unimportant in considering the effects of distraction. Also, subjects of moderate to high extremity (high commitment) on the pretest were similarly affected by the distraction manipulation. The results from recall of arguments also indicate that distraction interferes with the process of learning the content of a persuasive communication. The results from both the present study and the one by Gardner (1966) indicate that distraction lessens recall and attitude change, results which are consistent with McGuire's (1966) interference concept of distraction and opposed to Festinger and Maccoby's (1964) disarming concept.

Festinger and Maccoby, in explaining the distraction phenomenon, presented a tentative hypothesis that when subjects are able to counterargue without distraction they have many ways to defend their attitude. Under conditions of distraction, however, subjects must reject the speaker to defend their attitude position. In the present study, the Festinger and Maccoby prediction regarding a negative relation between attitude change and perception of source bias is confirmed in one of the visual distraction conditions, though not in other conditions. Furthermore, the analysis of variance of the source rejection scores indicates that greater rejection occurred under conditions of distraction. The least attitude change occurred under these conditions, however, a finding directly opposite to that predicted by the distraction hypothesis. That the inverse relationship between attitude change and speaker rejection occurs without inhibited attitude change calls into question the interpretation of speaker rejection as a factor in the distraction hypothesis.

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(Received July 26, 1967)