



The counterintuitive influence of vocal affect on the efficacy of affectively-based persuasive messages



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ABSTRACT

Three experiments examined the extent to which congruency between affective vocal qualities of speakers and the affective content of persuasive messages influenced attitude change. In Experiment 1, a 2 (attitude basis: affective vs. cognitive) \times 4 (persuasive message: fully matched vs. partially matched vs. fully mismatched vs. written passage) between-participants experiment was conducted. Attitude change produced by the fully matched voice-content message did not differ from the written passage condition. However, both the partially matched and fully mismatched voice-content messages generated significantly more attitude change than the written passage. Experiment 2 replicated the findings of Experiment 1 and tested two explanations for the enhanced efficacy of voice-content incongruent messages. Supplementary analyses provide some evidence in support of an attribution explanation as a mechanism to account for these effects. Experiment 3 replicated the prior two experiments and tested four possible mechanisms for the persuasive effects of affective vocal-message incongruence. Analyses once again supported an attribution explanation for the incongruency effect.

1. Introduction

As the American poet William Carlos Williams said, “It is not what you say that matters, but the manner in which you say it; there lies the secret of the ages.” (*Selected Essays*, preface; Williams, 1954). Despite the intuitive appeal of this idea, social psychologists have largely ignored the role of vocal qualities in persuasion. This is surprising given the prevalence of oral communication in everyday life, and because a large literature has documented the important influence of vocal perception within oral exchanges (e.g., see Juslin & Scherer, 2005). One prominent feature often evident in oral exchanges is emotionality in the voice. Indeed, research has shown that distinct emotions are associated with changes in specific parameters of voice (Banse & Scherer, 1996; Bänziger, Patel, & Scherer, 2014; Juslin & Scherer, 2005; Scherer, Johnstone, & Klasmeyer, 2003), and that people can detect subtle changes in emotionality (Johnson, Ernede, Scherer, & Klinnert, 1986), even when language barriers prevent understanding of the content (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Pell, Monetta, Paulmann, & Kotz, 2009). This is particularly relevant in light of the large body of work supporting the important role played by emotional content in persuasion (e.g., see Petty, Fabrigar, & Wegener, 2003).

1.1. The role of affect in attitude formation and change

Both intuitively and empirically, we know that emotional expression communicates important information that can influence attitudes and/or behavior in listeners. Indeed, one fundamental type of evaluative information influencing attitudes is affect (Forgas, 2010; Olson & Kendrick, 2008; Rokeach, 1968; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). A second type of evaluative information is cognition, which reflects an individual's beliefs about an object's attributes. Evidence indicates that distinguishing between affect and cognition in terms of message content and attitude bases is often consequential for persuasive appeals (e.g., Becker, 1963; Crites, Fabrigar, & Petty, 1994; Eagly, Mladnic, & Otto, 1994; Knepprath & Clevenger, 1965; Ruechelle, 1958). In fact, communicators frequently design persuasive messages to elicit emotional responses from the recipient or to convey facts about an object's attributes. Moreover, evidence indicates that the interplay between the content of a persuasive message (affective vs. cognitive) and a recipient's attitude base (affective vs. cognitive) is an important determinant of effective persuasion (Edwards, 1990; Edwards & von Hippel, 1995; Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Haddock, Maio, Arnold, & Huskinson, 2008; Mayer & Tormala, 2010; Millar & Millar, 1990; See, Petty, & Fabrigar, 2008). Nonetheless, the extensive literature on attitude bases and persuasion has not been integrated with work on vocal affect.

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1.2. The role of vocal affect in the context of an affective persuasive appeal

Given that attitudes and messages can be based predominantly on either affect or cognition, this raises the question of how vocal affect might influence persuasion. Because affective messages are designed to elicit emotional responses in recipients, it makes sense that vocal emotions should be especially influential within such messages. Indeed, one can imagine several ways in which the interplay between messages designed to elicit an emotional response and the affective vocal cues of the speaker delivering that message might combine to influence persuasion. With this in mind, an important question is how best to conceptualize voice in terms of its emotional qualities. One influential view suggests that emotions can be conceptualized along two orthogonal underlying dimensions: valence and arousal (e.g., Bachorowski, 1999; Bradley & Lang, 2000; Frick, 1985; Owren & Bachorowski, 2007; Pakosz, 1983). As it applies to the persuasion process, this framework highlights the importance of considering the extent to which a speaker's vocally expressed emotions are congruent with the affective content of the message. For example, congruency on both valence and arousal exists when a speaker delivers fear-eliciting content using vocal qualities that reflect fear. Partial incongruency exists when voice and message are mismatched on either valence or arousal, such as combining fear-eliciting content with vocal qualities that reflect either excitement (i.e., matched on arousal, mismatched on valence), or boredom (i.e., matched on valence, mismatched on arousal). Full incongruency exists when voice and message are mismatched on both dimensions, such as combining fear-eliciting content with a contented voice.

These studies test two competing perspectives regarding how the interplay between affective vocal cues and an affective message might influence persuasion. The first perspective suggests that persuasion should be enhanced through affective voice-content congruence relative to incongruence. The congruence hypothesis is based on at least two findings. First, research on emotional contagion has shown that exposure to others' emotions can in some cases elicit similar emotions in oneself (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992; Hatfield & Rapson, 2008; Neumann & Strack, 2000). Second, affective voice-content congruence may lead the recipient to conclude that their emotional responses are appropriate, thus providing social validation (Cialdini, 2009; Guadagno, Muscanell, Rice, & Roberts, 2013; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Thus, both findings suggest persuasion will be enhanced when affective vocal cues match the affective content of messages and attenuated when these variables mismatch.

However, this pattern may not emerge in all contexts. If the content of an affective message is comparatively high in intensity, little room may exist for congruent affective vocal cues to enhance the impact of the content. Instead, affective voice-content incongruence may increase persuasion. At least two psychological phenomena might account for this outcome. First, recipients might judge the intensity of their own emotions in relation to the speaker's emotions thereby producing a contrast effect. For example, a speaker who delivers intense fear-eliciting content in a bored voice may cause the recipient to evaluate themselves as especially afraid relative to the speaker, leading to greater attitude change. Conversely, if the same content were delivered in a fearful voice, the recipient may view themselves as relatively less afraid than the speaker, reducing attitude change. Similar contrast effects in social judgment are well documented (e.g., Burger, 1986; Martin, Seta, & Crelia, 1990; Schwarz & Bless, 2007; Wänke, Bless, & Igou, 2001).

Second, persuasion may be influenced by message recipients' attributions regarding the source of their emotional responses (e.g., Schwarz, 1990; Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Wyer, Clore, & Isbell, 1999). For example, if intense, fear-eliciting content was delivered in a bored voice, the source of the recipient's emotional response should be unambiguous: recipients should attribute their fear to the attitude object described by the content rather than the speaker. Thus, emotional responses should be perceived as diagnostic of the attitude object and

persuasion should increase. However, if the same content was delivered in a fearful voice, the source of emotional responses is ambiguous because both the speaker's emotions and the attitude object may explain their fear. Thus, the recipient's emotional responses might not be seen as diagnostic of the object.

Although both of these processes may help explain how voice-content congruency influences attitude change, people may vary in their sensitivity to (in)congruency effects. One potentially relevant factor is whether an individual's initial target attitude is predominantly based on affect or on cognition. (In)congruence between emotion in content and in vocal cues may have a stronger effect on individuals whose attitudes are based on affect, because they are more sensitive to affective cues. By contrast, individuals whose attitudes are predominately based on cognition may be relatively insensitive to affective cues and thus less susceptible to the effects of vocal affect on persuasion. This would conform to prior research showing that matching a persuasive message to the recipient's (affective/cognitive) attitude base increases attitude change (Edwards, 1990; Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Haddock et al., 2008; Mayer & Tormala, 2010; See et al., 2008; but see Millar & Millar, 1990).

1.3. Overview of the present research

In three studies, we investigated how (in)congruency between affective vocal cues and the affective content of a message influences persuasion, and whether this process is moderated by a person's initial attitude base. This was examined using strongly affective content with affective vocal cues that either fully matched, partially mismatched, or fully mismatched the emotionality of the content. Because the present studies used a message with high-intensity affective content, we expected incongruency to enhance persuasion. Experiment 1 provided an initial test of our hypothesis. Experiment 2 was conducted to replicate the key effects in Experiment 1 and to explore the potential role of contrast effects and/or attribution processes. Experiment 3 was designed to replicate the effects of the prior two experiments and to test several additional mechanisms. For all experiments, all measures and manipulations are disclosed, and no participants were excluded.

2. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 provided an initial test of our hypotheses within the context of a novel attitude object. During the attitude formation phase, a positive attitude was created towards an ostensibly real animal called a *lemphur* (see Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). The information provided during the formation phase was either predominantly affective or cognitive in nature. During the persuasion phase, participants were exposed to a negative, affect-based persuasive message.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and design

Two hundred fifty undergraduates were recruited in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned across a 2 (attitude formation: affective base vs. cognitive base) \times 2 (questionnaire order: affective first vs. cognitive first) \times 4 (persuasive message type: vocal congruent vs. vocal partially incongruent vs. vocal fully incongruent vs. written passage) between-participant factorial design.¹ Minimum sample size requirements were based on a goal of 20 participants per cell (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011) to test our predicted 2 \times 4 interaction. Once this number was exceeded, data collection continued for the remainder of the academic semester.

¹ Because the order of presentation for the affective and cognitive scales was counterbalanced, this variable was originally included in the ANCOVA investigating post-message attitudes and associated analyses for all 3 experiments. As no effects were found, we do not include order as an independent variable in the analyses presented.

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