
5. From advertisements to word of mouth: understanding the Elaboration Likelihood Model in consumer-directed persuasion

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Which message would be more effective at persuading a consumer to purchase a new product: an advertisement highlighting the advanced features of the product or a friend asserting that they found the product useful in everyday life? In this chapter, we examine when and why messages from brands (advertisements) and messages from peer consumers (word of mouth) produce persuasion. To do this, we draw on a longstanding theory of persuasion from social psychology, the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (Petty & Briñol, 2012; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), to organize the variables involved and help explain the processes underlying their influence.

PERSUASION: ADVERTISEMENTS AND WORD OF MOUTH

By some estimates, consumers see 75–100 advertisements on average per day (Anderson, 2023), numbers which do not even consider the other 65–150 brand conversations that consumers spread between themselves per week (Keller & Fay, 2012). Indeed, consumer-directed persuasion has been a facet of human life since the dawn of commerce (for a historical review, see Teeny, 2025), and persuasion itself has been a focal topic of social psychology since its inception (see Briñol & Petty, 2012). Generally, people conceive consumer-directed persuasion as “advertisements” (messages) manufactured and deployed by sellers (e.g., small business owners, multinational corporations). These advertisements are intended to influence a buyer’s attitude (i.e., their general liking or disliking), which is a core determinant of behavior, such as purchasing (cf., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). A similar form of persuasion, though, can emerge from consumers unaffiliated with the brand (i.e., non-sponsored, consumer-generated messages), which is referred to as word of mouth (WOM). Historically, research on the effectiveness of consumer-directed persuasion has focused on an advertisement’s persuasiveness; however, technology has expanded everyday consumers’ ability to engage in persuasive communication themselves, making the impact of WOM equally important to understand.

On the surface, advertisements (or ads) and WOM might seem like very different “types” of persuasion. For example, they come from different sources (e.g., companies vs. friends), can convey different messages (e.g., functional benefits vs. anecdotal accounts), and likely differ in their presumed persuasive intent (e.g., deliberate vs. incidental). Yet, for all their differences, as we will describe, the variables that make an ad more effective are the same variables that make WOM more effective. Their primary differences come largely in the *a priori* consumer states of mind and assumptions about the specific form of the persuasion. Thus, we first outline some of the overlapping factors involved in the persuasiveness of ads and WOM, before

describing some of their core differences. We then use a theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, to help organize the different ways in which these variables affect attitude change across ads and WOM. Finally, we describe different consequences that emerge as a function of how the persuasive attempt was instantiated and strategies for maximizing its influence.

PERSUASION FACTORS

In any persuasive context, there are four key factors that comprise the multitude of variables informing an appeal's effectiveness: the *recipient* of the message, the *message* itself, the *source* of the message, and the *context* in which the message is delivered (McGuire, 1969; Teeny et al., 2021). We next detail these factors as well as some illustrative variables within each for both advertising and WOM. Notably, although the impact of the variables we describe is arguably the variables' dominant effect, we later explain how the same variable can enhance or detract from the persuasive attempt depending on the theoretical process responsible for the variable's impact.

Recipient Variables

Whether examining the influence of an ad or WOM, its persuasive impact is in part affected by psychological variables of the consumer receiving the appeal (i.e., the recipient). Generally, these variables reflect the extent of a consumer's propensity to be *open* to contrary views (Ottati & Stern, 2023) or to *counterargue* them (Brandt, 1979). Variables associated with increased openness or decreased counterarguing generally lead to a more effective persuasive attempt. For example, people with a lower sense of self-agency (i.e., the self-perception they can control elements in their lives) are generally more affected by persuasive appeals (Damen et al., 2015). Consumers high in their receptiveness to opposing views (Minson & Chen, 2022) or who have more agreeable dispositions (Alkış & Temizel, 2015) are also generally more susceptible to persuasion. Naturally, there are many recipient variables that can affect persuasion, and while some are more stable, like openness to change, others are more temporary. For example, people in a positive (vs. negative) mood are often more persuadable (for a review, see Petty & Briñol, 2015), as are those who have recently felt socially excluded (Ruijten et al., 2015).

Message Variables

Message variables constitute elements in the message itself, like the position taken, the framing of the appeal, and the arguments presented in it. At the highest level, whether the message is an ad or WOM, variables that enhance its perceived cogency enhance its persuasiveness (Petty et al., 1976). To determine how a variable affects perceived cogency, persuasion scholars usually draw on expectancy-value models (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). These models posit that variables making the ostensible benefits of the advocated position seem more *likely* and/or more *desirable* to the consumer will increase its influence. For example, persuasive appeals that feature many arguments in favor of a particular position can increase the perceived likelihood that a beneficial outcome will occur and/or the perceived desirability of those benefits (Shu & Carlson, 2014), generally making such appeals more effective. Other factors can also

enhance the likelihood or desirability of an advocated benefit, such as the scarcity of a product (i.e., scarcer products are perceived as more desirable; Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2013) or the imagery depicting a product (i.e., the benefits of products described with high imagery are perceived as more likely to occur; see Petrova & Cialdini, 2018).

Source Variables

Beyond what is said in the message, an appeal's effectiveness often hinges on its source, specifically, the source's perceived *attractiveness*, *power*, and *credibility* (for a review see Briñol & Petty, 2009). Attractiveness refers to a source's physical attractiveness or likability, where more physically attractive and likable sources tend to be more persuasive (Chaiken, 1979; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Smith & De Houwer, 2014). Similarly, the more powerful a source (i.e., their actual or perceived control over desirable resources), the more persuasive they tend to be (for a review, see Briñol et al., 2017). This element is particularly salient with advertisements where messages from companies with greater "brand power" (i.e., prominence in the marketplace) tend to be more effective (Caldieraro et al. 2018). Finally, consider the source's credibility, a dimension encompassing three elements: the source's perceived expertise on the topic (i.e., how knowledgeable the source is), perceived trustworthiness (i.e., how likely the source is to provide information honestly), and perceived bias (i.e., the perceived slant in what is communicated; Wallace et al., 2020a, 2020b). In general, the more expert, trustworthy, and less biased a source is perceived to be, the more influence the appeal tends to have (see Briñol & Petty, 2009).

Context Variables

Lastly, any persuasive attempt is affected by the context in which it occurs, including the *channel* through which the message is delivered (e.g., online vs. offline WOM; Li et al., 2017) and the *environment* surrounding message reception (e.g., an ad while at the theater vs. at home; Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008). Nowadays, the context plays an increasingly important role in understanding persuasive effects given the diversity of ways, places, and times that consumers can receive persuasive attempts. For example, the message could occur through physical ads in one's environment (e.g., product displays), direct communication on one's digital device (e.g., social media mentions), and countless other forms. The influence of the context on persuasion, however, is less studied relative to the other factors, in part because marketers have long had the least control over it (Teeny, 2025). Still, work here has found, for example, that the presence of pleasant background music can increase the effectiveness of persuasive attempts (Vermeulen & Beukeboom, 2016). Other work has shown that a persuasive appeal's impact can be influenced by *where* the appeal is delivered, including such seemingly mundane factors as where within a group of people a consumer is seated when receiving the message (Zhu & Argo, 2013).

Persuasion Factors: Advertisements versus Word of Mouth

Although the effectiveness of both ads and WOM is determined by the same variables within these four communication factors (e.g., more cogent messages produce greater persuasion for both), there are broad, normative differences in consumers' perceptions about ads versus

WOM, which can impact the overall influence of those variables. Take, for example, consumers' dispositional persuasion knowledge (i.e., the degree to which they believe a message is using communication tactics to try to persuade them; Friestad & Wright, 1999). In general, the less persuasion knowledge a consumer possesses, the more susceptible they are to persuasion (de Pelsmacker & Neijens, 2012). Although this is true regardless of whether that persuasion comes via an ad or WOM, consumers tend to believe, on average, that ads (vs. WOM) are more likely to try to manipulate them (Moore and Lafreniere 2020), and this perception enhances resistance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Consequently, although the impact of any variable will carry the same influence for WOM and ads (e.g., a more likable source will tend to increase persuasion for both), consumers' heightened persuasion knowledge in response to ads lowers advertisements' effectiveness relative to WOM (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007).

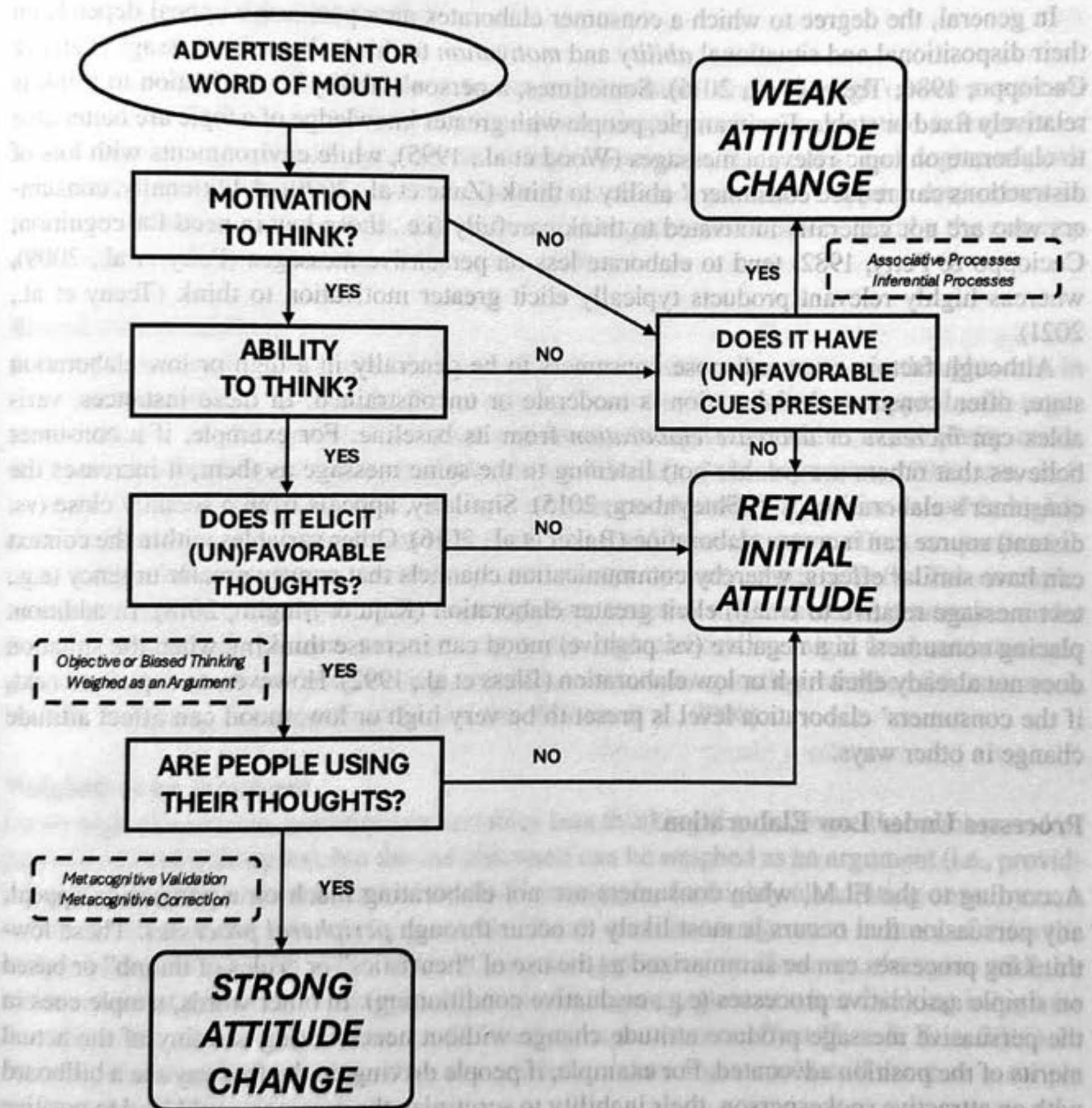
Of the different *a priori* perceptions consumers carry about ads versus WOM, probably the most salient are differences in variables associated with the source of a message. That is, holding all else constant, when consumers know that a persuasive attempt was generated by a company (an ad) versus another consumer (WOM), they perceive the source of the message to be less trustworthy and more intent on trying to persuade them, which largely accounts for WOM's historical persuasive advantage over ads (Moore and Lafreniere 2020). That is, consumers tend to perceive the source of WOM (vs. an advertisement) as more honest and less manipulative, thus increasing the effectiveness of WOM-based appeals (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). These perceived source differences are further bolstered by the contexts in which ads versus WOM typically occur. Whereas ads often occur in contexts that have been associated with deceptive appeals (e.g., TV ads; Darke & Ritchie, 2007), WOM typically occurs in more casual settings, where such persuasion knowledge concerns are less likely to be activated (Cheung et al., 2009). In fact, when the same information in an advertisement is conveyed by another consumer, its influence is increased (Keller & Fay, 2009).

Importantly, by knowing that ads (vs. WOM) are trusted less, marketers can focus their efforts on message, source, and context variables that help to improve this perception. For example, ads that reference reviews by objective third parties or offer arguments that are backed by empirical tests can help to improve consumers' trust in the source of the appeal and thereby its influence (Isaac & Grayson, 2017). At the same time, this also suggests that trying to generate more trustworthy WOM might not be the most effective strategy, because this form of persuasion is already perceived as relatively trustworthy (Moore and Lafreniere, 2020). Instead, focusing on source characteristics that help to bolster their perceived expertise or power might be more productive (Lim & Chung, 2014). It is worth noting that there will be times when ads (vs. WOM) could be more effective, despite being perceived as less trustworthy. For example, TV ads often have narrative components, whereas WOM is generally more attribute-focused, meaning ads could be more effective for consumers with greater dispositional liking of stories (Chen, 2015).

THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

So far, we have described particular variables within recipients, messages, sources, and contexts as having a unidirectional influence. However, the same variable (e.g., a source's physical attractiveness) that seems persuasive in one instance (e.g., advocating for a diet product) might be ineffective or counterproductive in another (e.g., advocating for a computer; Trampe et al.,

2010). To understand how a variable will affect persuasion, we draw upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Briñol, 2012; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It describes how any variable's effect on attitude change critically depends on the degree to which consumers are *elaborating* on the persuasive appeal. Furthermore, it explains how the same variable can sometimes increase and sometimes decrease persuasion depending on the process by which it operates. See Figure 5.1 for an overview of the model.



Source: Adapted from Petty & Cacioppo, 1986.

Figure 5.1 The Elaboration Likelihood Model

Amount of Elaboration

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) posits that people vary in the degree to which they are likely to think about (i.e., elaborate upon) a persuasive message. Whereas some persuasive messages might receive a lot of elaboration from consumers (e.g., a sports ad during a closely watched sporting event, or WOM from a close friend), other persuasive attempts receive hardly any consumer elaboration (e.g., an irrelevant advertisement during an unimportant game, or WOM from an unknown peer). As we describe, the degree to which consumers elaborate on a message has profound effects on how a variable within a persuasive appeal affects the consumer.

In general, the degree to which a consumer elaborates on a persuasive appeal depends on their dispositional and situational *ability* and *motivation* to think about the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Teeny et al., 2016). Sometimes, a person's ability or motivation to think is relatively fixed or stable. For example, people with greater knowledge of a topic are better able to elaborate on topic-relevant messages (Wood et al., 1995), while environments with lots of distractions can reduce consumers' ability to think (Zane et al., 2020). Additionally, consumers who are not generally motivated to think carefully (i.e., those low in need for cognition; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) tend to elaborate less on persuasive messages (Petty et al., 2009), whereas highly relevant products typically elicit greater motivation to think (Teeny et al., 2021).

Although factors can predispose consumers to be generally in a high or low elaboration state, often consumers' elaboration is moderate or unconstrained. In these instances, variables can *increase* or *decrease elaboration* from its baseline. For example, if a consumer believes that others are (vs. are not) listening to the same message as them, it increases the consumer's elaboration of it (Shteynberg, 2015). Similarly, appeals from a socially close (vs. distant) source can increase elaboration (Baker et al., 2016). Other variables within the context can have similar effects, whereby communication channels that convey greater urgency (e.g., text message relative to email) elicit greater elaboration (Kaju & Maglio, 2018). In addition, placing consumers in a negative (vs. positive) mood can increase thinking when the situation does not already elicit high or low elaboration (Bless et al., 1992). However, as explained next, if the consumers' elaboration level is preset to be very high or low, mood can affect attitude change in other ways.

Processes Under Low Elaboration

According to the ELM, when consumers are not elaborating much on a persuasive appeal, any persuasion that occurs is most likely to occur through *peripheral processes*. These low-thinking processes can be summarized as the use of "heuristics" or "rules of thumb" or based on simple associative processes (e.g., evaluative conditioning). In other words, simple cues in the persuasive message produce attitude change without necessitating scrutiny of the actual merits of the position advocated. For example, if people driving on the freeway see a billboard with an attractive spokesperson, their inability to scrutinize the message could lead to positive attitudes toward the advocated product, even if the spokesperson has limited expertise with the topic (Trampe et al., 2010). Similarly, if a product review on social media is not relevant to a consumer, thereby yielding little motivation to evaluate the appeal (Filiari & McLeay, 2014), simply seeing that the review comes from an aspirational group member could result in

positive attitudes toward the product (DeBono, 1987). When consumers are in a low elaboration state, many different variables can produce a positive persuasive effect by simply creating a positive association or inference associated with the message, such as: a greater number of arguments in the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), a majority group member who offers pro-attitudinal arguments (Martin et al., 2008), and a context surrounding the appeal that produces a good mood (Cyr et al., 2018). Under low elaboration, the positive cognitive inferences (e.g., “This source is credible, so their appeal must be good”) or emotional associations (e.g., “This message makes me feel good, so the appeal must be good”) can make consumers more positive toward the advocacy.

Processes Under High Elaboration

When consumers are elaborating on a message, persuasion occurs through one or more *central processes*. Relative to low elaboration, where simple positive or negative inferences or associations generate attitude change, under high elaboration, the number and degree of positive versus negative thoughts a person has in response to a persuasive appeal determines its influence. When thinking is high, the valence of thoughts is often determined by the cogency of the arguments presented (e.g., Petty et al., 1976).

Biased interpretations

In a high elaboration state, variables can bias how positive a consumer’s thoughts are in response to a persuasive message. For example, if a consumer receives an appeal with arguments that are neither particularly weak nor strong, being in a positive mood (Petty et al., 1993) or hearing from a highly credible source (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994), can each increase thought-positivity, which increases persuasion. Although a positive mood or highly credible source in this high elaboration example would have the same effect on persuasion as in a low elaboration state, variables do not always operate so consistently. For example, whereas receiving a message from a majority group member might increase persuasion under low elaboration, this same message source under high elaboration might lead consumers to generate fewer positive thoughts (e.g., because consumers question whether this source is biased), impairing the appeal’s influence (see Martin et al., 2008).

Weighed as an argument

Under high elaboration, not only can variables bias thinking (i.e., increase the number and/or positivity of one’s thoughts), but the variable itself can be weighed as an argument (i.e., providing evidence for the claim in and of itself). For example, for highly elaborating consumers, a famous athlete’s endorsement of a sports drink can serve as an argument in favor of it (as the athlete has expertise with sports drinks), increasing persuasion. However, the same athlete’s endorsement of pet food is no longer assessed as a cogent argument when thinking is high (as the athlete has no expertise in pet food), limiting its persuasive effect (Lee & Koo, 2016). In contrast, if elaboration was low, then the athlete’s endorsement could still serve as a simple positive cue.

Metacognitive validation

When in a high elaboration state, not only does the valence of people’s primary thoughts affect the appeal’s influence but so do their secondary thoughts: their metacognitions (i.e., their

thoughts about their thoughts; Petty et al., 2007). For example, a consumer might generate a positive thought in response to an ad (e.g., this mug will keep coffee hot); however, upon further scrutiny of that thought, they might not be very confident in it (e.g., uncertainty that the mug will in fact keep it hot). Thus, even if two consumers generate the same positive thought in response to an appeal, the consumer who has more confidence in or liking for that positive thought will be more likely to use that thought and thus be more persuaded by the appeal (see Briñol & Petty, 2022, for a review). Although this process might sound heavily cognitive, consumers in a high elaboration state can engage in this metacognitive process quite easily (cf., Jordano & Tournon, 2018). For example, a person might receive two recommendations from similar peers for different books to read, generating positive thoughts toward both. However, the consumer might experience more confidence in one recommendation (i.e., higher metacognitive validity), leading it to have greater persuasive impact on which book they ultimately decide to read (see Tormala & Rucker, 2022).

Metacognitive correction

In general, people are motivated to hold accurate attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This means that if they perceive that an appeal exerted undue positive or negative influence on them, in a high elaboration state they might try to correct their evaluations (Cesario et al., 2004; DeSteno et al., 2004; Petty & Wegener, 1993). For example, a consumer might realize that their positive reaction toward a product was influenced by its association with a favorite musician. So, the consumer might adjust their positive attitude to better align with what they perceive to be their true (less positive) attitude toward the product (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999). When consumers believe their thoughts have been biased by something irrelevant to the current appeal (whether it biased them positively or negatively), in a high elaboration state they will try to mentally estimate the *direction* and *magnitude* of that bias. They will then consciously adjust their evaluations to be more reflective of what they believe their objective reactions should be (Wegener & Petty, 1997). For example, a consumer might at first believe that an appeal with many favorable arguments is persuasive; however, upon reflection, the high number of arguments might seem “too good to be true,” leading them to correct (i.e., reduce) their positive reactions toward the appeal (Shu & Carlson, 2014).

Multiple Processes for a Single Variable

As alluded to earlier, although the prior sections described individual variables operating through low or high elaboration processes, the same variable can serve in each of the different roles outlined. Take, for example, positive mood (see Petty & Briñol, 2015). We noted that when consumers are unconstrained in their elaboration, positive (vs. negative) mood can reduce elaboration (Lee et al., 2009). However, if consumers are in a low elaboration state, positive mood can increase persuasion through an associative process (Bosmans & Baumgartner, 2005). Under high elaboration, positive mood could positively bias thoughts (Petty et al., 1993) or it could serve as an argument against the appeal (e.g., feeling a positive emotion like joy could be a counterproductive attribute when advertising a sad movie; Martin et al., 1997). After receiving a persuasive appeal, positive mood can make consumers more confident in their thoughts (Petty & Briñol, 2015) or lead them to correct their attitudes (e.g., if they believe their mood biased their attitudes; Wegener & Petty, 1997). In sum, these examples illustrate why understanding the consumer's state of elaboration is so important

in determining a variable's influence on persuasion. Put simply, no single variable is a "low elaboration" or "high elaboration" variable. Instead, any variable, like mood, can affect persuasion by a different process according to the consumer's state of elaboration.

INSTILLING MORE CONSEQUENTIAL PERSUASION

Thus far we have described the influence of consumer-directed persuasion attempts, whether via ads or WOM, according to the different processes outlined by the ELM. Although persuasion can occur under any level of elaboration, the greater the elaboration that goes into the attitude change, the more consequential the persuasion (see Petty et al., 1995).

The Impact of High Elaboration Attitudes

As people elaborate more on a message, they are more likely to integrate its propositions into their cognitive networks, resulting in greater influence on relevant behaviors in varied contexts. Thus, whereas high elaboration persuasion produces attitude change that is relatively "strong," low elaboration produces attitudes that are relatively "weak," that is, attitudes that are less durable and impactful (Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Luttrell & Sawicki, 2020). For example, WOM with relatively compelling arguments for a product would lead to greater persuasion the more consumers elaborate on the message, because consumers' higher level of elaboration will enable them to recognize the arguments' merits. However, the same message might produce persuasion even if it is not processed carefully if people simply accept it based on the mere number of arguments it contains. If so, the resulting attitude is less likely to persist over time or guide behavior. In fact, when some research suggests that advertisements have relatively weak influence (Shapiro et al., 2021), it is possible that the ads are simply not elaborated upon. Thus, if a marketer can deploy advertising or encourage WOM that is elaborated upon and ensures compelling arguments are offered, the persuasive attempt should have greater durability and impact. Conversely, if ads or WOM produce desired attitude change under low elaboration conditions, the message will likely have to be repeated for it to persist.

Maximizing Elaboration in Ads and WOM

Due to the greater strength of attitudes changed under higher elaboration, it is important to understand when consumers are more or less likely to elaborate on a message. Indeed, when it comes to differences between ads and WOM, this is an area where consumers' *a priori* assumptions and the normative forms of these appeals have significant implications. Of most importance, consumers by and large elaborate less on advertisements than they do word of mouth (e.g., Brown et al., 2007), often going so far as to actively avoid elaborating on advertisements specifically (cf., Baek & Morimoto, 2012). In comparison to ads, WOM sources are often friends whose high personal relevance can increase elaboration (Zhao & Xie, 2011). Even in cases of WOM from anonymous strangers, consumers are intent on identifying potential risks with the purchase, which can increase elaboration (Maslowska et al., 2017). To this effect, marketers often use creative tactics or surprising or unconventional forms of advertising (e.g., "guerrilla advertising") to increase elaboration of their ads (Davenport & Beck,

2001). Alternatively, they might try to identify traditional advertising channels that are more likely to elicit elaboration (Danaher & Dagger, 2013; Aribarg & Schwartz, 2020).

In general, there are six traditional channels through which ads reach consumers: person-to-person selling, public displays, print ads, radio ads, television ads, and internet ads (Teeny, 2025). Notably, each differs in terms of the amount of elaboration consumers are likely to devote to the persuasive appeals within them. For example, if engaged with a salesperson (i.e., person-to-person advertising), norms of conversation generally entail higher elaboration on the message as people need to think about what the communicator is saying before responding (Grice, 1975). In contrast, more static advertisements, like billboards, tend to receive lower elaboration (Wilson & Casper, 2016). Similarly, direct-to-consumer mail tends to receive higher attention than other forms of printed advertisements (e.g., in newspapers; Kojima et al., 2010; Mayer, 1952), because it feels more personally relevant. Interestingly, one of the most prolific channels of advertising, radio (where 80% of Americans aged 12 and over listen in a given week; Pew Research Center, 2023) tends to receive some of the lowest elaboration from its consumers (Riebe & Dawes, 2006; Pedreño-Santos & Garcia-Madariaga, 2022). Because audio is generally regarded as a less dominant form of sensory information (vs. vision; Krishna et al., 2016) and the majority of radio listening (73%) is done in the car, which increases distraction (Richter, 2023), these appeals generally receive lower elaboration. In contrast, consumers generally exhibit greater elaboration on television advertisements due to their more engaging nature (Bronnenberg et al., 2010; Weibel et al., 2019).

Of course, there are factors within these channels that can further impact consumers' elaboration. For example, consistent with work on the primacy effect (cf., Anderson & Barrios, 1961), ads that are earlier in a commercial pod (i.e., the specific period of commercial breaks) receive greater elaboration than ads later in the pod (Li, 2010; Peters & Bijmolt, 1997). Additionally, advertising that uses faster (vs. slower) shifts in video content can generate greater, automatic elaboration (Bolls et al., 2003). As another example, ads placed on the inside (vs. outside) of subway cars tend to receive greater elaboration because the consumer is "captive" and therefore more motivated or able to attend to it (see Spielmann & Richard, 2013). The amount of advertising in a given channel can matter, too, where specific instances of a channel (e.g., a specific website) will result in less elaboration on any one advertisement if there is a greater amount of advertising present overall (Yaveroglu & Donthu, 2008). Understanding these differences between and within advertising channels, then, is not only important for understanding the consumer's ongoing psychological process but also for how to maximize an ad's influence – which is why *personalized persuasion* has become a dominant tactic.

In order to enhance consumers' elaboration of an advertisement or WOM, one of the best approaches is to engage in personalized persuasion, which matches a variable from the message, source, or context to some aspect of the recipient (e.g., a message emphasizing the social benefits of a product for extraverts; see Petty et al., 2025; Teeny et al., 2021). This method for maximizing elaboration is particularly relevant for social media. For example, algorithmically curated ads can highlight product attributes most relevant to a user's browsing history, while influencer endorsements can be strategically deployed to match the consumer's perceived in-group (Teeny, 2025). Similarly, dynamic messaging, such as adjusting tone or framing based on a user's social media behavioral traces (see Matz et al., 2024), can increase elaboration by making the appeal feel more personally relevant. Moreover, social media fosters the kind of dynamic, two-way engagement – through comments, direct messages, or user-generated content – that can prompt consumers to elaborate more deeply on appeals. Given that social

media fosters both ads and WOM within the same digital ecosystem, understanding how personalization shapes elaboration across these formats is critical for enhancing persuasion.

CONCLUSION

Consumer-directed persuasion, whether delivered through advertisements or word of mouth, can be optimized by understanding the interplay of recipient, message, source, and context variables. Through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, we demonstrated how the consumers' extant level of elaboration can shift the influence of these variables – which are also affected at baseline by consumers' *a priori* perceptions about advertisements versus word of mouth. Notably, over time these perceptions will shift, and it will be up to future research to identify how their evolution will affect the persuasion processes we have outlined. For example, understanding how consumers perceive the credibility of AI-generated recommendations or how they elaborate on algorithmic- (vs. human-) curated product assortments will be important for understanding persuasion. Given the increased personalization of digital channels, too, future research could better explore how personalized persuasion might differ in short-term versus long-term influence. Addressing these questions will not only advance scholars' theoretical understanding of persuasion; it will also provide actionable insights for marketers seeking to navigate an increasingly complex consumer landscape.

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