The Role of Attitude Functions in Persuasion and Social Judgment

SHARON SHAVITT
MICHELLE R. NELSON

During the 1950s and 1960s, a class of theories was proposed that was the first to focus attention on the motives or functions that attitudes serve for the individual. These functional theories of attitude held that attitudes serve a variety of purposes important to psychological functioning (Katz, 1960; Katz & Stotland, 1959; Kelman, 1958, 1961; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). Functional theories were the first to recognize attitudes as instrumental constructs designed to serve individuals’ physical, social, and emotional needs.

THE FUNCTIONS OF ATTITUDES

Although different functional labels were used within each theory, the functions that were proposed can be grouped into similar categories (Insko, 1967). Katz (1960) proposed that attitudes serve a knowledge function, helping to organize and structure one’s environment and to provide consistency in one’s frame of reference (see also Smith et al., 1956). All attitudes likely serve this basic function to some extent.

In addition, attitudes likely serve any of a number of other motives. Many attitudes serve a utilitarian function (Katz, 1960; see also Smith et al., 1956), helping to maximize the rewards and minimize the punishments obtained from objects in the environment. Such utilitarian attitudes serve to summarize the outcomes intrinsically associated with objects and to guide behavioral responses that maximize one’s interests. For example, one’s attitude toward ice cream may serve a utilitarian function because it is likely to be based on the rewards (e.g., enjoyable taste) and punishments (e.g., weight gain) associated with ice cream and to guide behavior that maximizes benefits while minimizing costs (e.g., eating low-fat ice cream).

Attitudes also serve an important social role, aiding in one’s self-expression and social interaction. Holding particular attitudes can
serve to foster identification with important reference groups (Kelman, 1958, 1961), to express one’s central values, and to establish one’s identity (Katz, 1960). Moreover, Smith et al. (1956) noted that attitudes mediate our relations with other people through the judicious expression of those attitudes (see also Kelman, 1958, 1961). For instance, one’s attitude toward the death penalty may mediate one’s relations with others because it is likely to be based on what the issue symbolizes and on what the attitude is perceived to express about the self (Tyler & Weber, 1982). This social role of attitudes has been referred to as the social identity function (Shavitt, 1989) and comprises both public identity and private identity motives.

Finally, attitudes can serve to build and maintain self-esteem in a variety of ways. The original functional theories focused on psychodynamic mechanisms by which attitudes support self-esteem, suggesting that attitudes can serve as defense mechanisms for coping with intrapsychic conflict (Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956). The assumption was that attitudes distance the self from threatening out-groups or objects by projecting one’s unacceptable impulses onto them. This analysis was particularly pertinent to the conceptualization of prejudiced attitudes and resulted in important contributions in this domain (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Katz, Sarnoff, & Mcclintock, 1956; Mcclintock, 1958; for a review and critique, see Shavitt, 1989).

Attitudes serve a self-esteem maintenance function in other ways as well. Indeed, recent research has shown that attitudes toward a variety of targets are motivated by their implications for self-assessment (Dunning, 1999; Klein & Kunda, 1993, 1994). For instance, attitudes toward people with whom we affiliate are based in part on their implications for self-enhancing social comparison (Tesser & Campbell, 1983). Attitudes that associate the self with successful groups (e.g., winning sports teams) may be based on their implications for boosting self-esteem through a process of “basking in reflected glory” (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Functional theories have been influential and widely cited in the domain of attitudes and persuasion. In particular, they have offered critical insights into persuasion processes. Functional theories held that in order to change an attitude, it is necessary to know the motivational basis for that attitude. The central principle of these theories is that attitudes that serve different functions will change in response to different types of appeals.

Despite the fundamental importance of this insight, however, this and other functional predictions went largely untested for several years, in part because the theories did not frame these hypotheses in readily testable terms. The lack of an accepted methodology for identifying or manipulating attitude functions meant that these provocative theories lay dormant for a quarter century or more.

Recent Approaches to the Study of Attitude Functions

During recent years, the growing interest in the motivational underpinnings of cognitive and judgment processes has led to a strong resurgence of interest in testing functional predictions. The resulting studies have filled multiple volumes and articles (see Maio & Olson, 2000; Pratkanis, Breckler, & Greenwald, 1989) and greatly expanded our knowledge of both the antecedents and consequences of attitude functions.

As noted earlier, one of the main stumbling blocks to empirical progress in this area had been the lack of methods for operationalizing attitude functions. It is in this area in particular that important advances have been made.
Researchers have employed and validated a variety of approaches to establishing the functions of an attitude. These include assessment of functions through the classification of open-ended responses (e.g., Herek, 1987; Prentice, 1987; Shavitt, 1990), as well as direct assessment of functions through structured questionnaires (e.g., Herek, 1987; see also Lutz, 1981).

Other research has capitalized on personality assessments to operationalize attitude functions, identifying individuals for whom attitudes are typically likely to serve a particular function. Most of these studies have employed the self-monitoring construct (Snyder, 1974) to identify the social functions that individuals’ attitudes are assumed to serve (e.g., DeBono, 1987; DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Lavine & Snyder, 1996; Petty & Wegener, 1998; Snyder & DeBono, 1985).

The focus of this research is on the contrasting aspects of the social identity function. Snyder and DeBono (1985) suggested that high self-monitoring individuals, who strive to fit into various social situations, should tend to form attitudes that guide behavior appropriate to the relevant reference groups in each situation. This, they argued, implies that high self-monitors’ attitudes generally serve to establish their public identity (what Smith et al., 1956, labeled the social adjustment function). By contrast, low self-monitoring individuals, who strive to remain true to their inner values and preferences, should tend to form attitudes that reflect and express their true selves and establish their private identities (what Katz, 1960, labeled the value-expressive function). Research has generally supported these assumptions, suggesting that personality differences tend to predict differences in the functions that one’s attitudes tend to serve.

Direct manipulations of attitude functions have also been developed and validated, involving manipulations of the judgment context. For instance, heightening the salience of function-relevant dimensions prior to an evaluative judgment appears to induce or prime different functional underpinnings for the same attitude (e.g., Maio & Olson, 1995; Shavitt & Fazio, 1991). Indeed, utilitarian, social identity, and self-esteem goals all could underlie attitudes toward social groups, political issues, and many consumer products.

However, not all attitude objects are necessarily multifunctional. Some may be more limited in their functions, and this point has operational implications. Shavitt (1989, 1990) proposed that the purposes or functions that an object can serve should influence the functions that attitudes toward that object will serve, with some objects serving primarily a single type of purpose. For instance, aspirin serves primarily a utilitarian purpose due to the outcomes intrinsically associated with it. Thus, attitudes toward aspirin will typically serve a utilitarian function, guiding behaviors that maximize the rewards and minimize the punishments associated with this product. By contrast, flags primarily serve the social identity purpose of communicating one’s identities and loyalties to others. Thus, attitudes toward flags will primarily serve this same function, guiding behavior designed to express or display this attitude to particular audiences.

By presenting participants with different types of single-function attitude objects to respond to, the functions of their attitudes can be varied experimentally. Such object-based manipulations of attitude functions have been validated in several studies using multiple objects and products (e.g., Nelson, Shavitt, Schennum & Barkmeier, 1997; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt & Fazio, 1991; Shavitt, Lowrey, & Han, 1992).

In sum, a variety of methods have been developed recently for operationalizing functional theories. Direct measures, individual differences, situational variations, and object
variations all have proven useful in testing functional predictions.

CONSEQUENCES OF ATTITUDE FUNCTIONS

Persuasion Consequences

As mentioned earlier, one of the key predictions of functional theory is that messages will be persuasive to the extent that they match the functional underpinnings of the attitude they target. This matching hypothesis, as it has come to be known, has received extensive empirical support across studies using a variety of functional operations and outcome measures (e.g., DeBono, 1987; Prentice, 1987; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt et al., 1992; Snyder & DeBono, 1985, 1987; Spivey, Munson, & Locander, 1983).

For instance, DeBono (1997) showed that persuasive appeals are accepted by high self-monitors to the extent that the appeals address the social adjustive function (e.g., messages about the consensus of their peers). By contrast, appeals are accepted by low self-monitors to the extent that the appeals address the value-expressive function (e.g., messages about the values reflected by the advocated attitude). In the context of advertising, Snyder and DeBono (1985, 1987) showed that high self-monitors respond more favorably to image-oriented ads (social adjustive appeals), whereas low self-monitors respond more favorably to ads about product quality (what Snyder & DeBono called value-expressive appeals).

Shavitt (1990) provided evidence for the matching effect using an object-based method. Participants read advertising appeals about products that were expected primarily to engage either a utilitarian function (e.g., air conditioners, coffees) or a social identity function (e.g., perfumes, greeting cards). For each product, participants read an appeal for a brand advertised with utilitarian arguments stressing product benefits and attributes (e.g., “The delicious, hearty flavor and aroma of Sterling Blend coffee come from a blend of the freshest coffee beans”) and an appeal for a brand advertised with social identity arguments stressing what the product conveys to others (e.g., “The coffee you drink says something about the type of person you are. It can reveal your rare discriminating taste”). Functionally matched ads elicited more favorable attitudes, cognitive responses, and purchase intentions than did mismatching ads. Subsequent research yielded a functional matching effect when participants were asked to write their own ads for utilitarian and social identity products (Shavitt et al., 1992).

Information Processing Consequences

What processes underlie this matching effect? A variety of answers to this question have been offered. Lavine and Snyder (1996) showed that the effect can be mediated by the perception that functionally matched messages are higher in quality. In other words, matched messages may induce favorably biased processing of their content. By contrast, DeBono (1987) suggested that the effect is largely a peripheral process that does not require the processing (or even the presence) of substantive message arguments.

However, several studies (including DeBono, 1987, Study 1) have indicated that functionally matched messages can trigger elaborated processing of message elements. Indeed, this processing can be relatively objective, resulting in counterarguments as well as supportive responses (DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Petty & Wegener, 1998; Shavitt, Swan, Lowrey, & Wänke, 1994). For instance, DeBono and Harnish (1988) demonstrated that an attractive source can stimulate elabo-
rated processing of message arguments among high self-monitoring persons, whereas an expert source can stimulate such processing among low self-monitors. Therefore, high self-monitors agreed with an expert source regardless of the quality of the arguments that he presented (i.e., expertise served as a peripheral cue regarding the merits of the message) but agreed with an attractive source only when he presented strong arguments. By contrast, low self-monitors agreed with an attractive source regardless of argument strength but agreed with an expert source only when he presented strong arguments.

Similarly, Petty and Wegener (1998) showed that matching the substantive content of a message to the attitude function influences the degree of scrutiny that the message receives. Specifically, the attitudes of high and low self-monitors were strongly affected by the strength of message arguments when those arguments matched rather than mismatched the functional basis of their attitudes.

Finally, Shavitt et al. (1994) demonstrated that the attractiveness of endorsers in an ad, a message element that is particularly relevant to social identity goals, is used as a shortcut or cue to product evaluation when utilitarian goals are made salient (and involvement is low), whereas it is scrutinized as relevant information about the image of the product when social identity goals are made salient (and involvement is high). In other words, the attractiveness or unattractiveness of endorsers elicits greater scrutiny and elaboration when their presence is relevant to the functional basis of the attitude.

Implications for Predicting Long-Term Message Effectiveness

If function-relevant material in a message can elicit increased scrutiny, then one might expect thoughts that reflect the by-products of such scrutiny to be more important to persuasion than other thoughts. This would be expected both because such thoughts may reflect more systematic processing and because such thoughts are relevant to the goals associated with one’s attitude. Thus, to the extent that cognitive responses to a message are functionally relevant, those thoughts should also link more closely to one’s attitudes.

Will function-relevant thoughts be more important in predicting attitudes than thoughts that reflect other functional goals? This issue was investigated in the context of a study on long-term advertising effectiveness (Nelson et al., 1997). Long-term effects of a message are particularly important in consumer contexts, where delayed thoughts and attitudes about brands can be critical to the decision-making process. For example, one’s first exposure to an advertisement for a new product...
may trigger cognitive responding but may or may not trigger formation of an attitude toward the brand. Evaluating the brand might not become relevant until, say, one is at the grocery store a week later. At that point, the cognitive responses that one remembers may help to determine one’s judgment.

In a two-session study of advertising effects, Nelson et al. (1997) investigated the role of functionally relevant cognitive responding to an ad in predicting ad persuasiveness, focusing on the functions associated with product categories and personality categories. For instance, it was expected that the relevance of listed thoughts to the function associated with the advertised product would influence the predictiveness of those listed thoughts—perhaps because functionally relevant thoughts reflect more systematic processing than do functionally irrelevant thoughts.

In the first session, participants were shown print advertisements for a number of products varying in the functions they were expected to engage (e.g., utilitarian products such as a toothbrush, social identity products such as flowers, multiple-function products such as mineral water). The product functions were determined by pretesting. The ads employed were for fictitious brands but were designed to appear realistic. Utilitarian and social identity claims were balanced within each ad. Therefore, there was consistency in the type of advertising content used across products and function categories, and participants could focus on any combination of utilitarian claims or social identity claims for any product. After looking at each ad, participants listed their thoughts. A week later, participants returned and reported their attitudes toward the advertised brands and then attempted to recall the thoughts that they had listed during the first session. Finally, participants completed several other measures, including the 25-item Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974).

The results indicated that the types of thoughts that tended to be more predictive of attitudes at a 1-week delay were those that were more relevant to the functional basis of the attitude. Specifically, there was a consistent trend for the predictive value of each thought type to vary with the type of product (see Table 8.1). For utilitarian products, the utilitarian thoughts that one recalled at a delay were significantly more consistent with attitude than were the social identity thoughts that one recalled. The opposite was the case, although not significantly, for social identity products. These findings are consistent with assumptions about the functions associated with these product categories, as the types of thoughts that were predictive corresponded with the ascribed functions of the products.

In addition, interactive effects were found for product and personality, which might be explained in terms of how well the functions of the product correspond to the goals of the individual. In general, the thoughts that low self-monitors listed initially, as well as the thoughts that they recalled (see Table 8.1), were more consistent with their attitudes than were those of high self-monitors. More important, for low self-monitors, recalled utilitarian thoughts were significantly more consistent with attitudes for utilitarian products than with those for social identity products. The reverse was true for high self-monitors, for whom recalled social identity thoughts were significantly more consistent with attitudes for utilitarian products than with those for social identity products. Thus, the responses that participants recalled to an advertisement correlated with persuasion to the extent that the function associated with the responses and with the target product matched the goals of the individual.

These findings suggest that cognitive responses that “match” the functional basis of one’s attitudes may play a more important role.
Role of Attitude Functions

TABLE 8.1 Correlations Between Favorability of Thoughts Recalled at a Delay (Time 2) and Attitude Toward the Brand (Time 2) as a Function of Thought Type, Product Type, and Level of Self-Monitoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Recalled Utilitarian Thoughts</th>
<th>Recalled Social Identity Thoughts</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilitarian product</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-monitoring</td>
<td>.74 (n = 16)**</td>
<td>.50 (n = 14)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High self-monitoring</td>
<td>.33 (n = 16)**</td>
<td>−.30 (n = 17)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>.54 (n = 32)**</td>
<td>.14 (n = 31)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple-function product</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-monitoring</td>
<td>.58 (n = 16)*</td>
<td>.73 (n = 19)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High self-monitoring</td>
<td>.18 (n = 19)*</td>
<td>.15 (n = 17)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>.41 (n = 35)*</td>
<td>.46 (n = 36)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identity product</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-monitoring</td>
<td>.28 (n = 18)</td>
<td>.58 (n = 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High self-monitoring</td>
<td>.38 (n = 12)</td>
<td>.28 (n = 15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTE: Participants who did not provide any thoughts for a given thought type were not included in the relevant thought index analyses.

* \( p < .10 \)

** \( p < .05 \)

A role in persuasion than do other cognitive responses. This makes sense from the functional theory perspective of attitudes as goal-relevant constructs; that is, thoughts that reflect one’s goals matter more than thoughts that do not. It also fits well with research described earlier that showed enhanced processing of function-relevant material. Apparently, the by-products of such processing continue to be important in long-term persuasion.

Implications of Functional Theory for Person Perception

The previous section outlined ways in which the social identity function of attitudes has been investigated from the perspective of the attitude holder—in terms of persuasiveness of appeals and the processing of function-relevant versus function-irrelevant information. However, functional theory also posits
that people often hold or express their attitudes and preferences to communicate something about themselves to other people (Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956). That is, our attitudes toward specific issues, products, or ideas can serve to convey broader information about us to interested parties. To the extent that an attitude serves this social identity function, one would expect it to affect the judgments that observers make about the attitude holder based on their knowledge of that person’s attitude. For example, attitudes about political issues are often communicated to others via badges or bumper stickers—not only conveying information about an individual’s political attitudes but also likely triggering inferences about personality and preferences more generally. Similarly, the type of car one admires might be seen as offering clues to others about one’s personality. These examples demonstrate how the social identity function may implicate person perception processes.

This notion shifts the focus of attention from the attitude holder to the observer and the judgments made by that observer on the basis of attitudinal information. Prior research using conceptual frameworks other than functional theory has demonstrated that observers do make judgments about targets based on knowledge of their attitudes. This is true for attitudes regarding social issues as well as attitudes toward a variety of consumer products, from clothing to supermarket goods (for a review, see Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). Our object-based approach to functional theory makes specific predictions about when person impressions are likely to be informed by targets’ attitudes. We would expect person impressions to be based on attitudes to the extent that the attitude object engages a social identity function. Shavitt and Nelson (2000) tested this hypothesis in a series of studies in the context of attitudes toward a variety of consumer products.

In initial studies, participants were randomly assigned a product in one of three function categories—utilitarian (e.g., aspirin), social identity (e.g., team banner), and multiple function (e.g., sweatshirt)—and were instructed to list words that described the type of person who uses the target product. We expected that, to the extent products engaged attitudes that served a social identity function, they would elicit individuating descriptors of their users, with social identity products eliciting the greatest number of such descriptors and utilitarian products eliciting the least. The words listed by respondents were coded into three categories: (a) personality traits/individuating descriptors (e.g., “flashy”), (b) demographic characteristics (e.g., “old”), and (c) “other” words that did not necessarily describe anything enduring about the target person but tended instead to focus on product-related needs (e.g., “has a headache”).

No differences were observed between product categories in the total number of descriptors listed. However, several differences emerged in the types of descriptors listed (see Figure 8.1). As expected, participants used significantly more personality/individuating descriptors to describe users of social identity or multiple-function products than to describe users of utilitarian products. Conversely, “other” words appeared more often for users of utilitarian products than for users of multiple-function products, and they appeared more often for users of multiple-function products than for users of social identity products. That is, users of social identity products were described primarily in terms of their traits, interests, and activities. By contrast, users of utilitarian products were more likely to be described in terms of their product-related needs. Overall, these results confirmed that product attitudes are likely to elicit individuating person descriptions to the extent that those product attitudes tend to serve a social identity function. In other
words, the attitudes reflected by product use clearly did communicate information about the product users, but some attitudes appeared to communicate substantially more individuating information than did others.

In another study, we examined the influence of product purchase information on judgment of an individual target person (rather than a “type of person”). Respondents were shown a scenario in which they incidentally encountered product purchase information embedded within other information about the person. Participants’ involvement or motivation to form a careful evaluation of the target person was manipulated, as was the functional category of the product the target was purchasing.

In addition, the favorability of the product purchase information in the scenario was manipulated so that the effects of that information would be reflected in differences in the favorability of person judgments. The products employed were (a) utilitarian (fresh-squeezed orange juice [favorable], instant orange drink [unfavorable]) and (b) social identity (fresh flowers [favorable], plastic flowers [unfavorable]). Participants read a scenario in which they imagined themselves encountering the target person in a grocery store and, in the context of conversation, learning that the target intended to purchase one of these items. Similar to the previous studies, after reading the scenario, respondents listed as many words as they could think of to describe the target person. These descriptors were subsequently coded for their favorability.

Results indicated that product purchase information did influence descriptions of a specific target person even though that information was acquired incidentally in the context of other information about the person. Moreover, as in the initial studies, the function associated with the product affected the
impact of the product purchase information. Specifically, as the motivation to form a careful evaluation of the target increased, evaluations of the person became more consistent with the favorability of her social identity purchases and less consistent with the favorability of her utilitarian purchases (see Figure 8.2). This pattern of results suggests that, when seeking to form a careful evaluation of a target person, social identity attitudes are seen as more informative for that evaluation than are utilitarian attitudes.

In summary, perceivers can and will infer individuating information about a person from his or her attitudes. However, the degree to which a given attitude is seen as informative about dispositional characteristics of a target person depends on the functions engaged by the attitude object. Social identity attitudes appear to be perceived as a better, more informative basis for making person judgments than are utilitarian attitudes. These studies suggest that the social identity function has broader implications than considered previously. Indeed, functional theory may offer a useful framework for examining person perception processes.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As reviewed above, functional theories have important implications for the understanding of persuasion, message processing, and person perception. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind some limitations on the perspective that these theories afford. For instance, functional theories rarely address the diverse and cluttered contexts in which attitudes are often formed. Addressing these limitations can help point the way to a productive agenda for future functional theorizing and research. Below, some future directions are proposed that consider the roles of competitive communication contexts and differing cultural contexts in attitude functions.

The Role of Choice and Competition

Functional theories have tended to focus on absolute judgments and the factors that influence them. It is important, however, not to overlook a key aspect of most mass communication situations. Virtually every mass communication context is characterized by a goal-directed choices that people make pertaining to message exposure. Indeed, intense competition for the audience’s attention is a standard feature of mass communication domains, including advertising. Consider that studies have suggested that message factors, such as sexual content, that increase attention may do so at the cost of subsequent comprehension and/or elaboration (e.g., Severn, Belch, & Belch, 1990). One may be tempted to conclude that those attention-getting factors interfere with effective persuasion. However, in a highly competitive and message-dense environment, such as exists for many consumer product categories, attracting attention to one’s advertising is crucial. Indeed, the task of “breaking through the clutter” of other ads is often a more difficult challenge than eliciting favorable responses once attention is paid.

Wells (1993) noted that laboratory research on advertising, in which consistent levels of attention to stimuli are generally assured, has led to a neglect of the factors that drive attention and sometimes to erroneous conclusions. For instance, although highly absorbing television programs have been found to interfere
Figure 8.2. Favorability Index of Descriptions of the Target Person
with processing of the commercial content they carry (e.g., Schumann & Thorson, 1990), this does not mean that less absorbing programs would be better choices for ad placement. In the real-world viewing environment of the home, less absorbing programs fail to hold viewers’ attention, and thus ads placed in those programs may receive little attention or even exposure (see Wells, 1993).

A consideration of these issues can lead to different predictions from those afforded by a functional perspective alone. For instance, the long-term effects of a given message strategy on persuasion likely depend as much on competitors’ actions as on the processing of the focal message. The result is that a communication strategy (e.g., matching the appeal to the functional basis of the attitude) that appears to work in an absolute sense might not work in a competitive atmosphere.

To take just one example, as described earlier, it has been shown that many products engage particular attitudinal functions and that advertising appeals that match the function(s) of the product are more effective than advertisements that do not (Shavitt, 1990). However, in a competitive situation, marketing managers are concerned with finding the appropriate “positioning” for their brand relative to other brands. In this context, differentiation is the key concern, and appealing to a novel goal can be a viable approach.

For instance, although Advil competes in the utilitarian category of painkillers, in which appeals about efficacy and side effects are the norm (see Shavitt et al., 1992), the company recently ran a social identity-focused campaign portraying users as members of the can do “Advil Generation.” Such a novel positioning approach may be effective in “breaking through the clutter” of ads in a product category.

Future research should be conducted to address the impact of functional matching in real-world communication environments, where differentiation from competitors’ functional strategies may be advantageous even when this strategy does not match the product’s primary function. Both the functional match/mismatch of messages about the target and the functional match/mismatch of competitive messages can be examined or manipulated so that interactions can be observed.

Although functionally matched messages have been shown to elicit greater scrutiny in the laboratory (DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Petty & Wegener, 1998), would this effect emerge in a competitive communication environment characterized by many similar messages? Or do functionally mismatched messages elicit greater attention and elaboration than matched messages under such conditions? Does choice of the target brand over competitors’ brands then simply depend on the relative favorability of elaborated thinking elicited by the various messages? Does the perception of a message’s functional match/mismatch change in response to the product’s dominant framing in the competitive communication context (e.g., do products generally advertised as utilitarian tend to be perceived as utilitarian)? Or do other factors, such as individual differences, play a greater role in the functions that one’s attitudes toward a product tend to serve? These are among the questions implied by a focus on the communication context in which messages are placed.

More generally, it is important to keep in mind that the success of any persuasive strategy based on the functional approach often comes down to a question of how the audience members choose to spend their time (attending to your message or another message), their money (buying your brand or another brand), or some other resource (e.g., casting their vote for your candidate or another candidate). Research on attitude functions has been conducted in contexts where attention to stimuli is virtually ensured and information about alternatives is typically omitted. This high-
lights the need for greater attention to the links between attitude functions, absolute judgments, and selections among available alternatives.

The Role of Cultural Differences

Although functional theory offers considerable value for understanding persuasion and behavior in Western cultures, its relevance cross-culturally has not yet been tested. A number of caveats relevant to its cross-cultural application are outlined next, with a view toward identifying productive directions for future research.

The emic approach, which examines culture-specific characteristics from within a single cultural system (Berry, 1969), would argue against the theory’s universal application. First, from a strictly economic view, the categorization of products into social identity and utilitarian functions may assume a certain level of economic development not appropriate everywhere. For example, the social identity function refers to the goal of conveying a particular social image or identity, expressing one’s values, or gaining social approval. The luxury of obtaining goods to communicate aspects of one’s identity might not apply in less developed countries where people are primarily interested in satisfying their basic physiological needs (Samli, 1995). In impoverished nations, consumer needs may be related to food, shelter, or basic clothing and therefore may best be considered utilitarian.

On the other hand, some research suggests that attitudes toward Western brands of various products serve a social identity function in less developed nations (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000). Future studies should therefore examine the strengths and limitations of basing functional assumptions on economic development status. More generally, additional research is needed on attitudes, persuasion, and consumer behavior in developing countries because these countries have been largely overlooked in cultural consumer research (Maheswaran & Shavitt, 2000).

An additional emic argument might question the validity of using an individual’s attitudes and perceptions as explanatory constructs in every culture. In individualist societies such as the United States, personal goals take precedence over the goals of one’s group, and attitudes and perceptions link rather closely to behavior. However, in collectivist societies such as those of the Far East, the group is of greater importance than the individual, and consequently personal goals are secondary to group goals (Triandis, 1995), which means that one’s self-concept and social perceptions are also focused on the group and not on the individual (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991).

Because the cognitive approach focuses on individuals’ perceptual processes and on attempts by individuals to actively seek information, it has been suggested that cognitive approaches in general may be somewhat more relevant in individualist or industrialized societies (Ozanne, Brucks, & Grewal, 1992). It has also been suggested that attitudes themselves are more functional in individualist societies than in collectivist societies (see Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999). In collectivist cultures, people do not “need” attitudes to guide behavior. It is often norms rather than attitudes that drive behaviors in these societies (Bontempo & Rivero, 1992; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). Thus, whereas accessible attitudes have been shown to have functional benefits for easing decision making among U.S. participants (Fazio, Blascovich, & Driscoll, 1992), future research could examine whether accessible attitudes confer similar benefits in collectivist societies.
Indeed, in collectivist cultures, information incongruity (inconsistency in the valence of information presented about a target of judgment) and ambivalence (co-occurring negative and positive emotions or attitudes) appear to be readily tolerated and accepted without a need for resolution (Aaker & Sengupta, 2000; Bagozzi et al., 1999). Moreover, expectations about attitude-behavior consistency are lower in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures (Kashima, Siegel, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992). These findings are consistent with the notion that collectivist cultures place less importance on the opinions and preferences of the individual. Thus, personal attitudes may have less functional value in these societies than in individualist cultures.

On the other hand, the etic approach, which examines culturally general dimensions by comparing attitudes or behaviors across cultures (Berry, 1969), might offer a different view. Those espousing an etic approach might argue that the functional theory of attitudes is applicable across cultures but that the meaning and importance of the functional categories or of the products within them may vary cross-culturally. For example, as discussed earlier, the social identity function has been studied in the United States in terms of how one’s product attitudes may convey individuating information to others about one’s identity or image. However, in collectivist cultures, where the group is the relevant unit of identity, the product attitude may instead convey information about group identity or image. Do social identity appeals in collectivist cultures tend to use group identity rather than individual identity themes? If so, to what degree are such culturally relevant appeals effective? Future research could be profitably directed toward such questions.

Similarly, the utilitarian benefits that matter in collectivist societies may be those that accrue to the collectivity and not necessarily to the individual. Indeed, studies of the advertisements that are used or that are persuasive in collectivist societies show that ads stressing in-group and family benefits are typically preferred over those stressing benefits to the individual (Han & Shavitt 1994; Zhang & Gelb, 1996).

In addition, the implications of products for achieving a given functional goal might vary by culture. For example, in horizontally based (“same self”) individualist cultures such as Scandinavia and Australia, it is important not to be conspicuous among other people (Triandis, 1995). Therefore, the public display of wealth or status so useful for achieving social identity goals in the United States is frowned on. For example, in Denmark and Norway, there is an ingrained social modesty clause that reminds individuals not to think they are better than anyone else. In such societies, products may help to establish a desired social identity to the extent that they reflect such values. In a study of values and consumer behavior in Denmark (Nelson, 1997), one informant said that when rich people buy nice cars as a way to display their success, “people don’t like it and you don’t have friends” (p. 179). This is not the same admiration most Americans feel when they see a BMW.

Finally, how products are functionally categorized is likely dependent on historical, economic, and social values within a culture. Studies could be conducted to determine whether the nature of products preferred for their social identity benefits differs across cultures. For example, a refrigerator might be considered a utilitarian good in Western developed cultures but may be regarded as a sign of wealth or status (and thus a social identity product) in less developed cultures. Also, individuals in collectivist cultures may assign greater social identity significance to products that are effective in conveying a desired group or relational identity (e.g., team banners, wedding rings) as opposed to products that convey a desired personal identity (e.g., fountain
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CONCLUSIONS

The recent resurgence of interest in functional theories of attitude has opened new theoretical avenues and suggested new applications as well. In this chapter, we have illustrated some of the ways in which a functional approach offers considerable heuristic value. It should be recognized that functional theory offers implications not only for the study of persuasion but also for the understanding of other social processes, including person perception.

It is recommended that future research on the role of attitude functions in message processing reexamine functional predictions in light of the realities associated with competitive media environments. A systematic approach to the role of culture in the application of the theory would also be very useful. Research in these areas would substantially expand the value of functional theory for understanding the motivational underpinnings of social judgments.

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