

# The strategic use of attitudinal ambivalence in self-presentation



Vincent Pillaud<sup>1</sup>, Nicoletta Cavazza<sup>2</sup>,  
Catherine Brandner<sup>1</sup> & Fabrizio Butera<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Lausanne, Switzerland

<sup>2</sup> University of Modena-Reggio Emilia, Italy

Contact: [vincent.pillaud@unil.ch](mailto:vincent.pillaud@unil.ch)

## The strategic use of attitudinal ambivalence

Attitudinal ambivalence occurs when people hold both positive and negative evaluations simultaneously on the same topic. Although a great deal of research has described it as a weakness (e.g. Petty & Krosnick, 1995), recent research by Cavazza & Butera (2008) has shown that attitudinal ambivalence may be used to adapt in social influence situations. Indeed, these authors showed that attitudinal ambivalence allows to show agreement with a relevant source of influence at a manifest level, without truly changing one's opinions. Such results led us to the hypothesis that (a) individuals can exert some control over the expression of attitudinal ambivalence and that (b) this control is exerted in order to achieve social desirability.

## Measures, paradigm and hypotheses

### Felt Ambivalence, (Priester & Petty, 1996):

With regard to genetically modified food (GMF):

- I feel conflicted
- I feel undecided
- I have no hesitation (reversed)

### Potential Ambivalence (Bell, Esses & Maio, 1996):

- **First**, list the adjectives / emotions (out of 10) that come to your mind when you think of GMF.

- **Then**, assign a valence from -3 (extremely negative) to +3 (extremely positive) to each listed adjective / emotion.

Score of attitudinal ambivalence =  $P + N - 2 | P - N | + 30$

(P = the absolute value of the positive dimension score, N = the absolute value of the negative dimension score; see Bell et al., 1996).

Both scores of ambivalence have been normalized for the two studies.

### Self-presentation Paradigm (Jellison & Green, 1981):

- 1 Standard measure
- 2 Self-enhancement : answer in order to be **positively** evaluated
- 3 Self-depreciation : answer in order to be **negatively** evaluated

### Operational hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested through the following planned contrast:  
1 (Standard) 1 (Self-enhancement) -2 (Self-depreciation).

(a) If participants display different ambivalence scores under Self-enhancement and Self-depreciation, then they can exert some control over the expression of attitudinal ambivalence.

(b) If participants display under Self-enhancement and Standard equally higher scores than under Self-depreciation, then it may be inferred that control is exerted in order to achieve social desirability.

## Study 1

### Participants

523 participants (343 females and 180 males) with a mean age of 23.76 years ( $SD = 4.85$ ) from the University of Lausanne. We have used Limesurvey v1.72 to collect the data. The self-presentation conditions were set as a **within-participants** variable. We collected both adjectives and emotions for the measure of potential ambivalence.

### Results

For Felt ambivalence :  $F(1, 371) = 9.84, p = .002$

For Potential ambivalence (adjectives) :  $F(1, 150) = 18.28, p < .001$

For Potential ambivalence (emotions) :  $F(1, 150) = 15.62, p < .001$

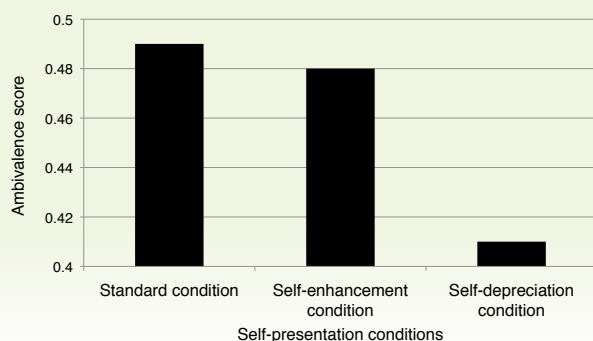


Figure 1. Ambivalence score as a function of self-presentation conditions. The depicted example refers to the felt ambivalence score, but the three scores follow the same pattern.

## Study 2

### Participants

106 participants (79 females and 22 males, 5 did not report it) with a mean age of 21.77 years ( $SD = 5.60$ ) from the University of Lausanne. The self-presentation conditions were set as a **between-participants** variable. We collected both adjectives and emotions for the measure of potential ambivalence.

### Results

For Felt ambivalence :  $F(1, 44) = 4.89, p = .032$

For Potential ambivalence (adjectives) :  $F(1, 27) = 17.69, p = .001$

For Potential ambivalence (emotions) :  $F(1, 32) = 7.47, p = .01$

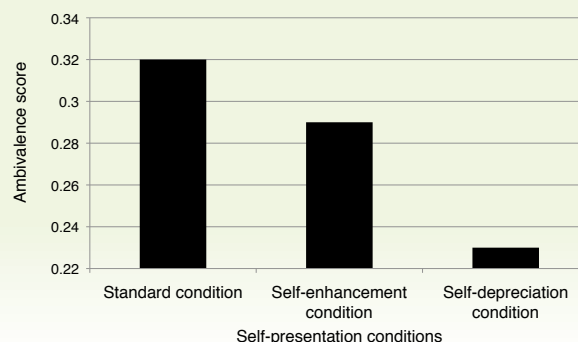


Figure 2. Ambivalence score as a function of self-presentation conditions. The depicted example refers to the potential ambivalence score (adjectives), but the three scores follow the same pattern.

## Discussion

Both studies showed that answers in the self-enhancement condition significantly differed from those provided in the self-depreciation condition, suggesting that indeed participants were able to strategically control the expression of attitudinal ambivalence, but did not differ from those provided in the standard condition. The latter suggests that indeed ambivalence is expressed by default with a self-enhancement purpose (social desirability).

**These results contribute to the contention that attitudinal ambivalence may serve an adaptive function, as individuals appear to be able to strategically control the expression of ambivalence with a view to achieving social desirability.**

## References

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