

Integrating conflicting information from multiple texts: Effects of prior attitudes and text format

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Integrating Conflicting Information from Multiple Texts: Effects of Prior Attitudes and Text Format

Problem statement

What is the influence of **prior attitudes** on the integration of conflicting information, and does this differ for **text format** (linear vs. nonlinear)?

Method

- Participants (117 Dutch pre-university students aged 15-18 years) read multiple texts (about 3000 words) on the relationship between violent videogames and aggression. Texts were presented on a computer screen in either a linear format (to be read from top-to-bottom) or in a nonlinear format (including hyperlinks), and included conflicting information (balanced positive/negative). A between-subjects design was used.
- Participants were asked to read the materials and write a short text on the topic. As a global measure of integration, these texts were scored on **perspective** (ambiguous, tentative, one-sided) and **position** (positive, negative, neutral) taken by the participant. As such, we could assess the extent to which participants acknowledged the ambiguity of the information in the texts – and thus acquired a clear overview of the debate – as well as the influence of their prior attitudes.

Perspective

Ambiguous	Two-sided; No or a neutral conclusion in the text
Tentative	Two-sided, but author draws conclusion in favour of one side of the debate
One-sided	Author discusses only one side or uses the other side solely to refute it

Preliminary results

- Students with more positive attitudes were significantly more likely to write tentative or one-sided texts;
- But: Boys were significantly more likely to write one-sided texts than girls, who were more likely to write ambiguous texts (i.e., a significant **gender effect**);
- Students with more positive attitudes were significantly more likely to express a favourable position toward violent videogames in their texts;
- Thus, (strong) prior attitudes appear to hamper integration.
- But: There were **no significant effects of text format** on global integration.

Further analyses

More fine-grained analyses on the level of idea units are carried out momentarily. Information in participants' written texts is coded as borrowed, added, or transformed. In addition, an eye-tracking study using the same tasks and materials is carried out to see how participants process information that is inconsistent with their prior attitudes (e.g., do they ignore it?).

Questions for round-table discussion

- How to interpret the significant effects of gender? Is it really a unique predictor or simply a result of the overrepresentation of boys with more favourable prior attitudes?
- What are alternative ways to study and measure integration of conflicting information?

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