The Effectiveness of Weight Management Influence Messages in Romantic Relationships

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The Effectiveness of Weight Management Influence Messages in Romantic Relationships

Charee Mooney Thompson, Lynsey Kluever Romo, & René M. Dailey

This study assessed the effectiveness of weight management conversations reported by participants (n = 158) using Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, and Kinney’s (1997) three influence dimensions: explicitness, dominance, and reasoning. In addition, the study assessed the potential mediating roles of politeness and resistance. Results showed that dominance was related to effectiveness, and that both politeness and resistance mediated this relationship. Reasoning was indirectly related to effectiveness through politeness. Overall, findings suggest that if romantic partners want to influence one another to enact healthy behaviors, they should address face needs, give reasons for their requests, and refrain from being dominating or too forceful.

Keywords: Interpersonal Influence; Romantic Partners; Weight Management

Although the majority of Americans struggle to manage their weight (Flegal et al., 2010), romantic partners can play an important role in influencing one another’s efforts by being supportive (e.g., Novak & Webster, 2011), controlling one another’s health-related behaviors (e.g., Tucker & Mueller, 2000), and showing warmth while pushing the other to enact healthy behaviors (e.g., Dailey, Richards, & Romo, 2010).
While studies have assessed general patterns of communication (e.g., over the course of the previous month; Dailey et al., 2010) or general characteristics of communication (e.g., categorizing messages as positive or negative; Tucker & Anders, 2001), little is known about romantic partners’ specific weight management conversations or features of them that determine their effectiveness. Thus, the goal of this study is to fill this gap in the literature by testing a model in which the relationship between an influence attempt’s explicitness, dominance, and rationale and its effectiveness is mediated by the source’s politeness and the target’s resistance.

Influence Dimensions and Effectiveness in Couples’ Weight Management Conversations

Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, and Kinney (1997) suggest people judge the extent to which messages are influential based on three dimensions: dominance (i.e., degree to which the source bids for power), argument or reasoning (i.e., degree of rationale provided), and explicitness (i.e., degree to which message source’s goals are transparent). Dominance in influence attempts is less likely to be perceived as legitimate and polite (Dillard & Kinney, 1994; Dillard et al., 1997). Further, message sources are perceived as less friendly and pleasant (i.e., less polite) the more they use controlling language (Miller, Lane, Deatrick, Young, & Potts, 2007). Conversely, dominance likely has a positive relationship with resistance, as dominant influence attempts are perceived to interfere with the target’s goals (Dillard & Kinney, 1994) and are related to targets’ thoughts about the obstacles and costs of engaging in the suggested behavior (Carson, 2005; Dillard, Kinney, & Cruz, 1996). Next, research has confirmed that when partners explain why the other should comply, partners are perceived as more polite (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Dillard et al., 1997). Importantly, when an influence attempt is framed in terms of its health benefits, individuals’ behavioral intentions increase as the number of reasons increases (McCormick & McElroy, 2009). Conversely, research suggests providing a rationale “softens perceptions of intrusiveness” and would therefore result in less resistance and negative affect (Dillard & Shen, 2005, p. 163; Dillard et al., 1997). Carson (2005) found argument levels of health-related social control were positively related to individuals’ reported feelings regarding content (regarded as positive), which reactance theory would suggest decreases resistance. Last, research concerning the effectiveness of explicitness suggests mixed results. On one hand, both quality (i.e., messages that are specific, particular, and require little guesswork) and frequency of health-related influence attempts are related to greater behavioral intentions (Miller et al., 2007) and more health-enhancing behaviors (Lewis & Butterfield, 2007). On the other hand, some health and safety studies have found that individuals who are more explicit about their influence intentions are less likely to be persuasive (cf. Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voulodakis, 2002). Further, explicit requests are viewed as requiring more effort from and creating obstacles for the target (Dillard et al., 1996), which may result in greater resistance. Ultimately, the relationship between explicitness and effectiveness, politeness, and resistance remains unclear. Based on the preceding
reasoning, we pose the following hypotheses and research questions concerning the relationships between the influence dimensions and effectiveness, as well as influence dimensions and the mediators of politeness and resistance: *In weight management influence attempts...*

**H1:** (a) Dominance is negatively related to perceived effectiveness, and (b) reasoning is positively related to perceived effectiveness.

**RQ1:** How is explicitness related to perceived effectiveness?

**H2:** (a) Dominance is negatively related to perceived politeness, and (b) reasoning is positively related to perceived politeness.

**RQ2:** How is explicitness related to perceived politeness?

**H3:** (a) Dominance is positively related to resistance, and (b) reasoning is negatively related to resistance.

**RQ3:** How is explicitness related to resistance?

Although the purpose of Politeness Theory is not to explain the effectiveness of messages, an implication of using more polite messages is that one can be more successful in interactions such as influence attempts. Also, undergirding politeness is appropriateness—the appropriateness of the message given the type of face threats and context (see Trees & Manusov, 1998). Accordingly, if an individual’s influence attempt regarding weight management is perceived as appropriate, the partner may be more receptive to comply. Given this reasoning, the following hypotheses are added: *In weight management influence attempts...*

**H4:** Perceived politeness is positively related to perceived effectiveness.

**H5:** Politeness mediates the relationships between the influence dimensions and perceived effectiveness.

Additionally, resistance or reactance likely decreases the effectiveness of an influence attempt, as resistance is negatively related to attitude change or behavioral intentions.

![Figure 1 Hypothesized Model.](image)
In weight management context, individuals’ resistance to influence attempts likely reflects an opposition to or disagreement with their partner’s viewpoint. As such, they are less likely to comply. Further, we also propose that resistance at least partially mediates the relationships between the influence dimensions and the perceived effectiveness of the partner’s influence attempt:

**H6**: Resistance is negatively related to perceived effectiveness.

**H7**: Resistance mediates the relationships between the influence dimensions and perceived effectiveness.

A model summarizing the hypotheses and research questions is provided in Figure 1.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 158 participants from a medium-sized Southwestern city. Participants included 93 couples from a larger study; of these couples, both partners’ data from 65 couples and one partner’s data from 28 couples were used for the current analyses. Participants were recruited through postings on neighborhood listservs, the city’s local Craigslist website, a mention in the fitness column of the city’s major newspaper, a listing in a local church bulletin, flyers in local establishments, and snowball sampling. Each participant was given a $15 grocery store or Amazon.com gift card for their participation.

The sample was fairly evenly divided between men ($n = 78, 49.4\%$) and women ($n = 80, 50.6\%$), with their ages ranging from 24 to 69 years ($M = 39.80, SD = 9.98$). Participants were largely White/Caucasian (74.7\%); other ethnicities included Asian or Pacific Islander (14.6\%), Black or African-American (3.8\%), Hispanic or Latino/a (1.9\%), and multiple or other ethnicities (5.1\%). Most (77.8\%) were in married or long-term relationships, 15 were engaged, 16 were dating, and four described their current relational status as “other.” Couples’ relationship length ranged from 1.17 to 45 years ($M = 11.10, SD = 8.89$). Individuals reported that their household income (combined with their partner) ranged from less than $20,000 ($n = 1$) to more than $100,000 ($n = 40$); the median income was between $80,000 and $100,000.¹ Participants’ body mass indexes or BMIs (weight in pounds $\times 703/\text{height in inches}^2$) ranged from 17.71 to 71.32 ($M = 26.69, SD = 6.81$), and the 65 partners’ BMIs were substantially correlated ($r = .51, p < .001$).

**Procedures and Measures**

Participants were asked to recall a recent conversation that reflected a typical influence interaction about weight management and to describe what led up to the interaction, as well as the script of the conversation (i.e., I said . . ., s/he said . . .). Weight management was defined to participants as the regulation of individuals’ weight or body size, including issues related to weight, body size and image, and eating and

¹ Median income was between $80,000 and $100,000.
exercise habits. These conversations were typically short, averaging 4.29 turns ($SD = 2.61$, range = 1 to 13), where turns were based on speaking exchanges provided in the scripts. The focal weight management issues were: diet ($n = 86$, 48.9%), exercise ($n = 53$, 30.1%), weight/body size ($n = 26$, 14.8%), and health ($n = 11$, 6.3%).

Next, participants completed measures of their partner’s effectiveness in getting them to enact healthier behaviors, as well as perceptions of their partner’s politeness. Conversations were coded for the three influence dimensions and the partner’s resistance. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all measures and coded variables based on these conversations can be found in Table 1. For coded variables, two of the three authors (hereafter referred to as coders) independently coded conversations. Cronbach’s alpha was used to assess reliability.

**Influence Dimensions.** Using the Dillard et al. (1997) dimensions of influence strategies, the coders rated each conversation for explicitness, dominance, and reasoning. Explicitness refers to the degree of transparency in the partner’s attempt; dominance is the forcefulness of the attempt; and reasoning is the amount (i.e., quantity) of elaboration the partner used. We followed the rating procedure used by Dillard et al. (1997), by which each dimension was rated on a 5-point scale. For explicitness, 1 = very inexplicit, 3 = neutral, and 5 = very explicit; for dominance, 1 = very submissive, 3 = neutral, and 5 = very dominant; and for argument, 1 = no logic, 3 = some logic, and 5 = a lot of logic. The conversations were unitized by turn, and each turn was coded for the influence dimensions. If individuals had multiple turns, their ratings across the turns were averaged into an overall score for the conversation. Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the three dimensions was acceptable: Explicitness had $\alpha = .74$, dominance had $\alpha = .65$, and argument had $\alpha = .82$. Sample conversations to illustrate dimensions can be found in Table 2.

**Resistance.** In addition to analyzing the source’s (partner’s) influence strategy and its characteristics, coders also rated the extent to which the participant resisted the influence attempt. Resistance was operationalized as the extent to which the participant refused to engage in, provided counterarguments against, or negated the suggested weight management behavior. Targets’ responses to the influence attempt were rated on a range from 1 (no resistance) to 5 (high resistance). Reliability was high ($\alpha = .89$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Explicitness</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dominance</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reasoning</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Politeness</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resistance</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Effectiveness</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Significance indicated by ‘$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.**
Table 2  Example Influence Messages Within Conversations and Influence Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversations (influence messages boldfaced)</th>
<th>Explicitness: 1 = very inexplicit, 3 = neutral, and 5 = very explicit</th>
<th>Dominance: 1 = very submissive, 3 = neutral, and 5 = very dominant</th>
<th>Reasoning: 1 = no logic, 3 = some logic, and 5 = a lot of logic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example Conversation 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: You look great. You’ve lost a lot of weight since having a baby.</td>
<td>4.5 3 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: But my tummy still isn’t flat and I don’t think I look as good.</td>
<td>3.5 3.5 3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: I think you look great. You’re doing a great job going on a walk everyday. I can tell a difference from that. Have you been doing any sit-ups?</td>
<td>5 4.5 2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: No.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: I think that might really help your tummy, you should do them.</td>
<td>5 4.5 2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example Conversation 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: Didn’t you already have a Poptart?</td>
<td>2 4 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: Yes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: Are you going to have some chips too?</td>
<td>2 4 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: Yes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: What is your weight?</td>
<td>1.5 3.5 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: I dunno 202-204 maybe.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: Have you given up getting to 180?</td>
<td>3 4 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: I don’t know, why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: I am afraid you are going to gain back weight.</td>
<td>4.5 3.5 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: (Said nothing.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example Conversation 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: I feel chunks.</td>
<td>5 4 2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: Oh, you should go to the gym. That will help.</td>
<td>5 4 2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Politeness. Politeness was assessed unidimensionally (e.g., Dillard et al., 1997; Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2011) using a modified version of Trees and Manusov’s (1998) scale that was completed by the partner being persuaded (i.e., target of the influence attempt). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from not at all (1) to very (7), and included items such as “How concerned was your partner about your feelings?” A confirmatory factor analysis showed good fit, \( \chi^2 (df = 9) = 13.76, \ p = .131, \ CMIN/df = 1.53, \) comparative fit index (CFI) = .99, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, but the second negative politeness item did not significantly load on the latent factor of politeness and was dropped. The remaining five items had a reliability of .85. Specific items used can be obtained from the first author.

Conversation effectiveness. Participants were asked to rate (one item on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from not at all effective to very effective) the extent to which their partner was effective in getting them to enact the weight management behavior based on the conversation reported. Measures with one or few items are not uncommon in health and persuasion research (see, e.g., the studies reviewed in Dillard et al., 2007; Dillard & Shen, 2005; Miller et al., 2007).

Results

Because much of the data included reports from both partners, we analyzed the correlations between partners’ responses for all of the variables. However, none of the
within-dyad correlations was significant ($r_s < .13, p_s > .224$). As such, we included both partners’ reports in our analyses as their responses were not interdependent.

Before assessing the hypothesized model, we first explored the relationships between the influence dimensions and effectiveness. Because the predictor variables are conceptually related (Dillard et al., 1997), effectiveness was simultaneously regressed onto dominance, argument, and explicitness. Together, dominance, reasoning, and explicitness explained a significant portion of the variability in effectiveness, $F(3, 151) = 4.00, p < .01, R^2_{adj} = .06$. Only dominance, however, significantly predicted effectiveness, $\beta = - .58, p < .01$; reasoning, $\beta = .25, p = .12$, and explicitness, $\beta = .08, p = .53$, were not significant. Thus, H1a was supported, and reasoning (H1b) and explicitness (RQ1) were unrelated to effectiveness. Next, a path model was used to test the remaining hypotheses (H2–H7) and research questions (RQ2 and RQ3) concerning the role of politeness and resistance as mediators of the relationship between the influence dimensions and effectiveness. The path model showed good fit, $\chi^2(df = 3) = 2.82, p = 1.00$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .03 without further alterations. The model with standardized parameter estimates can be found in Figure 2. Total, direct, and indirect effects on effectiveness, as well as their significance, can be found in Table 3.

**Politeness as a Mediator.** As predicted, the path from dominance to politeness was significantly negative ($- .27, p < .01$), and the path from reasoning to politeness was significantly positive ($.17, p < .05$). The path from explicitness to politeness was .13 ($p = .12$). Thus, H2a and H2b were supported, but explicitness was not significantly related to politeness (RQ2). Next, Hypothesis 4 was confirmed; politeness was positively related to effectiveness ($\beta = .43, p < .001$). Though resistance was not significantly related to effectiveness, its significant relationship with politeness prompted us to assess the indirect effect of reasoning on effectiveness through politeness. As shown in Figure 2, the path between dominance and effectiveness is nonsignificant.
when politeness and resistance are included in the model ($\beta = -0.08$; $p = .26$). Specifically, the indirect effect of dominance on effectiveness through politeness is $-0.12$, and a Sobel test confirmed that politeness mediated the relationship between dominance and effectiveness ($z = -3.12$, $p < .01$), as well as the relationship between reasoning and effectiveness ($z = 2.07$, $p < .05$). Thus, H5 was mostly supported.

**Resistance as a Mediator.** The standardized estimate for the path from dominance to resistance was $0.21$ ($p < .05$), from reasoning to resistance was $0.04$ ($p = .68$), and from explicitness to politeness was $0.13$ ($p = .12$). Thus, H3a was supported, H3b was not supported, and explicitness was not significantly related to politeness (RQ3). Supporting H6, resistance was negatively related to effectiveness ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < .01$). The model shows that resistance also mediated the relationship between dominance and effectiveness. Specifically, the effect of dominance on effectiveness through resistance is $-0.04$, and a Sobel test confirmed that resistance mediates the relationship between dominance and effectiveness ($z = -2.01$, $p < .05$). Thus, H7 was partially supported.

To summarize the relative contributions of both mediators to the relationship between dominance and effectiveness, the indirect effect of dominance on effectiveness via politeness was $-0.12$, and its indirect effect via resistance was $-0.04$ (Table 3). Thus, dominance has an overall negative indirect effect ($-0.16$) on effectiveness, mostly because of decreased perceptions of politeness.5

**Discussion**

Our primary goal was to understand how specific features of weight management conversations (un)succesfully motivate romantic partners to enact healthy behaviors. Similar to past research (e.g., Dillard et al., 1997; Dillard & Kinney, 1994), we found that the more power or coercion individuals perceive their partners use, the less effective they perceive the partner’s influence to be. Specifically, the use
of dominance was negatively related to effectiveness, and this relationship was mediated by both politeness and resistance. From a politeness standpoint, participants may have viewed dominant influence attempts as threatening negative face by limiting their options while pressuring them to act in a certain way. Or, individuals may have perceived dominant influence attempts as criticisms of their weight and health behaviors, thus threatening positive face. Other health influence research suggests that dominant influence attempts may lack the positivity (Tucker & Anders, 2001) or validation (Dailey et al., 2010) essential for effective communication about weight management. Concerning resistance as a mediator of the relationship between dominance and effectiveness, the more resistant the partner, the less effective the influence attempt. Indeed, when individuals use negative social control to influence their partners’ health behaviors, partners may be less likely to comply and more likely to hide the unhealthy behavior or do the opposite of the desired behavior (Tucker & Anders, 2001; Tucker, Orlando, Elliott, & Klein, 2006). Another way to interpret these findings is that effective conversations may be denoted by little resistance. People who are more resistant may not want to change their behaviors, and thus would reject their partner’s influence.

Reasoning, the degree of rationale provided to the partner for enacting healthier weight management behaviors, indirectly contributed to effectiveness through politeness. This suggests that targets perceive their face needs are addressed when sources provide support or rationale for the influence attempt. In other words, targets may appreciate that sources realize that the influence attempt threatens their autonomy or validation. Providing reasons why one should eat less or exercise more, for example, may show partners respect and equality (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Dillard et al., 1997). Also, providing a rationale may make partners’ requests seem more manageable or reasonable (Brown & Levinson, 1987), as well as competent (Schrader, 1999).

Interestingly, explicitness was not related to resistance, politeness, or effectiveness, suggesting that being straightforward in a request does not necessarily mean one is perceived to be more or less effective. As Dillard and colleagues (2004, 2005) argued, the impact of explicit messages may be context dependent. That is, individuals expect, and thus permit, close others to be more direct (Dillard et al., 1997). At the same time, the sensitive nature of conversations about weight may push partners to influence each other in more indirect ways. These findings provide further rationale to understand how explicit messages are perceived and thus related to health and other-related outcomes.

Although this study provides insight into what makes romantic partners’ influence attempts regarding weight management more or less effective, certain limitations should be noted. First, although we asked participants to report on a typical conversation, analyses based on multiple weight management conversations would increase the validity of the findings. In addition, we employed written reports of recalled conversations, whereas observing and coding weight management interactions would likely yield more nuances in terms of the influence dimensions. In terms of the sample, the average BMI bordered normal and overweight, which is representative of the participants’ city, but does not reflect the American public. More diverse samples would augment the findings of the current study. Last, to reduce the risk of fatigue effects in the larger study, the measures provided by the participants
(i.e., politeness and effectiveness) were short. The one-item measure of effectiveness should be bolstered in future research. In addition, more sophisticated measures of the variables assessed and obtaining participants’ perspectives of the influence dimensions would substantiate the current study.

Notes

[1] If both partners in the couple participated and their responses for relationship length differed, the two lengths were averaged and calculated into the average. If both partners’ responses for income differed, the higher income reported was used.

[2] In addition to the influence dimensions and resistance, two of the authors coded the conversations for descriptive information about the conversations: conversational turns and the focal weight management issue. The kappa for conversational turns was .86 (88.0% agreement). The kappa for weight management issue was .88 (92.1% agreement). When conversations included multiple issues the authors coded for the issue that prompted the conversation.

[3] A covariance matrix was constructed and used as input to AMOS 19.0 in order to estimate parameters using maximum likelihood procedures. Because the influence dimensions are conceptually related (Dillard et al., 1997), correlations between explicitness, dominance, and reasoning were freely estimated. In addition, because paths from explicitness and reasoning to effectiveness were not significant, we removed these paths before assessing the hypothesized model and mediation of these relationships was not assessed. However, we retained the path from dominance to effectiveness so we could determine whether this relationship was mediated by politeness and resistance. Four fit indices were used to assess the model’s fit, and guidelines for fit indices were chosen a priori. Specifically, the model’s chi-squared value (CMIN) should not be significant; the model’s comparative fit index (CFI) should exceed .95; and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), as well as the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), should not exceed .08. In order to estimate indirect effects, as well as their significance, 95% bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were used with 5000 samples (see Hayes, 2009).

[4] In order to rule out other plausible explanations we tested two additional structural models: one to include a path from politeness to resistance, and another in which effectiveness was the mediator and politeness and resistance were the outcomes. For the first alternative model, the path from politeness to resistance was not significant ($\beta = - .13, p = .09$). For the second model, the influence dimensions predicted effectiveness, which in turn predicted politeness and resistance. This model showed relatively poor fit, $\chi^2 (df = 7) = 16.09, p < .02$, CFI = .88, RMSEA = .09, and SRMR = .06.

[5] Interestingly, because the two mediators in the present study (i.e., politeness and resistance) have opposite effects, they essentially “cancel each other out” (Hayes, 2009). Dominance increases resistance but decreases politeness, and the two mediators have opposing effects on effectiveness. This phenomenon explains why the total effect of dominance on effectiveness was not significant ($\beta = - .08, p = .26$), even though the overall indirect effects of dominance are significantly negative (when both mediators are considered separately and together).

References


