Self-effects

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Self-effects are effects of messages on the senders or creators of messages themselves. Research on self-effects spans various theoretical and methodological backgrounds, including political deliberation, empirical psychology, and psychotherapy. In political communication, these effects mostly relate to the question how expressing opinions affects cognitions, emotions, and behaviors towards politics. There is ample evidence that self-effects play a vital role in the formation of political attitudes and affect political participation. With structural societal changes and a proliferation of social media, self-effects have become more likely and deserve to be studied more intensively. This entry defines self-effects, provides an overview of relevant research strands, offers theoretical explanations, and suggests promising areas for future research.

Self-effects, Expression effects, Media effects, Political deliberation, Political discussion, Social media

Media effects research predominantly focuses on message reception, examining how different messages and media content influence their recipients. Self-effects, on the other hand, describe effects of messages on the senders or creators of messages themselves (Valkenburg, 2017). It is the idea that putting thoughts into words, expressing opinions, discussing with others, or even only presenting parts of our (political) identities, shapes what we think, feel, and ultimately do. Situations in which self-effects occur range from interpersonal discussions with friends and family to expressing political attitudes at rallies or engaging in online discussions with strangers. This entry focuses on self-effects in political communication, e.g., how expressing political opinions impacts cognitions, emotions, or behaviors related to political topics, politicians, parties, or processes.

Compared to reception effects, self-effects are severely understudied. Pingree (2007) was one of the first to introduce self-effects to communication studies, labelled "expression effects". However, his observation that we have "largely missed half of the story of communication effects" (Pingree, 2007, p. 457) still holds true. In the past years, social media has revitalized the relevance of self-effects. The affordances of these media technologies and the associated cultural practices greatly facilitate self-expression and self-presentation (Winter et al., 2022). Consequently, self-effects are particularly prominent in social media and are likely stronger than in other settings due to increased public exposure and immediate feedback from a larger audience (Valkenburg, 2017). However, while research on self-effects has grown in recent years, numerous questions remain open (Carr et al., 2021).

Self-effects in different fields

The idea of self-effects spans various disciplines and research strands. Valkenburg (2017) distinguishes four areas where self-effects have been studied. First, the political deliberation paradigm "focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting" (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). It asks how discussions about politics contribute to democratic understanding and participation. In this area, Pingree (2007) proposed self-effects as mechanisms that explain the effects of deliberation above persuasion and learning from other's contributions in a conversation.

Second and third, research in the paradigms of self-persuasion and self-concept change deals less with back-and-forth discussions with others in groups and focuses more on the individual psychological effects of opinion expression (Valkenburg, 2017). Studies in self-persuasion found that people who were instructed to argue for a certain position later accepted this position more and shifted their attitudes accordingly (Aronson, 1999). Research on self-

concept change, on the other hand, refers more specifically to attitudes and cognitions towards the self, i.e., how people see themselves and the traits they possess (Valkenburg, 2017). Here, the process of internalization is key, understood as "the act of bringing one's private concept of self into agreement with one's recent behavior" (Tice, 1992, p. 435).

Lastly, self-effects have been studied under the expressive writing paradigm from psychotherapy. It deals with the effects of long, personal, and deep writing sessions on mental and physical well-being, but not with directional changes in self-concepts (Valkenburg, 2017). Research shows that writing about traumatic experiences and the associated emotions for extended periods of time increases well-being and can therefore help with overcoming even severe trauma and psychological disorders (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Since this research strand does not deal with political expression, it will not be covered in this entry. However, some theoretical explanations with regard to accessing emotions and overcoming inhibition (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011) may also hold value for research on self-effects in political communication.

Frameworks and models in self-effects research

In the deliberation paradigm, Pingree (2007) proposes the *bidirectional message effects model* that entails a communicator, received, and released messages. The model differentiates three types of self-effects: *expectation* effects arise simply through expecting expression; *composition* effects arise by composing a message and *release* effects arise after expression. All three types of self-effects may occur alone or in different combinations. This distinction is consequential for empirical investigations of self-effects since each type of effects may have different theoretical explanations and may work differently in different contexts. The bidirectional message effects model also stresses the interplay of reception and self-effects (Pingree, 2007). First, reception plays a vital role as input for further expression. Second, release effects stem mostly from the perception that others received or may receive that message. Therefore, self-effects may be exacerbated by reception effects. Third, self-effects may affect the strength and direction of reception effects, e.g., when people discuss recently consumed media content (Valkenburg, 2017).

A second influential theoretical model pertaining to self-effects in political deliberation is the *communication mediation model* (Shah et al., 2005, 2017). It states that media use first and foremost affects interpersonal and online political discussions, which in turn affect political participation and other outcomes. Empirical studies confirm these assumptions, showing that online political talk causes political participation, even more so than receptive media use

(Shah et al., 2005; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Thus, self-effects are at the heart of the mediation process translating media messages into media effects.

Most recently, *identity shift theory* has been proposed as a comprehensive systematization for self-effects in mediated contexts, focusing on online self-presentation. It is the newest advancement in the field and incorporates evidence from most research strands dealing with self-effects (Carr et al., 2021). Identity shift is understood as the "process of self-transformation resulting from intentional self-presentation in a mediated context" (Carr et al., 2021, p. 202). Self-presentation is therefore constrained to online presences and can refer to writing, posting images, filling a profile page and so on. The theory states five propositions that are backed by empirical evidence from offline and online studies: self-presentation leads to an altered self-perception or trait (e.g., political attitudes or self-concept) (P1) (Cho et al., 2018). This effect is stronger when the self-presentation is public (P2) (Carr & Foreman, 2016; Schlenker et al., 1994) and confirmed by feedback (P3) (Walther et al., 2011). As a prerequisite, individuals must be identifiable, connected to their self-presentation (P4) (Carr & Hayes, 2019) and identify with it (P5) (Carr et al., 2021).

Theoretical explanations for self-effects

Researchers have proposed various theoretical explanations for the occurrence and mechanisms of self-effects. They differ between the pre-expressive phase (expectation and composition) and post-expressive phase (release effects) (Pingree, 2007; see also Cho et al., 2018).

Pingree (2007) argues that the *expectation* of expression and *composition* of messages affects people's cognitions because it does not only involve retrieving information from memory but entails constructing ideas from knowledge and transferring them into language. This makes people find structure, address shortcomings, weigh arguments and so forth, which explains why message composition strengthens attitudes. Cho et al. (2018) amend this idea with a dual-process perspective, arguing that deep elaboration prior to expression is not likely to occur in every situation, and people more often resort to quick, heuristic modes of composing messages. Therefore, political expression is often guided by pre-existing political attitudes, possibly making them more salient and thus explaining a strengthening of cognitions or emotions.

For both pre-and post-expressive effects, a basic explanation lies in Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. It states that people avoid conflicting cognitions and behaviors since

it causes them discomfort, thus explaining self-effects as a result of trying to reduce dissonance.

With a focus on explaining *post-expressive* effects, much research on self-effects refers to Bem's (1972) self-perception theory. It states that people infer their attitudes from their overt behavior, especially when other cues are weak or hard to interpret, e.g., when people are not sure about a certain topic. Crucially, and counterintuitively, behavior causes cognitions and emotions in this perspective. For example, expressing a certain position in an online user comment could strengthen one's attitude as people infer their self-concept from their behavior. Jones et al. (1981) proposed biased scanning as mechanism at play (Valkenburg, 2017): while self-perception theory simply assumes that perceptions of new behavior override previous self-conceptions, biased scanning argues that self-presentation makes certain presented elements of the self-concept more salient and thus strengthens these conceptions over time. Further theoretical explanations and extensions of self-perception theory refer to social influences. Research on *public commitment* has shown that public behaviors impact self-perceptions much more than private ones because people feel social pressure to adhere to the image they convey in public (Schlenker et al., 1994; Tice, 1992). Releasing messages to others (and possibly already expecting to do so) thus fosters the attitudes behind these messages because people commit to a certain statement. Furthermore, feedback from others, particularly close friends rather than strangers, strengthens self-effects (Carr & Foreman, 2016; Walther et al., 2011). This may be explained by social validation and the human need to establish a shared reality with others (Hardin & Higgins, 1996).

Avenues for further research

Self-effects have thus far not been the focus of much research. Therefore, ample opportunities for further research remain.

Theory development and integration: although there are several theoretical explanations for self-effects, we lack a clear understanding of how they come about. More theory development is needed, incorporating different theoretical explanations, and testing them in comparison. Moreover, self-effects may be incorporated into other theories of media effects that are more oriented towards message reception. For example, it could be fruitful to look at the role of self-effects in agenda-setting or framing effects.

Self-effects in professional roles: self-effects have so far largely been studied among the general public. There are no studies investigating self-effects regarding people in professional

roles, such as politicians or journalists. However, these groups might be especially prone to self-effects since expression is integral to their daily work.

Longitudinal studies: self-effects have mostly been investigated in cross-sectional experimental settings, but it would be fruitful to track individuals' self-expression and examine how it influences their political attitudes and behaviors over an extended period, providing insights into the stability and durability of self-effects and their interactions with reception effects.

Boundary conditions: So far, there is little evidence on moderating and mediating variables in self-effects. It would be an important addition to the literature to identify factors that moderate the strength or direction of self-effects, such as the nature of the communication environment or the characteristics of the audience. Moreover, it is necessary to investigate cognitive, emotional, and social processes that mediate the relationship between self-expression and subsequent cognitions, emotions, and behaviors.

Interventions: Lastly, research could strive for a more applied perspective in self-effects research, exploring how interventions that promote self-reflection, deliberation, or constructive dialogue can enhance the positive outcomes of self-expression while mitigating the negative consequences, such as radicalization or polarization.

In conclusion, self-effects in political communication play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes, emotions, and behaviors towards politics. Understanding self-effects and their interactions with reception effects is therefore vital, especially since the possibilities of self-expression have grown with social media.

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