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ABSTRACI

Data from interviews with 1,966 potential voters in Summit County, Ohio, in 1972 were analyzed to determine the relationship between political disaffection and reliance on television or newspapers for campaign news. The question that assessed media reliance was "How much do you count on (television/newspapers) to help you make up your mind about whom to vote for in a presidential election -- a lot, somewhat, or not at all?" Questions on political attitudes assessed opinions regarding political powerlessness, altruism of politicians, efficacy of the voting process, distrust of politicians, political alienation, and political understanding. Opinions of the 1972 presidential contenders, George McGovern and Richard Nixon, were also assessed. Analysis of the data indicated the following: the greater their reliance on television, the more respondents seemed to feel that politicians were altruistic and trustworthy, that woting was efficacious, and that the candidates had positive images, and the less respondents appeared to feel politically powerless and alienated. Newspaper reliance was associated with the above characteristics to an even greater degree. Television reliance was unrelated to political understanding, while newspaper reliance was positively and significantly associated with it. (GW)



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Theory and Methodology Division

NEWSPAPER VERSUS TELEVISION RELIANCE

AND POLITICAL DISAFFECTION

Ъу

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The author thanks Chester Harland for valuable assistance in data processing and the University of Denver College of Arts and Sciences for computer analysis funding.

Presented to the Theory and Methodology Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Seattle, Washington, August 1978. One of those issues traditionally relegated to the "most discussed but least researched" baliwick of communication study during the era of electronic journalism has centered around the possibility that television reportage may be subtly influencing its audiences into becoming more remote and alienated from political processes.

However, several studies over the last few years have attempted to provide at least something of a data base for argument of the point. Perhaps the most compelling evidence, as well as reasoning, has been offered by Robinson who has experimentally demonstrated some of the cognitive processes which may lead to such influence. More impressively, Robinson has presented analyses from University of Michigan Survey Research Center studies supporting a positive association between reliance upon television for political campaign information and expressions of political inefficacy, distrust and cynicism. 2 The relationship held across all levels of education and income. Additionally, Robinson has found outcroppings of what he terms "videomalaise"-political malaise resulting from television reliance--in analyses of audience reactions to Watergate and voting for George Wallace in 1968. 4 While Robinson's data leave quite unspecified the direction of causality (Does television yield malaise, or are the already malaised watching more television?), he clearly believes television to be the more active participant in a relationship most likely to be at least a bit reciprocal. Robinson attributes the politically negative influence of television to unique factors he perceives in the makeup of bot rary television journalism and ong the factors are a large "inadvertent" the audience it serves. Promine

viewing audience for news, relatively high credibility of network news as perceived by audience members, the interpretive nature of and negativistic emphasis in network reportage, and the emphasis upon violence, conflict and anti-institutional themes in network news.

While many of the above factors need to be more appropriately documented through content analysis of both television and print news, those characteristics pertaining to audience members have been more directly spoken to through several recent research efforts.

Becker for example has found television dependent persons to be less knowledgeable than the newspaper dependent about local civic affairs, and to be less favorably inclined towards and trusting of local government officials. However, no such result was found for national political figures. Becker argues that a more informationally based approach to the question is needed, positing that affective changes in political orientations are likely to result from information gained from media, as opposed to being a direct consequence of media use per se.

In a similar vein, television news has been found less effective than newspapers in having an impact upon citizens' political information levels 6 and in influencing public agendas of importance of political issues. 7

O'Keefe and Mendelsohn also report correlative support for Robinson's hypothesis, but with greater concern given to the modes of media usage involved. Using a national sample of nonvoters, they inserted several media orientations, along with education and political interest, into a must be impacts of each upon sons given by responde oring. Increased attention



to televised political news was found to be positively associated with such nonvoting reasons as cynicism about candidates, being unable to discriminate between candidates, distrust in candidates and government, and inefficacy of voting. Moreover, the more helpful nonvoters saw television as being in aiding in their understanding of candidates, the more import they attached to the above abstention reasons. On the other hand, simple exposure to television news and to newspapers were not particularly well correlated with those reasons, but other orientations toward newspapers were negatively correlated with the reasons given. These relationships were strongest among 18- to 24-year-old nonvoters and those over age 64, replicating previous findings that political media impact is greatest among the young 9 and the elderly. 10

The above results suggest that the assumption that greater public affairs media use automatically coincides with heightened political participation and more positive political values may not always hold up, and that in fact detrimental effects may occur. The issue is particularly interesting in that no matter what the direction of causality, or the degree of reciprocity, the potential import of the relationship remains critical for both individual behavior and the functioning of the political system. That is, if the data are more a reflection of television content actively influencing political orientations, the nature of that content and the medium transmitting it are of crucial import. If, on the other hand, the data are more an indicator of the already politically disenchanted choosing television content as being congruent with, supportive of, justifying of, and/or reinforcing of their malaise, the content and medium are no less



deserving of study both from the vantage of communication theory and public policy.

Whatever the causal direction, information selectivity among audience members is apt to play a key role in the process. Clearly, the newspaper reader can more easily choose stories consistent with existing interests and attitudes. The politically disinterested can readily avoid political content at the glance of a headline, while the more concerned can select stories of specific relevance or supportive of given views. Attendance to television news raises a host of problems vis-a-vis selectivity, however. The politically disinterested viewer who wants to keep up with events in general may find political stories hard to avoid, particularly during heavy campaign periods. Cognitively tuning out one uninteresting news item on a well-paced news program can and often does lead to missing the next, perhaps more salient piece, as well. Thus the news viewer disinterested in and/or disaffected with matters politic is likely to get some exposure to them regardless, perhaps with negative consequences.

On the other hand, audience members already holding negative or cynical political views may actively seek out televised political news for its relative simplicity of format which allows them greater access to reinforcement or justification for their views. Moreover, the aim for balance in televised reportage may give an appearance of blandness, of all political personalities and issues being essentially alike. And the allocated by television during campaigns to extracurricular events and "hoopla" may do inish in viewers' eyes the salience of voting and elections. 11

The present work extends this line of research in several different directions with the hope of clarifying some of the key problems involved.



The general hypothesis to be examined, derivable from the above discussion, is that reliance upon television is likely to be positively associated with more negative political values and images of politicians, while newspaper reliance tends to be negatively associated with such orientations. Associations will be examined between television and newspaper reliance and such political values as political powerlessness, perceived altruism of politicians, efficacy of voting, distrust of politicians, political alienation and sense of political understanding. Furthermore, relationships between media reliance and images of political candidates will be investigated. In addition, following the argument the above relationships are primarily a product of media-audience interaction alone, and given that television news audiences are characterized by lesser levels of education and income, it is postulated that the above hypothesis will hold across education and income strata.

Moreover, Robinson's rationale addressing the roots of videomalaise in audience characteristics will be examined by partialling the analyses on citizens' perceived fairness of television vis-a-vis politics and on level of political interest. Presumably, greater perceived fairness, treated here as an indicator of credibility, attributed to television should interact with greater reliance to produce greater political malaise or disaffection. Similarly, since the less politically interested citizens can be regarded as a more "inadvertent" audience of televised political news, lesser interest should interact with greater reliance to effect greater malaise. The above controls will first be used individually and then in a multiple linear regression analysis.



METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The data presented below were generated as part of a larger study of the impacts of the 1972 presidential election campaign on voter behavior and result from personal interviews conducted during July 1972 with 1,966 potential voters aged 18 and over selected into a multi-stage area probability sample representative of the population of Summit County, Ohio. 12 The county includes urban Akron and its immediate suburbs, and it reflects diverse demographic characteristics not unlike those of the U.S. population as a whole.

For the purposes here, the typical problem arises of having to utilize measures designed for other empirical needs. As such, the key measures of media reliance run into much the same problem as those of Robinson in that they were geared for election campaign research. The items reflecting television and newspaper reliance were both of the same form: "How much do you count on (television/newspapers) to help you make up your mind about whom to vote for in a presidential election— a lot, somewhat or not at all?"

Political system values were more straightforwardly, albeit somewhat simplistically, assessed by the following items, which had possible responses of "agree," "unsure," or "disagree:"

Political powerlessness: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does."

Altruism of politicians: "Most of our leaders are devoted to the service of our country."

Efficacy of voting: "Every vote counts in an election, including yours and mine."



- Distrust of politicians: "Politicians never tell us what they really think."
- Political alienation: "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think."
- Political understanding: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on."

Candidate image measures were formed by combining responses to each of five positive-negative word pairs describing the two 1971 presidential contenders, George McGovern and Richard Nixon. Respondents were asked to evaluate each candidate in terms of whether he was "friendly-unfriendly," "strong-weak," "smart-dumb," "can be trusted-cannot be trusted," and "effective-ineffective." Or, the respondent could indicate being "unsure" as to how to evaluate the candidate. Scores on each word-pair dimension were added across both candidates to form a general index of candidate image dimensions. Descriptive data on the above measures for the sample are included in Table 1.

The data for the overall sample do not support the hypothesis that television reliance is associated with political disaffection, and in fact may lead to the opposite conclusion (Table 2). The greater the reliance on television, the more respondents appeared to indicate feelings that politicians were altruistic and that voting was efficacious; and, the less they appeared to feel politically powerless and alienated, and to distrust politicians. Greater reliance was also associated with more positive candidate images. Newspaper reliance was similarly associated with the above characteristics, although to a greater degree. The disparity between television and newspaper reliance was



especially strong in their associations with distrust of politicians and political alienation. Likewise, television reliance was unrelated to political understanding, while newspaper reliance was positively and significantly associated with it. Thus while television did not appear to be having negative effects on political values and candidate images, newspapers still appear to outdistance it in terms of strength of positive effects. While the correlation coefficients are generally low and the high levels of significance reflect in part the large sample size, the consistency of results across indices is impressive.

Level of education did appear to influence the degree of relationship between media reliance and political orientations (Table 3). For the lesser educated, political values and candidate images are quite consistently more closely associated with newspaper reliance and particularly with television reliance. Also noteworthy is that television reliance is unassociated with distrust of politicians and political alienation among respondents with some college, but is negatively and significantly associated with both characteristics among the high school (or less) educated. While the door is therefore open for an inference that media do have more impact on political values among lesser educated audience members, whatever influences occur appear to be in an integrative direction. The college educated seem more immune to television's thrust, but not that of newspapers.

Differences attributed to levels of income follow somewhat the same pattern as those for education, with one marked exception being that distrust of politicians is more negatively associated with both measures



of media reliance within the higher income group (Table 4). A similar result occurs on the candidates trust dimension. This may in part be a function of the wealthier being both much more trusting of politicians and placing greater reliance upon both media.

No clear pattern emerged regarding the proposition that a stronger relationship would exist between television reliance and political disaffection among those perceiving television as more "credible" or fair in its treatment of political matters (Table 5): The correlations between television reliance and powerlessness and efficacy, and most image dimensions between the high and low credibility groups, run in the predicted direction, but the findings for altruism and alienation run to the opposite. In no case is the magnitude of difference substantial.

The findings across levels of political interest are not unlike those across educational lines (Table 6). Greater media reliance is clearly more tied to political orientations among the lesser interested, and this result is most marked in the case of television. Thus there is a case to be made here for the impact of television on the "inadvertent" audience, but it appears that such impact is in a more positive, integrative direction than earlier research would suggest. However, newspapers still seem to have the greater influence on this audience. Highly interested citizens would appear to be singularly unaffected by television, but possibly somewhat influenced by newspapers.

The multiple regression analyses presented in Table 7 suggest that for most of the political values education and political interest are the primary determinants, with newspaper reliance playing a lesser but



nonetheless often significant role. Interestingly, in the cases of altruism of politicians and efficacy of voting, newspaper reliance appears to supplant education as a main predictor. Television dependence with other factors controlled for was found to be significant only in its associations with powerlessness and altenation. A substantially different pattern emerges from the regression analyses on candidate images, with the two dominant predictors being reliance on newspapers and television credibility. Thus these summary analyses support a finding which has occurred throughout the data presentation and which goes against prevailing assumptions about television's political influence: Newspaper reliance is a more powerful predictor than television reliance of most dimensions of candidate images. The one exception here is on the attribute of effectiveness, which may be an indication of television's greater ability to portray a human characteristic more associated with activity or "getting things done." The strength of television credibilityas an indicator of images is somewhat curious, although a possible explanation is that a form of halo effect exists here, with more favorable impressions of the fairness of television being congruent with positive impressions of attributes of candidates. Nevertheless, media orientations in general clearly surpass demographic characteristics and political interest in being indicative of images of candidates held by audience members.

DISCUSSION

The above results at once support earlier hypotheses concerning political influences of mass media and contradict more recent propositions and data pertaining to the unique role of television in contemporary politics. Support is found for previous contentions that higher reliance on mass media for political purposes is associated with more "positive" or integrative citizen orientations toward the political system. But while reliance on television yielded less positive results in the above regard than newspaper reliance, there is no direct evidence that greater television reliance evokes political disaffection or malaise on the part of viewers. In particular, the data suggest that television provides an even more integrative role for those audience members most likely to be labeled as "inadvertent" observers of political content—the lesser educated and politically disinterested.

Attempts to reconcile these data with the opposing results provided by Robinson's research and that of O'Keefe and Mendelsohn is doubtless difficult at this point. On the one hand, it is easy to lay part of the cause on the measures used and to a lesser extent on disparity of samples. It is especially appropriate to recall that the latter authors investigated nonvoters' reasons for abstention, and found only attention to television news to correlate with disaffection. However, squaring the results presented here with Robinson's substantial research efforts is more troublesome. While somewhat different items were used for all indices in the two investigations, the concepts examined were quite similar. Yet, the measures



of reliance in both instances were borrowed from specific campaign contexts, and neither directly address the main construct of reliance upon television news for information, and perhaps influence, vis-a-vis politics.

More importantly, the Robinson research typically used multi-item indices of the dependent variables, with appropriate checks of validity and reliability secured over their years of use in the University of Michigan Survey Research Center political studies. On the other hand, the measures used here were single-item indices pulled together more on the basis of their face validity for the purpose of widening the range of political values to be investigated. While the reliability of such single-item three-level measures can be assumed to be somewhat low, it should be noted that intercorrelations between key dependent variable items were generally respectable, with such related measures as political powerlessness, distrust of politicians and political alienation correlating with one another within a range of coefficients between .25 and .48. Furthermore, while the coefficients between independent and dependent variables here were admittedly low, their marked consistency of direction should not be overlooked, both as an indicator of substantive import and as a defense against unacceptable unreliability of the measures.

While the fact that one investigation dealt with a national sample and the other a local one should not pose much of a problem, it is possible that the time periods dealt with could. Robinson's data derive from 1960, 1964, and 1968 national campaigns, while the present study focuses upon 1972. It is admittedly unlikely, but could either differences in campaign structure, journalistic emphases or audience characteristics explain some of the



variation found? For example, could Robinson's data have resulted in part from something of a transitory period in television journalism, a time when a political reporting process geared more toward print media was slowly adapting to the realities of video coverage? Did perhaps subtle incongruities resulting from a print format being inappropriately fed into a video format add to audience perceptions of ludicrousness? Could this have changed over a few years as television journalism came into its own, and political processes to some extent followed the trend? The above points, and realistically any reconciliation of the conflicting results, will most likely have to await future examinations of this issue, preferably incorporating methodologies designed specifically for the task at hand. Potentially fruitful approaches should include several indices of media usage, as argued for by O'Keefe and Mendelsohn, and extensive measures of political learning applicable to formation of political opinions and values, as suggested by Becker. 13

Advocates of the videomalaise syndrome can perhaps optimistically view the results delineated here as somewhat supportive in that television reliance did appear inferior to newspaper reliance in terms of positive impact on political values, and a case might be made that this was simply one study in which the null hypothesis vis-a-vis videomalaise happened to be borne out. However, the more substantial finding that greater television reliance among the lesser educated and politically concerned was associated with positive political values raises more problems in its implication that videomalaise may not be so closely attached to "inadvertent" viewing patterns as has been argued.



Future designs could be appropriately based on frameworks following uses-gratifications related approaches to media-audience interactions, in which specific audience needs, motivations and expectations concerning political media usage could be more directly tied to the kinds of gratifications and influences which may derive from usages. It is clear from the present work that such audience characteristics as levels of education and political interest do affect the relationships between media reliance and political orientations, and thus that the kind of motivation-based assumptions included in the uses-gratifications approach could well be helpful in subsequent studies.

All in all, these several research efforts suggest that television's greatest political impact could well be upon the lesser educated and politically disinterested, which provides a critical area of study in of itself, whatever the direction of that impact.



FOOTNOTES

- Michael J. Robinson, "American Political Legitimacy in an Era of Electronic Journalism: Reflections on the Evening News," In D. Cater and R. Adler, eds., Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism (New York: Praeger, 1975); "Public Affairs Television and the Crowth of Political Malaise: The Case of the 'Selling of the Pentagon,'" American Political Science Review, 70:409-431 (1976).
 - 2 Ibid.
- Michael J. Robinson, "The Impact of the Televised Watergate Hearings," <u>Journal of Communication</u>, 24:17-30 (1974).
 - ⁴ Robinson, 1976, <u>op. cit</u>.
- Lee B. Becker, Idowu A. Sobowale and William E. Casey Jr., "Newspaper and Television Dependencies: Their Effects on Evaluations of Government Leaders," Paper presented to International Communication Association Convention, Chicago, 1978.
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- ⁸ Garrett J. O'Keefe and Harold Mendelsohn, "Nonvoting and the Role of Media," In Charles Winick, ed., <u>Mass Media and Deviance</u>. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978).
- Jay G. Blumler and Jack M. McLeod, "Communication and Voter Turnout in Britain,: In T. Legatt, ed., Sociological Theory and Survey Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1974); Garrett J. O'Keefe, "Voter Turnout over the Life Cycle," Paper presented to the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research Annual Conference, Chicago, 1976.
 - 10 O'Keefe, ibid.
 - 11 Patterson and McClure, op. cit.
- 12 For a detailed description of the methodology employed, see Harold Mendelsohn and Garrett J. O'Keefe, The People Choose a President (New York: Praeger, 1976).
 - Becker, op. cit.



TABLE 1

Levels of Media Reliance and Political Orientation

(N=1966)

	Mean		s.d.
Media Reliance (1-3)		V.	•
Newspaper Reliance	1.61	\	.68
Television Reliance	1.80	, · · ·	.74
Political Values (1-3)	•		
Political powerlessness	1.78		.96
Altruism of politicians	2.26		.93
Efficacy of voting	2.71	\	.67
Distrust of politicians	2.17	,	.94
Political alienation	1.83	.;	.95
Political understanding	1.41	•	.80
Candidate Images (1-6)			
Friendly-unfriendly	3.16		1.16
Strong-weak	3.19		1.16
Smart-dumb	2.50	,	0.88
Trusted-untrusted	3.56		1.22
Effective-ineffective	3.40		1.16

^{1 &}quot;One" reflects a "low" score on each attribute.

·· (N=1966)

		Television Reliance	Newspaper Reliance	
<u>P</u>	olitical Values		Y	
	Political powerlessness	10**	12**	
	Altruism of politicians	.06*	.08*	
	Efficacy of voting	•07*	.09*	
	Distrust of politicians	10**	16**	
	Political alienation	10**	15**	
i	Political understanding	.02	.07*	
<u>c</u>	andidate Images			
	Friendly-unfriendly	.08*	.117	
	Strong-weak	•06 *	.09**	
	Smar -dumb	.10**	.13**	
	Trusced-untrusted	· .09*	.09**	
	Effective-ineffective	.08*	.06*	

* p < .05

** p < .0]

TABLE 3

Correlations (<u>r</u>) Between Media Reliance and Political Orientations, by Education

(N=1966)

EDUCATION 1

	HI	GH	LOW		
	TV Reliance	NP Reliance	TV Reliance	NP Reliance	
Political Value	مب		•	:	
Political Powerlessness Altruism of Politicians Efficacy of Voting Distrust of Politicians Political Alienation Political Understanding	08* .04 .02020501	11** .08** .10**11	07* .04 .07* .10** .09**	11** .08* .07*' 14** 15** .04	
Candidate Images					
Friendly-Unfriendly Strong-Weak Smart-Dumb Trusted-Untrusted Effective-Ineffective	.06* .04 .07* .05 .06*	.07* .06* .07* .02	.08* .05 .10** .10**	.13** .09** .13** .09**	

^{*} p < .05

^{**} p <.01

¹ High = at least some college; Low = no college

TABLE 4
Correlations (r) Between Media

Reliance and Political Orientations by Income (N=1966)

$INCOME^{1}$

	HIGH		(LOW	
Political Values	TV Reliance	NP Reliance	TV Reliance	NP Reliance
Political powerlessness Altruism of politicians Efficacy of voting Distrust of politicians Political alienation Political understanding	08* .09*11**04	12** .14** .12**21**16**	10** .05 .06* 09** 11**	10** .06* .08*13**14**
Candidate Images				a
Friendly-unfriendly Strong-weak Smart-dumb Trusted-untrusted Effective-ineffective	.10** .03 .07* .10**	.06* .07* .13** .07*	.07* .06* .11* .09**	.12** .09** .13** .08**

^{*} p < .05

^{**} p < .01

¹ High = \$10,000.00 or over; low = under \$10,000.00.

(N≃1966)

TELEVISION CREDIBILITY

			rom	
Political Values	TV Reliance	NP Reliance	TV Reliance	NP Reliance
Political powerlessness Altruism of politicians Efficacy of voting Distrust of politicians Political alienation Political understanding	05 .06* .03 08* 11**	11** .09** .0516**13** .10**	12** .02 .08*09**08*02	11** .04 .11**13**14** .00
Candidate Images	·			· .
Friendly-unfriendly Strong-weak Smart-dumb Trusted-untrusted Effective-ineffective	.06* .02 .07* .05	.12** .06* .12** .07*	.07* .05 .12** .10**	.07* .08* .13** .07*

^{*} p<.05

^{**} p<.01

High = TV "fair" in treatment of political matters; Low = TV "unfair" or "fair and unfair."

TABLE 6

Correlations (r) Between Media Reliance and Political Orientations, by Political Interest

(N=1966)

POLITICAL INTEREST 1

•	HI	GH	L)W
•	TV	NP	TV	NP
.*•	Reliance	Reliance	Reliance	Reliance
Political Values				5 %
Political Powerles	ssness03	05	11**	15**
Altruism of Politi	lcians .00	.08*	.08*	.08*
Efficacy of Voting	01	.04	.08*	.11**
Distrust of Politi		13**	12**	17**
Political Alienati	ion05	11**	11**	17**
Political Understa	on. Oo.	.04	.02	.07*
			•	
				÷
	.;			
Candidate Images				
Friendly-Unfriend	ly .03	.12**	.11**	.12**
Strong-Weak	.03	.10**	.07*	.09**
Smart-Dumb	.10**	.14**	.10**	.13**
Trusted-Untrusted	.05	.06*	.11**	.10**
Effective-Ineffect	tive .01	64	.10**	.10**

^{*} p < .05

^{**} p < .01

High = "very interested" in politics; Low = "somewhat" or "hardly at all" interested

TABLE 7 Regression Analyses of Political Orientations 1 (N=1966)

				g g			
	TV	NP	TV	Political			٥
	Reliance	Reliance	Credibility	Interest	Education	Income	R^2
Political Values					•		н
Political Powerlessnes	s04*	 05**	03*	12**	14**	.07**	07
Altruism of Politician		.06**	.09**	.08**	.03		.07
Efficacy of Voting	.02	.06**	.03	.14**	.03	.01 .02	.02
Distrust of Politician		08**	09**	07**	17**	08**	.09
Political Alienation	04*	07**	05**	·09**	19**	C7**	.09
Political Understandin		.00	.03	.15**	.17**	.06**	.08
•					,		
		7	•	•	11	,	
<i>,</i>				•		/	
Candidate Images			•	· •	·		
- 	1			* 1	,		
Friendly-Unfriendly	.04	.08**	.09**	.01	.00	.05	. 02
Strong-Weak	.02	.05**	.09**	.04	.07**	.00	.02
Smart-Dumb	.05**	.09**	.04*	.04*	.06*	.07**	.03
Trusted-Untrusted	.01	.05**	.05**	.06	03	.04	.01
Effective-Ineffective	· .04*	.02	.01	.01	.02	.05**	.01

^{*} p < .05

^{**} p<.01

¹ Values are standardized regression coefficients (Beta)