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Is there Evidence for Dual Coding Processes in Attitude Learning?

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It is a fascinating yet worrisome idea that attitudes, the powerful determinants of many behaviors, are learned automatically, i.e., without intention, without awareness and with little cognitive effort. In this research we investigated the role of cognitive effort in attitude learning. We hypothesized that boundary conditions of effortless attitude formation are imposed by the brain's modal systems involved in learning (cf. Barsalou, 1999). Applying Barsalou's approach to an evaluative conditioning paradigm we predicted and found that attitude learning was impaired by an effortful secondary task only if that task involved the same modal systems as the attitude learning task. However, an effortful secondary task left learning unaffected if different modal systems were involved. The findings highlight that attitude learning incurs little effort if modal boundary conditions are considered. The implications for related aspects of automatic learning of attitudes, and a framework based on Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986) are discussed.