Petty and Cacioppo put forward the notion that there are two different routes to persuasive communication, depending on whether the audience is likely to focus on the message itself or on other factors such as how attractive or credible the source appears to be. This is known as taking the central or peripheral route.

The central route to persuasion is more appropriate if an audience is likely to focus on the arguments due to personal interest. Petty and Cacioppo also suggest this may be due to the fact that some people enjoy analysing arguments so are more likely to focus on quality of the arguments rather than their context, thus having a higher need for cognition (NC). Attitudes changed in this way are more lasting and less susceptible to subsequent attempts to change them.

The peripheral route is more likely to be effective if an audience is likely to focus more on the context of the message than the message itself. When processing by this route, individuals are more likely to be influenced by contextual cues such as celebrity endorsement of a product or the mood created. Messages processed in this way tend to be less personally important and the attitude towards the information frequently changes.

Lin et al. asked Taiwanese students to select a mobile phone based on consumer reviews. The reviews for each phone differed in quality - high quality reviews were objective and supported with relevant facts, and low quality reviews were subjective and based on emotional reaction. Students also completed a ‘need recognition’ measure. Consistent with predictions of the ELM, high need for cognition students placed a greater importance on review quality rather than quantity of reviews when making a decision.

Lin et al.’s research finding contributes to a better understanding of the effect of online reviews. Knowledge of the demographic profile of a target audience, (e.g. their level of need for cognition) can guide internet marketers to design appropriate promotional materials in order to influence online shoppers effectively.

Vidine et al. showed that NC is also relevant factor in real-life health campaigns. Students were exposed either to a fact based (central route) or emotion based (peripheral route) smoking risk campaign. Those with higher NC were more influenced by the fact based message (central route), whereas participants with low NC were more influenced by the emotion based message (peripheral route). What is also clear from research is that when people lack expertise about an issue (e.g. HIV risk or healthy eating), they are more likely to employ the peripheral route as they consider a health message. This helps to explain why health claims unsupported by research findings (e.g. that organic food is healthier than non organic food) are often appealing to many people.

Peripheral route influence may also be temporary – On 7th November 1991, the prominent US basketball player, Ervin (Magic) Johnson Jnr., announced that he was HIV positive. At the time of his announcement, psychologists Penner and Fritzsche had just finished collecting data on participants’ willingness to help a person with an AIDS virus. They found that no university students volunteered when asked to help an AIDS victim carry out a school project. However, one week after Magic Johnson announced that he was a victim, the helping rate soared to 83%. Four and half months after the announcement, helping was back to preannouncement levels, indicating that although the peripheral route influence (in the case of a celebrity model) can be considerable, there is strong likelihood that any change produced by this route is likely to be temporary.

The model assumes that people are rational and think carefully about the information being given to them by the media. However, Fiske and Taylor claim most human beings are essentially cognitive misers in that they frequently rely on simple and time efficient strategies when making decisions.