
INTERMEDIARY AS A MODERATOR OF THE EFFECTS ON ATTITUDE OF ADVERTISING CONTEXT AND CONTENT

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Abstract

Two persuasion experiments were conducted manipulating the personal relevance of the message, the quality of the arguments employed, and the characteristics of the message source. The results suggested that source content factors are more influential than source characteristics under high involvement conditions. The reverse tendency occurred under low involvement.

The Involvement Concept

Persuasion researchers within both social and consumer psychology have recently emphasized the need to distinguish between high and low involvement situations (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Schwarz, 1981, May 1978). Although many have made specific definitions of involvement within both disciplines, there is considerable agreement that in high involvement situations, the persuasive message under consideration has a high degree of personal relevance to the recipient, whereas in low involvement situations, the personal relevance of the message is rather trivial. In social psychology, this view has been represented by the work of the Sherifs who have argued that high involvement occurs when the message has "idiomatic importance" (Sherif et al., 1935, p. 301), and in consumer psychology this view is well-represented by Tracy (1968) who defines involvement as the number of "personal references" or connections that resistants make between the message and their own lives (p. 533).

Despite the widespread agreement that involvement has something to do with the personal relevance of a message, there is little agreement on the research procedures employed in studying involvement. Some of the research on involvement has been conducted by both social (e.g., Sherif et al., 1935) and consumer psychologists (see, e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1980). Psychologists have investigated subjects in settings that differ in terms of the extent to which an issue or product was personally important, or has explored designs allowing subjects to assign themselves to high and low involvement groups. These methods, which are correlational in nature, confound involvement with all other existing differences between the high and low involvement groups. Other social (e.g., Elson & Severance, 1970) and consumer psychologists (e.g., Lewin & Cacioppo, 1970) have defined involvement in terms of the specific issue or product under consideration. This procedure, of course, confounds involvement with aspects of the issue or product that are material to their own relevances. Finally, some researchers have studied involvement by varying the medium of message presentation. Interestingly, however, some investigators have reported that television is a more involving medium than is print (Hirsch & Sheth, 1975), whereas others have argued just the opposite (Cacioppo, 1967). A preferable procedure that keeps resistant, message, and medium characteristics constant for high and low involvement conditions was introduced by Petty and Cacioppo (1981) and the method employed in the studies to be reported here. In this procedure subjects are randomly assigned to high and low involvement conditions and receive the same message via the same medium, but high involvement subjects are led to believe that the issue or product has some personal relevance whereas low involvement subjects are not.

In addition to the methodological differences that have plagued the involvement concept, another area of disagreement concerns the effects on persuasion that involvement is expected to have. The Sherifs have argued that increased involvement is associated with increased resistance in persuasion (e.g., Sherif, 1955). The notion is that on any given issue, highly involved persons exhibit more negative evaluations of a communication because high involvement is associated with an inflated "attitude of rejection." Thus, inoculating messages on high involvement issues are thought to have an enhanced probability of being rejected because they are more likely to fall within the unacceptable range of a person's self-image attitude continuum. This view has received considerable acceptance within social psychology (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and consumer psychology (e.g., Halpern & Katz, 1979). Under this second view, increasing involvement does not necessarily increase resistance to persuasion, but instead shifts the boundary of communication impact. Tracy argues that under high involvement, a communication affects cognitions, then attitudes, then behavior, whereas under low involvement a communication affects cognitions, then behavior, then attitudes. The focal goal of the present paper is to present and test a third view of how involvement affects persuasion.

Involvement as a Determinant of Content-based Persuasion

Elsewhere we have proposed that the level of involvement affects the focus of a subject's thoughts about a persuasive communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Specifically, we have suggested that under high involvement conditions, the focus of thought is on the content of the persuasive message, whereas under low involvement conditions, the focus of thought is on non-content cues. Thus, under high involvement, if the communication presents arguments that are objectively accurate and subject to counterargumentation, resistance to persuasion will not occur. Thus, contrary to the elaboration view, increasing involvement can lead to either increased or reduced persuasion depending upon the quality of the arguments presented in the message.

In contrast to this focus on the content of a message under high involvement conditions, we have suggested that subjects who are not involved are more likely to focus on non-content cues such as the source available for adopting a certain attitude, the attractiveness, credibility, or power of the communicator's source, and the number of others who advocate a certain position. Focusing on such other aspects of the message, a communication allows a person to evaluate a message or decide what attitudinal position to adopt without engaging in any extensive cognitive work relevant to the issue or product under consideration. As Miller and others have noted: "It may be irrational to scrutinize the plethora of counter-attitudinal messages received daily. To the extent that one possesses only a limited amount of information processing time and capacity, one's scrutiny would diminish the thought processes from the vagaries of daily life" (p. 635). Thus, when a "
person is not highly involved with a persuasive message.

In an initial test of our two-process model of involvement (Cho, Hahs, & policymakers, we conducted an experimental study in which the participants were divided into high and low involvement conditions. In the high involvement condition, subjects were asked to imagine that they were preparing a speech for a political campaign. In the low involvement condition, subjects were asked to imagine that they were preparing a speech for a personal interest. The dependent variables were the extent to which subjects were engaged in the speech topic and the extent to which they were motivated to learn more about the topic. The results showed that the high involvement condition resulted in higher levels of engagement and motivation to learn more about the topic than the low involvement condition.

In Experiment 2, subjects were asked to imagine that they were preparing a speech for a political campaign. In the high involvement condition, subjects were asked to imagine that they were preparing a speech for a personal interest. The dependent variables were the extent to which subjects were engaged in the speech topic and the extent to which they were motivated to learn more about the topic. The results showed that the high involvement condition resulted in higher levels of engagement and motivation to learn more about the topic than the low involvement condition.

The results of the two experiments support the idea that involvement with persuasive messages can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the message. The findings also suggest that the two-process model of involvement can be used to predict the effectiveness of persuasive messages in different contexts.
TABLE 2

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECT OF INVOLVEMENT, ACCIDENT QUALITY, AND SOURCE ATTRIBUTIONS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD AN ADVERTISED PRODUCT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Involved (high)</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong arguments</td>
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<td>Weak arguments</td>
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Discussion

Experiment 1 replicated the findings from Experiment 1 that involvement (personal-relevant) is an important determinant of the effects of the consumer-based perception will occur. When the advertisement was high in personal relevance to the subjects, the quality or accuracy of the arguments perceived in the ad had a greater impact on attitudes toward the advertised product than when the ad was low in personal relevance. The study did not find strong support for the view that subjective factors were more important than the ad was low rather than high in personal relevance, however. In contexts high in personal relevance, changes in the market price of the product would have been more in the study because the model looked at changes in the market price of the product (it did not look at the price of the product itself).

The Role of Involvement in Perceptions

Taken together, the results of the two studies strongly indicate that, under high involvement, market prices are the perceptual determinants of the amount of information that subjects incorporate into their decision. In the present studies provide some evidence that attitude change is determined by different factors under high and low involvement, non-contract factors such as the credibility or attractiveness of the source are more important. Therefore, the present studies provide some evidence that attitude change is determined by different factors under high and low involvement conditions. In one of our current experiments, we are thinking about issue-relevant information is the most direct determinant of the direction and amount of persuasion produced. Attitude change induced via such a source is likely to be relatively infrequent and not the result of subsequent behavior. Under the second, or peripheral route, the attitude change is likely to be of primary concern in the central or the peripheral route. The experiments reported here as well as those reported in the literature on consumer behavior are consistent with the view that under low involvement, the central route is more likely to be stated by message content factors such as the number, quality, and accuracy of the message arguments presented (cf., Cacioppo & Petty, 1980; Chaiken, 1980; Cialdini et al., 1976).

The level of involvement is not the only determinant of the route to persuasion, however. In addition to having the necessary motivation to think about issue-relevant information, the message recipient must also have the ability to process the message at the central route and the source. Thus, even if involvement is high and the person is motivated to think about the message content, but the arguments are too complex for the person to understand, or if too many distractions prevent involvement, thinking, the central route cannot be utilized.

Finally, we note that attitude change via the central route is a very difficult way to change a person's attitudes. First, the person must attend to personal relevance to the recipient. Second, the person must have the ability to process the message content. Third, the message must present arguments that elicit primarily meaningful thoughts. If the recipient is not in the mood to process the message, then increasing involvement will not facilitate persuasion. If a change can be produced by the central route, however, the results are clear—the attitude change will tend to persist and be predictive of subsequent behavior. Thus, the central route is the key to understanding how increasing involvement will facilitate persuasion.

In summary, the results of two experiments suggest that involvement (personal-relevant) is an important determinant of the effects of the consumer-based perception. When the advertisement is high in personal relevance to the subjects, the quality or accuracy of the arguments perceived in the ad have a greater impact on attitudes toward the advertised product than when the ad was low in personal relevance. However, in contexts high in personal relevance, changes in the market price of the product would have been more important than the ad was low rather than high in personal relevance.