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ABSTRACT

The construct of involvement, used by marketers and consumer behaviorists for many years as a predictive measure of the qualitative relationship between an individual and a stimulus, has long been defined as having affective or cognitive roots. However, definitions that favor one or the other too heavily are less helpful because they are too restrictive. An affective definition of involvement, used primarily by social psychology researchers, asserts that involvement is an enduring drive state that is attached to one's central values or ego. A number of researchers have attempted to measure this in relation to subjects' involvement with products or ideas, but learning models that show cognitions preceding attitude formation suggest this theory is not very useful. Cognitive studies of involvement have looked at the influence of involvement on attention, comprehension, and behavior, as well as on persuasion. H. Krugman's work with "bridging experiences," M. Ray's work with product differentiation, and A. Mitchell's refining of the cognitive definition to include attention and interest have proven illuminating, but research indicates that the distinction between affective and cognitive measurement is not clear. A definition that includes both types of measures encompasses comprehension, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. Measures of interest and attention, and measures of emotional involvement can be used to assess the level of individual involvement. (A diagram and thirty-four references are included.) (JC)

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Weeding out the roots of involvement: Looking for a hybrid

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Weeding out the roots of involvement: Looking for a hybrid

The construct of involvement has been used by psychologists as far back as Freud as well as by marketers and consumer behaviorists to study persuasion and the influence of advertising. Involvement has shown promise as a measure of the qualitative relationship between an individual and a stimulus. By understanding this relationship, researchers hope to better predict the role of advertising and information sources in influencing a decision.

A review of the involvement literature shows that of the many ways involvement has been conceptually defined, all can be classified as having either affective or cognitive roots. The involvement literature has primarily associated affectively-rooted conceptualizations with research in social psychology and cognitively-rooted conceptualizations with consumer behavior/marketing research (Park and Mittal, 1985, p. 1; Cohen, 1983, p. 1). In social psychology, researchers rely on the affectively-based ego-involvement construct to understand the influence of persuasive communication on attitudes. Researchers of consumer behavior favor the cognitively-based construct to examine the influence of involvement on such processes as the hierarchy-of-communication-effects. This distinction in the literature is borrowed to highlight the different conceptual paths followed by involvement researchers.

In turn, the operationalizations of involvement have favored either affective or cognitive measures of involvement, but rarely both. The remainder of this article will identify the theoretical roots of various studies of involvement and in the process show the strength of an involvement concept which encompasses both affective and cognitive components.

Involvement from affective roots

In this context, involvement has been used to explain attempts in the mass media to affect attitude change. This approach to involvement is not surprising since much of the early work taking this perspective was done in the 1940s and 1950s during the effects tradition of mass communication research when researchers assumed the impact of the mass media was strong, and the role of the media consumer was passive.

Involvement, from this perspective, is conceptually defined as an enduring drive state that is attached to one's central values or ego. Since attitudes are also conceptualized as being value or ego-based (Sherif and Sherif, 1969), involvement and attitude from this perspective are closely linked. According to the ego-involvement model, the closer the link between an attitude and an individual's central values or ego, the more an individual will be ego-involved with the situation (Ostrom and Brock, 1968). These notions are formulated as

the social judgment theory, which says that the formation of an individual's attitudes is influenced by the attitudes of others and how others will react to an individual's attitudes (Sherif and Sherif, 1967a, p. 110).

This conceptual attachment to attitudes led researchers to measure involvement by asking respondents how committed they were to a particular attitude or stand concerning an issue. This was done by measuring the range or latitude of opinions an individual accepts or rejects in relation to an issue (Sherif and Sherif, 1967a; Gantt, 1970). According to social judgment theory, highly involved individuals will have a narrow latitude of acceptance and a wide latitude of rejection; the opposite will be true for a low-involved subject (Sherif and Sherif, 1967a, Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). The focus in such research is on the attitudinal state of the individual prior to facing an information processing or attitude change situation.

Related research has altered the conceptualization and measurement of involvement somewhat, but the affective roots remain. Lastovicka and Gardner (1979) identified involvement with products as the degree to which products relate to a consumer's identity and self-concept. They measured involvement by asking respondents to agree or disagree with statements such as "I use the product to express the 'I' or 'me' within myself." After factor analysis, two underlying dimensions were identified for

product involvement: the amount of importance consumers perceived for products in their lives, and commitment to a certain brand. An attempt (Lastovicka, 1979) to predict involvement with multiple regression using these and other dimensions as predictors showed that such cognitive dimensions as knowledge and experience with the product contributed more explained variance than consumers' perceived importance.

Zaichkowsky (1984) developed an involvement scale that she claimed could be applied to products, advertising or the media. Her conceptualization of involvement was the "personal relevance of the product to the consumer based on inherent needs, values and interests." Zaichkowsky is one of the few researchers to conduct meticulous evaluations of validity and reliability of her involvement measures. However, respondent scores on the 20-scale affectively-based (e.g., items measured importance, value, relevance, desirability of product) semantic differential varied widely for many product categories, and involvement scores were sensitive to such exogenous variables as product use.

Petty and Cacioppo (1979, 1981) also conceptualized involvement as the personal relevance or importance an individual attaches to an issue. In both their studies, issue involvement was manipulated by varying the relevance of a decision to the individual (e.g., comprehensive exams will be required at your school next year [high] versus 10

years from now [low] (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981)). Manipulations of involvement were checked by asking respondents how relevant or important they perceived the issues.

Another direction in ego-involvement research has been the study of consumer commitment to a product or brand and the ways in which such commitment influences receptiveness to advertising (Robertson, 1976; Traylor, 1981). In response to Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall's (1965) conceptualization of ego-involvement as "the arousal of the individual's commitment or stand in the context of an appropriate situation (p. 65)," Traylor (1981) attempted to separate involvement from this affectively-based foundation. He found poor correlations between measures that tapped an individual's affective attachment to a particular brand and the amount of interest in the product category. Traylor concluded that: (a) commitment should be conceived as an attitudinal construct, reflecting a psychological attachment to a particular brand or a stand on an issue; and (b) involvement be attitude-void, reflecting an individual's interest in a product or issue.

Social psychological perspective. Studies taking this perspective have more in common than their conceptualizations and operationalizations of involvement. Involvement from this perspective denotes an internal state. This feature of involvement is shared by conceptualizations

of involvement that have more cognitive roots. However, the cognitive perspective gives more weight to the interaction between individual and stimulus when predicting involvement.

Proponents of the affectively-rooted conceptualization of involvement (such as Sherif and Sherif, 1967a) claim that the measurement of attitudes includes affective as well as cognitive and conative components. This condition is well documented by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). Krugman (1983) is among critics who maintain that attitudes only have an affective or "feel" component. He cites interpretations of brain research that indicate left-brain activity is cognitive and right-brain activity is affective.

Many learning theories consider cognitions and attitudes separate components, and related research evaluates these two components separately in attempting to understand how information is accepted and processed. Learning models showing cognitions preceding attitude formation suggest that conceptualizations of involvement concerned only with affect are not very useful in understanding what and how information is taken in and how it influences attitude development.

Involvement from cognitive roots

This perspective has framed involvement in a broader context, examining the influence of involvement on attention, comprehension and behavior as well as on persuasion. While involvement has been studied from this

perspective in a wide variety of settings, its role in the communication process appears more subtle than when viewed from the affective roots literature, reflecting the post-effects tradition, which assumes an active audience less affected by the mass media.

The first conceptualization of involvement to differ from ego-involvement in that it tied involvement to cognitions rather than attitudes was Krugman (1965). Although his writings have not presented a clear conceptual definition of involvement (his definitions are operational), involvement seems to proceed from the type of processing individuals employ. An important element of Krugman's conceptualization is that much of the power to evoke this processing system is due to an outside stimulus (e.g., medium or message). Although involvement is still considered individually-determined, the individual/stimulus interaction is important. The focus is on cognitive processing at a particular moment and ignores any attitudes or feelings related to the situation.

Krugman (1965, p. 365) operationalized involvement as the number of "bridging" experiences, connections or personal references per minute a respondent made between his past experience and a stimulus (medium or advertisement). Respondents who made more "bridging" experiences were considered highly involved; those with few "bridgings," as low involved.

In addition, Krugman believed that involvement did not refer to attention, interest, excitement or something that related to attitudes. This cognitive base makes involvement from his perspective much different from involvement approached from the social psychological perspective.

Krugman (1967) used this approach to involvement in a study that showed magazines to be more involving than television. Wright (1974) also found the print medium more involving than the broadcast medium in studies contrasting similar newspaper and radio messages. Involvement was measured by counting the absolute number of cognitive responses evoked by the messages.

Media involvement in both studies may have been complicated by using the same ad in different media. An advertisement good for television may not be appropriate for use in radio, newspapers or magazines. In his review, Preston (1970) suggests that differences in involvement found by Krugman and Wright between print and broadcast ads may have been a product of message content. Based on a content analysis of ads in both media, Preston found ads for products that vary in the number and type of attributes across brands (e.g., autos, computers) appear more often in magazines than in television. Preston maintains that products with differences among brands and advertisements for these products are more involving, since consumers are likely to seek out information about these differences.

According to Preston, more frequent appearance of such ads in magazines account for the difference in involvement between magazines and television. Preston did not test the assertion that ads for highly differentiated products are more involving and vice versa. Ray (1973) argues that highly differentiated products can be low involving in situations where consumers perceive a clearly superior products and develop loyalty. Specific experiments in which advertising involvement is manipulated and product differentiation controlled are not yet in the literature.

Preston also attacks the limiting nature of "bridging" experiences as measures of involvement. He maintains that such measures tap subjects' product comprehension while ignoring their attitudes toward the product. Affective dimensions of involvement have been identified as important, yet are overlooked when involvement is operationalized by Krugman (1965).

In a later study (1971), Krugman speculated that components of the electroencephalogram (particularly low wave), a record of the electric activity of the brain which reflects the degree of mental activation evoked by a stimulus, could be used to identify media involvement. This suggests that Krugman is enlarging his view of involvement to include attention or interest in a stimulus, an element he earlier disavowed. Attention and interest are additional components with strong cognitive roots.

Krugman (1966) was the first to suggest that at low involvement levels individuals exercise a different information processing sequence than the traditional learning hierarchy. Krugman claimed that persons were willing to take action, such as purchasing a product, before forming an attitude about the brand. Models by Ray (1973) and DeBruicker (1979) suggest that a characteristic of the product, perceived differentiation among a set of alternatives, interacts with involvement to explain better the processing sequence individuals are likely to use in a given situation.

Ray (1973) reasons that perceived product differentiation affects the processing sequences only when involvement is high. He argues that behavior would be followed by attitude development, then information processing and storage in a high involvement, low perceived product differentiation situation. In a high-high (high involvement, high product differentiation) situation, the traditional learning model is invoked; in low involvement, the low involvement model (cognitive-conative-affective) is at work at both levels of product differentiation.

DeBruicker (1979) builds on Ray's model and argues that processing differs at the low involvement level as well. His model showed that the low involvement processing sequence occurs in low involvement, high perceived product differentiation situations. But in the low-low situation,

cognitions are followed by behavior with no attitudes being formed.

These models suggest that the interaction between an individual and a stimulus influence the type of involvement and the type of information processing sequence utilized by an individual. Researchers responded to these models by investigating consumer involvement with various elements of the communication situation, since knowledge of an individual's involvement with a medium, message or product would help communicators predict how information would be taken in. In the process, another cognitive-based conceptualization of involvement has arisen.

Mitchell (1981) defines involvement as a psychological state variable whose activation properties are evoked by a stimulus. These activations are cognitive responses like the amount of interest, attention and mental activity focused on the stimulus. The level of involvement is determined by the intensity of the state and is influenced by the situation.

Researchers attempting to identify involvement for various components of the communication situation (e.g., issues, products, television programs) exploited this definition, because it separates the consequences of involvement from the involvement state. To use such information processing consequences as "bridging" experiences as a measure of involvement, involvement must be

viewed as the sole determinant of the processing scheme. If it is not, alternate explanations for the "bridgings" limit the explanatory power of involvement. For example, Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) claim type of product and the length of time between purchases affects the kind of comments or "bridgings" individuals make after being exposed to advertisements.

In addition, Mitchell's definition, which introduced attention and interest to the involvement concept, freed researchers from having to use "bridging" experiences to measure involvement. Kapustin (1970) argues that the act of measuring "bridging" experiences is itself highly involving, and is hence inadequate for detecting low involvement learning. And Krugman (1965) recognizes that more sensitive measures (e.g., recognition) are needed to record low involvement effects.

A recent definition of involvement by Rothschild (1984) is attractive, because (a) it conceptualizes involvement as a state, which implies that it can be volatile and subject to individual differences, and (b) it avoids planting either affective or cognitive roots into involvement. However, this definition is too non-commital, establishing neither cognitive, affective or conative roots to explain the involvement construct.

Summary

The published research indicates that the distinction between affective and cognitive measurement is not clear (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). The purpose of underscoring this distinction is to point out the need for an involvement construct that avoids either an exclusively affective or exclusively cognitive foundation. Inconsistencies in the conceptualizations, operationalizations and results of involvement studies suggest that one-sided approaches to involvement have not mapped the domain of this construct. A definition embracing both the affective and cognitive intensity directed to a stimulus may improve future studies of program involvement.

Definition of involvement

Building on the definitions developed by Mitchell (1981) and Rothschild (1984), a global definition of involvement is arrived at:

> Involvement refers to the state of an individual aware of and engaged in an interaction with a stimulus. The state of involvement is driven by the individual's relationship to the stimulus. It may be characterized by cognitive, affective and behavioral activity in the individual. Intensity

of these characteristics of involvement as well as their collective number indicate that involvement with a stimulus is intense (high) or not (low).

By avoiding direct references either to affective-related components like values (Sherif and Sherif, 1969), or cognitive-related components such as connections between stimulus and past experience (Krugman, 1965), this definition implies that both affective and cognitive motivation or arousal must be considered when identifying involvement. This more global assessment of interaction between individual and stimulus may improve consistency in classifying involving products, media and programs.

This definition also considers information-seeking behaviors evoked by the stimulus important when identifying involvement. These behaviors may include active seeking of product or program information, outbursts of thoughts or emotions during media use, or lengthy comparative shopping expeditions, depending on the application of involvement. These behaviors are actively evoked when involvement is high and are missing in low involvement conditions according to researchers (Ray, 1973; Robertson, 1976; Lastovicka, 1979; Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984) who have contributed to the involvement research tradition.

This definition has the advantage of focusing attention on the state of the individual when exposed to a stimulus

(e.g., program). The state of a viewer when watching television programs and advertising is information advertisers must know to improve message placement, but information not available from program ratings alone.

Like many other concepts used in the communication literature (e.g., brand loyalty, source credibility) involvement is unobservable. Consequently, antecedents or consequences that are linked to involvement must be used as measures of involvement. The use of consequences to measure involvement, especially cognitive-related consequences such as amount of information processed, has not escaped criticism (Cohen, 1983; Park and Mittal, 1984). Park and Mittal (1984) claim that inferring involvement from consequences requires a monotonic relationship between involvement and consequences. The authors cite studies by Berlyne (1960) and others that show a curvilinear relationship between a consequence popular for measuring involvement (amount of information processing) and involvement. However, the rarity of reliable and validated cognitive scales (Smith and Swinyard, 1982, p. 83) requires the use of less reliable cognitive measures reflecting amount of processing. Measures like recognition, aided recall or comprehension tests that are more sensitive to cognitive activity at early stages in the processing scheme (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984) may tap the cognitive dimension of involvement.

Involvement is thus a function of at least four classes of variables:

a. Comprehension--the intensity of interest and attention devoted to a stimulus which results in the processing of information regarding the stimulus.
b. Emotions--those evoked by the stimulus. With program involvement for example, relevant emotions include suspense, excitement and feelings of participation.
c. Attitudes--evaluative tendencies evoked by the stimulus. More extreme attitudes (Lastovicka,1979) and wide latitudes of rejection (Sherif and Sherif, 1967b) have been identified as reflections of high involvement.
d. Behaviors related to information seeking--the intensity of information seeking tendencies evoked by the stimulus. For program involvement, relevant behaviors include reading previews of programs and overt reactions during program viewing.

The interaction of these variables is visually depicted in Figure 1. A stimulus, whether it be a product, message or program, evokes levels of interest and attention as well as emotions and attitudes that interact to produce a level of involvement, which in turn will determine the type of processing. Measures of variables adjacent to involvement in the model will provide more valid reflections of consumer involvement than measures of variables further from involvement's position in the model.

The cognitive dimension of involvement can best be tapped through well-developed measures of interest and attention as well as less reliable measures of low level information processing (e.g., recognition, recall tests). Interest is a cognitive component of involvement

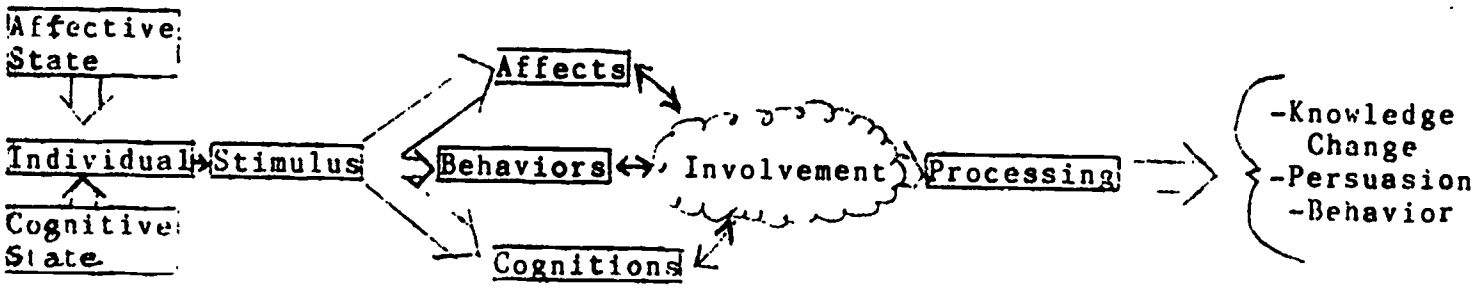
consistently identified in studies of media, message, program and product involvement.

Recall of memory cues (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), which pertain directly and indirectly to the stimuli for which involvement is being measured, can be used as surrogate cognitive measures to provide additional evidence for interpreting the validity of cognitive measures. For example, in a study of involvement with sports programs (Pokrywczynski, 1986), recall of information directly related to the sports event (e.g., names of players, eventual winner) and peripheral information about the event (e.g., location of the event, name of the announcer) was consistent with other cognitive measures of involvement with sports programs.

The affective dimension of involvement can be tapped through measures of the intensity of emotions evoked by the stimuli. Program involvement measures have focused on the suspense, excitement and empathic leanings toward characters in the program have been used individually to tap the intensity of interaction between viewer and program (Kennedy, 1971; Thorson et al 1985). Attitudes such as the amount of liking, enjoyment and importance have also been used to tap affective intensity.

Figure 1

THE GLOBAL MODEL OF INVOLVEMENT
WITH A STIMULUS



Effects:	High involvement	Low Involvement
	Strong attitudes	Weak attitudes
	Strong feelings	Weak feelings
	Wide latitudes of rejection	Narrow latitudes of rejection
	More thoughts provoked	Less thoughts provoked
	More comprehension/recall	Less comprehension/ recall

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