

The Effect of Involvement on Utilitarian and Hedonic Products Knowledge

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to examine the effect of involvement on objective and subjective knowledge in two types of utilitarian and hedonic products. This paper emphasizes the importance and implications of advertising messages for different types of products. A total of 380 questionnaires were distributed to university students. Involvement, the independent variable, was measured using Zaichkowsky's Personal Involvement Inventory (PII); consumer knowledge was the dependent variable; and product type was the moderator variable. The results show that involvement affects changes in knowledge, but this effect is different for products and types of knowledge. Perhaps usage experience influences the relationship between involvement and consumer knowledge. Organizations should consider the usage experience of the target market in relation to utilitarian products for advertising messages. In relation to hedonic products, motivational and aesthetic characteristics should be the focus of advertising messages.

Key words: Involvement • Objective Knowledge • Subjective Knowledge • Usage Experience • Utilitarian Product • Hedonic Product

INTRODUCTION

Good business is based on consumer behavior. Consumer behavior consists of seeking purchases as well as using, evaluating and disposing products or services [1].

One of the troublesome issues confronting researchers in consumer behavior is the relationship between product involvement as a driver of consumer information processing and product knowledge as a proxy for consumers' information processing abilities [2]. Understanding the effect of involvement and consumer product knowledge can be useful in composing memorable messages that guide consumers toward the intended brand.

This research examines the effect of involvement on objective and subjective knowledge in utilitarian and hedonic products. The results of past research, which are contradictory, have tested the relations between product knowledge and involvement without considering the product type.

Previous research into consumer behavior has emphasized the relationship between product involvement and product knowledge [3, 4]. Such research, however, has only implicitly noted the relationship between the two

factors. The correlation coefficients between the two factors has been an incidental result rather than a major topic [2]. Batra and Ray [5] point out that the correlation between these two variables is strong. Sujan [6] argues that these two variables are independent in information processing. In sum, the correlation between product involvement and product knowledge has not been carefully examined in the research, even though they are key variables in consumer behavior. Batra and Ray [5] show that the correlation coefficient between product involvement and subjective product knowledge of products is 0.49. Celsi and Olson [3] show that the correlation coefficient between product involvement and product knowledge (sum of objective knowledge, product use experience, product class familiarity) of tennis is 0.61. Sujan [6] shows that the correlation coefficient between product involvement and objective product knowledge of a camera is 0.51.

While some research reports a high correlation between involvement and product knowledge, other studies find a low correlation between the two variables. Zaichkowsky [4] reports that the correlation coefficients between product involvement and objective product knowledge of 35-mm cameras and red wine are 0.14 and 0.08, respectively and that they are not statistically

significant. Gensch and Javalgi [7] classify fertilizer buyers into high- and low-involvement groups and find no significant difference in subjective knowledge between the two groups. These research results imply that a consumer's high product involvement may not be indicative of high product knowledge. The only research which has tested the relations between product knowledge and involvement with respect to the type of product was conducted by Park and Moon [2]. The results of this research show that correlation between involvement and objective knowledge in utilitarian products (e.g. computers) is more than hedonic products (e.g. blue jeans); correlation coefficient 0.40 ($P < .05$) has been reported, while correlation coefficient between involvement and objective knowledge of hedonic products is 0.17 ($P < .05$). In addition, the correlation between involvement and subjective knowledge in hedonic products is more than in utilitarian products: the correlation coefficient is 0.60 ($P < .05$), while correlation coefficient of involvement and subjective knowledge in utilitarian products is 0.39 ($P < .05$).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Involvement: Involvement has been a critical variable in many marketing, social psychology and consumer behavior studies [8]. This conceptualization stems from the notion of "ego-involvement" in social psychology, where involvement is treated as the intensity of an attitude [9, 10]. Involvement is a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests [11]. At a macro level, involvement has been described as an internal state of arousal comprised of three properties: intensity, direction and persistence. Intensity is a person's degree of involvement or motivation. It falls along a continuum of high to low involvement and varies among products, situations and individuals. Direction is defined as the object or issue toward which an individual is motivated, while persistence is the duration of the involvement intensity [12].

The most rigorous attempt to categorize definitions of involvement is Laaksonen's (1997) classification of cognitively-based, individual-state and response-based approaches. These categories resemble those of Rothschild (1979), who suggests three forms of involvement: enduring, situational and response. This distinction provided the foundation for later research [10].

Enduring involvement (EI) is an ongoing concern with a product or activity that transcends situational influences [13]. It adopts the social psychological perspective following Laaksonen's cognitively-based

approach [10]. The major characteristics of enduring involvement are having a deep interest in the product or activity, finding it extremely enjoyable to act upon this interest and identifying oneself with the product or activity [14].

Situational involvement (SI) corresponds to the individual-state category of definitions suggested by Laaksonen (1997). This type of involvement represents a mental state and has nothing to do with cognitive elements such as values and needs. Unlike enduring involvement, SI is a temporary interest or concern with an object, triggered by a cause such as perceived risk.

Response involvement (RI) involves a behavioral orientation of involvement reflecting time and/or intensity of effort expended in the undertaking of behaviors [10].

Consumer Product Knowledge: The examination of consumer knowledge has a rich tradition in the marketing literature [15]. Consumer knowledge is an important construct in understanding consumer behaviors such as information search and information processing [16]. Knowledge is the body of facts and principles (i.e., information) accumulated by mankind (i.e., stored in memory) about a domain [17]. The degree of knowledge that consumers have about a product will influence the cues used to make product quality assessments [18].

Researchers agree that there are different types of product knowledge [19]. The measures of consumer product class knowledge used in previous studies fall into three categories. The first measures an individual's perception of how much s/he knows. The second category measures the amount, type, or organization of what an individual actually has stored in memory. The third category measures the amount of purchasing or usage experience with the product [20].

These three types of knowledge (i.e. subjective knowledge, objective knowledge and usage experience) are generally considered distinct, even though they are often positively correlated [19].

Differences between measures of subjective knowledge (i.e., what individuals perceive that they know) and measures of objective knowledge (i.e., what is actually stored in memory) occur when people do not accurately perceive how much or how little they actually know, assuming that the measures are equally sensitive. Of course, measures of objective knowledge can never be entirely objective. That is, such measures depend on some form of communication from the individual about his/her knowledge. Nevertheless, measures of objective knowledge are conceptually and operationally distinct from measures of subjective knowledge [20].

Objective knowledge is accurate information about the product class stored in long-term memory, while self-assessed knowledge or subjective knowledge is people's perceptions of what or how much they know about a product class [16, 21]. While objective product class knowledge is likely to influence information processing strategies, subjective product class knowledge is more likely to affect consumers' confidence in using information stored in memory [22]. Consumers with high levels of objective knowledge have been found to make more precise distinctions between important product and service attributes, disregarding those product characteristics that are less critical to making a sound assessment of a quality or buying decision [21]. In contrast, consumers relying on subjective knowledge lack an extensive base of pertinent information upon which to draw, leading to a limited recall of brands, models and specific product attributes [23].

Researchers interested in usage experience view an individual's previous product usage/experience as one indicator of objective knowledge. Among these researchers are Marks and Olson (1981), Mason and Bequette (1998) and Sujana and Dekleva (1987). The second approach measures subjective knowledge and focuses on how much an individual perceives s/he knows about that product. According to this approach, previous product usage/experience may be viewed as one indicator of subjective knowledge [24, 25]. Thus, previous product usage experience has been used as an indicator of both subjective and objective knowledge [26].

Alba and Hutchinson [27] propose that consumer knowledge has two components: familiarity and expertise. Familiarity is the number of product-related experiences that the consumer has accumulated. Expertise is the ability to perform product-related tasks. Other researchers believe that expertise is the result of two separate but interrelated dimensions: objective and subjective knowledge [28].

Product Type: Marketing scholars have long recognized the differential effects of product type on consumer behavior and have developed ways of classifying products [39]. Batra and Ahtola (1990) state that "consumers purchase goods and services and perform consumption behaviors for two basic reasons: (1) consummatory affective (hedonic) gratification (from sensory attributes) and (2) instrumental, utilitarian reasons." This is a two-dimensional conceptualization of consumer attitudes. The first dimension is a hedonic

dimension resulting from sensations derived from the experience of using products; the second is a utilitarian dimension derived from functions performed by products [30].

Holbrook and Hirschman [31] propose two types of consumption:

Utilitarian Product: This type of produce has tangible benefits for consumers [31]. In Western culture, such products are often labeled as practical or necessary [32]. Utilitarian products are purchased and consumed to satisfy consumer's practical or functional needs [29]. Utilitarian consumer behavior has been described as ergic, task-related and rational [33]. In the marketing literature, choice and decision-making with respect to utilitarian products are informed by the utility maximizing perspective [34]. Thus, the consumption of utilitarian products is more instrumental. The motivation initiating the need for a utilitarian product suggests that these products are primarily thought of in terms of their functional performance [35].

Hedonic Product: The purpose of a hedonic product is for fun, amusement, fantasy, arousal, sensory stimulation, or enjoyment [31]. Hedonic, pleasure-oriented consumption is motivated by the desire for sensual pleasure, fantasy and fun. In Western culture, such products are often labeled as frivolous or decadent. Such goods can cause consumers to experience feelings of guilt before, during and after consumption [32].

The concept of hedonic consumption recognizes that individuals consume many types of products because of the feelings and images that are associated with the product. This stems from an underlying belief that people buy products not only for what they can do, but for also what they mean. Thinking about the product and fantasizing about the use of the product achieves the desired values, so the product is cognitively experienced as hedonic. The cognitive motives driving the consumption of hedonic products are arguably the need to satisfy symbolic and value-expressive motives such as ego gratification, social acceptance and intellectual stimulation. In addition, hedonic products are typically considered in terms of possibilities for self-enhancement and subjective meanings of the intangible product features [35]. Hedonic products have pleasure potential, whereas utilitarian products perform functions in everyday life. Products with a high pleasure potential provide non-tangible, symbolic benefits and are likely to

hold greater potential for evoking positive emotions in a consumer [36]. Hedonic and utilitarian values reflect two contrasting paradigms in consumer behavior theory. Specifically, the information-processing paradigm views consumer behavior as objective, rational and oriented toward problem-solving. In contrast, in the experiential paradigm, consumer behavior pursues the more subjective, emotional and symbolic aspects of consumption [37].

Research Hypothesis

Involvement and Objective Knowledge: Distinctions between two types of product lead to different psychological processes when consumers evaluate a product [31]. The evaluation of utilitarian products tends to be more cognitively-driven, while the evaluation of hedonic products tends to be highly subjective and affect-driven, implying that cognitively-based processes are less important [29, 34]. Hirschman [38] points out that the most important judgment criteria for self-expressive products such as fine art are subjective and abstract attributes such as aesthetic pleasure. For utilitarian products, the criteria are objective, functional and the product's ability to solve a problem. The reason for the presence of different information processing procedures depending on different product types is that the involvement type is likely to depend on the product type. Accordingly, a more focused discussion of involvement type is essential to understand the reason for the different evaluation criteria. Previous research has found that consumers' involvement with a particular product can be classified as utilitarian (cognitive) and hedonic (affective) based on the motivation for the interest in the product. Previous research points out that the information processing method can be a function of the type of involvement [2]. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is provided:

H1: The effect of consumers' product involvement on objective product knowledge is greater for utilitarian products than for hedonic products.

Involvement and Subjective Knowledge: While objective knowledge is likely to influence information processing strategies, subjective knowledge is more likely to affect consumers' confidence in using information stored in memory [22]. Some research, for example, Bruks [20] indicates that subjective product knowledge is related to motivational factors such as confidence in decision-making ability. He adds that objective product knowledge

is related to actual information processing ability. According to this discussion, involvement that is directly related to the motivational aspect is more likely to be connected with subjective knowledge than objective knowledge. In relation to this, Zaichkowsky [4] notes that there is a risk of measuring product involvement instead of the complexity of memory structure if subjective knowledge or product-use experience are used to measure knowledge structure. These discussions imply that involvement can be more closely related to subjective knowledge than to objective knowledge because of the motivational aspect of subjective knowledge.

Moreover, the relation between product involvement and subjective product knowledge can be changed according to the product type. The possibility of strong motivation or subjectivity is likely to be higher for a hedonic than for a utilitarian product. The fact that consumers have an interest in a particular product because of self-expressive needs means that they want to enhance their self-esteem and project an ideal image to the external world through consumption of the product. Therefore, it is difficult for consumers to recognize that they are not knowledgeable about concrete attributes of a hedonic product [2]. The following hypothesis is based on this reasoning:

H2: The effect of consumers' product involvement on subjective product knowledge is higher for hedonic products than for utilitarian products.

Objective Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge and Product Type:

Another topic that has been considered in the consumer knowledge field is the correlation between objective and subjective knowledge. Bruks [20] reported a correlation coefficient between objective and subjective knowledge of a sewing machine as 0.54 and Cordell [39] reported a correlation coefficient between objective and subjective knowledge of cameras as 0.31. However, the effect of product type on this correlation was not considered. Park and Moon [2] mentioned it as a sub-result in their research and proposed that the correlation coefficient between objective and subjective knowledge of utilitarian products is 0.603 and 0.264 for hedonic products. Based on these results and research performed in the domain of consumer knowledge, a third hypothesis is expressed as followings:

H3: The correlation between objective and subjective knowledge is higher for utilitarian products than for hedonic products.

Methodology:

Data Collection and Analysis

Product Selection: The objective of the first phase was to select test products. A total of 120 college students participated in the two-phase test. Subjects were asked to answer the questionnaires regarding product type using the five-item scale developed by Vaughn [40]. In the first step, ten products were chosen based on past research: computers (desktop and laptop), mobile phones, watches, soda, MP3 players, perfume and eau de cologne, digital cameras, pizza, mineral water and automobiles. Questionnaires were distributed to 60 students. After the data analysis, questionnaires on six products were distributed to 60 students. Products included computers, mobile phones, watches, perfume and eau de cologne, digital cameras and pizza. Results show that computers yielded the best score among utilitarian products with an average of 2.53 and perfume and eau de cologne obtained the best score among hedonic products with an average of 2.47. The computer was considered a utilitarian product, because students used it for research.

Pretest: The pretest, which measured reliability, asked 70 college students to answer questionnaires, with three sections designed to measure involvement, subjective knowledge and objective knowledge. SPSS data analysis indicated that the Cronbach's α of the questionnaires was 0.899 and 0.889 for the utilitarian and hedonic products, respectively. The Cronbach's α of the 20 items of involvement were 0.904 and 0.895 for the laptop group and perfume group, respectively. The Cronbach's α of the three items of subjective knowledge were 0.719 and 0.730. The Cronbach's α of the product type questionnaire were 0.75 and 0.723 in first and second phase, respectively.

Main Study: Data were collected in the main study by measuring the participants involvement as well as subjective and objective knowledge of utilitarian and hedonic products through face-to-face interviews and questionnaires with participation of college students in four management colleges in the Tehran area. Based on number of students in four colleges (10400) and with regard to Krejcie, Morgan and Cohen (1970) sample size table, 380 students through stratified random sampling method selected as sample. The number of 400 questionnaire distributed, that 200 students was given a questionnaire about the utilitarian product: a laptop and other group of 200 was given a questionnaire about the hedonic product: perfume. In total 380 completed questionnaire were obtained, that 192 questionnaire for

utilitarian product and 188 questionnaire for hedonic product gathered. The Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) scale developed and validated by Zaichkowsky [11] and most extensively used [42, 8, 2, 43, 44] to measure involvement was employed. The measurement scale for subjective knowledge was composed of three items based on previous research [20, 41, 2]. The measurement scale for objective knowledge was composed of ten questions for each product based on previous research [2, 16, 19].

Data Analysis: Structural equation modeling (SEM) with Lisrel software was used for the data analysis. SEM is a comprehensive statistical approach for testing hypotheses about relations between observed and latent variables. It combines features of factor analysis and multiple regressions for studying both the measurement and the structural properties of theoretical models. SEM is formally defined by two sets of linear equations called the inner model and the outer model. The inner model specifies the relationships between unobserved or latent variables and the outer model specifies the relationships between latent variables and their associated observed or manifest variables [45]. SEM methodology can account for independent variable errors and model multiple relationships simultaneously, which results in more powerful tests of mean differences [46]. To improve the questionnaire and eliminate irrelevant questions, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed. To ensure the adequacy of the sample, the KMO test was used. The results of EFA showed that for 20 items addressing involvement with the utilitarian product, Items 4, 5, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18 were unsuitable; for 10 questions addressing objective knowledge of the utilitarian product, Questions 1, 3, 6, 9 were irrelevant. Among 20 items addressing involvement with the hedonic product, Questions 7, 11, 15 were unsuitable; of the three items addressing subjective knowledge, Item 3 was unsuitable; regarding objective knowledge, Questions 6, 8, 9 were unsuitable. To test the hypotheses, SEM was performed and hypotheses were tested. To test the third hypothesis, the Kendall correlation coefficient was used.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis show that involvement affects product knowledge (combination of objective and subjective knowledge). In other words, involvement is representative of changes in product knowledge, but this effect is different in utilitarian and hedonic products. The effect of involvement on utilitarian product knowledge was 55%, while this effect was 57%

for hedonic product knowledge. The results obtained for these models showed excellent fit (RMSEA = 0.045; GFI = 0.92; AGFI = 0.91) for the utilitarian and hedonic product models (RMSEA = 0.075; GFI = 0.94; AGFI = 0.92).

Research findings in this respect as well as recent research on these factors report a strong correlation between these two factors.

Testing of the research hypotheses produced the following results:

H1: Involvement has no effect on objective knowledge and the relation between them is not meaningful; in other words, involvement is not representative of objective knowledge. The numbers obtained for the in t-value model were 1.04 and 0.90 for utilitarian and hedonic products, respectively. With respect to $\alpha=0.05$, the relation is not meaningful, so the first hypothesis is not supported.

H2: Research findings suggest the effect of involvement on subjective knowledge of two types of products. The effect of involvement on subjective knowledge of the utilitarian product was 56% and 52% for the hedonic product. Involvement represented 56% of the subjective knowledge of the utilitarian product and 52% of the subjective knowledge of the hedonic product. The numbers obtained for the in t-value model were 6.34 and 4.57 for utilitarian and hedonic products, respectively. Thus, the second hypothesis, which claims that involvement has a greater effect on subjective knowledge in hedonic products, is not supported.

H3: To test this hypothesis, the Kendall tau-b correlation coefficient was used. The correlation coefficient between objective knowledge and subjective knowledge was 0.187 for the utilitarian product and 0.125 for the hedonic product. The correlations are low level but Those are significant at a 95% significance level. This supports the third hypothesis.

Results show that involvement affects product knowledge. These results suggest that consumers have some involvement in product purchases and are interested in seeking information and knowledge about the product. The more involvement there is, the more consumer interest there is and the greater the effort to obtain more knowledge.

The findings of the hypotheses test show dramatic results. With respect to selected products and their comparison with research products, it is likely that

something else should be considered. Usage experience can affect this relation as a moderator variable. Some researchers have suggested that high usage experience and high knowledge of others can affect the results of research [2]. As stated earlier, usage experience is one knowledge type. Some researchers argue that it is the cause of increasing subjective knowledge and some claim that it increases objective knowledge [26]. One of the reasons for this claim is that according to the data, a very small section of the sample use utilitarian products high subjective knowledge. For this reason, the effect of involvement on subjective knowledge of this product is greater. With respect to the hedonic product, since more people in the sample use it and it is a hedonic product, they have more subjective knowledge than objective knowledge.

Organizations should consider the usage experience of the target market in relation to utilitarian products. If consumers have usage experience, then firms should focus on functional properties and presentation of factual information with respect to product performance in advertising messages in order to increase objective knowledge. If usage experience is low, then organizations should focus on motivational and aesthetic characteristics and present value information on their advertising messages. In relation to hedonic products, the effective factors that encourage consumer to purchase are motivational and aesthetic characteristics, which should be focus on in advertising messages.

The limitations of research are the selection of only one representative product and the limited distribution of the questionnaire. To obtain valid results, it is necessary to consider product types, product knowledge and usage experience.

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