

COGNITIVE AND ATTITUDINAL EFFECTS OF INVOLVEMENT

Tatiana GAUGAȘ

Academia de Studii Economice din Moldova

Eficiența mesajelor publicitare este pe larg influențată de nivelul de implicare a audienței. În acest articol se studiază teoriile existente privind atenția și nivelul de percepere a informației ce influențează implicarea consumatorilor în perceperea mesajelor publicitare. Sunt analizate și caracterizate cele patru niveluri de implicare și participare a audienței: atenția prealabilă, atenția locală, înțelegerea și elaborarea atitudinilor, fiind aranjate gradual de la cel mai mic nivel de implicare spre cel mai mare.

There is a consensus that high involvement means (approximately) personal relevance or importance. Further, it is generally accepted that communication influences can occur with low involvement, and that the mechanism of communication impact for low involvement is different from that for high involvement. However, theorists have shown little agreement regarding the theoretical mechanisms of involvement, interpreting it in terms of concepts such as extent of personal connections (Krugman), linkage to central values (Sherif and Hovland), complexity of decision making (Houston and Rothschild), peripheral vs. central cognitive processes (Petty and Cacioppo), and level of arousal (Mitchell; Burnkrant and Sawyer).

Because of the lack of consensus about the processes underlying variations in involvement, considerable uncertainty remains not only about just what the consequences of involvement are, but also about how antecedent variables influence involvement. Necessarily, then, there is also considerable uncertainty about how to apply the concept of involvement in predicting consumers' responses to variations in marketing strategy [1].

This uncertainty takes the form, for example, of theoretical interpretations that predict both greater cognitive change and greater resistance to cognitive change with high involvement. It is a major task in the analysis of consumer involvement to identify, in terms of psychological theory the processes that constitute variations in involvement [2].

Krugman identified high involvement with a specific cognitive process that he called „personal connections” or „bridging experiences”. A quite different conception of the cognitive mediation of involvement appeared in analyses influenced by Sherif and Hovland's theory that involvement is interpretable as the linkage of new information to central or ego-involved attitudes. By tapping into regions of strong belief, high involvement yields resistance to cognitive change or a narrowing of the range of acceptable opinion positions [3].

A still different interpretation of involvement appears in Houston and Rothschild's proposal that consumer decision processes (response involvement) increase in complexity with increasing involvement. Yet another process interpretation of low vs. high involvement is Petty and Cacioppo's distinction between peripheral and central routes to persuasion. In contrast to the foregoing conceptions, which treat the mechanism of high involvement as basically cognitive, Mitchell has conceived of involvement as a high level of arousal or drive. Similarly, Burnkrant and Sawyer have conceptualized involvement as an increased drive state, which they designate as “need for information” [4].

In an influential paper, Craik and Lockhart proposed that the level (*or* depth) to which an incoming message is processed determines the durability of memory for it. Although subsequent research has led to some modification of this formulation (Baddeley; Cermak and Craik; Craik and Tulving) it has continued to support the principle that memory for an event depends on the amount and nature of cognitive activity that accompanies it. The interpretation of audience involvement incorporates this central principle of the levels-of-processing analysis. That is, we shall associate the idea of increases in involvement with qualitatively distinct forms (levels) of cognitive activity that (1) require increasing amounts of attentional capacity, and (2) produce increasingly durable effects on memory.

The four levels differ in the abstractness of symbolic activity used in the analysis of an incoming message. The progression from *pre-attention* (the lowest level) through *elaboration* (the highest) is assumed to be accompanied by the allocation of increasing capacity, which is required for increasingly abstract analyses of incoming information.

Pre-attention uses little capacity. The second level, *focal attention*, uses modest capacity to focus on one message source, and to decipher the message's sensory content into categorical codes (object, name, word). Further capacity is required for *comprehension*, which analyzes speech or text by constructing a propositional representation of it. The fourth level of involvement, *elaboration*, uses still more capacity to enable the integration of message content with the audience member's existing conceptual knowledge.

The four hypothesized levels of audience involvement can be related to the opening description of two traveling musicians. Recall that the husband listened carefully to the advertisement of a concert by one of his favorite soloists. Perhaps he was thinking simultaneously about previous occasions on which he had heard this performer and about how to adjust his schedule to be able to go to the concert (elaboration). He may have continued to attend well to the immediately following advertisement for audio equipment (comprehension), but this ad may not have prompted elaboration, perhaps because it was not relevant to any future action. The next advertisement – a familiar soft drink commercial – may have been listened to (focal attention) because attention had not yet been diverted elsewhere, but the following ad – for a clothing sale – was ignored (pre-attention), and that was followed by sleep.

This illustration gives only an intuitive introduction to the analysis of audience involvement. The conception of four levels should become clearer as considering their relation to research procedures, to laboratory findings, and to advertising practices.

When a novel or unfamiliar stimulus is initially presented, it elicits an orienting response, which consists of mild physiological arousal together with physical orienting of receptors toward the source of stimulation. The orienting response corresponds to focal attention being directed toward the novel stimulus. If the same stimulus is repeated several times, it ceases to elicit the orienting response. This elimination – or *habituation* – of the orienting response corresponds to a reduction of involvement from focal attention to pre-attention. Orienting responses can also be elicited by familiar stimuli that are especially significant, such as one's own name, or by cues that predict the occurrence of affectively significant events.

Selective listening research uses the shadowing task, in which the subject repeats a verbal message aloud as it is being heard. This task commands focal attention and also effectively prevents focusing on any concurrent auditory message. Thus a second message that is presented simultaneously with the shadowed message remains at the level of pre-attention. Further, the cognitive demands of repeating one message and rejecting a second may use enough capacity to prevent the subject's involvement in the attended message from progressing to any level of involvement higher than focal attention.

Research on levels of processing in memory has developed procedures, referred to as *orienting tasks that* constrain the nature of a subject's processing of experimental stimuli. The design of orienting tasks assumes that stimuli are ordinarily processed through a series of stages of analysis. The more stages used in the analysis of any stimulus, the „deeper” is the processing of that stimulus. Some tasks – for example, judging whether a word is printed in upper or lower case – are intended to use only sensory stages of analysis. These sensory orienting tasks require only the focal attention level of involvement. The somewhat more demanding task of judging whether or *not* two words are synonyms is assumed to require complex semantic analysis in addition to sensory analysis, and is placed at the comprehension level. A still more complex orienting task obliges subjects to judge whether or not each of a series of trait adjectives describes them. This self-reference task, which requires judgments based on the relation of stored knowledge about oneself to current input, has been placed in elaboration.

In some recent studies of human memory, the levels-of processing conception of successive stages of processing has been supplemented by the assumption that encountered events give rise to prepositional representations. Greater cognitive elaboration of an event consists of a greater number of propositions based on the event. Among the relevant research procedures are ones that have been used to vary comprehension of a message. For example, Bransford and Johnson wrote stories that were virtually incomprehensible without additional context, such as a title *for* the story or a picture that showed the action being described. Reading such stories without the needed context, effectively constrained subjects' involvement to the focal attention level, permitting little or no comprehension or elaboration. Addition of the context permitted comprehension. Still greater involvement (elaboration) can be achieved by instructions that induce the subject to generate visual imagery or additional story details that supplement a provided text [5].

In recent years, the cognitive response approach has been influential in research on the persuasion process. In this approach the audience is conceived of as an active processor of the persuasive message. Research procedures that encourage active cognitive responding – e.g., explicit instructions to respond verbally to the message or instructions to improvise a message from materials provided by the experimenter – correspond to the elaboration level of involvement. This active cognitive responding also occurs when a communication is ego-involving, and especially when it presents a disagreeable opinion, in which case elaboration takes the form of counter arguing.

The presence of a mild distracter may occupy enough attentional capacity to interfere with cognitive responding, while still permitting comprehension. Examples of such mild distraction that have been used in persuasion research include accompanying a spoken persuasive message with an irrelevant film of abstract art or asking the message’s audience to focus on judging the speaker’s personality. Messages that are known to be agreeable, that are presented by trustworthy sources, or that are difficult (but not impossible) to understand may all be received at the comprehension level, without elaborative cognitive responding. To lower the level of involvement to focal attention, the experimenter can use messages that are moderately familiar, that are accompanied by sufficient distraction to disrupt comprehension, or that are constructed so as to be incomprehensible. Involvement may be reduced further to the level of pre-attention by using distracters that are sufficiently strong to draw focal attention to another source, or by using messages that are either very familiar or very unimportant.

Four Principles for the Control of Involvement

The Table summarizes a variety of laboratory procedures for inducing the different levels of involvement. Although these laboratory methods are typically not directly transferable to natural settings, still the principles that underlie them are:

1. *Bottom-up (data-driven) processing.* When low-level analyses detect indications of significant message content, the next higher level of analysts is invoked.

2. *Top-down (concept-driven) processing.* Analysis at the level of comprehension or elaboration may reveal that the message is unimportant or very familiar, as a consequence of which the use of capacity for comprehension may be suspended, or attention *may* be *directed* elsewhere,

3. *Competence (data) limitation.* Involvement is limited to a low level if the content of a message cannot be analyzed at a higher level—for example, words may be in a foreign language, they may be presented too rapidly, or they may be masked by noise.

4. *Capacity (resource) limitation.* Because high level of involvement are demanding of a limited resource (attentional capacity), involvement in one message is necessarily limited when capacity is allocated to some other message.

The first two of these principles make use of a well known contrast between bottom-up and top-down (or data-driven vs. concept-driven) processing. The fourth principle (capacity limitation) makes it clear that involvement can be distributed at different levels to several concurrent messages, rather than there being a single level that characterizes the person as a whole. However, when involvement with any one message is at the level of focal attention or higher, the limited nature of attention capacity makes it unlikely that involvement with any concurrent message will exceed the pre-attention level.

Immediate Effects

Summarizing present knowledge of the cognitive and attitudinal consequences of the four levels of involvement we conclude: For all levels, the most immediate effect is to analyze codes produced by prior processing. For the first three levels, other immediate effects are to activate the next higher level of involvement if analysis detects sufficiently important content, and to produce representations that can be operated on by the next higher representational level. For example, the comprehension level requires symbolic word codes for construction of prepositional representations, and the elaboration level makes use of these prepositional codes for integration with existing conceptual knowledge. These immediate effects determine which among several concurrent messages receives limited attention capacity, and to what level this message will be analyzed.

Enduring Effects

It is, however, the enduring effects of the different levels may determine the impact of advertising messages on their audiences. The lowest level, pre-attention, has no definitely established – but some controversially claimed – enduring effects. The three higher levels are associated with a pattern of increasingly strong effects.

With pre-attention, stimuli receive extensive immediate analysis that produces little or no lasting effect. Evidence for this pre-attentive analysis is plentifully available from research in the orienting response and selective listening traditions. Pre-attentive analysis apparently functions to monitor background stimulation for the occurrence of novel or significant events. For example, affectively significant information (such as the subject's name) in the unattended channel of the selective listening task will be detected and can cause a shift of focal attention to the source of the message that contains this significant content. Also, after many repetitions (habituation) of a novel patterned stimulus, pre-attentive analysis can detect the omission of some component of the pattern, re-attracting focal attention (orienting response). Pre-attentive analysis includes sensory buffering – that is, brief sensory persistence of visual or auditory inputs – which makes it possible to switch attention to and identify an event after it has ceased to stimulate receptors.

The question marks in the rows for enduring cognitive and attitudinal effects of pre-attention reflect a currently very active controversy as to whether any such effects exist. There continues to be no confidently established support for claims of various types of lasting effects of „subliminal” communications.

With focal attention, familiar stimuli are perceived categorically as separable, identifiable objects (figure, rather than background), and unfamiliar stimuli establish sensory memory traces. When a novel event is repeated at the level of focal attention, the traces of separate presentations merge into a categorical sensory representation of the event. Subsequent exposures to instances of the category are then recognizable and, importantly, they become decreasingly effective in eliciting focal attention. (This decreased effectiveness, as noted previously, is referred to as habituation.) As familiarization through repetition proceeds, the perceived pleasantness – or affective value – of the event tends to shift in a positive direction. Affective change also occurs if a component of a repeated event has prior affective value – for example, when a product is advertised in the company of an attractive person or elegant surroundings. Because of the *integrative* property of a category representation – the property by which presentation of a part can activate the representation of the whole – initially neutral components of the repeated event will come to elicit the positive affect associated with other components. This affective learning process, which underlies „image” advertising, is similar in principle to Pavlov's classical conditioning.

With comprehension, a message can establish traces at the propositional level of representation. This trace formation process is apparently less gradual than the sensory trace formation at the focal attention level, since memory for message propositional content can often be established with a single message exposure. Nevertheless, comprehension is usually not sufficient to establish easily retrievable memories. This is because, without elaboration, a message's propositional content is unintegrated with existing knowledge and thus is difficult to access. If the comprehended message effectively associates novel persuasive arguments with an attitude object (such as a commercial product or a political candidate), it can produce message-based attitude change. This attitude change occurs to the extent that the attitude object as cue is able to retrieve the message's arguments. However, because comprehension does *not* necessarily *integrate message content* with other attitude-relevant knowledge, message-based persuasion may become substantial only with repeated comprehension-level processing of the message.

The highest level of involvement, elaboration, produces substantial freedom of memory and attitude from the specific details of the original message or its setting. Elaboration consists of such cognitive activities as relating information in a message to important personal goals (self-reference, personal connections), imagining events related to the content of the message (imagery), and actively supporting or disagreeing with a persuasive message (cognitive responding). Elaboration serves to establish memory traces in which message content is integrated with existing propositional knowledge. As a result, it may take only a single exposure to effectively establish the contents of an elaboration-processed message. In the attitude domain, it is possible – indeed, likely, when the message disagrees with the audience's existing attitudes – that elaborative processing will evaluate the content of the message. When involvement is at the elaboration level, this makes a *boomerang effect* possible – i.e., attitude change opposite to that advocated in the persuasive message.

This analysis of levels of involvement *is* based on serial processing assumptions, in which message analysis occurs in an orderly sequence of stages. One consequence of this stage assumption is that a message analyzed at a high level must also have been analyzed at all lower levels. For example, a message that is analyzed for propositional content (comprehension) must also have received perceptual analysis (focal attention). Thus a comprehended message should produce the effects of comprehension (propositional trace formation and some message-based persuasion) along with those of focal attention (sensory trace formation, affective conditioning, and mere exposure).

How are these effects integrated and – in the event that the effects of different levels oppose one another – which level will predominate? By the principle of *higher level dominance* – that is, the effects associated with the highest level of analysis applied to a message should be dominant. For example, among attitudinal effects, affective conditioning – which is associated with focal attention – should be outweighed by message-based persuasion effects, which should in turn be dominated by cognitive-response-based persuasion effects.

The principle of higher-level dominance is intended to apply only to the comparison of single exposures at different levels. It is plausible for two reasons. First, a message that is analyzed at one of the higher levels is, in effect, analyzed only briefly at lower levels. And second, the effects associated with the higher levels tend to be stronger, in the sense of depending less on repetition and being longer-lasting.

In summary, the analysis deals with phenomena that have been the focus of a variety of theories of involvement in the consumer behavior literature. The major distinguishing feature of our analysis is its focus on audience involvement and its linking of levels of audience involvement to the psychological concepts of variable attention capacity, levels of processing, qualitatively different representational systems, and (indirectly) arousal. The use of these concepts permits an orderly formulation of the antecedents and consequences of involvement.

Involvement is related to antecedents by means of the four principles of bottom-up processing, top-down processing, competence limitation, and capacity limitation; it is related to consequences by the association of levels of involvement with an orderly series of cognitive and attitudinal effects. Although our interpretation of involvement cannot claim to encompass all the phenomena dealt with by prior analyses, it does accommodate many of them and, perhaps more importantly, it provides a framework that permits the similarities and differences among prior theories to become apparent.

Because the discussion of audience involvement has indicated the complexities of this concept, it may be useful to conclude with a brief summary definition: audience involvement is the allocation of attention capacity to a message source, as needed to analyze the message at one of a series of increasingly abstract representational levels. Low levels use little capacity and extract information that is used first to determine whether a higher level will be invoked and, if so, as raw material for analysis by the next higher level. Higher levels require greater capacity and result in increasingly durable cognitive and attitudinal effects.

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