

Atlantic Marketing Journal

Volume 4 | Number 2

Article 3

September 2015

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Recommended Citation

Handlin, Amy H. (2015) "Revising the Conceptual Foundations of Attitude Formation in the E-Marketing Era," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol4/iss2/3>

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Revisiting the Conceptual Foundations of Attitude Formation in the E-Marketing Era

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Abstract - This paper proposes revisions of four seminal models of how marketing influences attitudes: mood mediation, cognitive response generation, situational parameters, and task mediation. Extensions of each model reflect applications and insights drawn from e-marketing. Additionally, the author integrates the models along key dimensions which are relevant to particular e-marketing issues, and identifies certain challenges to attitude formation research in this setting.

Keywords - Attitudes, e-marketing, mood, cognitive response, situation, task mediation

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - Marketing communications drive purchases, to a significant degree, by influencing consumer attitudes toward brands and products. How this process occurs is, therefore, a critical marketing issue. While scholars have studied attitude formation in depth since the 1970s, the earliest work needs updating and revision in the e-marketing era to improve its relevance to today's researchers and practitioners.

Introduction

Consumer researchers have long agreed that marketing communications drive purchases, to a significant degree, by influencing attitudes toward brands and products. Since the 1970s, numerous models of this process have been developed by marketers and social psychologists. Despite the shift to online advertising and shopping, the conceptual bases of many of these models remain relevant and should be re-introduced to contemporary scholars and practitioners. However, additional work is needed to address the distinctive ways in which attitudes are (or could be) influenced by e-marketing tools.

The four models chosen by the author obviously do not represent the field as a whole; instead, they are intended to illustrate an array of domains and dimensions.

Following Grewal, Mehta, and Kardes (2004), the models also vary in terms of the functional bases of the attitudes considered; e.g. whether the attitudes facilitate decision making (knowledge function), communication (value expressive function), social interaction (social adjustive function), or fulfillment of hedonistic goals (utilitarian function). The main features of each function may be summarized as follows:

- **Knowledge:** Consumers with substantial product knowledge also “have extensive attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences available in memory to evaluate new information and to inform their attitude judgments” (Biek, Wood and Chaiken 1996). This enhances the efficiency of their information processing and gives them added confidence in their shopping choices.
- **Value expressive:** These attitudes motivate consumers to make purchases that reflect their self-identities and how they believe others will judge them. In addition, they facilitate interpersonal communication by enabling people to express themselves through consumption decisions.
- **Social adjustive:** Attitudes serving this function are geared toward helping the consumer conform to societal norms and gain the approval of others. This facilitates social interactions and achievement of desired social goals.
- **Utilitarian:** These attitudes are associated with a perspective on consumption as a means to an end. Consumers with a utilitarian (instrumental) bent make purchase decisions in order to maximize the potential rewards of a purchase and minimize the consequences of making a mistake.

Four Seminal Models and Relevant Findings from Research on E-Marketing

Model 1. Mood Mediation

Original model:

Most notably elaborated in the work of Gardner (1985), this model posits that marketing communications impact upon consumers’ transient feeling states, or moods. In turn, moods influence the affective and/or cognitive processes that form attitudes and lead to behavior. For example, mood may facilitate retrieval and recall of mood-congruent information (cognitive), and is believed to bias evaluation and judgment in mood-congruent ways (affective). In some instances, mood impact may be quite direct, as when it is so tightly associated in memory with a particular behavior or affective response that it may directly access/activate that behavior or response.

This model focuses on the development of value-expressive attitudes. Acting in concert with one's mood enables the consumer to express values, preferences, and perceptions, and to communicate one's state of mind – happiness, sadness, and so on – to others.

Mood effects have been found to be most influential in situations where stimuli are ambiguous and not extreme; when consumers are moderately aroused; when precision is not highly significant (such as choosing a snack food rather than a computer); and when moods are positive. More relevant to e-marketing, mood effects have demonstrated particular strength when mood induction and purchase behavior occur closely together in time – a common occurrence in online shopping.

E-marketing findings:

Researchers have found that certain characteristics of website design and functionality influence attitude indirectly via “shopping enjoyment,” a mood-like transient feeling state. According to Koufaris et. Al. (2001), value-added search mechanisms and the buyer's sense of control on a shopping site are key factors linked to perception of a positive experience, which in turn increases the likelihood that a consumer will make repeat purchases from that site. Thus a mood-based framework offers more contemporary usefulness if extended beyond highly generalized states like happiness and sadness to particular instances of shopping pleasure.

Model 2. Cognitive response generation

Original model:

According to Wright (1973), marketing communications generate an array of spontaneous cognitive responses. In turn, these responses influence attitudes positively or negatively depending on how the incoming message compares to preexisting knowledge and beliefs. The array includes counter arguments (new message conflicts), source derogation (source is believed to be biased), and support arguments (new message is congruent).

This model focuses on the knowledge function of attitudes, and its domain is limited to instances where evaluative mental processes take place; in other words, it would not apply in situations where an attitude is triggered by affect alone. More relevant to e-marketing, the existence and relative importance of the three response types have been found to vary with level of involvement – which also moderates the influence of certain online devices.

E-marketing findings:

Research on the impact of online consumer reviews is particularly relevant to this model. For example, Lee, Park and Han (2008) have found that as the ratio of negative to positive online reviews rises, consumers become increasingly unlikely to generate counter arguments or source derogation. Involvement mediates this effect in that the quality of the reviews matters more to high-involvement than to low-involvement consumers; however, the attitudes of both groups eventually conform to the preponderance of those expressed online.

Model 3. Situational parameters

Original model:

Stemming primarily from the work of Belk (1975), the starting point for the process of attitude formation in this model is the situation; marketing stimuli act to modify one or more situational parameters, which then trigger particular affective or cognitive responses to the stimuli. Originally, the parameters included physical and social surroundings, temporal perspective, task definition, and antecedent states such as moods.

Functionally, the attitudes considered in this model tend to be either value-expressive or social-adjustive. They are susceptible to normative pressures, and may be adopted by consumers who seek to bolster their social standing based on what they buy.

E-marketing findings:

One limitation of the original model was that it was useful only in the presence of a fairly limited number of situational factors recognized by and reacted to by consumers. E-marketing scholars have added to that pool at least two important online factors: personal relevance of a marketing stimulus, and its degree of interactivity.

Personal relevance in this context is tied to involvement, and is defined as “the extent that consumers perceive [the object] to be self-related or in some way instrumental in achieving their personal goals and values” (Celsi and Olson 1988). It has been shown to exert a direct influence on attitude (Lieberman and Chaiken 1996), while also moderating the impact of argument strength and repetition (Claypool 2004).

An e-marketing environment heightens the importance of personal relevance because consumers can choose whether or not to use online tools to execute their purchase decisions. When a stimulus is perceived as personally relevant, it is likely to be used; when it is perceived as personally irrelevant, it is likely to be ignored or

judged negatively as a distraction. Campbell and Wright (2008) argue that “for a repetitive online advertisement, a user’s attitude toward the ad [as well as to the website and to the advertised product] is positively affected by the level of personal relevance in the advertisement.”

Interactivity, defined as “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (Steuer 1992), has been identified as the single largest predictor of attitude toward a website (Peng, Fan and Hsu 2004). Of course, even a moderately sophisticated website offers far greater participation opportunities than any legacy medium. User attitudes are believed to become more positive as interactivity increases (Campbell and Wright 2008). While advertising differs from websites in certain design and communication parameters, online ads can and do vary in degree of interactivity. Specifically, ads can offer more or less content available for manipulation, and be faster or slower in facilitating the manipulation. Because highly interactive ads enable individualized, one-on-one interaction between consumer and marketer, these stimuli are likely to generate a positive affective response.

Model 4. Task mediation

Original Model:

As exemplified by Schurr and Calder (1986), this model postulates that the starting point for attitude formation is the task environment, which mediates the meanings associated with communications and behaviors in that setting. This occurs via a set of “scripts” (similar to schemas) activated by the given environment, based on prior experience within the environment. Once activated, these scripts direct both cognitive and affective response to incoming stimuli.

Functionally, the attitudes considered in this model are utilitarian. This means they are tightly linked to vested interests and preexisting beliefs.

E-marketing findings:

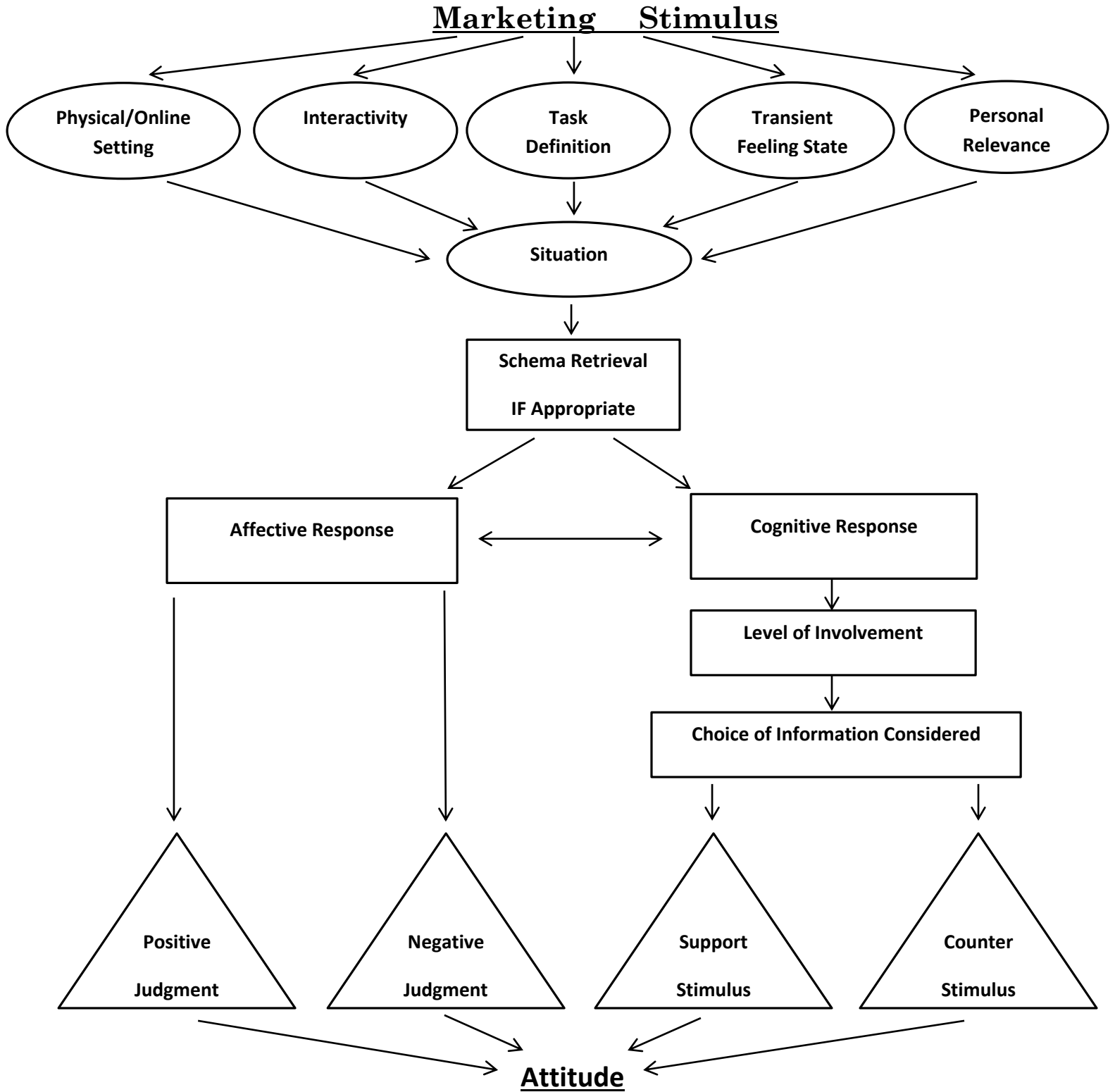
A limitation of the task mediation model was that it applied only to situations where incoming stimuli were relevant to stored scripts. In a task environment unfamiliar or ambiguous to the consumer, the pathway to attitude formation was unclear. But research on SMS (Short Messaging Service) as an advertising channel can be seen as an extension of this model to an e-marketing task environment familiar to anyone with a smartphone. Specifically, studies suggest that people’s attitudes toward mobile ads are heavily dependent on their preexisting feelings about this medium. Tsang, Ho, and Liang (2004) found that most consumers have

negative attitude toward SMS marketing communications. However, the subset of consumers who have explicitly consented to receive SMS ads demonstrate a positive attitude toward them. This suggests that by obtaining prior permission, marketers have an opportunity to simultaneously identify their most promising prospects – while reducing general consumer ill will.

A Proposed Model

The author developed an updated model of attitude formation which retains the conceptual bases introduced in the seminal literature and extends these concepts to encompass relevant e-marketing findings. Its five key characteristics include:

1. Treats situational variables as mediators of all incoming stimuli.
2. Chooses situational parameters to maximize objectivity/generalizability (per Belk) but (a) substitutes the more inclusive and particularized notion of “transient feeling state” for Gardner’s “mood,” enabling the model to capture the concept of “shopping enjoyment,” and (b) explicitly incorporates interactivity and personal relevance as key stimuli in the e-marketing setting.
3. Posits situational determinance of affective vs. cognitive response to a stimulus (per Belk), a concept that deserves centrality in a contemporary model to capture the diversity of responses to mediated environments.
4. Illustrates that a variety of affective and cognitive responses may be activated, enabling individuals to choose the most efficient (and/or to refer to a schema) in a given situation.
5. Recognizes that affective and cognitive processes may interact in the formation of attitudes (e.g. retrieval of certain information may reinforce bias).



Key: ○ Mediators □ Psychological Processes △ Outputs

Discussion

The goal of influencing consumer attitudes in order to drive purchase behavior is no less important to today's e-marketers than it was to their brick-and-mortar predecessors. Thus there is value in revisiting the conceptual foundations of attitude formation, laid in the 1970s and 1980s, and extending these ideas based on the findings of more recent research. In particular, the four seminal models may be integrated along three dimensions.

1. *Situational variables play a critical role in mediating each postulated process.* Whether affect- or cognition-oriented, even those models that are not situationally based acknowledge explicitly (Gardner) or implicitly (Wright) that certain situations will significantly help or hinder the mechanisms they describe. These situations may relate to the personal relevance or degree of interactivity of online advertising, and should be considered by the designers of all e-marketing stimuli.
2. *Either affect or cognition (or a combination of both) is utilized in all models as a mental bridge between incoming stimuli and attitude formation.* In other words, there is a shared assumption that all stimuli will be evaluated and/or judged in highly individualized ways prior to attitude formation. From this perspective, e-marketers have an advantage over their predecessors because customized messaging has become so much easier than in the past. It is in their interest to fully explore customization opportunities.
3. *People are assumed to seek consistency between incoming stimuli and preexisting knowledge or beliefs.* This lesson has yet to be learned by many mobile phone advertisers, who irritate consumers with uninvited and unwelcome messaging.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This paper focused on four attitude formation models because of their robustness and relevance to e-marketing issues. There are many alternative models that could be mined for additional insights. Also, certain influences on people's attitudes toward e-purchasing lie outside the scope of these conceptual frameworks: for example, the functionality of their favorite devices, or the privacy settings available on various websites. Even a seemingly trivial issue like the need to remember multiple passwords may have affective implications; more seriously, some consumers are clearly worried about the security of their credit card numbers or other identifying information when they shop online. In addition to testing the

author's proposed model, future research should consider the impact of such influences.

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