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Differential Involvement With Products
and Issues: An Exploratory Study

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**College of Commerce and Business Administration
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**



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Differential Involvement With Products

and Issues: An Exploratory Study

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This paper reports findings intended to clarify thinking about an ambiguous variable that is often assumed away or designed into behavioral studies in an arbitrary manner. This troublesome variable, ego-involvement,* is often given cavalier treatment because of the difficulty of accurately defining, measuring and, more importantly, recognizing its importance as a critical variable.

The topic of involvement has not been extensively explored in the literature. An occasional study appears dealing with involvement with issues (12) and also an occasional study dealing with importance of products (15,2), but no study has reported combining these two categories to explore the relative involvement of people with issues and products.

Cardozo in his study on the influence of effort in satisfaction implied that the more valuable or important a product is to a consumer, the more effort he will put forth to acquire it (1). Likewise, Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall suggest that involvement with a topic or issue influences how information relating to that particular topic or issue is processed (12, p. 242-44). And, one of the more widely researched issues in the marketing and social psychology literature - cognitive dissonance - has as one of its main tenets that the importance of cognitive elements affects the magnitude of dissonance (3). Also, it is a truism that the more central a belief is to a person's view of himself and the world, the more difficult it is to modify that belief.

* Ego-involvement as used in this paper is the definition offered by Freedman: "a general level of interest in or concern about an issue without reference to a specific position." (4)

Yet, surprisingly, there seems to be little hard evidence regarding what issues, topics or products are important or ego-involving and those that are low in importance or ego-involvement. Much of our thinking about ego-involvement is based upon intuition, so perhaps it is time to examine the accuracy of these assumptions.

Muzafer Sherif has been concerned with involvement as a major component in his approach to attitudes and attitude change. He suggests that "ego" is an unstable constellation of attitudes which can be referred to as ego-attitudes. These attitudes, which are characteristic of the person and a part of him, form with respect to objects, persons, situations, and groups. The contents (objects, persons, etc.) of the ego provide a frame of reference for the individual so that he may adjust his social behavior. Ego-involvement exists, then, when any conscious or unconscious stimulus is related by the individual to the domain of the ego. Ego-involvement affects not only what will be learned and how it will be learned, but also how the individual behaves and makes judgments. Thus, judgments and behavior, which follow from the identification of oneself with certain values and attributes are, to that extent, ego-involved. Accordingly, the degree of ego-involvement can be determined by the relative importance of attitudes that the individual holds regarding the object or issue. This degree of ego-involvement can also be called the intensity with which an attitude is held (13).

For Sherif, ego-involvement is an internal factor which operates in a judgmental situation and which has direction. For example, an individual would be positively ego-involved with his spouse and negatively ego-involved with an enemy (14).

A method for measuring ego-involvement has been developed and tested by Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall (12). Their procedure measures involvement through a judgmental process in which attitudes are expressed in terms of attitudes of acceptance, rejection and noncommitment. Operationally, they define involvement as being high when the latitude of rejection is large relative to the latitude of acceptance with the latitude of noncommitment being almost non-existent. They have studied such issues as prohibition, desegregation and presidential elections.

The problems and limitations existing in the work of Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall point up the gaping holes in our understanding of ego-involvement. While they have dealt with issues, the issues were probably highly involving to start with. Naturally people would be involved with elections in an election year, so their results probably cannot be extrapolated to less involving issues or products. Likewise, Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall were primarily interested in involvement within a certain situation (i.e., situational involvement). The effects of situational constraints and their influence on an individual's feelings and action tendencies is not to be denied, but the measurement of involvement without respect to the situation has much, if not more, to offer those interested in message-processing by people. This is based on the premise that communications will be differentially processed depending on the level of involvement with the topic of the communication.

Freedman proposed two definitions of involvement: 1) Involvement is an "interest in, concern about, or commitment to a particular position on an issue," and 2) Involvement is a "general level of interest in or concern about an issue without reference to a specific position." (4)

Hovland's analysis of the divergence of results between attitude change in the experimental situation and through surveys gives support to this study by stating that deeply involving issues can be used in experiments, which to some extent, was the method of exploration used in this study. Since attitude change, in particular, is not relevant, we do not need to deal with the reasons for discrepancy, but his suggestions with respect to involving issues are useful (5).

Rokeach's interpretation of attitudes and values gives insight into the study of involvement. He suggests that individuals have a hierarchy of values along a continuum of importance, which is called the individual's value system. Attitudes and values are interconnected within the individual to form a hierarchical mental organization which is internally consistent. Changes in either attitudes or values affect the entire system, which in turn usually produces a change in behavior. In an actual measurement of values, Rokeach found a relationship between "terminal" values (world at peace, equality of all men, freedom, national security) and involvement. He reports that values transcend the situation and provide a standard for guiding an individual's attitudes, actions, and emotions (11).

Perspective is given to the understanding of involvement by Krugman, who suggests that involvement with a product or issue is distinctly different from involvement with the channel or media through which a communication about some product or issue is received. Involvement with advertisements is operationally defined as, "the number of connections, conscious bridging experiences or personal references per minute, that the subject makes between the content or the persuasive stimulus and the

content of his own life." (10) Krugman demonstrates that by this operational definition people are less involved with television advertising than with advertisements appearing in magazines. He has also demonstrated this same phenomenon by recorded brain waves of a subject watching television commercials or reading a magazine (8).

Krugman also argues that most people are rather low-involved with television and with the products advertised on television. Therefore, he argues that what really takes place is not persuasion, but a type of association learning that may not result in any attitude change until (or even after) the person is confronted with a stimulus such as a package in the store (9).

Reviewing the literature, then, we find that:

1. Involvement refers to ego-involving attitudes.
2. The relative importance of issues to the individual is a measure of involvement.
3. Communications have differing effects depending on the involvement with the topic by the receiver of the communication.

The following study is designed to test empirically the widespread intuitive hypothesis that issues are more important (ego-involving) than products and to give some evidence of product and issue ranking on this variable.

Twenty products and twenty issues were chosen for investigation. In general the products were representative of goods that college students would be knowledgeable about and either have purchased or could reasonably anticipate purchasing in the next few years. Likewise, issues were representative of those about which college students would have some knowledge.

It was not the purpose of this study to investigate a subject's position on an issue or brand, nor the usage rate of a product or the amount of time spent in relationship to an issue.

After extensive pre-testing it was found that the word "importance" most closely approximated the concept of ego-involvement used in this study.* Other words tested were 'meaningful', 'central', 'satisfaction', 'involvement' and 'significant.' It is interesting to note that the word 'involvement' could not be used because of its extensive use with the war (i.e., involvement in Viet Nam) and other current issues in the sense of physical participation in various activities such that other meanings seem to have been forgotten.

Subjects were forty-four male students enrolled in an undergraduate consumer behavior course at the University of Illinois-Urbana. Each subject was given a list of ten issues and ten products which he was to locate on a series of eight concentric circles. (See Figure 1) The use of concentric circles allows the respondent to express more accurately how he perceives the importance (involvement) of the various products and issues than if he were merely asked to rank or rate them. There is no reason to anticipate that results obtained in this manner would be inconsistent with those obtained using a paired-comparison procedure. The paired-comparison procedure is not realistic for this study because of the large number of possible pairs.

* A general level of interest in or concern about an issue or product class without reference to a specific position or brand. Adapted from Freedman (4). This also was consistent with the exogenous variable, "importance of purchase" in Howard and Sheth, The Theory of Buyer Behavior (7).

Subjects were told that the arrow on the diagram moves from the outer circle which represents things of no importance toward the central point which represents the most important things imaginable. An example used was that of the Christians who on being thrown to the lions would place their religious beliefs right in the middle of the diagram. Subjects were also reminded that their exact beliefs about a product or issue were not what was being measured, but rather how important the issue or product was to them personally.

RESULTS

The space between each circle was assigned a number for the purposes of scoring, 8 being the most important (central point of the circles) and 1 the least important (the outer circle). The data were analyzed using a completely randomized analysis of variance procedure, with each product and issue representing one treatment level.* Following the over-all analysis of variance procedure, differences between individual products and issues were explored using Tukey's HSD (honestly significant difference) multiple comparison procedure (16, p. 87).

The means for all products and issues are presented in Table 1.

The analysis of variance procedure reported in Table 2 indicates that the difference between products and issues is significant at the .01 confidence level. Tukey's HSD multiple comparison test was used to make all pair-wise comparisons. The critical value for these data, which must be exceeded to indicate significant difference at the .01 level, is 1.73. The number of pair-wise comparisons significant at the .01 level of confidence is considerable. The results of Tukey's HSD tests did support

* Adjustment was made for unequal n following the procedure of Winer (16, p. 222-4).

our basic assumption that issues are more involving than products, however.

It is easy to see that those products specified by subjects as being of little importance (low level of ego-involvement) are significantly different from those specified as being of high importance. For instance, the product facial tissues is viewed as significantly less important than beer and all higher rated products. Likewise, the product, automobile, is viewed as significantly more important than a movie and all lower rated products.

The same type of analysis can be made for issues and between issues and products. Of course it is obvious that issues as a class are more important than products as a class ($t = 12.72$). Furthermore, we find products viewed as most important are only equivalent to the middle group of issues and are viewed as being significantly less important than the Viet Nam war, future occupational status and the draft.

The data suggests that the products and issues examined in this study fall roughly into three groups, representing three levels of importance or ego-involvement. The first group would include those products and issues which have a mean value falling between 1.19 and 2.91. The second group would include those products and issues having a mean value between 3.00 and 4.81 and the third group would be issues having a mean value above 5.00. Obviously this is an arbitrary classification and open to much conjecture and statistical haggling.

DISCUSSION

The extensive series of investigations in the area of communication and persuasion following from the work of the Yale group has increased

our understanding of the communication process. A review of these studies however, indicates that most issues used by Hovland and others would probably be considered to be relatively ego-involving or important (i.e., treatment of juvenile delinquents, devaluation of currency, early end of the war with Japan (6). The frequent extension of these findings to include response to persuasive marketing communications for relatively low-involving products is, however, potentially misleading.

Rather than relying entirely on these findings in the future, advertisers (as well as communicators in general) would be wise to subject their own topic or product to some empirical analysis regarding its importance to their customers. If their products are truly low involving, it means that the problem of selective exposure looms large, but it also means that the cognitive process involved in giving meaning to communications about low-involving products is sufficiently different from more involving products or issues to make many assumptions questionable. For instance, Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall suggest that "evaluations or opinions of the uninvolved or slightly involved individual will vary significantly with changes in the order of arguments, the style and plan of the communication, the identity of the communicator (low or high prestige), and almost any procedure that invests some aspect of himself in support of one stand or another in the situation." On the other hand, they state that people who are highly involved "are less susceptible to attitude change in the first place and less responsive to variations in the immediate communication situation, such as characteristics of the communication designed to sway him." (12, p. 16).

Depending on future research, there appear to be some possible applications of the findings reported here. Realizing that individuals are probably more involved with most issues than they are with the products they purchase and consume, the first possible application of this idea would be in the development of advertising appeals. For most segments of the market that the creative advertising person is trying to appeal to, he must remember that under most conditions his product does not rank very high in the consumer's hierarchy of things important to him. Level of involvement by topic probably varies across a wide variety of sociodemographic variables. This implies that, for instance, a particular social class may be highly involved with automobiles, but another considerably less involved. Involvement with a product may be a function of purchase experience. Similarly, an individual's knowledge about, interest in, and concern with an issue would influence his involvement. Finally, individuals play a variety of roles, which may influence which products or issues are important when related to a particular role.

This does not suggest that advertisers must incorporate contemporary issues into their advertising appeals, but that they should place the importance of their products in its proper perspective and appeal to the consumer appropriately. On the other hand, when a believable connection can be made between an issue and a product, this might attract more potential consumers (i.e., more individuals would probably perceive this advertisement). Also, once a product has been related in the consumer's mind to an issue, something important to him, the probability of this person's retaining knowledge of the product is increased.

More generally, researchers studying consumers' involvement with products in the future should realize that the continuum of involvement does not range from product A to product Z or from brand 1 to brand 7, but extends to a broader categorization of products and issues. Although more research is needed in the area, it now seems that individuals are more involved with issues. Overlooking this fact could exaggerate what actually exists in the consumer's mind. Clear support is not given to the intuitive feeling that the more expensive a product is, the more important or ego involving it is to the individual. In fact, based on this study, we would have to say that some other factor is accounting for a large part of the variance.

The results of this study, to a great extent, conform to intuition. Nonetheless, these results point out the absolute necessity of taking into account the actual level of ego-involvement with a product or issue if the investigator believes there will be a differential response to communications based on the level of involvement with the topic of the communication. Further, these results should serve as a call to reevaluate many of the studies on which communication theory is based.

TABLE 1

Mean Values for all Products and Issues#
(Ascending Order of Importance)

PRODUCTS			ISSUES		
	\bar{x}	n		\bar{x}	n
Facial tissues	1.19	21	Fraternity membership	2.38	21
Bicycle	1.39	23	Apollo flights	2.91	23
Soup	1.52	21	Lowering voting age to 18	3.48	23
Comb	1.65	23	Religious beliefs	3.71	21
Cola	1.81	21	Legalization of marijuana	3.76	21
Cigarettes	1.83	23	Censorship	3.95	21
Portable typewriter	1.86	21	Grades	4.17	23
Toothpaste	1.95	21	Legalization of abortion	4.48	23
Transistor radio	2.14	21	Federal aid to education	4.56	23
Coffee	2.61	23	Presidential elections	4.78	23
Movie (in a theater)	2.67	21	Sports	4.81	21
Color television	2.83	23	Cost of living	5.09	23
Pants	2.91	23	Racial equality in work, housing and education	5.17	21
Beer	3.00	21	Birth control	5.57	21
Milk	3.09	23	Freedom of speech	5.62	21
News magazine	3.24	21	Environmental pollution	5.67	21
Bed	3.74	23	World peace	6.17	23
Meat	3.78	23	Viet Nam war	6.28	21
House	4.17	23	Future occupational status	6.43	23
Automobile	4.52	21	The draft	6.71	21

Mean for all products = 2.59

Mean for all issues = 4.79

Range of possible values = 1 to 8
1 = no importance
8 = highest importance

TABLE 2

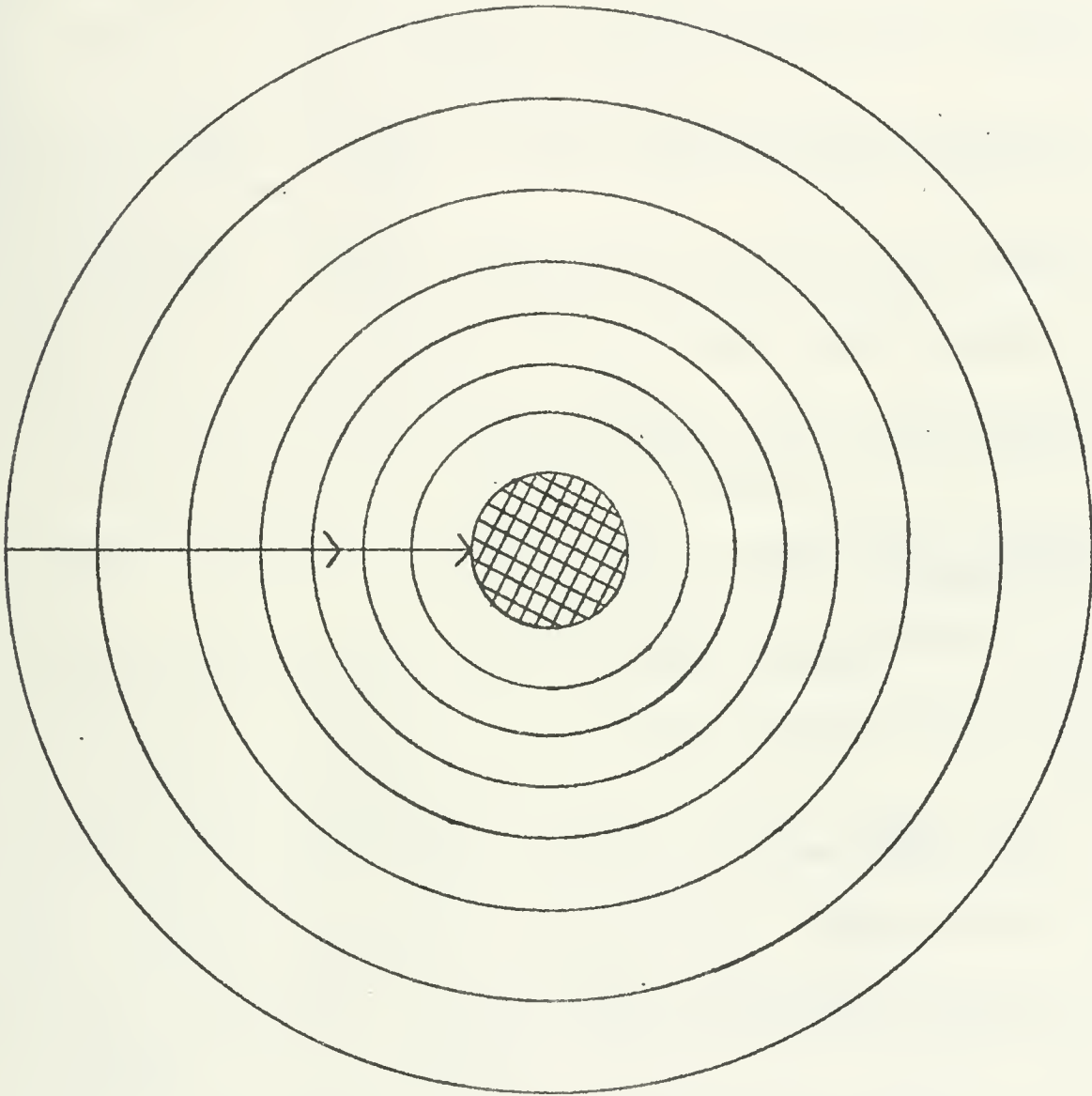
Analysis of Variance
All Products and Issues

Source of Variation	S.S.	D.F.	M.S.	F
Between All Products and All Issues	2030.3	39	52.06	26.27
Within Groups	1664.4	840	1.98	

F.01:40, $\infty = 1.59$

FIGURE 1

On the circle diagram below, as the arrow moves FROM the outer circle TO the central point, this indicates greater degrees of IMPORTANCE in your life. (KEEP IN MIND: YOU ARE CONSIDERING HOW IMPORTANT EACH ITEM IS TO YOU.)

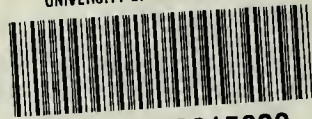


1. Please place the number of each item somewhere on the circle diagram that is appropriate for you.
2. Cross off each number after you place it on the diagram.
3. Stay within the outer circle.

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