

## Re-Examining the Marketing Basics: The Mirage of the Routes to Persuasion?

by

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*Abstract.* One of the key predictions advanced in mainstream models of persuasion (e.g., the Elaboration Likelihood Model) is that attitude changes induced in highly involved individuals via the central route (systematic processing) are relatively persistent and predictive of behavior, whereas attitudes induced under low involvement conditions through the peripheral route (heuristic processing) are relatively temporary and unpredictable of behavior. Despite its central role in marketing theory, the proposition has not been tested in product advertising. Supporters argue that this prediction should hold irrespective of how involvement is conceptualized and across domains of persuasion (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1983, 1990). A critical investigation is conducted herein, motivated by the observed gap between scholarly mantra and marketing practice. Also, this paper argues that the exact opposite of the mainstream theory should be obtained in marketing contexts when involvement is based on consumers' intrinsic personal relevance, suggesting that the instinct of marketing executives may not be misguided after all.

*Key words:* attitudes, elaboration-likelihood-model, marketing, persuasion

JEL classification: M31 (Marketing), M37 (Advertising)

### 1 Introduction

The importance of studying attitudes was acknowledged repeatedly over time, leading as early as 1979 to Kassirjian and Kassirjian's conclusion that attitudes are the central focus of consumer behavior research. Scholars' interest in this topic is just as vivid today as it was four decades ago, and is not likely to wane. In the preface of their 2005 handbook of attitudes, editors Albarracín, Johnson and Zanna note: "A recent search for the term *attitude* in the American Psychological Association's comprehensive index to psychological and related literature (PsycINFO) yielded 180,910 references." A large number of theories and models concerning attitudes, their antecedents and their consequences, vie for the attention of the discipline. Consequently, numerous empirical studies confirming or disproving particular theoretical frameworks have been published.

Among the frameworks focused on persuasion, attitude formation and change, two capstone works are Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM - 1981, 1986a, 1986b)

and Chaiken's (1980) Systematic versus Heuristic Information Processing Model (SHM). Interestingly, ELM and SHM advance a similar proposition with respect to attitude endurance. It is argued that attitude changes induced in highly-involved individuals via the central route (systematic processing) are relatively persistent and predictive of behavior, whereas attitudes induced under conditions of low-involvement via the peripheral route (heuristic processing) are relatively temporary and unpredictable of behavior. This proposition is of crucial interest for consumer researchers and advertising practitioners. However, a review of the literature reveals the surprising fact that the proposition has not been tested in the domain of marketing products. By contrast, other aspects of the ELM framework received generous empirical support. For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1983) and Andrews and Shimp (1990) show that the product attitudes of highly-involved subjects, who typically use the central route/systematic processing, are influenced by the quality of the advertising message (argument strength). The attitudes of low-involvement consumers, who use the

peripheral route, are mainly influenced by 'flashy' ad aspects such as attractiveness, credibility or prestige of the product endorser. If attitude changes induced under the peripheral route are indeed volatile and unpredictable of behavior, why is it that advertisers spend millions of dollars on celebrity endorsements, and why a large proportions of ads have nowadays shifted away from informational messages in favor of content that is less argument-based? Perhaps marketing executives have decided not to target highly-involved consumers, for whom the advertised product has significant personal relevance. Maybe managers are happy to spend on advertising that doesn't trigger enduring attitudes and has unpredictable consequences on consumers' behavior. Or perhaps advertising professionals are simply unaware of the research done in their area of expertise... In today's highly competitive business environment, where well-trained managers are the norm rather than the exception, the above-mentioned explanations are quite unlikely. An alternative account would be that the real-life insights of seasoned executives are in conflict with ELM's proposition. In order to understand the roots of the gap between theory and practice, a re-examination of the key assumptions concerning involvement, persuasion routes, enduring attitudes and behavior, is an essential first step toward elucidating this marketing paradox. For ease of expression, ELM/SHM's proposition will be hereon labeled the IPAB proposition (from Involvement-Persuasion-Attitude-Behavior). Worthy of note is that IPAB has received support outside the marketing domain of product advertising. For example, the proposition is seemingly (1<sup>st</sup> explanatory note) warranted when persuasion focuses on public-interest topics like sleep deprivation (Chaiken, 1980) and university policies (Petty *et al*, 1985). However, Petty and Cacioppo (1983) acknowledge the risk of generalizing findings that pertain to the ELM propositions from social psychology into other domains: "Although the accumulated research in social psychology is quite consistent with the ELM, it is not yet clear whether or not the ELM

predictions would hold when involvement concerns a product (such as toothpaste) rather than an issue (such as capital punishment) and when the persuasive message is an advertisement rather than a speech or editorial." The present paper argues that there are several reasons why the IPAB proposition might not hold in the context of product advertising and when involvement derives from intrinsic personal relevance. These reasons concern: 1) specific issues of motivational involvement, 2) the relative nature of attitudes in the marketplace (each product is evaluated relative to competing products, not in absolute terms as might be the case with evaluations of social topics) and 3) a dynamic versus a static perspective on the objects of attitudes (market velocity dictates that new information is made available at a rapid pace, as new features and products are introduced).

A critical perspective that dismantles the ELM logic and highlights how the opposite of mainstream marketing theory can be observed in real-life situations will be formalized and discussed in detail. Before developing the argument, an overview of relevant concepts will be presented in the next section. The literature review is focused on the capstone works, as the critical argument is geared toward the core of marketing theory. Moreover, while there is a wealth of literature published in the last five years or so on the topic of attitudes, it tends to follow in the footsteps of classical works and perpetuate the IPAB assumption made by their predecessors, without questioning or bringing new insights for the specific topic at hand.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Attitudes

In any given domain, individuals make judgments about whether objects, events and people are favorable or unfavorable, good or bad, likeable or unlikeable. Researchers who study attitudes investigate factors involved in these evaluations: how they are formed, changed, represented in memory, and translated into cognitions, motivations, and actions (Solomon *et al*, 2014).

Attitudes have been defined in many ways. However, research operationalizations of the concept of attitude reveal consensus and emphasis on evaluative aspects (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Katz, 1960; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981, 1986; Petty and Wegener, 1998). Attitudes can be judgments, memories, or both. Thus, research on attitudes covers judgments made 'on the spot' by individuals (Schwarz and Bohner, 2001) as well as evaluative representations in memory (Fazio, 1986).

Attitudes should not be equated with beliefs. A belief and an attitude are both categorizations, and all categorizations can be conceptualized as a probability assignment. However, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) note that at least some beliefs can be verified or falsified with external, objective criteria, whereas attitudes have more difficulty facing such criteria. Also, although some early works have used the terms attitudes and affect interchangeably (e.g., Bagozzi, 1982), Albarracin, Johnson and Zanna (2005) point out that there are several reasons to distinguish attitudes from affect per se. Chief among these reasons is the fact that affect is often a powerful basis for attitudes (see Wyer and Srull, 1989). People form attitudes on the basis of their cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to an entity (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, 1998; Zanna and Rempel, 1988). "Regardless of the origins of attitudes, the term '*attitudes*' is reserved for evaluative tendencies, which can both be inferred from and have an influence on beliefs, affect, and overt behavior". (Albarracin *et al*, 2005)

Herein, Eagly and Chaiken's (1993, p. 1) definition of attitudes will be adopted: an "*attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor*".

## **2.2 Two systems of information processing and attitude formation**

Situational characteristics and consumers' individual traits and goals combine in determining how much cognitive effort and what kind of inferences are made when

evaluating a product, a task, an argument, etc. Two different ways in which consumers deal with persuasive information and arrive at an evaluation / decision can be identified. The two systems of reasoning are labeled central route vs. peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986a, 1986b), systematic vs. heuristic (Chaiken 1980), rational vs. experiential (Gilovich and Griffin 2002, Epstein 1973, 1990, 2005, Kirkpatrick and Epstein 1992, Pacini and Epstein 1999), rule-based vs. associative (Sloman 1996; Smith and DeCoster 2000), System 1 vs. System 2 (Stanovich and West 1999, 2000, 2002; Kahneman and Frederick, 2002; Kahneman, 2003), reflective vs impulsive (Strack and Deutsch, 2004), deliberative/analytic vs. tacit/intuitive (Hogarth, 2005).

Each author brings his/her own perspective and research interests in conceptualizing the two systems. However, the conceptualizations of Chaiken (SHM - 1980), and Petty and Cacioppo (ELM - 1981) share many features, presumably because they have the same focus on persuasion and attitude formation. ELM and SHM are perhaps the most recognizable and widely used theories of persuasion, being taught in consumer behaviour undergraduate classes, PhD marketing seminars, and presented as must-know basics to marketing scholars and practitioners around the world. Both frameworks identify distinct routes to attitude change: one ('central route', 'systematic view') resulting from a person's diligent consideration of relevant information, a process involving considerable cognitive effort, and the other ('peripheral route', 'heuristic view') emphasizing a less effortful and less systematic type of processing, guided by heuristics.

Systematic processing is theorized to occur when a message receiver is both motivated to process information (e.g. due to the personal relevance of the issue) and has the ability to process the content. Under such circumstances, elaborate cognitive processes are set in motion, and the processed message significantly impacts the person's attitude toward the communicated topic. When the targeted recipient is not motivated or not able to process incoming

information, his/her attitudes might still be affected via the peripheral route. Under heuristic processing, the message recipient is theorized not to focus on the primary message arguments, but on background cues (music, scenery, source characteristics, number of message arguments, etc.) that are peripheral to the main message content.

### 2.3 Involvement

It is generally accepted that involvement refers to the perceived relevance or importance placed by a consumer on a given stimulus, action or event (Solomon *et al.*, 2014). There is also relative consensus in the literature that attitudes can be influenced (by marketing communication or other means) whether a subject's involvement is low or high. Furthermore, it is accepted that the impact for low involvement is different from that for high involvement (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984; Andrews and Shimp, 1990). However, the particular type of involvement conceptualized and measured varies widely across researches. This fact may obscure the true meaning of the various frameworks proposed and the interpretation of empirical results.

Involvement can be defined along three dimensions: opportunity to process, ability to process and motivation to process information (Celsi and Olson, 1988) Opportunity to process information is determined by the immediate environment. A person's involvement can be restricted by situational distractions (time pressure, noise, crowding, information overload, information format: by brand or by attribute, verbal vs. pictorial, etc). Ability to process is derived from a person's prior domain knowledge and his/her level of intelligence. For example, knowing nothing about Chinese characters implies that relevant knowledge cannot be retrieved from memory when exposed to this kind of stimulus, so the subject does not have the ability to elaborate. By contrast, most people would have the ability to process information related to shampoo: because this type of product is used on regular bases, consumers are likely to have at least some

domain knowledge acquired through experience.

Motivation to process information can be either an intrinsic (a relatively stable trait of the individual, determined by his/her goals and inclinations) or extrinsic (e.g. motivation by rewards such as monetary incentives, or demotivation by making the product unavailable in the regional market of the consumer). Celsi and Olson (1988) use the labels *intrinsic sources of personal relevance* (ISPR) for intrinsic motivation and *situational sources of personal relevance* (SSPR) for extrinsic motivation. The ISPR-SSPR distinction is of great importance for the present study, and its applicability will be illustrated shortly. Most researchers have examined only the effects of situational involvement, essentially ignoring intrinsic involvement. One reason for this is "the relative ease of manipulating situational factors in laboratory experiments, compared to within-individual characteristics". (Celsi and Olson, 1988) Rather than manipulating intrinsic involvement for products, some researchers found the solution of measuring it (e.g. Lastovika and Gardner 1979, Richins and Bloch, 1986; Celsi and Olson, 1988). In this respect, Zaichkowsky's (1985) useful and robust scale termed "the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII)" became a staple of research pertaining to involvement. The PII scale contains 20 seven-point items, each labeled with bipolar adjectives, such as important/unimportant, essential/nonessential and relevant/irrelevant.

Separating the effects of intrinsic felt involvement (motivation to process) and consumers' domain knowledge or 'expertise' (ability to process) is difficult, because they are related. They both develop concurrently in long term memory as consumers' experiences with the product accumulate (Celsi and Olson, 1988). However, examples in which the two constructs are distinct can be offered. A person might feel intrinsically involved with dancing without having any knowledge of the domain (e.g., no knowledge about dancing styles, routines, outfits appropriate for each type of dance, dance schools, etc.)

### 3 The IPAB proposition and its (lack of) testing

A key proposition of ELM (implicitly or explicitly present in other mainstream persuasion models as well) is that attitude changes induced via the central route (for high-

involvement individuals) are relatively persistent and predictive of behavior, whereas those induced under the peripheral route (for low-involvement individuals) are relatively temporary and unpredictable of behavior. This proposition is labeled here IPAB (Involvement-Persuasion-Attitude-Behavior). An illustration of IPAB is provided in Figure 1.

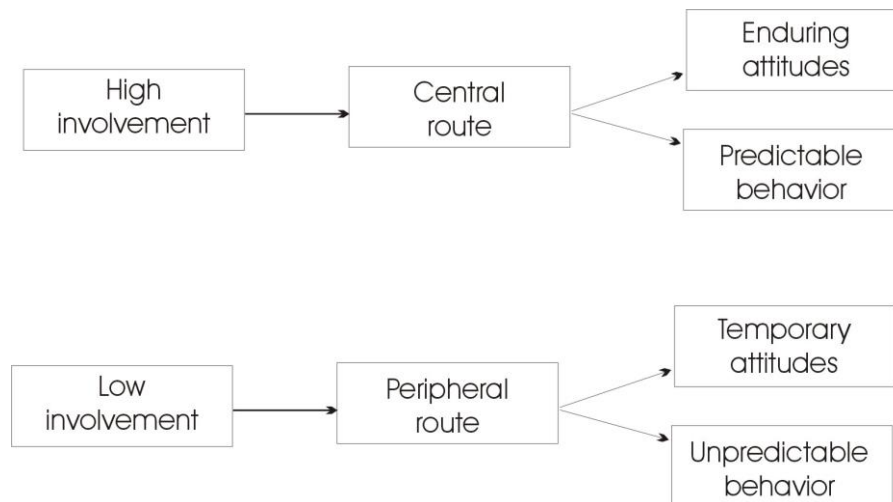


Figure 1. An intriguing proposition of the Elaboration Likelihood Model

This proposition has not been tested in product advertising. However, IPAB has received support in social psychology experiments. It was demonstrated that IPAB holds true when persuasion concerns public-interest topics like sleep deprivation (Chaiken, 1980) and university policies (Petty *et al*, 1985). IPAB's lack of testing in the product advertising domain is surprising not only considering the value of such proof for the business world, but also given that all other propositions of ELM have been reportedly tested in conjunction with products (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1983; Andrews and Shimp, 1990).

One aspect concerning involvement is important to note at this point. Although in ELM and in all studies testing ELM predictions involvement is conceptualized as "personal relevance", actual operationalizations invariably focus on extrinsic (situational) motivation. For example, using ads for a fictitious brand of disposable razor as stimuli, Petty and Cacioppo (1983) manipulated low involvement by telling participants that the product will not be made

available in their regional market. Participants in the high involvement condition were told that the product will soon be introduced in their regional market, and, moreover, they will be allowed to choose a particular brand of disposable razor to take home after the experiment. Andrews and Shimp (1990) used advertisements for a new product as stimuli. Both the product category (low-alcohol beer) and the brand (Break) were new to consumers at the time of the experiment. Low involvement was manipulated by informing American participants that Break would be introduced in a far-removed region of U.S.A., thereby eliminating any future prospects for purchasing the product. High involvement was manipulated by informing participants that: (1) the product will soon be available in their market area, (2) they were to choose between Break and another brand of low-alcohol beer as a gift for participating in the study and (3) they might be selected to participate in a paid interview concerning Break beer.

In a meta-analysis, Johnson and Eagly (1989) questioned Petty and Cacioppo's conceptualization of and evidence for the effects of involvement on persuasion. A reply to this critique was offered: "[Johnson and Eagly] concluded that (a) what we had termed issue involvement represented two distinct types of involvement (outcome- versus value-relevant), (b) each type of involvement had unique effects on persuasion, and (c) outcome involvement effects may be obtained only by 1 group of researchers. We argue that although 2 distinct research traditions of involvement have emerged, our original position that the 2 categories of involvement induce similar processes in persuasion situations remains viable." (Petty and Cacioppo, 1990) The debate might be futile when it comes to other propositions of ELM, but I argue that distinguishing among different types of involvement has crucial relevance for the IPAB proposition in the context of product advertising.

Also note that, although ELM is generally concerned with attitude changes, experiments are designed to reflect attitude formation, not change (e.g. formation of attitudes about a new product or a new product category).

#### **4 A critical argument**

The present paper addresses three research questions:

1. Is the empirical support for IPAB found in social psychology translatable into the product advertising domain (when the same operationalizations of constructs are used, particularly for the concept of involvement)?
2. If involvement is operationalized in terms of intrinsic motivation, is the IPAB proposition still adequate?
3. On exposure to a product advertisement, how do different levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation combine in generating enduring/temporary attitude changes and predictable/unpredictable behavior?

I argue that product advertising differs from persuasion in the social domain in at least two important respects. First, each product is

evaluated relative to competing products, not in absolute terms. That is, a product is judged as good or bad, likeable or unlikeable, based on the range of features and attribute levels of other products. Thus, consumers' attitudes toward a product are greatly influenced by their attitudes toward other products. By contrast, most social topics (e.g. capital punishment, sleep deprivation, introduction of a compulsory candidacy exam) are quite amenable to absolute scaling.

Secondly, the issue of information about the object of evaluation should not be neglected. In social psychology experiments, subjects seek or process different amounts of information depending on manipulation conditions and individual traits. The subset of information available to each subject might change, but the total information pool is relatively constant because the object itself doesn't suffer significant alterations over time. For example, on the issue of abortion, different people might have access to different pieces of information, but the phenomenon of abortion itself (what it is, what are its characteristics and implications) does not change in objective terms. Products are a very different matter. Not only can a product change rapidly (in its features, price, etc.), but also new products are continuously introduced on the market, modifying the evaluative scales and the total pool of information to be considered. Researchers might be allowed to have a static perspective on the objects of attitudes in the case of social issues, but they must adopt a dynamic perspective when it comes to product-related persuasion.

Can IPAB be adequate in the context of product advertising? Let's consider the case of extrinsic (situational) involvement, as manipulated in the empirical tests of ELM. In this case, findings to support IPAB may well be obtained, especially if the proposition is adapted to the context. Participants who are informed that a product will not be made available in their market have little reason to attend to an advertisement of that product. They might report an attitude at the experimenter's demand, but they might not remember anything about the report, the ad or the product one month after the experiment.

Thus, attitudes held and reported by low-involvement subjects at the time of the experiment (t1) could differ from their attitudes at a subsequent time (t2) when they actually encounter the product in the marketplace and evaluate it as part of the consideration set.

Participants who are extrinsically motivated to pay attention to the product ad during the experiment are likely to remember at least partial information about the advertisement, the product or their reported attitudes at a subsequent time t2. Thus, all else being equal, when involvement is situational-triggered the attitudes of highly involved individuals at time t1 and t2 can be expected to be more similar (compared to the low-involvement individuals).

Of course, as mentioned previously, the *ceteris paribus* condition ignores the fact that after exposure to the ad, all consumers (regardless of their situational involvement during the experiment) might acquire new information about the product or the product category, especially if the time lag between t1 and t2 is large. Rather than arguing that highly involved individuals will have enduring attitudes, it is perhaps more reasonable to propose that their attitudes are more enduring in comparison to the attitudes of low-involvement subjects. Thus a re-framing and refining of IPAB for product advertising can be formally stated as follows:

*P1. Exposure to a product advertisement will trigger more enduring attitude toward the product and more predictable purchase intentions in the case of individuals with high extrinsic (situational) involvement, compared with individuals under low extrinsic (situational) involvement.*

Note that P1 is a special case of IPAB, designed to draw attention to the particular type of involvement used in ELM testing, and to reflect the differences between evaluations of products versus social topics.

What about intrinsic involvement, which is the segmentation aspect of real interest to marketers when targeting consumers? According to Petty and Cacioppo (1983, 1990) ELM predictions should be the same regardless of the type of motivation (involvement) used. However, I argue that a prediction contrary to IPAB can be

made when consumers' personal relevance is intrinsic. Celsi and Olson (1988) define the intrinsic sources of involvement as relatively stable structures of personally relevant knowledge, derived from past experience and stored in long-term memory: "This knowledge represents perceived associations between objects and/or actions and important self-relevant consequences, such as the attainment of goals and/or maintenance of values. For example, car buffs, wine connoisseurs and skiing fanatics generally tend to perceive the shopping and consumption activities associated with these products as personally relevant".

a) Consumers with high intrinsic involvement are particularly likely to actively seek or to pay attention to information concerning the product or the product category. In the examples discussed previously, subjects are exposed to ads of new/fictitious brands of beer and disposable razor during the experiment. After leaving the laboratory, in their daily lives, subjects with high intrinsic involvement will presumably be exposed to and process more information about the brand (e.g., Break) and the product category (e.g., low-alcohol beer). Moreover, as new products are introduced on the market or existing products are modified, high-involvement consumers would be the ones who keep up to date and take note of these changes. By contrast, low intrinsic involvement consumers are not likely to seek/process additional information about the product or competing products, and will not keep in touch with developments in that category. Consequently, at time t2, low-involved consumers are not likely to have additional information beyond what was offered at time t1 (e.g., during the experiment), whereas highly involved consumers are likely to have substantial additional information. This discrepancy will be accentuated when the time interval between t2 and t1 is large and when the market velocity is high (i.e. many new products are introduced on the market at a rapid pace).

- b) Based on the credibility and source trustworthiness literature it can be argued that a consumer's attitude toward a product is more influenced by the totality of information (2<sup>nd</sup> explanatory note) concerning products in that category (including information about the target product) than by information from a single product advertisement.
- c) Hawkins and Hoch (1992) confirmed the findings of previous researchers that higher involvement (better elaboration) led to better memory. However, the pieces of information that low involvement participants did remember had a greater impact on belief: "That is, low-involvement processing led to poorer memory but greater belief". Examining the heuristics for low-involvement decision making, Hoyer and Brown (1990) found that consumers who are aware of the name of one of the brands in a product category will repeatedly choose that brand, even when it offers objectively determined lower quality. Peter and Nord (1982) note that one of the simplest low-involvement decision heuristic involves the retrieval of previously formed affect associated with the product.

Corroborating a), b) and c), a proposition contrary to IPAB can be advanced when involvement is defined in intrinsic terms:

*P2. Exposure to a product advertisement will trigger more enduring attitudes toward the product and more predictable purchase intentions in the case of individuals with low intrinsic involvement, compared with individuals high in intrinsic involvement.*

Individual traits (e.g. intelligence and need for cognition) influence attitude changes and persuasion (Brinol and Petty, 2005). For example, it was found that attitude changes in people high in need for cognition are generally more persistent than for those who are low in need for cognition (Haugtvedt and Petty, 1992; Cacioppo *et al.*, 1983). Also, Cacioppo *et al.* (1986) show that the attitudes of individuals high in need for cognition were more predictive of behavioral intentions and reported voting behavior than were attitudes of individuals low

in need for cognition. There is every reason to believe that individual traits will affect persuasion-induced attitudes and purchase intentions in the context of product advertising, especially in the case of intrinsic involvement:

*P3. In the context of product advertisements, the hypothesized relationships between consumers' involvement (both intrinsic and extrinsic), attitudes toward the product and purchase intentions, will be moderated by individual traits such as the need for cognition.*

The critical argument put forward in the present paper relies on P1, P2 and P3 to cast a different light on a seemingly solid and uncontested proposition of the core persuasion marketing theory to date. It is hoped that the argument will prompt scholars to pause and think twice about the taken-for-granted assumptions of existing research, opening new roads in theory development and partnering with seasoned marketing executives to craft better frameworks that are in-tune with the realities of the current marketplace environment.

## 5 Conclusions

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on attitudes and persuasion. First, it identifies the conditions under which an important prediction of ELM and SHM (prediction labeled IPAB here) has been empirically tested. Emphasis is placed on the specificity of product advertising (as opposed to persuasion concerning social issues) and the manipulations of involvement in terms of situational/extrinsic motivation. Secondly, given the surprising fact that (to the best of our knowledge) IPAB has not been directly tested in product advertising, a much-needed critical analysis is conducted herein, casting light on the precarious ground of one of the most popular assumptions in marketing and advertising. Finally, this paper argues that the exact opposite of ELM's proposition should be obtained for product advertising when consumers' involvement is based on intrinsic personal relevance. Such an account represents a vital first step toward reconciling the observable gap



between scholarly mantra and marketing practice.

### Explanatory notes

1. It will be discussed at a later point in this paper that the particular experimental manipulations of Chaiken and Petty et al. produced special cases when IPAB can be elicited. There is no evidence of IPAB's adequacy in situations beyond those special cases.
2. Information is received from different sources.

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## Author description

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