

Factors influencing product involvement among young consumers

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Abstract

Purpose – In light of the core role of product involvement as a variable in consumer behavior, the current study seeks to examine which variables influence product involvement among young people. This paper aims to explore five variables: age, subjective product knowledge, influence of parents, influence of peers, and product category.

Design/methodology/approach – The research was founded on a quantitative field study, whose sample was comprised of 252 young people, ages 4-15.

Findings – The findings among the entire sample imply that young people's product involvement is explained by all of the variables that were examined. Interesting findings came to light for each one of the age groups: Young children's product-involvement level was influenced by parents and peers. The product-involvement level for children was influenced by peers and product category. Adolescents' product-involvement relies on subjective product knowledge and product category.

Originality/value – These findings expand the existing knowledge about young consumers' behavior patterns and show that the existing models provide a partial picture. In addition, the product-involvement variable must be seen as a basis for market segmentation of the younger populations. The recommendation is to carefully create segments that examine the different product-involvement levels among each age group.

Article Type:

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Keyword(s):

Young adults; Influence; Israel; Consumers; Behaviour; Children(age groups).

Introduction

The present study focuses on the product-involvement variable among a young consumer population. Interest in the product-involvement variable and its characteristics was prompted by extensive evidence that the product-involvement variable plays a considerable role in the behavior of adult consumers. Moreover, recent findings show that this variable also plays an important role in the way young people process marketing and advertising information ([Muratore, 2003](#); [Te'eni-Harari et al., 2009](#)). The importance of the product-involvement variable makes it imperative to clarify those factors which influence young people's product involvement. The study at hand explored five variables that might possibly influence product involvement: the young person's age, the subject's subjective product knowledge, parents' influence, peers' influence, and product category.

Literature review

The role of product involvement in consumer behavior

Product involvement reflects recognition that a particular product category may be more or less central to people's lives, their sense of identity, and their relationship with the rest of the world ([Traylor, 1981](#)).

Researchers who study consumer behavior attribute a great deal of importance to the product-involvement variable. Studies have shown that product involvement can influence the decision-making process regarding a product, the extent to which consumers will search for information about the product, the timing in adoption of the product, the manner in which the consumer's attitudes and preferences regarding the product are influenced, the consumer's perceptions of alternatives in the same product category and brand loyalty ([Bauer et al., 2006](#); [Brisoux and Cheron, 1990](#); [Celsi and Olson, 1988](#); [Charters and Pettigrew, 2006](#); [Iwasaki and Havitz, 1998](#); [Leclerc and Little, 1997](#); [Lin and Chen, 2006](#); [Park, 1996](#); [Park and Young, 1986](#); [Ram and Jung, 1994](#); [Traylor, 1981](#)).

Moreover, studies have found that the product-involvement variable is a constant and stable variable, relative to many other variables; consequently, it may serve marketers and advertisers in the long-term ([Havitz and Howard, 1995](#); [Iwasaki and Havitz, 1998](#); [Quester and Smart, 1996](#)).

All the above studies, however, focused on product involvement among adults, while up until now very little research has addressed product involvement among young people.

A recent study that examined product involvement among young people found that children notice sales only when the sales are for products that the youngsters already perceive as relevant to their world ([Muratore, 2003](#)).

Another research study demonstrates that ad effectiveness is significantly and positively influenced by product involvement: when children perceive the product as being relevant and meaningful (a high level of product involvement), their attitudes are influenced. On the other hand, when the product is not perceived as relevant and meaningful (a low level of product involvement), the attitude measures are influenced to a significantly lower degree ([Te'eni-Harari et al., 2009](#)).

The above-mentioned studies indicate that the product-involvement variable is important and significant in understanding the processes that young people undergo when they are exposed to marketing and advertising stimuli. Yet, the question remains: What factors influence young people's level of product involvement? The present research is devoted to investigating this question.

Factors influencing the level of product involvement

Although product involvement significantly influences (adult) consumers' cognitive and behavioral responses, including memory, attention, processing, search, brand commitment, satisfaction, early adoption, and opinion leadership, we still know surprisingly little about its origins ([Coulter et al., 2003](#)). The studies that have been conducted up until now have examined the relationship

between either one or two variables, and product involvement, among adults, as is presented below.

Age

Studies show considerable variations in levels of product involvement between different age groupings of adults ([Coulter et al., 2003](#); [Quester and Smart, 1996](#); [Salma and Tashchian, 1985](#)). [Quester and Smart \(1996\)](#) found statistically significant differences between the mean involvement levels of 18-29 year-olds and 30-41 year-olds as a group, and 30-41 year-olds and 42-54 year-olds as a group.

According to [Coulter et al.'s \(2003\)](#) survey, data indicate a tendency for younger women to be more involved with cosmetics than older women.

Subjective product knowledge

Studies found that the level of product involvement among adults is influenced by subjective product knowledge. [Greenwald and Leavitt \(1984\)](#) claim that consumers' product knowledge will increase as the rate of consumer involvement increases. [Barta and Ray \(1986\)](#) show that the correlation coefficient between product involvement and subjective product knowledge of the products (photographic film, deodorants, facial moisturizer, instant coffee, instant cocoa, drink mixes, and frozen pizza) is 0.49. [Lutz et al. \(1983\)](#) show that consumers who have a lot of knowledge about a specific product are more likely to perceive the product as being important than consumers who have less knowledge ([Lutz et al., 1983](#)).

Social influence

Social influence is an important determinant of consumer behavior ([Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980](#); [Bearden and Etzel, 1982](#)). According to [Coulter et al. \(2003\)](#), social networks play an important role in facilitating product involvement among adults. Their findings suggest a strong relationship between product involvement and the use of friends and family as information sources.

Product category

[Zaichkowsky \(1985\)](#) examined the level of product involvement among 751 adults for 13 product categories. Her study findings show a significant difference in product involvement level for various products. For example: a low level of product involvement was found for: instant coffee, bubble bath soap, and breakfast cereal. A medium level of product involvement was found for: facial cream, mouthwash, headache remedies, and tissues. A high level of product involvement was found for: calculators and automobiles. The studies of [Kapferer and Laurent \(1986\)](#) also show a variance in product involvement for different products: In their studies, 20 product categories were examined among a sample of 800 adult women. A higher level of product involvement was found for the clothing and perfume categories than for other product categories.

Young consumers

According to [Valkenburg and Cantor \(2001\)](#), there has, as yet, been little systematic research conducted in academic circles on the different determinants of children's consumer behavior. Only a few studies have investigated the development of consumer behavior within a wide context.

Various researchers have proposed relating to a number of stages in the development of the child, as a consumer. The stages are presented in [Table I](#).

Studies found that the development of the economic understanding of children increases as they get older. The older a child gets, the more he tends to present a wider system of answers, which are easier to understand ([Leiser et al., 1990](#)).

Moreover, [Gregan-Paxton and Roedder \(1995\)](#) found that differences exist among different age groups as regards the ability to make consumer-oriented decisions. Young children react in a more

limited manner, while older children tend to adapt the information they accumulate to the consumer environment. In addition, [Roedder and Whitney \(1986\)](#) also cited cognitive development and the child's age as factors that contribute towards advancing the consumer developmental process. In light of the findings about the importance of the role of age in the developmental process of the consumer, this study hypothesizes that the level of product involvement among young people will be influenced by age:

H1. Young people's level of product involvement is negatively influenced by youngsters' age, i.e. the older the child, the lower the product involvement.

This hypothesis claims that a higher level of product involvement will be found among younger children than among older children. The hypothesis is based on the findings that testify to an improvement in the consumer abilities of the youngster and his increasing ability to be selective, as he gets older.

In addition to the age of the child, other significant factors were found to explain the behavior of young consumers. [Roedder and Whitney \(1986\)](#) mentioned the accessibility of consumer information accumulated from experience and other sources as an important factor in advancing the developmental process of the young consumer. In light of this finding, the second hypothesis claims that the level of product involvement will be influenced by subjective product knowledge:

H2. Young people's level of product involvement is positively influenced by youngsters' subjective product knowledge, i.e. the higher the subjective product knowledge, the higher the product involvement.

The assumption that product involvement will be positively influenced by subjective knowledge is based on studies that revealed similar findings among adults ([Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984](#); [Lutz et al., 1983](#)).

Additional studies conducted among youngsters showed that parents and peers play an important role in the processing of market information and consumer development ([Adler et al., 1980](#); [Coleman and Hendry, 1999](#); [Donohue and Meyer, 1984](#); [Dorr et al., 1989](#); [Furnham, 2000](#); [Goldberg, 1990](#); [Lee and Brown, 1995](#); [McNeal, 1992](#); [Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001](#); [Van Evra, 1990](#)).

In light of the importance of the social environment in the forming of consumer behavior among the young, *H3* and *H4* in this study assume that product involvement among children and adolescents will be influenced by parents and peers, who represent the youngsters' immediate social environment:

H3. Young people's level of product involvement is positively influenced by parents, i.e. the stronger the influence of parents, the higher the product involvement.

H4. Young people's level of product-involvement is positively influenced by the attitudes of peers towards the product, i.e. the stronger the influence of peers, the higher the product involvement.

The assumption that product involvement will be positively influenced by parents and peers is based on findings discovered among adults in relation to the connection between product involvement and the influence of the surrounding environment ([Coulter et al., 2003](#)).

The fifth hypothesis of this study assumes that differences in involvement levels will be found for the different products:

H5. Differences in young people's levels of product involvement will be found in relation to different product categories.

This hypothesis is based on findings discovered among adults in relation to product involvement and product category ([Kapferer and Laurent, 1986](#); [Zaichkowsky, 1985](#)).

Methodology

Research design

The study was based on 12 cells of analysis: three age groups (4-7, 8-11, 12-15) × four product categories.

The study was founded on a comprehensive, quantitative field study, in which each participant was interviewed individually, face-to-face. Each subject was asked about one product only. Initially, the subjects were asked questions regarding their product involvement. This was followed by questions regarding their subjective product knowledge, the influence of parents and peers, and socio-demographic questions.

Samples

Three age groups of young people participated in the current study: ages 4-7; 8-11; and 12-15. In order to test whether there are significant differences between the three age groups, young people were randomly chosen from among the median age of each group: 5-6 (84 young children); 9-10 (84 children); 13-14 (84 adolescents). The research related to the exact age of the subjects (mean=9.45, SD=3.24, $n=252$).

The study was carried out in Israeli public schools (K-8), in conjunction and with the approval of the Ministry of Education, as well as that of the respective principals, teachers, parents and young people.

Measures

The dependent measure: product involvement

Examination of product involvement was based on the abbreviated inventory developed by [Zaichkowsky \(1994\)](#). Zaichkowsky's scale is considered a valid measurement for product involvement ([Goldsmith and Emmert, 1991](#)) and previous studies investigating product involvement have relied on this scale ([Brisoux and Cheron, 1990](#); [Celsi and Olson, 1988](#); [Chow et al., 1990](#); [Ram and Jung, 1994](#)). However, previous research ([Te'eni-Harari et al., 2009](#)) found that the original scale of concepts would be hard for young subjects to understand. After an in-depth examination of each index among young people, the researchers chose ten indexes suitable for questionnaires geared toward the young population:

1. Important-unimportant.
2. Related to my life-unrelated to my life.
3. Says a lot to me-says nothing to me.
4. Has value-has no value.
5. Is interesting-is boring.
6. Is exciting-is unexciting.
7. Is attractive-is unattractive.
8. Is great-is not great.
9. Involved-uninvolved.
10. [I] "have to have" [it]-don't "have to have" [it].

Another change in Zaichkowsky's scale (based on [Te'eni-Harari et al., 2009](#)) was the use of the PolliMeter scale. The use of the PolliMeter is very simple and can be operated even by young children ([Stashevsky and Lampert, 2008](#)). Results showed that using the PolliMeter increases both validity and reliability ([Lampert, 1979, 1981](#); [Lampert and Stashevsky, 2006](#)). All ten questions were combined to create a single unified index (Cronbach's alpha=0.858, $n=252$).

The independent measures

Age group

The younger age groups (ages 4-7 and 8-11) were chosen based on the models of [McNeal \(1992\)](#) and [Valkenburg and Cantor \(2001\)](#), while the older children's age group (12-15) was chosen based on models and studies that found important changes among this age group ([Berti and Bombi, 1988](#); [Leiser et al., 1990](#)).

Subjective product knowledge. Subjective knowledge reflects what consumers think they know about the product and the consumers' feelings of "familiarity" with the product ([Brucks, 1985](#); [Cordell, 1997](#); [Seines and Gronhaug, 1986](#)). In the current study, the youngsters were asked two questions. The first question was: "how much do you know about this product?"

The goal of the question was to examine the amount of self-knowledge the youngster feels he possesses about the product, as a result of his personal experience with the product. Nevertheless, as we are talking about a young population, the knowledge is often based on indirect experience, through others. Therefore, we also asked the youngster the following question: "do you know other people who use this product?"

The answers to these questions were provided by means of the PolliMeter, where response options ranged from "know a lot" to "know very little". The two questions were combined to create a single unified index ($r=0.144$, Sig.=0.022, $n=252$).

Peers' influence. This variable investigated the way subjects perceive their peers' influence. The examination was based on the model conceived by [Ajzen and Fishbein \(1980\)](#).

The subjects were asked about their peers' attitudes towards the product category (and not toward a specific brand): "What do your peers think about the product?" The subjects' response, as to quality of the product in the eyes of their peers was either a "very good product" versus a "product which is not good at all".

Moreover, the subject was asked how important his peers' opinion about the product is to him ("very important" versus "not at all important").

The two questions were combined to create a single unified index ($r=0.284$, Sig.=0.000, $n=252$).

Parents' influence. This variable investigated the way subjects perceive their parents' influence. The subjects were asked: "What do your parents' think about this product?" and "How important is your parents' opinion about the product to you?" The two questions were combined to create a single unified index ($r=0.203$, Sig.=0.001, $n=252$).

Product category. In order to test young people's level of involvement for different products, four products were selected for the present study: mobile phones, hotdogs, books and toothpaste.

These products were chosen in order to relate to a range of different types of products that are relevant to the lives of youngsters. The product category variable was examined by a dummy variable for different products, except for the toothpaste, which was treated, in this study, as a reference variable.

Results

Results among the entire research sample

Linear regression analysis showed that the independent variables accounted for 49 percent of the variation in product involvement ($R^2=0.50$; Adjusted $R^2=0.49$, $F=34.74$, Sig.=0.000).

Product involvement was positively and significantly influenced by: parents ($B=0.21$, Beta=0.23, Sig.=0.000), peers ($B=0.23$, Beta=0.26, Sig.=0.000) and subjective product knowledge ($B=0.11$, Beta=0.11, Sig.=0.032). Product involvement was negatively and significantly influenced by age ($B=-1.78$, Beta=-0.23, Sig.=0.000).

Product involvement level was also influenced by the product category variable (hotdogs: $B=-13.63$, Beta=-0.24, Sig.=0.000).

As can be seen, product involvement was significantly influenced by all of the independent variables. Based on these findings, it can be determined that *H1* (age), *H2* (subjective product knowledge), *H3* (parents' influence), *H4* (peers' influence) and *H5* (product category) were confirmed.

Results among each age group separately

Young children (ages 4-7)

Linear regression analysis showed that the independent variables accounted for 40 percent of the variation in product-involvement ($R^2=0.45$, Adjusted $R^2=0.40$, $F=10.32$, Sig.=0.000). Product-involvement was found to be positively and significantly influenced by: peers ($B=0.18$, Beta=0.26, Sig.=0.011) and parents ($B=0.28$, Beta=0.35, Sig.=0.002).

It is important to note that parents have a stronger influence than peers among children in this age group. Product-involvement was not significantly influenced by subjective product knowledge or product category.

Children (ages 8-11)

Linear regression analysis showed that the independent variables accounted for 46 percent of the variation in the product involvement ($R^2=0.50$, Adjusted $R^2=0.46$, $F=12.86$, Sig.=0.000). Product involvement was found to be positively and significantly influenced only by peers ($B=0.37$, Beta=0.43, Sig.=0.000).

Product-involvement level was also influenced by the product category variable (hotdogs: $B=-10.94$, Beta=-0.22, Sig.=0.044).

Product involvement was not significantly influenced by either subjective product knowledge or parents.

Adolescents (ages 12-15)

Linear regression analysis showed that independent variables accounted for 43 percent of the variation in product-involvement ($R^2=0.47$, Adjusted $R^2=0.43$, $F=11.44$, Sig.=0.000). Product involvement was found to be influenced by subjective product knowledge ($B=0.26$, Beta=0.23, Sig.=0.025) and by product category (hotdogs: $B=-28.11$, Beta=-0.45, Sig.=0.000).

Discussion

The findings imply that young people's product involvement is explained by all of the variables that were examined in the current study. Each one of these variables significantly contributes to explaining product involvement among the entire research sample (ages 4-15).

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the differences received among the different age groups. The findings reveal that product involvement among each age group was influenced differently.

Product involvement and age

The present study shows that young people's level of product involvement was negatively influenced by age. That is to say, with age, the young person's product involvement decreases.

It seems that the changes occurring in their cognitive capabilities, their ability to process information, and their development as a consumer all serve to bring about a different level of product involvement. Together with the maturation process, young people better understand the defining characteristics of the product and the game rules of commercialism; they are more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the product; they are also more aware and understand more about the cost of products. As a result, the adolescent's level of product involvement is lower than that of the child, who is more excitable and less critical.

This finding demands a closer scrutiny of the existing models that describe consumer development. These models do not relate to the product-involvement variable. The understanding – that in the first stages of consumer development product involvement is higher, after which it decreases, as the child's age increases – is of utmost importance.

Furthermore, this finding shows that it is necessary and correct to also relate to older children (at least up till the age of 15) when describing the development of the child as a consumer, and incorrect to stop at the age of 8, as in [McNeal's model \(1992\)](#), or even the age of 12, as in the model of [Valkenburg and Cantor \(2001\)](#).

Product involvement and subjective product knowledge

Study findings among all age groups (ages 4-15) show that product-involvement level was positively influenced by subjective product knowledge.

This is in line with studies conducted among adults, which attribute the influence of the knowledge variable on the product-involvement variable ([Barta and Ray, 1986](#); [Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984](#); [Lutz et al., 1983](#)).

As regards the influence of this variable among each age group, it was found that product involvement is only influenced by subjective knowledge among the adolescents (12-15). While the younger children's age groups were mainly influenced by the surrounding social environment as regards product involvement, the older children's involvement was mainly based on themselves and the knowledge available to them.

The finding related to adolescents is also important for further understanding the development of the young consumer. This finding shows that it is necessary to relate to subjective knowledge and its use among adolescents within the framework of models that describe development, including the models of [McNeal \(1992\)](#) and [Valkenburg and Cantor \(2001\)](#).

Product involvement and social influence

Study findings across all age groups (ages 5-14) show that product involvement was positively and significantly influenced by both parents and peers.

These findings demonstrate that young people assign a rather high level of importance to parents and peers. They observe, listen, and act according to what they see in their immediate surroundings – namely, their parents and peers. Young people, as a whole, seem to need to demonstrate that they are an integral part of the society in which they live and therefore tend to conform to attitudes they observe among parents and peers. These findings are in line with the findings of [Coulter et al. \(2003\)](#), who found that social networks play an important role in determining the level of product-involvement among adult consumers.

Hence, we must differentiate between the three age groups: among young children between the ages of 4-7, product involvement was positively influenced by parents and peers. For this age group, product involvement was more influenced by parents' attitudes than by peers' attitudes. Among children between the ages of 8-11, peers are a significant variable influencing product-involvement level. Among adolescents (ages 12-15), product-involvement level was not influenced by these two variables.

Thus, we can see a clear transition, wherein the youngsters go from depending mainly on the social environment to depending mainly on themselves and the knowledge that is accessible to them.

These findings serve to contribute significantly to our expanded understanding of the developmental process of children as consumers. As [McNeal \(1992\)](#) points out in his model, parents play an important role as regards young children. Therefore, it is of high importance to clarify the changes that take place around the age of 8 and around the age of 12.

Product involvement and product category

An examination of all age groups (ages 4-15) shows that product involvement was influenced by product category. In an independent examination of each age group, it is possible to see that product category had a different influence on each age group.

Among ages 4-7, product-involvement level was not influenced by product category. On the other hand, as regards children between the ages of 8-11 and 12-15, product-involvement level was influenced by product category.

These findings show that differences exist between the age groups; that is, between young children (ages 4-7) and older children (ages 8-11 and 12-15).

This finding reveals the centrality of the product in the process, especially among the older children (over the age of 8). Here, too, it seems that there is a certain importance in relation to this component in the existing models that describe the development of the child as a consumer.

Implications

Theoretical implications

The study findings show that the existing models, which describe the development of the young consumer ([Berti and Bombi, 1988](#); [McNeal, 1992](#); [Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001](#)), provide only a partial picture about these processes. The findings of this study contribute towards forming an improved model, from several diverse aspects. This improved model includes: the addition of the product-involvement variable, relating to the developmental process of the consumer also as regards older children – in opposition to [McNeal's \(1992\)](#) model, as well as that of [Valkenburg and Cantor \(2001\)](#). Moreover, the improved model proposes paying more significant attention to the role of product category among older children (over the age of 8), relating to the role of subjective product knowledge – mainly among adolescents, as well as relating to the role of peers up till the age of 11.

Implications for marketers and advertisers

The above findings have practical implications. The product-involvement construct is an important dimension for further understanding the behavior of young consumers. As such, the product-

involvement variable must be seen as a basis for market segmentation of the younger populations. It is important to divide the young population, according to product-involvement level – “involved” versus “not involved” (we can also relate to the intermediary levels).

The recommendation is not to settle for simply dividing the population up according to product-involvement level, but rather to create segments that examine the different product-involvement levels among each age group.

As regards the younger children (ages 4-7), marketing activity, aimed at raising product-involvement or keeping product involvement high, can do so through parents and peers, by employing the following components: mobilizing parental support for the product (direct appeals to parents) and presenting positive attitudes of peers about the product (advertising buzz). Nevertheless, since parents have a greater influence than peers, it is recommended to focus on parents.

As regards children aged 8-11, marketing activity, aimed at raising product-involvement or keeping product involvement high, needs to focus primarily on peers' attitudes and on peers' influence – presenting positive attitudes of peers, testimonials regarding the product, encouraging and enhancing positive communication by word-of-mouth about the product, and using instant messaging – an important channel of communication among young people.

In the cases where a firm wants to raise the product-involvement level, in a category where involvement is relatively low, it is also possible to consider linking the product to other products that enjoy a high level of product involvement. An additional possibility is to redefine the product's characteristics in an attempt to change the product's perception along with the product involvement.

Among adolescents aged 12-15 the treatment for product involvement must focus on expanding the knowledge of the young consumer about the product; in this way, he will feel that he has a broader knowledge of the product. Furthermore, also among this age group (similarly to the 8-11 age group), it is important to focus on product category and examine ways to specifically treat product involvement in the relevant category.

Further research

Further research is needed to examine demographic and cultural factors that may help to further explain young people's product involvement ([Zaichkowsky and Sood, 1989](#)).

In addition, it is necessary to also examine the implications of product involvement on the consumer behavior of youngsters. One of the interesting questions in this context is whether high product involvement creates a high level of brand loyalty among the young population.

Table 1 Stages in the development of young consumers

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Berti and Bombi (1988)	3-6 The child knows what a store and money are	6-7 The child begins to establish rules about prices and amounts	7-10 The child has a limited understanding of concepts relating to purchasing, selling and work	11-14 The child integrates the various roles into a single network	–
McNeal (1992)	0-2 The child goes shopping with his parents and observes	2-4 The child begins to ask for certain products during the shopping trips	4-5 The child begins to choose products himself, and has preferred brands	5-8 The child begins to request, choose, and pay for products under parental supervision	8 and up The child purchases products without the help of his parents and has an understanding of money
Valkenburg and Cantor (2001)	0-2 Feelings, wants and preferences	2-5 Nagging and negotiating	5-8 Adventure and first purchase	8-12 Conformity and fastidiousness. Peers play an important role. The ability to critically evaluate and compare products develops	–

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