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Attention Economy and Marketing Mechanisms: A Comparison of Low- and High-Involvement Products

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Abstract. In the era of the attention economy, consumer attention has become an increasingly scarce and valuable marketing resource. With the rapid development of digital platforms and algorithmic recommendation technologies, the way firms acquire and utilize consumer attention has undergone significant changes. This paper uses a conceptual analysis examines how attention-based marketing mechanisms differ across products with different levels of consumer involvement. By integrating insights from attention-based marketing theory and consumer decision-making literature, this paper analyzes two distinct pathways through which attention is transformed into purchase behavior: low-involvement products primarily rely on attention repetition and mental availability to stimulate purchasing, while high-involvement products require deeper information processing and trust formation after attention is captured. The study further discusses how firms can allocate attention resources effectively by adopting broad attention strategies for low-involvement products and deep attention strategies for high-involvement products in the digital marketing environment. This paper contributes to a better understanding of attention allocation in marketing and provides both theoretical and practical implications for firms seeking to improve marketing effectiveness in the attention economy.

Keywords: Attention Economy, Attention-Based Marketing, Consumer Attention, Marketing Mechanisms, Product Involvement

1. Introduction

Internet platforms have developed rapidly, while individuals' capacity to process information remains inherently limited. Simon first argued that, in an information-rich environment, attention is the truly scarce resource [1]. Building on this idea, Goldhaber introduced the concept of the attention economy, arguing that market competition increasingly centers on competing for consumers' limited attention [2]. This theoretical insight is reflected in current practice: according to WPP Media, social media remains the largest advertising channel and the primary driver of content-driven ad growth, confirming that competition for consumer attention now defines the marketing landscape [3].

Concurrently, the mechanisms for capturing attention have shifted fundamentally. Traditional marketing relied on a push-based model that purchased mass-media exposure. The rise of algorithmic recommendation, however, has enabled a pull-based approach: platforms collect user

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behavioral data to construct preference profiles and proactively deliver targeted content, allowing firms to move beyond broad-spectrum exposure toward more precise precision attention.

Existing research has primarily examined the market logic through which firms compete for consumer attention. Some studies suggest that consumer attention has become a critical resource for achieving marketing effectiveness, while others emphasize that the ways in which brands capture consumer attention have been fundamentally transformed by digital technologies and platform-based marketing [4, 5]. Although previous studies have demonstrated the important role of attention in brand communication and consumer decision-making, most have focused on specific product contexts or individual theoretical perspectives, with limited attention paid to the different mechanisms through which attention influences consumer behavior across product categories.

Building on the attention economy and consumer decision-making literature, this paper conducts a conceptual literature-based analysis to examine how consumer attention translates into purchase behavior through different marketing mechanisms for low- and high-involvement products. It argues that firms should use broad attention strategies for low-involvement products and deep attention strategies for high-involvement products. These arguments offer both theoretical and practical implications for marketing in the attention economy.

2. Theoretical foundations of marketing mechanisms

2.1. Attention

Attention is a limited cognitive resource that determines which information consumers selectively perceive and process .Importantly, attention should not be regarded as a homogeneous resource. The amount and depth of attention allocated to a stimulus can vary across consumers and decision-making contexts, leading to different behavioral outcomes [6]. In particular, attention can differ in its intensity and depth of processing. In low-involvement purchase situations, consumers typically allocate relatively limited cognitive resources to product information and rely more heavily on existing memory and familiarity. In contrast, high-involvement purchase situations generally require greater cognitive effort and deeper processing of product-related information. Thus, the effectiveness of attention depends not only on whether a consumer notices a marketing stimulus, but also on how much cognitive resources are subsequently devoted to processing it.

Based on this distinction and attention-based marketing theory, this paper treats attention as a dynamic and limited cognitive resource rather than a uniform input. In low-involvement purchase situations, consumers typically allocate limited cognitive resources to product information and rely more heavily on existing memory and familiarity. In contrast, high-involvement products, attention serves as an entry point for deeper information processing and subsequent trust formation. The role of attention therefore depends not only on whether consumers notice a marketing stimulus, but also on how deeply they process the information.

2.2. Mental availability

Mental availability, proposed by the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute, refers to the likelihood that consumers can quickly recall a specific brand within a particular consumption contexts [7]. Unlike traditional brand loyalty theories, Mental Availability emphasizes that consumers tend to rapidly retrieve familiar brands from their long-term memory and use this information to make purchase decisions.

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The formation of mental availability depends on the network structure of a brand within consumers' memory. Through sustained advertising exposure, brand symbols, packaging design, and repeated communication, firms continuously strengthen the connection between the brand and specific consumption scenarios, thereby increasing the probability that the brand will be recalled by consumers and selected at the point of purchase. For consumers, this memory-based decision-making process can effectively reduce cognitive costs and enhance purchasing efficiency.

2.3. Information processing

Consumer decision making is essentially an information-processing process, which comprises three main stages: Information Acquisition, Information Evaluation, and Information Integration [8]. During the information acquisition stage, consumers actively gather relevant information, including product attributes, brand reputation, price, and user reviews, to mitigate the decision-making risks arising from information asymmetry. During the Information Evaluation stage, consumers conduct comparative analyses of different brands based on factors such as product quality, price, functionality, and brand image, and make value judgments according to their own needs. Finally, during the Information Integration stage, consumers synthesize all available information to form an overall perception, thereby building trust in specific brands and ultimately making the final purchase decision.

3. Differences in marketing mechanisms between product types

The role of attention in marketing effectiveness cannot be understood independently of the consumer decision-making context. Product involvement provides an important contextual condition because it reflects the extent to which consumers perceive a purchase as consequential and worthy of cognitive effort. As involvement increases, consumers may engage with marketing information in different ways, which in turn affects how attention contributes to subsequent decision-making. Therefore, rather than assuming a uniform relationship between attention and purchase behavior, it is necessary to examine how the function of attention changes across different levels of product involvement. The following sections examine these differences by considering the decision-making processes associated with low-involvement and high-involvement products.

3.1. Low-involvement products: mental availability-based marketing mechanism

Low-involvement products typically feature low prices, high purchase frequency, and low perceived risk, such as food and daily necessities. Because the purchase cost of these products is relatively low, consumers generally do not spend significant time comparing options; instead, they rely on their existing experience to make purchasing decisions quickly.

The primary role of attention is to direct consumers' limited cognitive resources toward relevant brand information. When consumers repeatedly attend to brand-related information, the information is more likely to be processed and retained in memory. Over time, repeated exposure and the reinforcement of associations between the brand and relevant consumption contexts can increase the accessibility of the brand in memory, enabling consumers to retrieve it more easily at the point of purchase. Therefore, in purchasing decisions for low-involvement products, Mental Availability plays a decisive role. By leveraging continuous advertising campaigns, brand identity, packaging design, and high-frequency exposure, firms can consistently strengthen the connection between the

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brand and consumer scenarios, thereby enhancing the brand's accessibility within consumers' memory.

For low-involvement products, the core marketing objective of enterprises shifts from "providing more information" to "increasing the likelihood of brand recall." Consequently, the marketing mechanism for low-involvement products can be understood as a process in which consumer attention strengthens Mental Availability, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchase.

The marketing activities of Mixue Ice Cream & Tea provide an illustrative example of this mechanism. Its beverage offerings represent a typical low-involvement product category, in which consumers generally do not spend substantial time comparing alternatives. Mixue's marketing activities show how attention can be converted into mental availability and then into purchase. First, its repetitive theme song acts an auditory cue that draws consumer attention and makes brand-related information more likely to be noticed Mixue-related brand information. Second, the Snow King IP(visual brand asset) provides a distinctive brand cue that helps associate these marketing stimuli with the Mixue brand. Through repeated exposure, the association between the Snow King, the brand, and relevant consumption contexts can be reinforced. Meanwhile, Mixue's active social media engagement increases the frequency and range of consumers' encounters with these brand cues, while its high-density store network repeatedly connects the brand with concrete consumption situations. As these associations are reinforced, Mixue becomes more accessible in consumers' memory. When consumers later consider buying a beverage or ice cream, Mixue is more likely to be recalled and considered, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchase.

3.2. High-involvement products: information processing and trust-based marketing mechanism

High-involvement products typically exhibit characteristics such as higher price, lower purchase frequency, high perceived risk, and significant decision consequences, examples include automobiles, housing, and financial services. Consumers are generally willing to invest more time and cognitive resources to gain a thorough understanding of and compare these products [9].

For high-involvement products, capturing attention merely signifies that consumers have incorporated the product into their consideration set. After paying attention to a product, consumers typically proceed to gather additional information about the product, compare differences between brands, and comprehensively evaluate factors such as product quality, price, after-sales service, and brand reputation, ultimately forming an overall judgment. Following this information processing stage, consumers gradually form an assessment of the brand's capabilities, product quality, and corporate credibility, essentially establishing consumer trust. Morgan and Hunt identify trust as a key mediating variable in successful relationship marketing, arguing that trust facilitates confidence in exchange relationships and supports subsequent relational outcomes [10]. In high-involvement purchasing, information processing alone is insufficient. Consumers need to translate their evaluation of product and brand information into sufficient Trust before committing to a consequential purchase.

Therefore, the marketing mechanism for high-involvement products can be understood as a process in which consumer attention initiates Information Processing, which contributes to the formation of Trust and ultimately supports purchase behavior.

The marketing activities of the Xiaomi SU7 illustrate how Information Processing can contribute to Trust formation in high-involvement product marketing. Product-launch communications, founder-related brand visibility, and extensive social-media exposure can initially attract consumer attention. Once attention is captured, consumers enter the information acquisition stage and acquire

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further information about the vehicle through official product specifications, professional reviews, owner feedback, and test-drive experiences.

In the information evaluation stage, consumers compare and assess the information obtained from different sources. For example, they may examine the vehicle's range capability, safety performance, and other product attributes, while comparing official claims with professional reviews and user experiences. This comparison helps consumers to assess the consistency, credibility, and relevance of the available information.

In the Information Integration stage, consumers combine the information obtained and evaluated from different sources to form an overall assessment of the Xiaomi SU7 and the Xiaomi brand. Rather than relying on a single marketing message, consumers integrate information concerning product performance, safety, quality, user experience, and brand reputation. When information from different sources provides sufficiently consistent evidence, consumers can develop greater confidence in the product and the brand, thereby contributing to the formation of Trust. For a high-involvement product such as an automobile, this Trust can provide consumers with greater confidence in making the final purchase decision.

3.3. Comparison of marketing mechanisms

The comparison between low-involvement and high-involvement products demonstrates that attention plays different roles in the conversion of attention into purchase behavior. For low-involvement products, attention primarily functions as a mechanism for increasing mental availability and facilitating quick purchase decisions. For high-involvement products, attention serves as an entry point that encourages deeper cognitive engagement and trust development.

Therefore, the effectiveness of attention-based marketing depends not only on how much attention a brand obtains, but also on how firms transform attention according to product involvement and consumer decision-making processes.

4. Differentiated attention allocation in algorithmic marketing

The rise of digital platforms and algorithmic recommendation has changed how firms compete for consumer attention. By analyzing behavioral signals such as search queries, browsing records, and purchase histories, algorithmic systems can identify consumer interests and deliver content with greater precision. However, the value of algorithmic marketing is not limited to generating more exposure. Attention is transformed into purchase behavior through distinct mechanisms depending on product characteristics: for low-involvement products, it primarily operates through mental availability, whereas for high-involvement products, it operates through information processing and trust. Algorithmic marketing therefore provides a practical means for firms to allocate attention resources in ways that correspond to these different mechanisms rather than applying a uniform approach.

This paper distinguishes between broad and deep attention strategies. A broad attention strategy expands the breadth and repetition of consumer attention across digital contexts to strengthen mental availability. A deep attention strategy attracts consumers who are likely to engage in further evaluation and guiding them toward detailed, credible information to facilitate information processing and trust formation.

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4.1. Low-involvement products: broad attention strategy

For low-involvement products, the central objective of algorithmic marketing is to expand the breadth of consumer attention. Because these purchases involve limited decision effort, consumers are more likely to choose brands that are readily accessible in memory when a relevant need arises. Algorithmic recommendation can support this process by increasing the frequency with which consumers encounter distinctive brand cues across different digital contexts. Repeated and contextually relevant exposure can strengthen the association between a brand and relevant consumption situations, thereby reinforcing mental availability.

Firms marketing low-involvement products should therefore prioritize strategies that broaden attention coverage and maintain brand presence, such as shareable content, distinctive brand identity, and context-based communication. The objective is not to encourage extensive evaluation but to ensure that the brand remains readily accessible when a purchase situation emerges. Low-involvement strategies therefore emphasize attention breadth and mental availability.

4.2. High-involvement products: deep attention strategy

For high-involvement products, algorithmic marketing should focus less on maximizing exposure and more on attracting consumers who are likely to engage in further product evaluation. Because these purchases involve greater perceived risk and more consequential decisions, consumers typically require more information before building confidence in a product or brand [11]. Algorithmic targeting can therefore help firms identify consumers with relevant interests and direct them toward content that supports deeper information processing.

Rather than relying on repeated exposure alone, firms should provide detailed and credible material, such as professional reviews, product comparisons, user testimonials, and experiential content. Such content enables consumers to acquire, evaluate, and integrate information from multiple sources, gradually forming a more comprehensive understanding of the product and brand. This process can reduce uncertainty and contribute to the development of trust [12]. High-involvement strategies therefore prioritize the depth and quality of attention, emphasizing substantive engagement and relevant information rather than simply maximizing impression volume.

The two strategies differ in how algorithmic marketing supports the conversion of attention into purchase. Low-involvement products require broad attention that reinforces mental availability, whereas high-involvement products require deeper attention that facilitates information processing and trust formation. Algorithmic recommendation does not itself constitute a new consumer decision mechanism; rather, it provides firms with a practical tool for matching attention strategies with product characteristics. By adopting differentiated attention strategies, firms can use algorithmic distribution more effectively than through a one-size-fits-all approach.

5. Conclusion

This paper examine how attention-based marketing mechanisms differ across products with varying levels of consumer involvement. Building on the decision mechanisms identified the analysis leads two central conclusions.

Consumer attention is converted into purchase behavior through fundamentally different mechanisms depending on product involvement. For low-involvement products, attention primarily strengthens mental availability, enabling rapid, memory-based purchase decisions; for high-

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involvement products, attention serves only as an entry point that must be translated into deeper Information Processing and Trust formation. Second, these different mechanisms imply that firms should not apply a uniform approach to attention. In the algorithmic marketing environment, low-involvement products require broad attention strategies that expand exposure and reinforce mental availability, whereas high-involvement products require deep attention strategies that guide targeted consumers toward detailed information and trust-building content. The key insight is that the value of algorithmic marketing is not simply about maximizing user attention, but in aligning the breadth or depth of attention with the decision mechanism each product demands.

This paper has several limitations. It is conceptual and literature-based, and the proposed mechanisms have not been tested against actual consumer behavior data. Second, the study treats product involvement as a binary distinction between low- and high-involvement products, whereas in reality involvement exists on a continuum and many products fall in between. The discussion of algorithmic marketing is largely generic and does not differentiate among platform types, which may apply attention mechanisms in distinct ways.

Future research could examine how attention metrics, breadth versus depth, relate to purchase outcomes across different product categories.Trating involvement as a continuous or multidimensional construct and investigate intermediate or hybrid product types. In addition, comparative studies across different algorithmic platforms could clarify how platform-specific recommendation logics shape attention allocation. Finally, future work could explore how emerging technologies, such as generative-AI-driven recommendation, further transform the ways firms translate attention into purchase.

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