“Is It Really Complicated?” Motivational Differences in the Effects of Structural and Outcome Complexity on Consumers’ Web Site and Brand Evaluations

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As marketers spend significantly to enhance the aesthetics and sophistication of consumer experiences, they are increasing the complexity of interactive consumption environments (e.g. web sites). However, little is known about how consumers react to such complexity, in terms of their evaluations. In this research, we examine two specific types of complexity: Structural Complexity, defined as the number of distinct cues at the web site that the consumer has to process, and Outcome Complexity, defined as the abstractness of icons and symbols that the consumer uses to navigate the web site. We focus on consumer motivations, to analyze if the two types of complexity will lead to negative or positive outcomes at a web site.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As marketers spend significantly to enhance the aesthetics and sophistication of consumer experiences, they are increasing the complexity of interactive consumption environments. However, little is known about how consumers react to such complexity, in terms of their evaluations. In this research, we examine two specific types of complexity: 1) **Structural Complexity**, defined as the number of distinct cues (e.g., information categories, length of text, audio, video, animation) at the web site that the consumer has to process, and 2) **Outcome Complexity**, defined as the abstractness of icons and symbols that the consumer uses to navigate the web site (e.g., ambiguous icons at a web site that does not allow the consumer to form clear outcome predictions). While these types of complexity maybe more memorable, communicate more information and are likely to engage consumers, they often make the web site difficult to navigate and use. In this research, we investigate if complexity in the form of multiple cues and abstract icons will lead to positive or negative outcomes at a web site.

Extant research on complexity advocates two divergent views of complexity. Research on stimulus complexity (Berlyne 1960) suggests that (moderately) complex environments will evoke the most favorable evaluations since it creates a stimulating environment. On the other hand, according to cognitive load theory (Sweller 1988), complexity can be perceived as superfluous and inefficient, leading to unfavorable evaluations. This paper attempts to address this conflict by focusing on individual motives. There is research to suggest that motives such as goal directed (focused on the end goal) and experiential (focused on the experience) persuade individuals to adopt separate mechanisms that guide evaluations (Hoffman and Novak 1996), implying that individuals belonging to these two different motive groups will have varying outcomes to complexity in an online environment.

We posit that distinct consumer motives (goal directed vs. experiential) will interact with the level (low, moderate, high) and type (structural, outcome) of complexity to determine consumer evaluations of the web site and brand. It is proposed that the congruence between the complexity level and needs of specific motives will drive the favorable evaluations toward a web site. Experiential consumers who are looking for an engaging experience will find the moderate complexity web site stimulating and challenging, triggering favorable evaluations; while the goal directed consumers who are seeking efficiency will find the low complexity web site ideal for pursuing their goal in a linear manner. In addition, we predict that due to the conceptual nature of the end goal (seeking specific information), individuals in a goal directed motive display higher sensitivity for low outcome complexity. On the other hand, individuals with an experiential motive are stimulus driven, and more focused on the elements of the stimulus that make the process of browsing engaging and stimulating, displaying higher sensitivity for moderate structural complexity.

These predictions are tested across two studies. Study 1, across 48 web sites designed as a 3 (Low, Moderate or High Structural Complexity) X 2 (Goal directed or Experiential Motive) demonstrates that the match or mismatch between consumer motives and complexity levels leads goal directed and experiential consumers to vary in their evaluations of complexity, but only at moderate and low levels. In Study 2, a second type of complexity, outcome complexity was introduced to examine the interplay between the two complexities, structural and outcome in influencing consumer reactions. Study 2, designed as 2 (Low Structural or Moderate Structural Complexity) X 2 (Low Outcome or Moderate Complexity) X 2 (Goal directed or Experiential Motive) confirms the findings of Study 1 by illustrating that goal directed individuals display a higher preference for the low complexity level (low structural-low outcome) than experiential individuals. Conversely, the experiential individuals display a higher preference for the moderate complexity level (moderate structural–moderate outcome) than goal directed individuals. In addition, the results indicate that goal directed individuals are sensitive to changes in outcome complexity but not sensitive to changes in structural complexity, while experiential individuals are sensitive to changes in structural complexity but not sensitive to changes in outcome complexity.

If corroborated, this research has theoretical and practical relevance. In particular, these insights contribute to complexity literature by explaining that motivation is a key moderator of consumer reactions to complexity, and may help reconcile conflicting findings on complexity reported previously. From a practical standpoint, the framework suggests that marketers should tailor the complexity of the environment to align to the motives that consumers bring to the consumption task. For example, a marketer may choose to differentiate among consumers based on their motives, and direct them to environments of varying complexity.

REFERENCES