The Unexpected Impact of User Manual At the Pre-Purchase Stage on Product Evaluation and Purchase Intention: an Exploratory Study

Benoît Aubert, Grenoble Ecole de Management / Customer Equity Institute, France
Olivier Trendel, Grenoble Ecole de Management / Customer Equity Institute, France
Daniel Ray, Grenoble Ecole de Management / Customer Equity Institute, France

In order to better understand capability and usability of a product, an increasing number of consumers read user manuals at the pre-purchase stage. The objective of this exploratory research is (i) to understand the impact of reading user manual at the pre-purchase stage on product evaluation and purchase intention and (ii) to investigate mediating and moderating effects. In an experiment, we found that user manual exposure may positively influence product evaluation and purchase intention, as long as the perceived pedagogical quality of the manual is high. User manual evoked usage vividness and perceived customer education are mediating this effect.

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In the first two studies, all participants read a story describing the process of making a mug. The final outcome was held constant by showing the same mug picture in all conditions. Process emotions were manipulated by telling half of the participants that the process was pleasant and telling the other half that it was unpleasant. Producer in the story was either the participant himself or another participant in the experiment. As predicted, an ANOVA on object evaluation yielded a process emotion by producer interaction. Participants in the pleasant process condition evaluated the object more highly than the others. The effect of process on object evaluation was stronger if the participant imagined that he had made the object. This was not because participants could not imagine how another person would feel in the process. In fact, in both studies, they predicted no difference between their own process emotions and those of another person. Furthermore, study 2 reveals how the self-object relationship takes shape. Symbolic meaning of the object mediates the effect of the building process on identification as well as attachment. Process emotions contaminate the object and give it a symbolic meaning. People become attached to or identify with the object because of the object’s symbolic meaning.

In a third study, I find evidence that outcome emotions affect evaluation of an object beyond the role of process emotions outlined above. Pride enhances evaluation of objects and shame diminishes the evaluation of the same object. Also, whether from the process or the outcome, positive emotions enhance symbolic meaning of objects and result in identification with as well as attachment to the object. Symbolic meaning of the object also mediates the effect of outcome emotions on attachment and identification. Unlike the first two studies, there was no interaction between producer and emotion on evaluation of the object, symbolic meaning of the object, or attachment. When emotions are related to the outcome (rather than the process), there is no distinction between self and other. Process emotions seem to be a stronger factor in shaping the self-object relationship than the outcome emotions.

My findings show that emotions that are evoked in the process as well as outcome emotions may enhance or diminish the value of objects by giving symbolic meanings to objects and therefore by shaping consumers identification with and attachment to the objects. If the outcome emotions are negative (positive), consumers are unhappy (happy) about the product regardless of who produced the object. On the other hand, process creates stronger response in object evaluation if self is involved. This research contributes to how self is extended to objects (Belk, 1988) and how consumers come to bond with the objects. The findings can help marketers to create additional value for consumers by understanding how the process and outcome emotions result in over or undervaluation of the objects.

References

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Abstract
In order to better understand capability and usability of products, an increasing number of consumers read user manuals at the pre-purchase stage. The objective of this exploratory research is (i) to understand the impact of reading user manual at the pre-purchase stage on product evaluation and purchase intention and (ii) to investigate mediating and moderating effects. In an experiment, we found that user manual exposure may positively influence product evaluation and purchase intention, as long as the perceived pedagogical quality of the manual is high. User manual evoked usage vividness and perceived customer education are mediating this effect.

Research background
The rising number of products’ features can overwhelm consumers with concerns on capability and usability of products (Thompson and al. 2005). Such complexity may lead consumers to face difficulties when evaluating an offer at the pre-purchase stage (Bell and Eisengerich 2007). Thus, consumers search more and more for product usage information at the pre-purchase stage such as product usage instructions (Higgins and Shanklin 1992). They can for instance easily download user manuals through companies’ websites in order to get proper usage information.

It is thus reasonable to question the “return on investment” of letting consumers read user manuals at a pre-purchase stage. So far, literature on user manuals remains scarce and legitimately focuses on post-purchase issues (Celuch, Lust and Showers 1992; Wiese and al. 2004). The goal of this study is not to understand why some customers read user manual at the pre-purchase stage, but rather to explore the impact of such a behavior on product evaluation and purchase intention and also to propose a possible underlying mechanism. From a managerial point of view, this research provides companies with indications about the value of positioning user manuals as pre-purchase communication tools.

To analyze the effects of user manuals on product evaluation and buying intention, the role of perceived customer education and user manual evoked usage vividness has been investigated. Perceived customer education reflects the degree to which customers perceive having been educated on a product by a company and is an antecedent of skills improvement, usage and consumer satisfaction (Aubert 2007). User manual evoked usage vividness refers to the quality of product usage related mental imagery (Babin and Burns 1998; MacInnis and Price 1987).

From the existing literature we hypothesized that reading user manual before purchase improves perceived customer education and consequently product evaluation and buying intention (Honebein 1997). We also hypothesized that user manual evoked usage vividness...
mediates the link between user manual exposure and perceived customer education: the more a customer is able to clearly represent himself using the product mentally when reading a user manual, the more he should perceive having been well educated by the company (MacInnis and Price 1987).

**Evidence of the impact of user manual at the pre-purchase stage**

138 students from a major European business school participated in an experiment on the evaluation of a new digital multi-featured camera soon to be available on the local market. User manual (present, absent) was the only between subject factor that was manipulated. 68 students were provided with 4 original sources of information: one document on how to choose a digital camera, one copy of the web page for the camera, one document presenting the technical specification of the camera and a consumer report for this camera. The 70 other students were provided with the same 4 sources of information plus the original user manual for this camera. Students were asked to spend as much time as needed (up to 30 minutes) to study the different documents. They were informed that in a second part they would have to give their opinion on the camera.

We controlled that the average time spent reading the documents was greater in the user manual present condition than in the user manual absent condition (M=24.1 min. and 20.1 min., p<.01). We also controlled that product feature knowledge was the same for the 2 experimental groups (all p NS). As hypothesized, we found that students in the user manual present condition perceived being better educated to use the product by the company than students in the user manual absent condition (M=5.38 and 3.93, p<.01). We also found that product evaluation and purchase intention were greater in the user manual present condition (p<.01 and p<.1 respectively). In order to test the mediating role of perceived customer education we performed several regression analyses (Baron and Kenny 1986; Shrout and Bolger 2002) and found, as expected, that perceived customer education fully mediates the relationship between user manual exposure and product evaluation or purchase intention. In particular, the effect on user manual exposure on product evaluation or purchase intention disappears (p NS) when perceived customer education is entered in the model.

**Understanding the underlying mechanism**

In a second part we studied the specific impact on perceived customer education, of 3 variables that qualify user manual exposure: exposure duration, level of attention and importance given to this source of information when evaluating the product. We found a significant relationship (marginally significant in the case of exposure duration) between these 3 variables and user manual evoked usage vividness (all p<.01 for attention and importance and p<.1 for exposure duration) and a significant relationship between user manual evoked usage vividness and perceived customer education (p<.05). Moreover, we found that user manual evoked usage vividness fully mediates the relationship between the 3 variables qualifying user manual exposure and perceived customer education.

Finally, as suggested by Hennig-Thurau and al. (2005), we tested the moderating effect of 2 variables: user manual perceived pedagogical quality (a key variable controllable by companies) and customer expertise with the product category, on the relationship between the 3 exposure variables and usage vividness. Following Jaccard, Wan and Turrisi (1990) procedure, we found that perceived pedagogical quality conditions the impact of the 3 exposure variables on user manual evoked usage vividness (all p for the interaction variables <.05) such as a poor level of pedagogical quality precludes the existence of the relationships. Interestingly, we found no moderating effect of customer expertise with digital cameras (all p for the interaction variables NS). Thus, companies do not have to take it into account.

**Conclusion and further research**

This research unveils that encouraging potential customers to read user manuals at the pre-purchase stage may positively influence product evaluation and purchase intention, as long as the perceived pedagogical quality of the manual is high. User manual evoked usage vividness and perceived customer education are key mediators between user manual exposure and behavioral antecedents. In further studies, we investigate the impact of other dimensions of user manual evoked imagery.

**References**


