After the Box Has Been Opened: Goal Orientation As the Driver of New Product Usage and the Moderating Effects of Product Knowledge and Perceived Newness

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This paper combines goal orientation theory with recent studies of consumer cognitive and emotional responses to new technological products to examine the drivers of new product usage. In a three wave, longitudinal field study with real consumers of new communication products, we find that consumers’ goal orientation has a strong self-reinforcing effect on new product usage across time and that this effect is reinforced by usage surprises, product knowledge and perceived product newness. Whilst approach goal orientation acts as a driver for long term usage, avoidance goal orientation has a resilient, negative effect on product usage. We discuss the implications for marketers of technological consumer products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The success of an innovation ultimately depends on consumers’ acceptance and sustained use of that innovation—not necessarily the easiest thing for firms to ensure. Customers who buy a product and use it less than expected will be less inclined to invest further in the technology (Farley et al. 1987). Given the importance of understanding the processes driving consumers’ continued product use, it is surprising how little attention the subject has traditionally drawn from researchers (Rogers 2003); especially for technological products where consumers initial usage experiences are quite complex (Mick and Fournier 1998). Some recent research has, however, begun to examine the effect of usage on successful adoption (e.g., Shih and Venkatesh 2004; Wood and Moreau 2007).

The extant literature has tended to examine product usage in isolation from motivational factors and, in particular, in isolation from consumers’ goals, even though goals are central to consumer decision making (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998; Higgins 2002). In a three wave, longitudinal field study with real consumers reporting their usage of new communication and entertainment products, we combine goal orientation theory (e.g. Dweck 1986; Nicholls 1984; Elliot and Sheldon 1997) with recent studies of consumer cognitive and emotional responses to new technological products to examine the drivers and consequences of new product usage. We ask why some new product purchases are followed by rapidly increasing use, while others are followed by little or no use. We examine the attainment of long-term product usage as a function of consumers’ goal orientation. Goal orientation consists of two dimensions: approach goal orientation and avoidance goal orientation. We find that consumers’ goal orientation has a strong self-reinforcing effect throughout the three waves.

Next we are interested to know how the perceived newness of a product will moderate the relationship between goal orientation and usage. Linking perceived newness to goal orientation theory, we reason that, because individuals with approach goal orientation perceive the achievement setting as a challenge, the newer the product is perceived by these individuals, the greater the challenge product use is perceived to be. This construal in turn is likely to generate more excitement, encourage more affective and cognitive investment, and facilitate greater concentration and task absorption. In contrast, people with avoidance goal orientation perceive the achievement setting as a threat; the newer the product is perceived to be, the greater the threat product use is perceived to be. This construal in turn elicits more anxiety and encourages greater self-protective withdrawal of affective and cognitive resources. Additionally, new consumer tech products are characterized by innovative and often complex features (Thompson, Hamilton, and Rust 2005) that deliver superior customer benefits (Zhao, Meyer, and Han 2006). To extract high utility from such products requires consumers’ investments in time and money and, more importantly in knowledge acquisition. The empirical results of our fieldwork support our conceptualization that approach goal orientation acts as the key driver for long term usage particularly when combined with perceived product newness and product knowledge. In contrast, avoidance goal orientation has a negative effect on product usage that is resilient; it is unaffected by product knowledge but is reinforced by perceived product newness.

We also reason in our framework that for consumers, new and technologically complex products are characterized by high uncertainty about the value of new benefits and the appropriate cost-benefit trade-offs to use in evaluating the products (Hoeffler 2003; Alexander, Lynch and Wang 2008). Since this uncertainty is particularly high before actual use of the product, consumers likely encounter unexpected joys or frustrations which lead to experienced emotions (i.e., surprises) when they start using the product. We argue that individuals with avoidance goal orientations tend to focus on negative aspects of product relevant information, likely generating negative emotional responses. Individuals with approach goal orientations, on the other hand, focus on positive aspects of product relevant information, likely generating positive emotional responses. Additionally, surprises experienced during the initial period of product use partially mediate the reinforcing effect of initial goal orientation on subsequent goal orientation.

In sum, in a three wave, longitudinal field study we empirically tested our conceptual framework. Using structural equation modeling (i.e. Amos 7.0) to analyze the data, we find support for our hypotheses. Most importantly, we find that the reinforcing effect of goal orientation results in two distinct paths of consumption: consumers either use the new product more and more (i.e. the approach goal orientation path) or less and less (i.e. the avoidance goal orientation path). In addition, we find that consumers on the approach goal orientation path are more likely to spread positive word of mouth than consumers on the avoidance goal oriented path. We discuss the implications of these findings for marketers of technological consumer products and for managing customer relationship and providing service.

REFERENCE


