A HEDONIC/UTILITARIAN DUAL MEDIATION HYPOTHESIS: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS AND THE BI-DIMENSIONALITY OF ATTITUDE IN WEBSITE EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, the communication world has attended the unprecedented growth of a new media, the Internet. Websites, one of the Internet’s main tools, are being widely used in the communication process carried out by companies through the virtual environment. For that reason, further research needs to be undertaken so as to identify and understand consumers’ behaviour online. In this paper we propose and test a conceptual model on website effectiveness in which we incorporate consumers’ cognitions and emotions as well as both the hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of attitude. Therefore, we present the Hedonic/Utilitarian Dual Mediation Hypothesis model, where the cognitive paradigm and the uni-dimensionality of attitude are overcome. Our results show that both types of responses play a key role in communication through websites, that there is a causal effect from emotions to cognitions, and the superiority of treating the attitude as a bi-dimensional construct in order to get a better understanding of consumer behavior.

Key words: cognitions, emotions, attitude dimensions, website effectiveness

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the Internet has become one of the most prolific areas in advertising and communication research (Chung and Zhao, 2004). Almost every aspect of this new medium has been subject to the scholars’ scrutiny so far. Thus, there seems to be little doubt that e-commerce will become mainstream in the future, not just a fad (Lee et al., 2004). Although there are some similarities between the Internet and traditional media, the former can not be considered just a new device since it has some features such as the interactivity, which enables direct dialogue between customers and organizations (Karson and Fisher, 2005b), personalized experiences (Evans and Wurster, 2003), high level of control for users, as they can decide what to see and in which order (Mohammed et al., 2001), timeless availability, etc., that make it unique (see Karson and Korgaonkar, 2001 for a review).

Nevertheless, although the Internet has reached an unprecedented growth as a communication medium, there still remains some research to be undertaken so as to explain how the variables involved in the communication process in the online context work (Putrevu and Lord, 2003). That is the reason why this research aims at contributing to a better understanding of the factors that determine website effectiveness as a communication tool.

Websites are one of the Internet’s main tools as they have the potential to provide high levels of information in addition to creating virtual product experiences (Klein, 2003). They represent the future of interactive marketing communications (Ghose and Dou, 1998). Furthermore, they provide marketers with feedback from consumers to improve their advertising message and intended target (Pavlou and Stewart, 2000). As Klein and Ford (2003) state, corporate sponsored websites are intended to generate and reinforce positive brand and product messages, and have become a primary source of information for consumers, not only for those who purchase online but also for those who purchase offline. Therefore, it deserves special attention and specific research to find out which are the mechanisms that guide consumer’s attitudes and intention visiting a website.

A website may be considered a form of advertising (Hwang et al., 2003). Accordingly, we can apply conventional advertising proposals to websites by substituting websites for ads in traditional models. In fact, this proposition has proved to be robust through studies carried out by Karson and Fisher (2005a, 2005b) and Sicilia and Ruiz (2005), in which they demonstrate that the DMH provides a good background to explore the relationships between information processing and website effectiveness.

In this paper, we develop a conceptual framework based on the Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH) and named Hedonic/Utilitarian DMH and test whether the DMH is the best fitting of the four models posited by MacKenzie et al. (1986). In our approach, we introduce two main novelties. First of all, consumers’ emotions are added to the cognitive responses proposed in the DMH so that they can act simultaneously in the attitude formation process. Although some researchers have claimed that affective responses are involved in communication processes (Allen et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2002), they have not been incorporated in a holistic model yet. Secondly, attitude is treated as a bi-dimensional construct made up of a hedonic and a utilitarian component. We also use attitude towards the website, attitude towards the product and purchase intention to assess communication effectiveness (Brown and Stayman, 1992; Homer, 1990; MacKenzie et al., 1986).

Let’s illustrate our view with a common example before the theoretical explanation is developed. Imagine a consumer who wants to book a trip to a relaxing resort through the Internet. After surfing on the Net for a while, (s)he narrows the choice to two options displayed in two different websites. Both fulfill the main features she is looking for, but the first travel agency offers better conditions in the event of cancellation and more information about the characteristics of the resort. However, the second website shows beautiful scenes, with amazing landscapes, images of relaxing spa... that generate positive emotions such as pleasure, liking, delight, …. The consumer may select this second option just because of the favorable affective responses evoked. These simple situations make us think that not only is information important when making a decision, as cognition-laden theory suggests, but also emotions may play a key role. Thus, both cognitive and emotional responses should be analyzed when assessing communication effectiveness through a website.

In summary, the goal of this paper is to test a holistic model which demonstrates that both emotions and thoughts are involved in the effectiveness of the communication process online and also shows the advisability of considering the
attitude as a bidimensional construct. In order to fulfill this goal, the structure of this paper is as follows. Existing literature on cognitive responses as well as the role of emotions in the communication process is reviewed. Based on this revision, hypotheses are formulated and the Hedonic/Utilitarian Dual Mediation Hypothesis conceptual model is developed. Next, the research methodology is summarized. Finally, results are reported and implications discussed.

2. Influence of cognitions and emotions in website effectiveness

To attain our goal, we work on two main premises. On the one hand, MacKenzie et al. (1986) explained and tested four alternative models in an attempt to find out the way in which attitude towards the ad ($A_d$) mediates attitude towards the brand ($A_b$) and purchase intention (PI). The Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH) specifies an indirect flow of causation from $A_d$ to $A_b$ through brand cognitions ($C_b$) in addition to the direct influence that links both types of attitude. The indirect relationship represents the central route to persuasion proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981) whereas the direct relationship represents the peripheral route of persuasion. Compared with the other three alternative models, this approach turned out to be the one that best explains ad effectiveness. This model’s superior fit has been supported repeatedly by later studies (Karson and Fisher, 2005a; Brown and Stayman, 1992). The DMH remains to be considered the most widely accepted model of advertising effects hitherto.

On the other hand, marketers have studied consumers’ emotional responses to advertisements extensively (Burke and Edell, 1989; Edell and Burke, 1987), and have found that emotions can affect attitude towards the brand and attitude towards the ad significantly (Kempf and Smith, 1998). Moreover, several studies have found empirical evidence supporting the relationship between pleasure (an emotional response) and several approach behaviors, such as staying longer in the store, purchase intentions, money spent in the store, impulse purchases, and affiliation with the store’s personnel (Dubé et al., 1995; Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000). In the online environment, several studies concluded that enjoyment, an specific emotion, was an antecedent of behaviors such as loyalty (Javenpaa and Todd, 1997), web use (Novak and Hoffman, 2000), and intention to return to the website (Koufaris, 2002). Recently, Bosnjak et al. (2007) have shown that affective involvement is the main determinant of online buying intention.

Allen et al. (2005), although admitting that finding ways and means to incorporate emotional experience into consumer and market research has been an ongoing challenge for a long time, have carried out some research offline which features that emotional information may serve as a separate antecedent of attitude. That means that emotional reports will add to traditional cognitive information in explaining attitude’s variance. However, the cognitive approach has dominated persuasion research whereas the affective processes have been given a relatively minor role in spite of the wide use of emotional appeals in advertising (Morris et al., 2002). Focusing only on cognitive processes and refusing to consider the role of emotions in communication could lead to a misunderstanding of various consumer behaviors (Allen et al., 1992). Consequently, if we are to fully comprehend what factors attitude depends on, we must ask consumers to report not only their cognitive states, but also their emotional experiences.

Traditionally, most studies have treated product/brand attitude as a one-dimensional construct. Nonetheless, attitudes are complex and multidimensional and this assertion has led some marketing scholars to try to integrate an experiential view of consumption with more traditional functional approaches (Mano and Oliver, 1993). One of the earliest endeavors to measure the multiple dimensions of product/brand attitudes was that of Batra and Ahtola (1990), who state that “consumers purchase goods and services and perform consumption behaviors for two basic reasons: (1) consummatory affective gratification (from sensory attributes) and (2) instrumental, utilitarian reasons”. In short, consumption “involves experiential as well as instrumental outcomes” (Babin et al., 1994, p. 644). The first dimension is a hedonic dimension resulting from sensations derived from the experience of using products, and the second is a utilitarian dimension derived from functions performed by products (Voss et al., 2003). The domains, which evidence a fundamental presence across consumption literature, are meant to be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive (Babin et al., 1994). Capturing both dimensions with a reliable and valid scale turns out to be a difficult task. Recently, Voss et al. (2003) have developed a valid, reliable, and generalizable scale to measure the hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of consumers’ attitude. They tested the scale for the central route of persuasion, using involvement as a proxy for cognitive elaboration. In our research, we develop and test a global model in which we use emotions and cognitions as antecedents of the hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of attitude towards the website and towards the product, i.e., by testing the Hedonic/Utilitarian Dual Mediation Hypothesis model.

Therefore, we incorporate in the same model the cognitive and emotional components that have traditionally been considered fundamental in communication effectiveness but, however, have been usually analyzed independently so far (Sicilia et al., 2005; Kempf and Smith, 1998; Burke and Edell,
Based on Voss et al. (2003) research, we propose the following hypotheses linked to the relations between cognitions responses \((C_{u,w}, C_{p})\) and emotions \((E_{u,w}, E_{p})\) and the utilitarian and hedonic dimensions of attitude towards the website \((A_{u,w}, A_{e,w})\) and the product \((A_{u,p}, A_{e,p})\):

- **H1:** Cognitions generated by the website will have a positive influence on the utilitarian dimension of attitude towards the website.
- **H2:** Emotions generated by the website will have a positive influence on the hedonic dimension of attitude towards the website.
- **H3:** Cognitions generated by the product will have a positive influence on the utilitarian dimension of attitude towards the product.
- **H4:** Emotions generated by the product will have a positive influence on the hedonic dimension of attitude towards the product.

Moreover, the Dual Mediation Hypothesis applied to the Internet also predicts a direct effect of attitude towards the website on brand cognitions, that is to say, an indirect effect of attitude towards the website on attitude towards the brand through brand cognitions (Karson and Fisher, 2005a; Sicilia et al., 2005). The reasoning for this influence is that consumers’ reactions to the ad affect his/her propensity to accept what is said about the product. To put it another way, the better the ad makes the consumer feel, the more prone (s)he is to accept product claims (MacKenzie et al., 1986). Additionally, other studies based on classical conditioning processing have demonstrated that a direct affect transfer is not only possible between the unconditioned stimulus (ad or website) and the conditioned stimulus (brand or product), but also the classical conditioning is able to influence the central route of persuasion through the formation of beliefs about the conditioned stimulus (Kim et al., 1998; Kim et al., 1996). Literature has shown that conditioning may be an effective mechanism to generate changes in attitude through changes in beliefs and cognitions about a product. Considering that both cognitive and emotional responses come to the consumer’s mind while exposed to a stimulus, the effect of classical conditioning may appear for both types of responses. As the cognitive dimension of attitude is associated with beliefs and assessments (Dubé et al., 2003) and, consequently, its approach is more informational, instrumental and rational, a more favorable utilitarian dimension of attitude will increase the number of product thoughts. Similarly, as the hedonic dimension of attitude is linked to pleasure and experiential motivations, a more favorable hedonic dimension of attitude towards the website will contribute to the generation of more product emotions. This rationale is also supported by the idea posited by Shimp (1981), which stated that cognitive and emotional responses towards a stimulus are related to the cognitive (utilitarian) and affective (hedonic) dimensions of attitude, respectively. Based on this reasoning, we propose:

- **H5:** Utilitarian dimension of attitude towards the website will have a positive influence on cognitions generated by the product.
- **H6:** Hedonic dimension of attitude towards the website will have a positive influence on emotions generated by the product.

In addition to the indirect effect of attitude towards the website on attitude towards the product through product cognitions, literature has demonstrated the existence of a direct influence of attitude towards the communication vehicle (advertisement, website) on attitude towards the product or brand (Karson and Fisher, 2005a; MacKenzie et al., 1986). Since we have differentiated two dimensions of attitude, utilitarian and hedonic, and taking into account the link between emotional assessments, on the one hand, and cognitive assessments, on the other hand, with no link between emotional assessments, on the other hand, and cognitive assessments, on the other hand, with no link between emotional assessments, on the other hand, and cognitive assessments, on the other hand, this case, (s)he is likely to realize the arousal of feelings, (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Subsequently, (s)he is likely to attribute those feelings to factors associated with the stimulus. The act of attributing affect leads to thought elicitation, in order to identify the factors that originate the feelings. Thus, Coulter (1998) found a direct link from feelings to cognitions.

Later, Pham et al. (2001) showed that feelings could guide and, consequently, predict thoughts. They argue that once feelings have been registered, the initial affective response will lead to the subsequent thought generation through automatic and controlled processes. Therefore, the initial affective response will make the individual try to retrieve congruent material with such affect (Blaney, 1986; Isen et al., 1978) to check, with the previous knowledge stored in his/her memory, whether the
affective responses are suitable. This process will lead to a more elaborated, relevant and, in short, cognitive response (Wyer et al., 1999; Cohen and Areni, 1991). Taking these conclusions as a basis, we propose:

H9: Emotions generated by the website have a positive influence on thoughts generated by the website.

H10: Emotions generated by the product have a positive influence on thoughts generated by the product.

Furthermore, persuasion models propose a direct link between attitude towards the brand (or product) and purchase intention (MacKenzie et al., 1986; Karson and Fisher, 2005a). This path has already been tested by Voss et al. (2003) differentiating between utilitarian and hedonic dimensions of attitude. For that reason, we do not propose hypotheses regarding these relationships but include them in the model, which is represented in Figure 1.

![FIGURE 1: Proposed model](image)  

3. Methodology

A convenience sample of individuals was recruited for the study in exchange for extra credit. A total of 165 valid questionnaires were collected. We used holidays booking through a real website as stimulus. Nowadays, prices for these services are lower due to companies’ cost reduction. As a result, travel tickets have become the most frequently product bought through the Internet (www.icmd.com). Young people, whose price sensitivity is higher than that of general population, are joining this trend.

On arrival at the computer laboratory, subjects were informed about the procedure. First, they answered questions about their Internet experience (Bruner II and Kumar, 2000), product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1990), and product knowledge (Smith and Park, 1992). Although, there were no previous hypotheses regarding these variables, we decided to include them to control for possible external influences on the analysis. Then, subjects were requested to visit a real website which deals with holidays booking and interacted with it. They were instructed to book a holiday package to London for the last weekend of the current month. Once participants completed the task, they wrote down all the thoughts that came to their minds while they were on the website (Sicilia et al., 2005; MacKenzie et al., 1986), as well as all the feelings and emotions they experienced during exposure (Coulter, 1998). Finally, subjects reported their hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of attitude towards the website and towards the product using the HED/UT scale (Voss et al., 2003), as well as their purchase intention (Zhang, 1996). The full experiment lasted approximately 20 minutes.

To comply with Rose et al.’s (1990) recommendations, three independent judges who were unfamiliar with the study objectives took part in the codification procedure. Two of them counted and classified the cognitive and emotional responses as positive, negative or neutral for each individual. The third judge solved disagreements between the others.

To assess the reliability of the first two judges’ classification, we worked out the agreement percentage proposed by Holsti (1969). Results were 89.97%, 92.21%, 90.08% and 80.45% for cognitions generated by the website and the product and emotions generated by the website and the product, respectively. The acceptance threshold for this index is 85%, so we can consider our results as appropriate. As emotions categorization could be more difficult for the judges, we provided them with a scale proposed by Burke and Edell (1989), in order to facilitate their task. To obtain net responses for both the website and the product, unfavorable emotional/cognitive responses were taken away from the favorable ones. Neutral responses were not considered in the calculation.

4. Results

Preliminary analysis

Before testing our hypotheses, a confirmatory factor analysis was run using LISREL 8.7 program (Jöreskog and Sörböm, 1999). Results showed that the model fit the data well. The goodness-of-fit statistics for the model were as follows: $\chi^2(80) = 106.07; p=0.036; \text{RMSEA} = 0.045; \text{NNFI} = 0.99; \text{CFI} = 0.99; \text{GFI}=0.92$.

We also evaluated internal consistency of constructs using two measures, the composite reliability ($\rho_c$) and the average variance extracted (AVE). The $\rho_c$ and AVE values for all constructs in the model were significantly higher than the stipulated criteria, and therefore indicative of good internal consistency. Discriminant validity of the model constructs was evaluated using two different approaches. As a first test of discriminant validity, we checked whether the correlations among the latent constructs were significantly less than one. Since none of the confidence intervals of the $\varphi$-values...
(±two standard errors) included the value of one 
(Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), this test provides evidence 
of discriminant validity. Secondly, we performed a 
test of discriminant validity suggested by Fornell and 
Larcker (1981). This test is supportive of 
discriminant validity if the average variance 
extracted by the underlying construct is larger than 
the shared variance (i.e., the $\phi^2$ value) with other 
latent constructs. This condition was satisfied for all 
variables. Therefore, internal consistency and 
discriminant validity results enabled us to proceed to 
estimate the structural model.

**Structural model estimation**

Using the maximum likelihood method, we tested 
our proposed model. All the hypotheses turned out to 
be significant but H4, which predicted that emotions 
generated by the product would have a positive 
influence on the hedonic dimension of attitude 
towards the product. One possible explanation for 
this result may be related to the type of product we 
used as stimulus. Since we worked with holidays 
booking, consumers could not experience directly the 
service they were looking for, so its ability to evoke 
emotions could be limited and delayed in time until 
they were actually on holiday. The structural 
coefficients and the goodness of fit are shown in 
Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2: The structural model of**

**Hedonic/Utilitarian DMH**

Although our findings supported all the 
theses except for H4, when using structural 
equations it is recommended to test competing 
models so as to assure that the theoretical model is 
the one that fits the best. We compared our model 
with the other three suggested by MacKenzie et al. 
(1986) as well as with the Extended DMH proposed 
by Karson and Fisher (2005a), in which they stated 
that attitude towards the website has a direct positive 
effect on purchase intention. Our main results are 
shown in Table 1.

As recommended by Bollen (1989), we report the 
CFI to enable comparisons across models with 
varying degrees of freedom and differences in model 
structure. As can be seen in Table 1, each model 
produced a reasonable fit, although the Independent 
Influences Hypotheses (IIH) was clearly less 
adequate than the other three models. Regarding the 
Reciprocal Mediation Hypothesis (RMH), apart from 
its worse fit indices, there was an additional indicator 
of problems, namely, standardized coefficients 
greater than 1 announced bad fit. In short, and 
consistent with previous research, the 
Hedonic/Utilitarian DMH emerged as the best fitting 
of the four models tested by MacKenzie et al. (1986) 
based on the CFI for each of the models. A 
comparison between our model and the original 
version of DMH made no sense as our proposal was 
richer in information and more complete but, of 
course, at the expense of less parsimony, which 
turned into more degrees of freedom and a higher $\chi^2$ 
statistic.

Next, we contrasted the EDMH to the DMH. As 
the DMH model was “nested” within the EDMH 
model, we performed a $\Delta\chi^2$ test to determine the best 
fitting model. The test between the DMH and EDMH 
produced a non-significant decrease in $\chi^2$ statistic 
($\Delta\chi^2=1.46$, $\Delta df=2$). Regarding paths’ significance, 
estimates were similar for those paths that were 
common whereas the two paths that distinguished the 
DMH from its extension were non-significant. 
Therefore, our theoretical model provided a better fit. 
We also compared all these models using the 
bootstrapping methodology. The Dual Mediation 
Hypothesis remained to be the best fitting model. 
Consequently, our results confirm the validity of the 
DMH in the virtual context.
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TABLE 1: Structural Estimates and Goodness-of-Fit Indices
5. Discussion

In this study, we propose and test a conceptual model, the Hedonic/Utilitarian Dual Mediation Hypothesis model, in which both cognitions and emotions are combined to better understand individuals’ behavior in an online environment. The data provided insights into the predicted simultaneous influence of both types of responses and also show that emotions exert a positive and direct influence on thoughts. Therefore, one of our main contributions is the addition of emotions to the traditional approaches in which the cognitive paradigm used to prevail (Allen et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2002). Failing to comprehend the role of affect in communication processes limits findings and predictability. Linked to the latter, there is another contribution, this of methodological nature: the measurement of emotions following a protocol similar to that used for information processing and known as thought elicitation.

In addition, our results confirm that the attitude construct is made up of two dimensions, hedonic and utilitarian, that are not independent but positively correlated for both the website and the product. To the best of our knowledge, although previous research had dealt with bi-dimensionality, this distinction had not been integrated in a holistic model so far.

Another contribution concerns the correspondence that exists between cognitions that came to the consumers’ mind and the utilitarian dimension of attitude as well as the emotions expressed by subjects and the hedonic dimension of attitude. Both links have been widely held in literature (Shimp, 1981) but not empirically tested in a virtual environment.

The data also revealed that the Dual Mediation Hypothesis remains to be the best model in an online context taking into account the specific changes introduced by our research. This is consistent with previous research (Sicilia and Ruiz, 2005). What is more, our findings based on the Hedonic/Utilitarian Dual Mediation Hypothesis suggest that the framework of the Dual Mediation Hypothesis provides a better explanation than the extension proposed by Karson and Fisher (2005a).

From a managerial point of view, these results also involve important implications for marketers. They can assess more coarsely their websites’ communication effectiveness. As long as they identify what kind of responses their consumers generate, they can get clues about the factors that have made their strategies end up in success or failure. The relative importance of each dimension will provide marketers with insights about whether to introduce more emotional appeals or/and more cognitive stimuli when communicating through their websites. Therefore, a company that deals in an extremely hedonic product such as perfumes, jewelry or vacation resorts, for which most of its consumers may not be interested in the specific composition of the fragrance or the way the jewel has been cut but in the sensations the consumer would feel in case of purchase, it should evoke emotional responses when communicating its products through the website. This way, marketers could favorably influence consumers’ attitudes and encourage them to buy the product. On the contrary, when the product is basically functional or utilitarian, which is the case of word processing software, dish detergent or contact lens, for which consumers want the company to give them reasons to justify their choice, marketers should concentrate on providing detailed information about the specific features of the product so as to enable consumers to make the right decision.

Finally, some directions for future research are put forward. Moderating effects should be tested in order to know which factors affect the paths between the main variables involved in our model. Bosnjak et al. (2007) warns that personality traits (self-confidence, need for social interaction, whether the consumer is an early adopter of new technology devices, a variety seeker…) represent an underdeveloped area of online consumer behavior, to which more attention should be paid. In our study, those personality traits could influence the intensity and valence of consumer’s responses as well as attitudes and purchase intention. Another avenue for future research would be to apply our framework to both a highly hedonic product and a highly utilitarian product. This analysis would allow us to know whether the proposed paths remain valid, whether their relative weight vary or whether they become non-significant because of the product’s cognitive or affective load. A third direction for investigation could be to check whether our framework holds for the offline environment. As a final suggestion, additional research is needed to analyze the gap that exists between consumers’ favorable intention to purchase on the Internet and the relatively low rate of purchases online.

References


In psychology, attitude is a psychological construct, a mental and emotional entity that inheres in, or characterizes a person. They are complex and an acquired state through experiences. It is an individual's predisposed state of mind regarding a value and it is precipitated through a responsive expression towards a person, place, thing, or event (the attitude object) which in turn influences the individual's thought and action. Prominent psychologist Gordon Allport described this latent Beyond these generalities, the definition of emotions and their development depends on whether one takes a functional perspective, a process viewpoint, or considers emotions to be discrete biophysiological states. Functionalist Perspectives. From a functionalist perspective, an emotion entails a readiness to adjust one's relationship to the environment with respect to something that is of importance to the person. The adjustment can be one of maintenance or change. Hence, this approach emphasizes the idea that emotions function to focus action that achieves personal goals. In doing so, em...