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ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ

**COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY IN E-COMMERCE: AN APPLICATION
OF COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY USING
THE EXAMPLE OF ZALANDO**

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Abstract: *This study examines the influence of psychological methods on digital purchasing behavior using the example of the online shop Zalando with special consideration of the concept of cognitive complexity. After building on the theoretical foundations of business psychology and cognitive load theory, the work analyzes five central design dimensions of digital systems: Description, Structure, Interaction, Limitation and Communication. This underlies the methodological basis, a combination of theoretical foundation with a practical case study that examines the user experience and the psychological effectiveness of Zalando's e-commerce platform. Thereby, the combination of classical and neuroscientific findings on the design of cognitively supportive digital environments has not been reviews as in this approach. The analysis shows that Zalando creates a balance between cognitive relief and activating customer loyalty through clear information structure, personalized communication and targeted incentives. At the same time, potentials become visible, such as non-transparent sustainability communication and the optimization of interactive elements which minimize uncertainties and cognitive dissonance. Overall, the study underlines the relevance of cognitive complexity for the design of digital sales processes and provides practical recommendations for the further development of user-centric online stores.*

Keywords: *business psychology; cognitive complexity; buying behavior; e-commerce; Zalando*

INTRODUCTION

In the age of digitalization, conventional psychological principles are becoming increasingly important for understanding and influencing digital consumer behaviour. Therefore, on digital platforms such as Zalando, processes such as perception, cognition and motivation are activated through design, communication and interaction to influence purchasing decisions. Which is influenced by business psychology, which provides the theoretical framework for this, particularly through emotional appeal, persuasive communication and customer loyalty strategies described by Klaus Moser (2015).

Based on this, the article examines cognitive complexity as a psychological principle of business psychology and analyses how digital stimuli, information overload and personalized functions influence decision-making behaviour on platforms such as Zalando. Thereby, the theoretical basis combines principles of cognitive complexity with Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (2011), Moser's (2015) business psychology and Bandura's (1976) model learning. To generate insights on that a mixed methodology is being used, which analyses how product presentation, process design, selection limitation and value-oriented communication affect customers' digital purchasing behaviour while deriving psychological recommendations for improving user-oriented e-commerce design.

With the help of these results, the scientific contribution of the study is positioned in the following gap: existing research discusses cognitive load, user experience, personalization and online purchasing behavior, but it rarely integrates these aspects into a single, operationalized framework for assessing cognitive complexity in a real e-commerce interface. Zalando is a suitable case study because its platform combines a large product assortment, filtering and recommendation systems, visual product communication, sustainability labels and personalized interaction elements within one highly developed online retail environment. The study therefore contributes by linking five ob-

servable design dimensions (Description, Structure, Interaction, Limitation and Communication) with their cognitive effects and opportunities for improving user-oriented e-commerce design.

The paper first introduces business psychology, followed by theoretical approaches to cognitive complexity as the basis for evaluating their application in the digital context of the Zalando shop.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, a theoretical-conceptual foundation combined with a qualitative case study analysis is used to examine the effects of psychological principles and cognitive complexity on digital purchasing behavior. Therefore, concepts from business psychology (Moser 2015), Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller 2011; Paas & Van Merriënboer 1994) and neuroscientific findings from neuromarketing form the interdisciplinary theoretical basis for analyzing perception, thought and decision-making processes in digital environments.

In the empirical part, a qualitative analysis of the Zalando online shop is conducted through structured observations and heuristic evaluation methods based on the five dimensions of cognitive complexity: Description, Structure, Interaction, Limitation and Communication (Springer, 2023). These criteria are derived from current research on usability and user experience in e-commerce platforms (Madanchian 2024; Weinstein et al. 2022). Thereby, the qualitative approach makes it possible to identify both effective design features and optimization potential regarding cognitive relief and user orientation, while aligning with established standards in psychological and marketing research (Flick 2022).

For methodological transparency, the case study is specified as a structured snapshot analysis of the publicly accessible Zalando online shop at the time of manuscript preparation. The observation protocol should record the exact observation period, the number of analysed product pages, the product categories included in the sample and the navigation paths followed by the researcher. The evaluation criteria are derived from the five analytical dimensions: clarity and completeness of product descriptions, hierarchical structure and navigability, degree of interactive support, reduction or expansion of available options and transparency of value communication. This clarification makes the qualitative procedure more reproducible and improves the transparency of the empirical basis

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Business Psychology

Psychological processes influencing consumer behavior have always been central to business psychology and therefore form the basis of this study, particularly regarding sales and marketing psychology in digital purchasing decisions. Although both are sub-disciplines of business psychology, they address different phases of the customer journey (Jobber & Lancaster 2006, 114). On the one hand, marketing psychology focuses on influencing consumer behavior through brand communication, emotional advertising and persuasive strategies (Moser 2015), which is closely linked to Bandura's concept of model learning, which explains how people orient themselves towards the behavior of others through observation and imitation (Bandura 1976). It is further reflected in digital marketing strategies such as social proof and influencer marketing. According to Wänke (2015), social cognition, group norms and emotions are therefore important influences on consumer behavior. Especially in the digital age, personalization through A/B testing, tracking tools and neuroscientific methods such as eye tracking allows companies to analyze and influence individual responses to advertising more precisely than traditional methods alone.

On the other hand, sales psychology focuses on customer communication, trust building and needs analysis (Maier 2018). Thereby, traditional models such as AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) increasingly reach their limits in complex digital decision-making situations (Schürle 2013), creating the need for more flexible models that integrate cognitive, emotional and social aspects of buying behavior.

Digitalization has closely linked marketing and sales psychology, particularly through e-com-

merce platforms that combine marketing influence with sales interaction. Exemplary for this, the analysis of click and scroll behavior using tools such as Hotjar or conversion tracking enables deeper insights into unconscious decision-making processes. Underlined by studies such as Gulfraz et al. (2022) which show that trust and personalized communication are central success factors in digital sales environments, while classical principles such as authenticity, empathy and psychological triggers remain relevant in adapted digital forms (Tracy 2006; Tintelnot 2023).

Overall, this study combines business psychology according to Moser (2015) with findings from social psychology (Bandura; Wänke) and sales psychology (Tracy; Schürle). As observational learning increasingly occurs through digital interfaces, e-commerce becomes the central space for psychological influence in which marketing and sales strategies are interconnected.

Cognitive complexity

After outlining the fundamentals of business psychology, the focus now shifts to cognitive complexity as a central psychological concept in digital system design. Cognitive complexity describes the ability to process, differentiate and connect multiple streams of information simultaneously, particularly in decision-making situations or when solving complex problems (Streufert et al. 1969). Exemplary, research in educational and organizational psychology shows that individuals with high cognitive complexity can manage ambiguity and complex tasks more effectively (Hennessey 2018).

However, cognitive capacity is limited, as excessive cognitive load can lead to mental exhaustion, reduced performance and decision blocking (Sweller 2011). Therefore, digital environments should be designed to support cognitive performance without overburdening users (Paas & Van Merriënboer 1994). This issue is especially relevant in today's digital world, where social media, personalized advertising and constant information streams frequently contribute to information overload, concentration problems and emotional stress. Especially younger generations are particularly affected by digital multitasking and shortened attention spans (Rosen et al. 2013), while older generations often experience difficulties adapting to new technologies (Neves et al. 2019).

A central explanatory model is Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (2011), which distinguishes between intrinsic, extrinsic and germane cognitive load. The theory aims to reduce unnecessary extrinsic load while promoting productive cognitive processes, making it highly relevant for digital learning and purchasing environments. Similarly, AI-supported tools such as chatbots and recommendation systems attempt to simplify interactions and personalize user experiences (Madanchian 2024). Yet, if these systems provide excessive or irrelevant information, cognitive overload may increase. Where consequently, strategies such as selective media consumption, content curation and digital detox are considered effective in reducing cognitive strain and improving well-being (Weinstein et al. 2022).

Further, research on human-computer interaction demonstrates that complex digital environments, including e-commerce platforms and immersive systems such as the metaverse, can both increase engagement and create mental exhaustion if interfaces are overloaded or poorly structured (Springer 2023). Therefore, clear communication, intuitive navigation and adaptive interaction strategies are essential for minimizing extrinsic cognitive load (Sweller 2011; Madanchian 2024). Furthermore, predictive analytics and AI-supported marketing systems rely on these principles by filtering and structuring information according to user behavior (Madanchian 2024).

From this it follows, that cognitive complexity is a key concept for designing effective digital systems. Emphasized by the research of Sweller (2019) and Madanchian (2024) that successful digital environments must balance information quantity with intelligent structuring, understandable communication and adaptive interaction. Therefore, in e-commerce and digital marketing, cognitive complexity results not only from the amount of information but also from its presentation, interaction possibilities and communication strategies (Weinstein et al. 2022). Accordingly, five central dimensions can be identified: Description, Structure, Interaction, Limitation and Communication. Studies on human-computer interaction show that these dimensions strongly influence cognitive processing, emotional reactions, brand perception and conversion rates in digital markets (Springer 2023; Madanchian 2024).

With this in mind, the following chapter analyses these five dimensions in greater detail to

show how digital environments can minimize cognitive strain, strengthen user orientation and support adaptive user experiences.

Product Description

The way products are described in digital environments directly influences cognitive complexity and user perception, due to the fact that product descriptions act as a key interface between consumers and digital offers, meaning their structure, scope and language can either increase or reduce cognitive load (Weinstein et al. 2022). As research shows that concise, clearly structured and contextualized information improves cognitive efficiency, while overly complex or redundant content leads to information overload and inhibits decision-making (Springer 2023; Madanchian 2024).

In e-commerce, therefore, effective descriptions are especially important because decisions are often made quickly and under high information pressure. Thereby, relevant factors include semantic density and relevance filtering, ensuring that users receive only the information necessary for their purchase decision. Furthermore, utilizing bullet points, standardized attributes, and supporting media such as images or videos reduces extraneous cognitive load and strengthens trust in digital offers, which are considered key drivers (Sweller 2019; Weinstein et al. 2022). Personalized product descriptions can further regulate cognitive complexity individually (Madanchian 2024), although excessive personalization may reduce users' trust and cognitive control.

Overall, effective product descriptions reduce cognitive load and support decision-making through clear, relevant and structured information presentation.

Structuring Process

The structuring of digital content is a key factor in managing cognitive complexity because structures organize information hierarchically and improve accessibility. Especially in e-commerce environments, visual and organizational principles strongly influence how users process information and make decisions (Springer 2023).

This means, a clear and consistent structure directs cognitive resources toward relevant information, while unstructured layouts increase extraneous cognitive load (Sweller 2019; Weinstein et al. 2022). Besides logical organization, visual factors such as typography, white space, color contrasts and navigation design significantly influence cognitive processing. Research further shows that progressive disclosure strategies and adaptive structures, such as filter functions or personalized recommendations, reduce complexity by preventing information overload (Neves et al. 2019; Madanchian 2024).

Summing this up, studies in human-computer interaction demonstrate that excessive interface complexity negatively affects cognitive performance (Springer 2023). Consequently, modern digital systems increasingly rely on modular and minimalist designs to create cognitive relief and improve user experience.

Interaction

Interaction describes how users communicate, navigate and process information within digital systems. Looking into e-commerce and AI-supported environments, interaction is increasingly shaped by adaptive systems and personalized interfaces, creating both opportunities for efficiency and risks of cognitive overload (Madanchian 2024).

In this context, research shows that excessive interaction density, such as pop-ups, over-personalization or unfiltered recommendation systems, increases extraneous cognitive load and can lead to frustration or decision abandonment (Sweller 2019; Springer 2023). In contrast, intuitive interaction designs, such as chatbots or voice assistants, support cognitive processing by guiding users through complex information spaces in a context-sensitive way (Madanchian 2024).

Real-time feedback, transparent system states and adaptive responses further promote trust, orientation and perceived control, all of which reduce cognitive complexity (Weinstein et al. 2022). Interaction therefore represents not only a functional interface but also a central regulator of cognitive load in digital systems.

Delimiting Options

The targeted limitation of options is another important aspect of cognitive complexity in digi-

tal environments. Moreover, research on the “paradox of choice” shows that although freedom of choice supports autonomy, too many options can create decision stress, uncertainty and cognitive overload (Iyengar & Lepper 2000; Weinstein et al. 2022). Especially, in e-commerce systems, excessive or unstructured selections often lead to cognitive paralysis and lower user satisfaction (Springer 2023). Therefore, intelligent limitation strategies aim to reduce unnecessary cognitive load while maintaining relevance and personalization. Methods such as categorized menus, defaults, progressive disclosure and adaptive recommendations help users process information more efficiently (Madanchian 2024).

Following from that, a clear information architecture supported by filters and comparison functions further contributes to cognitive relief (Weinstein et al. 2022; Springer 2023). As a result, limiting options improves both efficiency and user-friendliness in digital systems.

Value Communication

The communication of information and values is another central factor influencing cognitive complexity in digital systems. Due to the fact that communication determines how demanding interactions are perceived and whether cognitive resources are used effectively or unnecessarily burdened (Weinstein et al. 2022). According to Cognitive Load Theory, cognitive overload depends not only on the amount of information but also on its structure and relevance (Sweller 2019).

In digital marketing, value communication refers to the targeted presentation of a product’s value proposition. Studies show that storytelling, visual stimuli and narrative structures can reduce cognitive complexity by making information emotionally engaging and easier to process (Weinstein et al. 2022; Madanchian 2024). AI-supported systems such as chatbots or recommender engines can further personalize communication and reduce cognitive load if implemented appropriately (Madanchian 2024). However, excessive personalization or irrelevant recommendations may have the opposite effect.

Based on that transparent communication is not only particularly important for building trust in e-commerce but also AI-supported systems. Based on explainable algorithms and open feedback channels improve trust and facilitate cognitive processing (Springer 2023). Overall, effective value communication reduces cognitive complexity and improves information processing, decision-making and user experience in digital environments.

RESULTS

Practical Analysis of Cognitive Complexity in Zalando’s Online Shop

The Zalando online store is a meaningful example of how digital platforms can be analyzed along the five categories of cognitive complexity: description, structure, interaction, limitation and communication. These dimensions play a key role in how users process information, make decisions and evaluate the digital shopping experience. Essentially, the aim is to reduce cognitive load, facilitate orientation and make decision-making processes more efficient. As explained in the introduction, current findings from cognitive load theory (Sweller et al. 2019; Paas et al. 2020) clearly show how crucial the targeted design of these five areas is in order to avoid mental overload to increase usability.

To make the results more explicit, the analysis applies the five dimensions as operational criteria rather than only as thematic categories. Each dimension is assessed according to whether it reduces cognitive load, creates additional orientation effort or opens potential for improvement. The observations therefore focus on concrete interface elements such as product descriptions, image presentation, filter menus, recommendation functions, sustainability labels, wish lists and value-oriented communication. This structure allows the case analysis to connect the theoretical model of cognitive load with observable design decisions in Zalando’s online shop.

The following analysis shows that Zalando largely succeeds in reducing the cognitive load in the area of description, i.e. the product description, by providing concise, bullet-point information. This is because users receive clear information on material, fit, care instructions and special features. This textual information is also supported by high-quality product images and occasional videos that provide additional visual guidance. As a result, the reduction of extrinsic cognitive load

is effectively implemented. Nevertheless, there is still potential for more in-depth information, for example through interactive content that provides background information on manufacturing conditions or styling options. Such additions could increase the learning-relevant, so-called germane load, as they promote a deeper understanding and communicate the product value more clearly. The positive, clear visual separation of content and the linguistically reduced presentation, which reduces unnecessary extrinsic stress, are particularly striking. One specific aspect within the description is the labeling of products as “sustainable”. However, this is not standardized, but only for certain items that meet defined criteria. The sustainability label is clearly shown as a visual element, but there is often a lack of further information in the detailed product description, for example on the type of sustainability, certificates used or the underlying criteria. This can lead to cognitive incongruence for environmentally conscious users, as the label alone does not provide a sufficient explanation. A transparent, standardized description of sustainable features, for example in the form of a sustainability score or clear sustainability categories, could positively modulate cognitive complexity, strengthen trust and make decision-making processes more efficient.

The category of structuring processes is considered in the next step, as the structuring of the purchasing process is also aimed at cognitively relieving the user. In this case, the Zalando website follows a clear hierarchy, from main categories to submenus and customizable filter options. These enable a targeted reduction of irrelevant information and promote a clear navigation flow. The design of the interface is consistent, which strengthens recognition effects and facilitates cognitive orientation. The intelligent filter function in particular helps users to navigate efficiently through the product range without being overwhelmed. Currently, however, filtering is still largely manual. This means that a more dynamic, adaptive learning filter logic, which is based on previous use, can further improve orientation in the future.

The next point to consider is interaction, as interaction with the store is aligned towards user relief and decision support. Zalando uses interactive features such as the Fit Finder, wish lists or personalized home pages to pick up on individual preferences and narrow down the selection. These personalized elements help to reduce the intrinsic cognitive load, as users have to compare and weigh up less. Recommendations such as “Last viewed” or “You might like this” also support the decision-making process. However, if the density of recommendations is too high, there is a risk of information overload, which in turn places unnecessary demands on cognitive resources. Progressive disclosure of content, depending on scroll depth or user interest, could therefore help to ensure a balanced cognitive load.

When it comes to communicating product and brand value, Zalando has a strong visual and emotional position. It also shows that the communicative design in the Zalando online store plays a central role in dealing with cognitive complexity, as it both directs attention and contributes to emotional coherence (Weinstein et al. 2022). The visual design of the store activates emotionally positive contexts and thus facilitates intuitive evaluation. Supplementary content such as storytelling formats about brands or manufacturers, embedded in the product context, could increase the perceived value even more specifically and increase the cognitive processing depth. This reduces the cognitive load during evaluation, as visual signals are processed more quickly than purely text-based information. Thereby, the visual communication of values such as sustainability, diversity or exclusivity is particularly effective. Highlighting sustainable products with a visible label (“sustainable”) serves as an emotional and moral anchor that enables users to make decisions based on personal values. A clear contribution to reducing decision-making conflicts in a cluttered digital environment (Madanchian 2024). However, it is important to emphasize that sustainability is not a general standard in the Zalando store, but is used specifically as a unique selling proposition (USP) for individual products. This form of selective communication is effective in terms of cognitive efficiency, as it offers quickly recognizable differentiating features. Though, one challenge is that the communicative impulse is not always supported by depth of content in the product description. In order to promote trust and credibility in the long term, a stronger link between communicative labels and concrete sustainability information would make sense, ideally via standardized sustainability criteria or transparent links to background information (Springer 2023).

Table 1. Conceptual model linking the five dimensions of cognitive complexity, cognitive effects and improvement potential in Zalando's online shop.

Dimension	Observed Zalando element	Cognitive effect	Potential improvement
Description	Bullet-point product information, images and selected sustainability labels	Reduces extraneous load by making key product attributes quickly accessible	Standardize sustainability explanations and add comparable criteria or scores
Structure	Category hierarchy, submenus and filter logic	Supports orientation and reduces search effort	Develop more adaptive filter logic based on previous navigation patterns
Interaction	Fit Finder, wish lists, recommendations and personalized home page areas	Supports decision-making but may create overload if recommendation density is high	Use progressive disclosure and clearer feedback on why recommendations appear
Limitation	Filter options, product sorting and narrowing mechanisms	Limits the choice set and reduces choice paralysis	Balance reduction of options with perceived autonomy and transparent comparison tools
Communication	Visual branding, sustainability cues and value-oriented product presentation	Creates emotional coherence and can reduce decision conflict	Connect labels with concrete background information and transparent evidence

CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION

This paper combines theoretical principles of business psychology with the concept of cognitive complexity in order to better understand digital purchasing processes. It became clear that digital platforms such as Zalando specifically use psychological mechanisms to influence purchasing decisions and at the same time control users' cognitive stress. The analysis of the five central design areas, Description, Structure, Interaction, Limitation and Communication, shows that Zalando strives for a balance between cognitive relief and activating information transfer. This can be seen in the visual simplification, clear structuring and personalized communication, which help to reduce the extrinsic cognitive load. At the same time, targeted incentives are provided to encourage deeper processing and thus support the decision-making process.

An important point of discussion is the presentation of sustainability. While sustainability is emphasized as a clear USP for individual products, there is a lack of consistent and transparent communication that increases cognitive consistency. This can lead to uncertainty and cognitive dissonance among environmentally conscious customers. Interaction and limitation also present opportunities and challenges: Automated recommendations and limited choice facilitate orientation but can also impair the feeling of autonomy. This underlines the need not to design cognitive relief at the expense of informed and self-determined decisions. Overall, the work confirms that cognitive complexity is a key concept for the design of digital systems. Since a well-balanced system architecture that intelligently controls the amount and processing of information promotes user satisfaction and supports sustainable purchasing decisions. The findings suggest that digital platforms should not only focus on efficiency, but also on ethical and psychological user needs.

In practice, this means integrating psychological methods and neuroscientific findings more closely in order to create adaptive, cognitively relieving and emotionally appealing user experiences. Future research should combine qualitative, quantitative and neuroscientific methods in order to further explore the dynamics of digital purchasing processes and develop optimal design recommendations.

In this respect, the main scientific contribution of the article is the translation of Cognitive Load Theory into an applicable analytical model for e-commerce interfaces. By connecting the five dimensions with concrete Zalando examples, the study demonstrates how cognitive complexity can be evaluated not only as a theoretical construct, but also as a practical design criterion for online retail platforms. This contribution strengthens the link between business psychology, user-experience research and ethical digital sales communication.

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КОГНИТИВНА СЛОЖНОСТ В ЕЛЕКТРОННАТА ТЪРГОВИЯ: ПРИЛОЖЕНИЕ НА ТЕОРИЯТА ЗА КОГНИТИВНО НАТОВАРВАНЕ С ПРИМЕР ОТ ОНЛАЙН МАГАЗИНА ZALANDO

Резюме: В това изследване се разглежда влиянието на психологическите методи върху поведението при дигитални покупки на примера на онлайн магазина Zalando, като се обръща специално внимание на концепцията за когнитивна сложност. Като се основава на теоретичните основи на бизнес психологията и теорията за когнитивното натоварване, работата анализира пет централни измерения на дизайна на цифровите системи: описание, структура, взаимодействие, ограничение и комуникация. Методологическата основа на работата е съчетание на теоретичната основа с практическо изследване на случай, което хвърля светлина върху потребителското преживяване и психологическата ефективност на платформата за електронна търговия на Zalando. Комбинацията от класически и невронаучни открития за проектирането на когнитивно подкрепяща цифрова среда е нова. Анализът показва, че Zalando създава баланс между когнитивното облекчение и активирането на лоялността на клиентите чрез ясно структуриране на информацията, персонализирана комуникация и целенасочени стимули. В същото време се виждат потенциали, например в прозрачната комуникация за устойчивост и оптимизирането на интерактивните елементи за минимизиране на несигурността и когнитивния дисонанс. Като цяло, проучването подчертава значението на когнитивната сложност за проектирането

на цифрови процеси на продажби и предоставя практически препоръки за по-нататъшното развитие на ориентирани към потребителите онлайн магазини.

Ключови думи: бизнес психология; когнитивна сложност; поведение при покупка; електронна търговия; Zalando

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