Purchase Availability: Trick Or Treat?

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We questioned the use of the purchase availability operation, as a substitute for involvement when predicting purchase intentions. We posited that the involvement antecedents - personal profile, purchase situation and target product - would better explain involvement. Our findings indicated significant effects of the purchase availability operation as well as the three antecedents' effects on involvement levels. However, we found that the purchase availability operation had an additional effect on purchase intentions. Therefore, we should be careful about using it as an accurate measure of involvement. A more accurate measure is based on a hybrid procedure of the involvement antecedents.

[to cite]:


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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer involvement was mainly manipulated by the purchase availability manipulation; namely, using a future event or one that occurs in a far away country as compared to using a current event or one that occurs in the subject’s own country or city. We questioned the use of the purchase availability manipulation as a substitute for involvement when predicting purchase intention. We posited that the involvement antecedents—consumer’s personal profile, purchase situation and target product—would better explain involvement.

Meta-analyses of previous studies indicated that both the three antecedents’ framework and the purchase availability manipulation have considerable relations with involvement and that these components do not differ in the extent of their association with involvement. Independently, we found significant relations between involvement levels and purchase intention. These findings gave support to the comprehensive model operated within our research.

The research model included the activation of specific components in each of the antecedents and the purchase availability manipulation as independent variables: (1) Consumer’s personal profile antecedent: we concentrated on the enduring involvement (EI) attribute. Consumers with high EI have a continuing and strong interest in a specific product class. They may subscribe to or regularly purchase magazines dealing with the product class and maintain perceptual vigilance for information concerning the product. (2) Target product antecedent: we focused on the target product’s complexity, recognized as one of the specific attributes that influence the involvement levels in a stable manner. For that purpose, four products were examined: a mutual fund and a savings account, taken from the financial context; and a stereo and a radio tape, taken from the audio devices context. We reassured that a mutual fund is perceived as more complex as compared to a savings account; a stereo is perceived as more complex as compared to a radio tape; and that either a mutual fund and a stereo or a savings account and a radio tape are not perceived differently in terms of their complexity. (3) Purchase situation antecedent: we activated the social context of the purchase situation. Prior research suggested that when the social context is in the presence of others, it encourages consumers to pay closer attention to the purchasing process, and therefore increases involvement levels. Specifically, the current study examined the effect of others that are present during the purchasing episode and are assumed to be interested in the same product as the consumers themselves. (4) Purchase availability manipulation: we activated it in terms of time: whether the product is available to purchase today or in a future date (six months from now).

We measured their effects on two dependent variables: involvement with the product and purchase intention.

The study included a sample of four hundred and forty graduate participants. Two hundred and forty participants were exposed to financial products and two hundred participants were exposed to audio devices. Participants were randomly assigned to each of the cells in a four (target product) by two (purchase situation) by two (available vs. unavailable) between subjects matrix. The study was based on a written questionnaire.

Using the Structural Equation Modeling methodology, we explored the direct and indirect effects of the purchase availability manipulation and the three antecedents in determining purchase intention. The effects were estimated by a maximum likelihood method.

Our findings replicated the meta-analyses findings with regards to the significant effects of the antecedents on involvement, and further extended these effects to purchase intention. However, they raised questions concerning the purchase availability effect on involvement and its direct effect on purchase intention. We found that the purchase availability manipulation had an additional substantial effect on purchase intention, which is considerably higher from its effect on involvement; whereas the three antecedents exclusively influenced involvement levels.

Examination of the cognitive responses content revealed that participants were negatively influenced by the unavailable condition and that the available condition had lead to minor cognitive responses. We did not find a consistent direction of content inference (favorable/ unfavorable) within the involvement antecedents.

In sum, we found that the purchase availability manipulation is insufficient to act as a substitute for operating involvement when determining purchase intention due to its additional direct effect on purchase intention. A feasible explanation for the direct effect may derive from the unanimous way of inferring the purchase availability manipulation as compared to the multidirectional inference of the antecedents. We further found that the antecedents as an integrative framework better explained the involvement variable.

One of the possible ways to overcome the inaccuracy of the purchase availability manipulation as a substitute to involvement includes linking it to other involvement manipulations, such as providing a free gift in the end of the experiment (the target product/another product) and sample size (small/large groups). Nevertheless, based on the current findings and their proposed explanation, it may be assumed that although the linkage solution provides alternative ways to operate involvement, it does not eliminate the additional direct effect of the purchase availability manipulation on purchase intention.

We suggest another possible solution based on a hybrid manipulation of the involvement antecedents: the consumer’s personal profile and the target product antecedents. The core principle behind the suggested hybrid procedure is based on the nature of relations that exist between the consumer’s EI attribute and the complexity of the target product. Specifically, we posit that a complex target product would enlarge the differences in involvement levels between the high and low EI consumers and by that would enhance the manipulation effectiveness; whereas, we do not expect to find significant differences in involvement levels when exposing the consumers to a simple product.

REFERENCES


