

**SWP 22/91 INVOLVEMENT, COGNITIVE STRUCTURES AND
BRAND LOYALTY: THE EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS
FOR A UNIFYING THEORY**

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Assael 1987)). Recently, significant progress has been made in reducing the level of uncertainty by improving both the description of the involvement concept and by providing new methods of measurement (Laurent & Kapferer 1984; 1985; 1986). Potentially, this new approach to involvement could provide a powerful diagnostic tool to assist in the marketer's understanding of the consumer - product relationship.

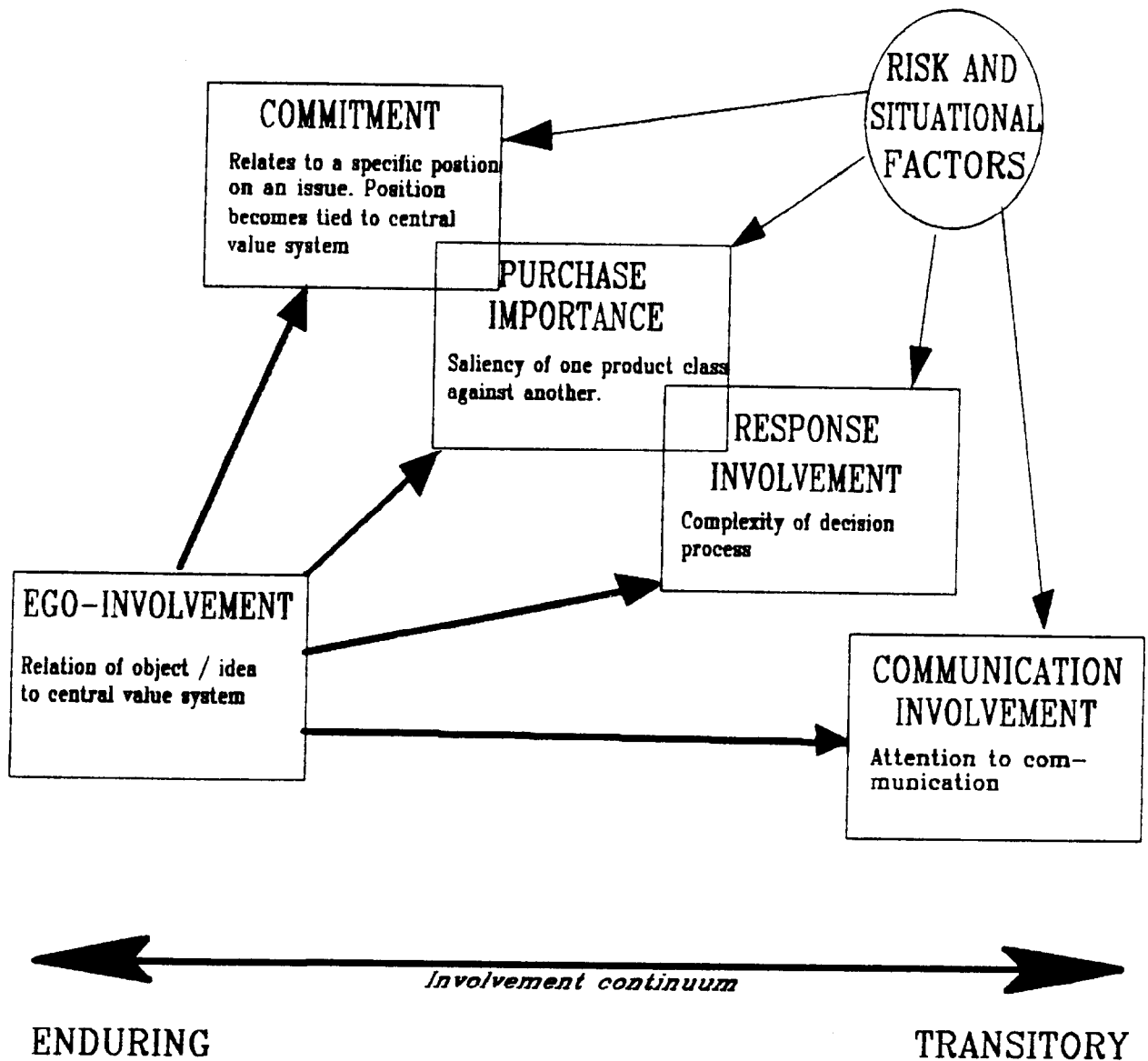
This paper sets out to examine the utility of the involvement concept as a mediator in behavioural research and, in the light of Laurent & Kapferer's recent work, identifies future research directions.

The Notion of Involvement: It's Origins Development and Definition.

The involvement concept was first discussed in social psychology (Sherif and Cantril 1947) and subsequently introduced into the consumer behaviour field by Krugman in his seminal work during 1965. In it's broadest sense, the term is used in the consumer behaviour field to describe both the level of importance attached to purchase events (Howard & Sheth 1969) and the extent to which an object,

idea or purchase is tied to the central value system of the individual (Ostrom & Brock 1968). Since these early works, the notion has been developed and researched in many differing fields with the result that definition and redefinition has tended to form the corner-stone in many instances. This problem of definition has been well highlighted in the literature (see Lastovicka and Gardener (1979); Muncy and Hunt (1984) Assael (1987)) as, indeed, has the task of involvement measurement (Zaichkowsky (1985); Kapferer & Laurent 1984;)). Whilst it is not our purpose in this paper to re-open the definition argument, some reference to the issues may be useful. Our review of the literature suggests that a single definition is no longer a realistic objective (an argument supported by Muncy and Hunt (1984); Kapferer & Laurent 1985). In fact, Muncy and Hunt, identify five definitions of involvement that have been used in empirical research and which seem indigenous to buying behaviour theory. However, confusion still arises because of the overlap in these definitions and the difficulty of defining the relevant dimensions of product involvement and how they interact (Traylor 1981). This is illustrated in figure 1 which shows the implied interactions that emerge as a result of Muncy & Hunt's definitions. It is worth noting that much involvement research uses Ego-

Figure 1. Interaction of Involvement Definitions



Adapted from Muncy and Hunt 1984

Involvement as the basis for definition, which, it is argued underlies (and often precedes) the other definitions. However to regard this particular definition as a universal, all-embracing concept (viz Zaichkowsky 1985) would be misleading because of the undoubted influence which non-ego related risk impacts on the other definitions.

Kapferer and Laurent challenge not only the definition of involvement but also the dimensionality of the construct. They argue that if involvement is regarded as a unidimensional construct (Zaichkowsky 1985), marketer's will only gain a narrow insight into associated consumer behaviour. Instead, they posit the idea of an "Involvement Profile" which is a more holistic description of involvement because it is multidimensional. The authors identify five antecedent facets of involvement (shown in table 1) derived from both the literature and interviews with advertising and marketing managers. In most of their experimental survey work, Kapferer & Laurent are able to show discriminant and trait validity for each of the five antecedent facets and are, thus, able to confirm the proposed dimensionality of the involvement construct. This involvement profile system has been used by the researchers as the basis for defining classes of involvement (1986)

which, we believe, provide significant opportunities for future empirical research.

Table 1. The Antecedent Facets of Involvement

1. Interest
Centrality, ego-importance of the product class
2. Pleasure
Hedonic or rewarding value of the product class
3. Sign
Perceived sign value of the product class
4. Risk Importance
Perceived importance of the negative consequences of a mispurchase
5. Risk Probability
Subjective probability of making a mispurchase

(After Kapferer and Laurent (198

Another factor which may also have a significant impact on the value of involvement theory will be in establishing the position, or the pivotal point, at which behavior becomes characteristic of either high or low involvement. The Hupfer & Gardner study (1971) was able to demonstrate that almost all consumer non-durables can be regarded as low involvement. However, it has also been implied in other studies that some consumer non-durables exhibit high involvement characteristics. The reason for this apparent discrepancy is most certainly connected with problem

definition and, more specifically, with researchers confusing ego involvement, commitment and product importance. The multidimensional view of involvement proposed by Kapferer and Laurent helps solve these problems in two ways. Firstly, by removing the need for a high / low classification and, secondly, by linking specific antecedent facets of involvement with specific behavioural characteristics.

Involvement as a Mediating Conduit.

The Dependent Variables of Involvement.

The involvement concept is a causal or motivating variable which is considered to have a consequential influence upon consumer purchasing and communication behaviour. There are four main areas of this causal relationship that have been investigated in detail. These are the effect of involvement on the consumer decision making process (and hence the predictive ability of attitude models), the level of information search, the size of an evoked set and brand loyalty. Logically, the ultimate aim in developing the involvement concept must be to provide a diagnostic model from which appropriate marketing and advertising strategies can be determined (see page 1).

In this section of the paper, we review the progress that has been made in establishing the validity of the assumed relationships between involvement and behavioural characteristics. However, a major problem that has come to light during the review process is the phenomena 'circular mis-usage' (first highlighted by Kapferer & Laurent). That is, the propensity of researchers to operationally define involvement by its proposed effect (the amount of consumer information search is a common measure). Thus, a type of involvement relativity has arisen where measure and effect become the same variable, leaving no reliable basis for measurement. Despite this limitation, we believe that much can be learned from this involvement research in delineating new areas for empirical study which not only overcome the circular mis-usage problem but which can also be validated.

Involvement, Cognitive Structures and Attitude Models: The Empirical Foundations.

Involvement is widely cited in the marketing literature as a mediator of consumer decision making. For instance, Engel, Blackwell & Miniard (1986) suggest that involvement is a pivotal concept that mediates between external stimuli and internal responses.

problem solving (for low involvement) and extended problem solving (in high involvement situations). Assael (1987) invokes the notion of consumer involvement as a key discriminator of consumer behaviour throughout much of his book. An example of this are his four classifications of consumer behaviour based upon levels of involvement and brand sensitivity (p. 90). A unique consumer decision process is suggested for each of these four classes. In a similar vein, the proposition of hierarchical structures for decision making (based upon an involvement continuum) have been derived from Ray's work (1973). The familiar Cognitive - Conative - Affective Structure for low involvement purchasing and the Cognitive - Affective - Conative structure for high involvement products are loosely based upon his empirical findings. As a result of this seminal work it is now a widely held view that attitude formation occurs post-purchase for low involvement and pre-purchase for high involvement (viz Assael 1987). However, Ray's initial work on these structures has now been questioned by De Bruicker (1979) because his original analysis is vulnerable to the criticism about using pooled information to imply information processing styles of the individual. In fact, De Bruicker argues the data can only be considered as tentative evidence that individuals actually

do process information according to the tenets of low involvement theory. Further analysis of Ray's ideas and the suggested dissonance-attribution hierarchy has been undertaken by Lastovicka and Gardener (1978). This piece of work examines cognitive structures amongst purchasers of compact cars; the consumer group being split according to their level of involvement with the product. The measure of involvement used here was based on the scaling procedure developed by Sherif et al (1967); (1965). The work was able to show a tentative correlation between the involvement index and the level of decision process complexity but was unable to demonstrate validity of the cognitive structures proposed in their hypotheses. However, this does not necessarily suggest that theoretically-derived decision making structures are erroneous; Ehrenberg (1988) and East (1990) both point out the inherent difficulties in the verification of behaviour models because of the overlap in concepts and the paucity of agreed methods for measurement.

Moschios and Korgaonkar (1982) have had more success in illustrating a relationship between involvement and post-purchase product evaluation. Using dissonance theory as a research framework, they hypothesise that for high involvement products there is a positive relationship

between expectations and performance evaluations; conversely, for low involvement products a negative relationship applies. Their work confirms that the level of involvement acts as a moderating variable.

Involvement and Reasoned Action Theory

A further area for discussion within this general area of decision processing is the extent to which consumer involvement affects the predictive ability of the Extended Fishbein model (derived from the Theory of Reasoned Action). Compared with other decision models, the Extended Fishbein Model provides a theoretical structure which is more easy to test empirically. Consequently, the model has been the subject of much empirical research in a number of different product areas (see Ajzen & Fishbein (1980); Sheppard, Hartwick & Warhaw (1988)). Since reasoned action theory assumes attitude formation pre-purchase, it is at variance with the low involvement hierarchy models. However, many researchers have applied reasoned action theory to low involvement purchases with some level of success (eg. Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Miniard, Obermiller & Page 1982). In a theoretical sense reasoned action theory does not appear to provide an appropriate paradigm for low involvement purchasing behaviour. However, research to test this

assumption is relatively scarce. One piece of work that attempts to explore the validity of the model in this situation is the Beatty and Kahle study (1988). In this research, the authors test the relationship between brand commitment in the soft drinks market with the predictive ability of both the low involvement hierarchy model and the Extended Fishbein Model. Since the results of the study were largely inconclusive, the relationship still remains unclear. Considering the low involvement nature of the product (a soft drink) it is perhaps not surprising that habitual purchasing (rather than attitude formation) was found to characteristise the respondent's behaviour. The results may have been more illuminating had a multidimensional profile of involvement been used (rather than the surrogate of brand commitment) and the models tested across a number of different product fields.

Involvement and Brand Loyalty

In considering the relationship between brand loyalty and consumer involvement, one again encounters the problem of definition. The notion that ego involvement leads to commitment and brand loyalty is a belief held by many researchers (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann 1983; Assael 1987).

Also stemming from this belief is the idea that there is a direct relationship between low involvement and low brand loyalty. Whilst ego involvement is usually a prerequisite of commitment, we would argue that brand loyalty, brand commitment and ego involvement can generally be regarded as discrete phenomena. For instance, repeat purchase behaviour can exist independently of either ego-involvement or commitment (as the result of habit). Traylor (1981) observes that brand commitment may be an indicator of brand loyalty but not vice versa. If one accepts the premise that there is a direct link between commitment and loyalty, then Traylor's work is able to shed some light on the involvement-loyalty relationship through the surrogate of commitment. The results showed no direct relationship between product involvement and commitment. Traylor concludes; "that for some individuals product involvement and brand commitment seem completely unrelated".

Park Assael and Chaik (1987) highlight a further dimension of the involvement-commitment relationship through their work on product trialability. They observed a desire by the involved consumer for firsthand experience of the brand because of the subjective validity it imposed. In this work they test whether product trial mediated in the relationship between a high level of consumer involvement

and the behavioural characteristics of purchase. They were able to confirm that this was the case. In addition, they discovered that the number of favoured brands was highest when respondents were highly involved with products amenable to trial. This finding is at variance with the notion that high involvement is related to high unibrand loyalty.

In an extensive study, Kapferer and Laurent (1984) attempt to relate their system of involvement profiles (see table 1) to purchasing characteristics. Using survey data gathered from 800 respondents across 20 product fields they found a positive relationship between interest in a product and repeat purchase. However, a negative relationship was found to exist between the pleasure-value facet and repeat purchase. Other facets of their involvement profile, such as sign, did not consistently affect repeat purchase behaviour. Although this work gives considerable credence to the belief that there is a relationship between involvement and brand loyalty, it should be noted that a self-report approach was adopted to assess the extent of repeat purchasing. The authors acknowledge that survey data of this kind is not the most reliable method of repeat purchase data collection. Panel data would have provided a more accurate measure since it facilitates a sequential recording of the actual purchases made.

Consumer Involvement and Marketing Strategy.

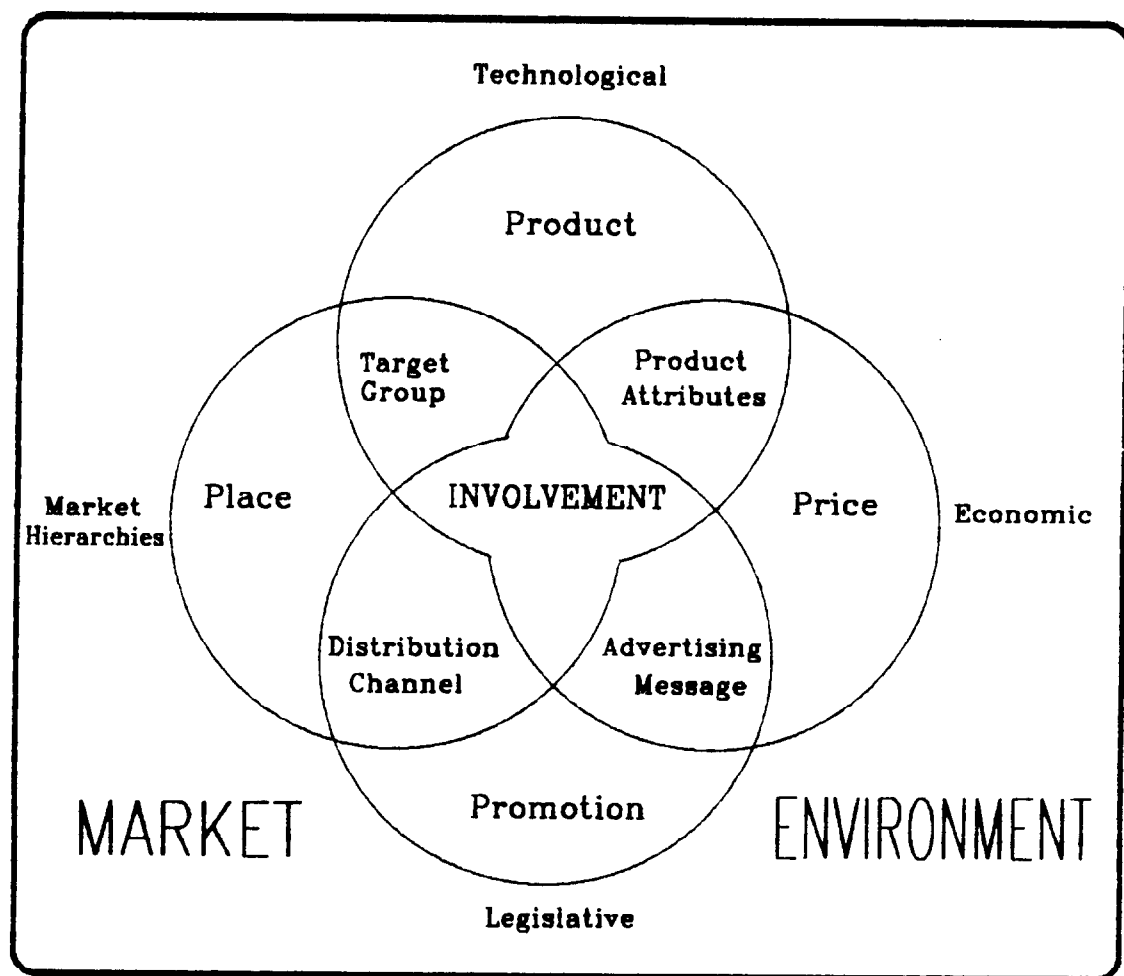
Given the rather confused view of involvement that emerges from the literature, it is perhaps surprising to find that strategies based on involvement are widely presented in marketing texts. For example, Assael (1987) offers strategies designed to bestow low involvement products with high involvement status (pp.103 - 107). Since there is not yet a wide consensus on how to measure involvement (or to test the validity of such a measure), it does seem rather premature to be suggesting strategies based on theoretical abstractions. In recognition of this problem, Kapferer and Laurent (1985) have used cluster analysis to identify ten categories (or segments) based on the involvement characteristics of 800 respondents (using their involvement profile approach). This empirical work is of considerable importance because of the more holistic nature of the involvement measure provided by their consumer profiles. However, further work is needed before the proposed segments become valuable for strategy development because of the need to extend their research to different countries and across a wider product range.

Conclusion

Involvement has come to be regarded as an important concept with marketing theorists since it provides a conceptual framework to articulate the consumer-product relationship. However, attempts at empirical verification of the concept as a mediator in the purchase decision have been limited. Four other criticisms can also be levelled at the literature in this area. Firstly, the area of low involvement purchase behaviour has been largely ignored by researchers because of the assumed unpredictability of low involvement behaviour (Assael 1987). Secondly, arguments about definitions seem to have produced mutually exclusive rather than complimentary research. Thirdly, problems in measurement techniques have reduced the value of much of the empirical research to a rather qualitative level. Finally, given the rather confused view of involvement that emerges from the literature, we are of the belief that marketing strategies based on the level of consumer involvement may be premature.

There is sufficient qualitative evidence in the literature to show the existence of links between involvement and selected behavioural characteristics (see figure 2). However, what is now urgently required is quantitative research to pave the way toward an integrated involvement

Figure 2. Involvement and Marketing Strategy



theory. The way forward now seems clearer since Kapferer and Laurent have provided both an empirical definition and a quantitative measure of involvement which has been derived from extensive empirical research. Since the measurement of brand loyalty has now been firmly established by Ehrenberg (1988) and multiattribute modelling techniques have been refined through empirical research, it seems an appropriate juncture to attempt to combine these separate aspects of behavioural research in an integrated study of involvement and its dependent variables. In order to track both attitudinal and purchasing data, we would propose using a longitudinal research design based upon a consumer panel with measurements made across a number of different product fields.

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