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In this article, we discuss why using realistic experimental designs and measuring actual behavior is important for consumer research. We also discuss when and where researchers might choose to use realistic experimental designs and actual behavioral measures for consumer research.

Consumer behavior research is a broad field that includes many methodologies, but one common goal is to understand the behavior of individuals through experimental research. The most common method involves manipulation of aspects of an artificial scenario, but not necessarily their actual behavior.

We begin by explaining how we classify experiments along the two dimensions of realism and behavior, by determining that the terms realism and behavior are used to describe the design of experiments and the characteristics of experimental realism and behavior.

We distinguish between hypothetical measures and actual behavior and we include both intended and unintended actions in our definition of behavior. When to use IVs and DVs to enhance the validity of consumer research is discussed in more detail.

Consumer research is more effective if the project employs experimental realism and more behavioral measures.

There are many different goals for which consumer research projects may be conducted, but the goal of a research project should be clearly identified before data is collected.

Research goals and the research design of experimental consumer research papers vary widely. The research design that best demonstrates that an effect exists may not be the same as the one that best demonstrates support for a definitive, causal process.

Several theoretical goals and practical purposes exist for experimental consumer research, including enhancing realism through more naturalistic manipulations.

The first goal of an experimental consumer research paper is to develop a new theory or test the validity of an existing theory by exposing boundary conditions to known contextual effects on choice (such as attention regulation, automatic response override, or rule switching).

Amir and Levav (2008) used a theory-focused study to reject the prevailing theory on decision inconsistency, and instead developed a theory more nuanced than the prevailing one.

When designing experiments, it's important to align the research methodology with the research goals. For example, if the researchers want to develop an alternative theory of decision making (for example, a new theory of mind), it's not necessary to utilize realistic or consequential stimuli or measure actual behavior.

In order to demonstrate the existence of a phenomenon, a consumer research paper may use stimuli that resemble actual ads consumers see in the marketplace. The stimuli may need to be realistic and the researchers may use stimuli that depict the perceptions of product attributes, such as a picture.

Goldsmith & Amir (2010) used behavioral measures to establish that uncertain promotions are more efficient than certain ones. Lee, Amir and Ariely (2009) also found that preference consistency results from actual choices.

Lee and Tsai (2014) examined the effects of price promotions on product consumption. They found that the effect of price promotions on the product consumption experience depends on when the product is consumed.

The authors examined the impact of scarcity appeals by giving participants a color printout that looked like a real advertisement, and found that consumers exposed to such ads behaved more aggressively.

Lynch and Ariely (2000) and Lee, Frederick, and Ariely (2006) set up elaborate experimental designs aiming to measure the effect of a specific marketing variable on another variable of interest (behavior, attitude, etc.).

In order to build stronger empirical evidence for a particular theory, try to use different types of measures, and vary the measures along the behavior dimension, in order to triangulate and build stronger empirical support.

The goal of consumer research is to develop a theory, test a psychological process, establish boundary conditions, demonstrate the managerial or policy implications of a phenomenon or develop a theory.

As discussed above, the choice of the experimental variables can determine the level of realism, and the impact of the research.

Real consumer packaged goods used to create physical product displays inside the lab can be used to create realistic IVs. If the researchers want to examine how consumers react to product displays in a brick-and-mortar grocery store, this method can be used to create a more realistic IV.

To make the experience of buying a larger-than-expected sized suit more realistic, researchers made participants take their own measurements for the suit and then bring the measurements to the lab administrator who ostensibly used them to determine the size of a custom-fit suit they would be evaluating.

The experimental realism of a study is at its maximum when the research can take place in the same setting as the actual consumption experience. For example, when the research assistants are disguised as store assistants and hand out coupons to shoppers, the realism of the experiment is increased.

Consumers who are unaware of the impact of a given factor are less likely to adjust their consumption quantity in response to that same factor. Including some studies that are higher on experimental realism than others helps to make the overall empirical evidence more convincing.

To make an experiment more realistic, participants should use actual, physical products, have direct social interactions with other participants, and wait for a few minutes instead of imagining one.

Many web-based designs are used in consumer research today that allow more realism. Examples include substituting the canonical hypothetical scenario with a more realistic one, having participants write actual recommendation messages to their friends, and writing actual reviews of products.

When studying behavior, experiments focus on the choice of a person to buy, sell, trade, click through, search, and get rid of something. Other experiments focus on behavior that is not an overt choice, such as the amount of time a person waits before giving up.

When we refer to a behavior as a dependent variable, we mean anything that a participant does in an experiment that has some consequence over and above indicating one's thoughts about a given matter.

Behaviorally consequential actions are those that carry some form of consequence (e.g. social, financial, effort, time, self-efficacy). Notably, behavior is not binary: it can be either nonbehavioral or behavioral depending on the context.

There are countless examples of behavioral measures used in consumer research, some of which carry consequences and are therefore considered behaviors. These include time spent reading about a new product as a proxy for interest, and signing a petition.

A researcher can use direct and indirect methods to infuse consequence into the DV, for example, by actually making a charitable donation, or selling actual products to participants, as opposed to asking for participants' likelihood to donate, or their degree of risk aversion.

The realism and behavioral measures of an experiment depends on the design of the experiment. It is possible to increase both dimensions in all three designs, though field experiments are naturally higher in realism and behavioral measures.

The researchers intercepted passersby in the main student union building at the University of British Columbia in order to observe and measure the behavior of the passersby when giving away poppy pins for Remembrance Day.

The DVs in Russell et al.'s study are not considered behavior, but are rather self-reported by participants in a survey. This study should still be considered a field experiment because it is high on experimental realism, and it incorporates realism and actual behavior.

As defined by the definition of field experiment, the experience in a field experiment should be a clean, naturally occurring consumption experience. A clean, naturally occurring consumption experience can take place anywhere, even inside a laboratory, if it meets the essential criteria for a field experiment.

One type of experimental design that can include realism in the IV and actual behavior in the DV is realistic experiments in the field. These are experiments conducted outside the lab and the participants know they are taking part in a research study.

A lab experiment is a research study in which participants make decisions and experience some sort of consequence as a result of participating. The participants are often less than representative of the average consumer, and their random assignment allows identification of treatment effects across conditions.

In a study, participants who stood on a black runner (and thus had crossed a "virtual task boundary") were more likely to stay in a lab for a taste test than those who stood on the floor carpet.

In other examples, both Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) and Winterich, Mittal, and Morales (2014) observed and recorded participants' actions in the lab that carried actual monetary consequences.

A researcher can use behavioral measures to assess behavior in a study without using any experimental realism. However, to be fair, consequential choices to hypothetical scenarios are nonsensical, so a researcher can use other measures of interest, commitment, engagement, or effort.

Unintentional behavior can be measured with advances in technology. These may include eye movements, voice intonations, facial expressions, saliva, or hormone levels to assess affective states or emotions.

In experiments, report the precise data first, before making generalizations. If you measure the participants' intentions, but did not measure actual behavior, report the participants' actions first, then the generalization.

In a movie example, if the researcher had used actual tickets to the movie or a voucher instead of a hypothetical voucher, the researcher would have concluded much more directly about how participants would respond to the movie.

In order to decide how to incorporate realism and behavior into a research project, the researchers should consider the number of studies and the degree of experimental realism and behavior measured.

In order to make a compelling empirical package, researchers should use measures that vary along the experimental-realism and behavioral-measure dimensions across studies.

In the current article, we have discussed the benefits of using realistic experimental designs and measuring actual behavior in experimental consumer research. We also highlight several examples from the existing literature to suggest how consumer researchers can use realism to strengthen their research.