

Case Study
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Schiffman, Bednall, Watson and Cowley (2001): Pearson Publishing

Involvement, Self Concept and Murdoch Magazines

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Walk into any newsagency and you can't fail to be immediately struck by the hundreds of magazines on offer, everything from lifestyle, sport and recreation, business and investment to fashion, entertainment, motoring and computers.

Each year sees the launch of new titles, targeted at seemingly more and more segmented audiences. Whilst some succeed over the long term, eventually becoming part of people's lives, others often fail within months, failing to attract circulation and advertising revenue.

You may have your own favourite magazines that you subscribe to, buy each week or month, or that you regularly browse through at the newsagency.

Now imagine yourself as a brand manager or advertiser trying to make the decision about which magazine to advertise in. All of a sudden how people relate to the magazine becomes all important. How do they read it? Do they skim through it? Do they read the advertisements as extensions of the editorial, or are the ads totally unconnected to the content of the stories?

At Murdoch Magazines, such questions are central to the success of their publications. As publishers of the leading circulation titles in Australia; Marie Claire, Better Homes and Gardens, Family Circle and Men's Health, they are committed to increasing reader involvement with their magazines.

Involvement is a theoretical concept of which any student of consumer behaviour would be more than familiar. At Murdoch Magazines, however, involvement is more than just theory. It is central to the company vision and the strategy of their publications...

"Our readers are hungry for information to make decisions – and most importantly they are ready to act on this information. What a powerful environment for advertisers!... "Murdoch Magazines are therefore dedicated to service journalism. Service journalism is about building a strong magazine/reader relationship by helping consumers do things that, in one way or another enrich their lives – as opposed to magazines that primarily seek to entertain, provide light relief, pictures, gossip or unattainable dreams" - Matt Handbury, Chairman, Murdoch Magazines

Murdoch Magazines pays strong attention to ongoing research to assess their connection to the consumer. As part of their program of research they recently commissioned a consumer psychology study to explore in depth the whole platform of involvement. This comprised a unique combination of consumer behaviour and the latest techniques from experimental social psychology.

This particular study was focused on assessing experimentally how involvement could be measured through the link between self-concept and the reader's magazine. If the magazine is indeed central to people's lives then it stands to reason that it should also be linked to a person's sense of self and hence the way they relate to the magazine.

Such questions involve not only understanding consumer and social psychology but also necessitate the use of valid and reliable procedures and measures.

The research team used a multi-method approach which comprised, amongst other techniques, two instruments...The Personal Involvement Inventory (Zaichowsky,1985) and The Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz, 1998).

The Personal Involvement Inventory is a 20-item scale that is one of the most cited in the consumer behaviour literature (Mittal, 1995).

The Implicit Association Test, is an exciting new technique in social cognition that measures implicit or unconscious associations through a reaction time task (you can visit the Implicit Association Test web site at www.yale.edu/implicit and test yourself). It is especially useful in testing for self-concept related associations.

Respondents were 78 female readers (25-44 years of age) who regularly read both Better Homes and Gardens and Women's Weekly (having bought 3 to 4 out of the last 6 issues). Half had a slight preference for Women's Weekly and half had a slight preference for Better Homes and Gardens. In other words they read both magazines regularly. It was a conservative test of the concepts because if anything the possibility of their being any differences was minimised. Women's Weekly was chosen as the comparison magazine as it is the highest circulation monthly women's magazine. Better Homes and Gardens is the circulation leader in the Lifestyle magazine category.

The methodology used a within-subjects repeated measures design. Respondents were recruited over the telephone and invited to attend a central location research session. They completed the computer based IAT test first and then moved on to the paper and pencil Involvement Inventory. They were "blind" to the purpose of the research and the researchers were not present during the experimental procedure.

Although there were other tests used and many more relationships investigated, there were three key hypotheses that were tested:

1. Readers should have significantly higher involvement with Better Homes and Gardens than Women's Weekly, as measured by the Personal Involvement Inventory. This was not because they didn't like Women's Weekly or that it wasn't fun to read, but because Better Homes and Gardens was related more to taking action and doing things in one's life. Previous research had indicated that Better Homes and Gardens was read as a source for information whilst Women's Weekly was read more for entertainment/enjoyment.
2. Readers would have faster IAT reaction times for the association between their self-concept and Better Homes and Gardens than for their self-concept and Women's Weekly. This was because what people do to make their lives better is more related to their sense of self or their striving to express their ideal self-concept. The research team called this Identity Involvement. People should therefore be quicker overall at reacting to "Me" and "Better Homes and Gardens"

associations in the IAT test, and slower to reacting to “Me” and Women’s Weekly”.

3. Faster IAT scores should be significantly associated with higher Involvement scores. This is a fundamental test of the convergent validity of the two related constructs, and methodologies.

Let’s look at the results.

Firstly which magazine were readers more involved with as measured by the Personal Involvement Inventory?

Figure 1 below shows the 95% Confidence Intervals for the mean Involvement scale scores for both magazines

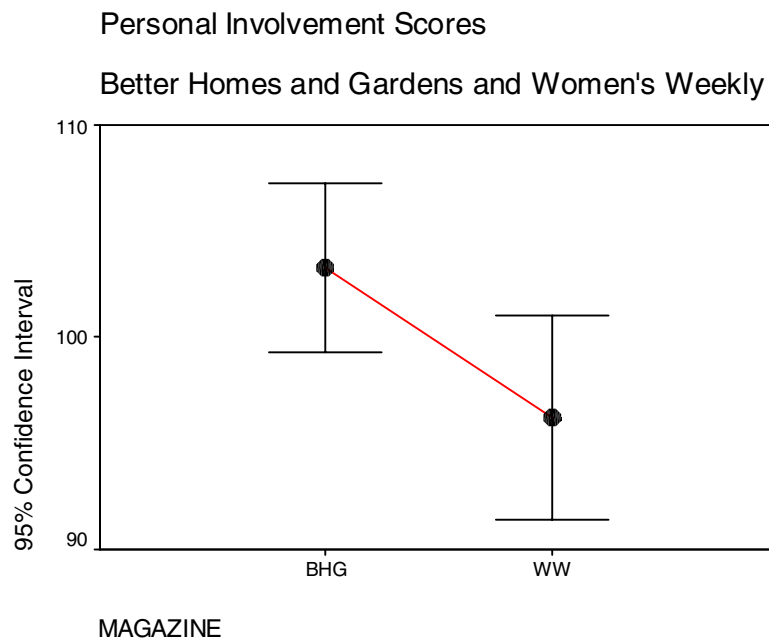


Fig 1.

There was a significant difference ($p=.025$) between for the mean scores for Better Homes and Gardens and Women’s Weekly. The readers in the study enjoyed both magazines, yet they felt significantly more involved with Better Homes and Gardens.

Looking at the results of the Implicit Association Test we can see from Figure 2 that readers who preferred Better Homes and Gardens had significantly faster average response times for “Me and Better Homes and Gardens” associations than they did for “Me and Women’s Weekly” ($p=.038$). These reaction times are measured in milliseconds. The readers who preferred Women’s Weekly had faster response times for “Me and Women’s Weekly” than they did for “Me and Better Homes and Gardens” as would be expected. The response times for Better Homes and Gardens were, however, faster overall as predicted.

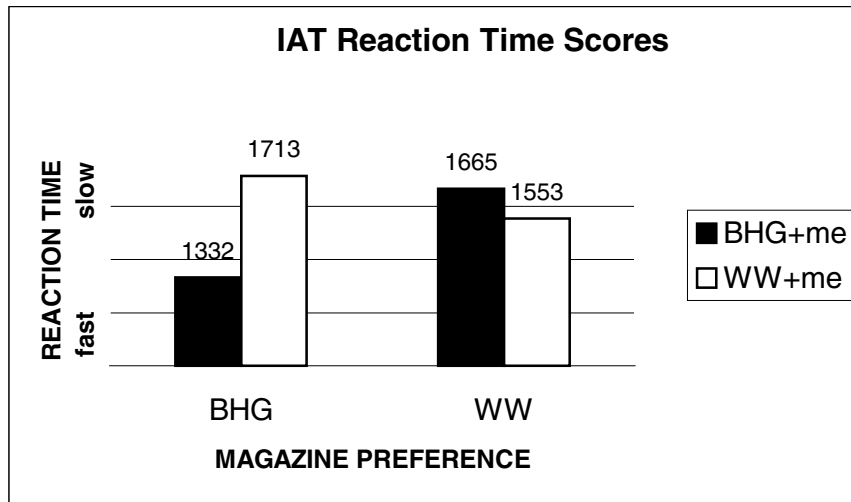


Fig 2. (faster scores indicate closer associations)

Furthermore Women’s Weekly preference readers did not distinguish between their preferred and non-preferred magazines as strongly as Better Homes and Gardens preference readers did. We can attribute this difference between the preference groups to the fact that BHG preference readers are more strongly *identity involved* with BHG.

The association between The IAT reaction times and the Involvement Inventory was ($r = 0.32$, $p = .005$) for Women’s Weekly and ($r = 0.35$, $p = .002$) for Better Homes and Gardens. In other words people’s implicit association between their self-concept and the magazine (identity involvement) was significantly related to their stated personal involvement with the magazine. Whilst the two methods measure two different constructs in quite different ways, they are obviously conceptually related.

Putting the Murdoch Magazines “Involvement” platform to a scientific experimental consumer psychology test, supported the foundation of their strategy of service journalism. Readers were more personally involved with Better Homes and Gardens and this involvement was reflected in their unconscious self-concept associations.

Further data collected in the complete project indicated that this stronger personal and identity involvement with Better Homes and Gardens also translated into spending more time reading the magazine and a greater likelihood of trying new ideas and purchasing from the magazine.

The research shows how the concepts derived in consumer behaviour research and the related discipline of social psychology have direct relevance to the real world of publishing. Next time you browse through those magazines in the newsagent or read the stories and look at the ads, think how involved its readers are. Think about how they read the editorial content and the advertisements and whether the editorial and ads connect to the reader’s self-concept. It could be a crucial business decision to an advertiser.

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- Mittal, Banwari (1995). A comparative analysis of four scales of consumer involvement. Psychology & Marketing, 12, 7, 663-682.
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Questions

1. Why should Involvement be related to advertising in magazines? If you were an advertiser what would be the advantages of a service journalism based magazine?
2. What are some problems in explicit (paper and pencil) methods to measure self-concept and associations with it? What is the benefit of the IAT approach? (visit the web site to learn more about it).
3. How would Involvement and Self-Concept relate to advertising in other media?
4. What sorts of products and services advertising would be suited to entertainment based magazines and why?
5. What sorts of magazines do you read and why? Which ones are you more involved with and which ones are more representative of who you are or who you would like to be?

The research team for the project: Michael Edwardson, School of Marketing, UNSW, Professor Ladd Wheeler, School of Psychology, UNSW, Dr. Kipling Williams, School of Psychology, UNSW, Cassandra Govan, School of Psychology, UNSW, Deborah Davis, Strategic Consultant, Murdoch Magazines, Ada Giaquinto, Research Manager, Murdoch Magazines, Kate Maloney, Senior Researcher, Murdoch Magazines, Special thanks to Professor Anthony Greenwald at Washington University for permission to use the IAT test, Mark Day, Managing Director, Surveytalk for the fieldwork management.