

The influence of purchase situation on buying center structure and involvement: a select meta-analysis of organizational buying behavior research

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Abstract

Researchers investigating various aspects of organizational buying behavior often have reported mixed, sometimes contradictory results. Recently, there have been attempts to consolidate work in this area [cf. Bunn, M.D. 1993. Taxonomy of buying decision approaches. *Journal of Marketing*; 57:38–56 (January); Johnston, W.J., Lewin, J.E. Organizational buying behavior: toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Business Research* 1996; 35 (January): 1–15]. However, to date no one has attempted a meta-analytical integration of this research stream. To fill this gap, the authors conduct a meta-analysis of the relationships between the nature of the purchase situation and buying center structure and buying center involvement. While results indicate that cumulative findings in some cases are robust, in other cases they are not. Subsequent moderator analysis indicates that study design characteristics account for significant variation in findings across studies.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, researchers have studied the processes and behaviors used by organizations in their purchasing activities. Marketers, in particular, have encouraged these investigations as an aid to better understand, serve, and retain their organizational customers. As a result, scores of theoretical and empirical articles have examined the constructs associated with organizational buying behavior.

Additionally, like most business activities, the environment surrounding organizational purchasing is dynamic—evolving with the emergence of new techniques and technologies (Cannon and Perrault, 1999). For example, in recent years new processes have been introduced to aid organizations in their procurement efforts. These aids

include (1) Web catalogs offering product specification, price, and availability, (2) Internet-based ordering and tracking systems, (3) electronic data interchange to facilitate inventory control, credit approval, invoicing and receivables, and (4) direct communication and relationship management tools. These new activities and aids provide opportunities for new research in organizational purchasing. However, before conducting new research a meta-analysis of the existing literature could prove useful in several ways. For example, by quantitatively summarizing the accumulated body of knowledge systematic sources of differences can be identified (Farley and Lehmann, 1986), new work in the field can be more effectively designed (Farley et al., 1998), and certain unresolved questions may be either clarified or settled (Brown and Peterson, 1993).

One of these unresolved questions is elucidated by McQuiston (1989) who points out that researchers have had mixed success examining participation and influence

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(involvement) in organizational purchasing. Additionally, McCabe (1987) observes that the literature continues to support apparently conflicting views of the relation between buying center structure and the nature of the purchase situation. Summarizing these issues, Ghingold and Wilson (1998) argue that generalizable conclusions regarding the dynamic nature of buying center structure and its implications remain cloudy at best.

To fill this void and to address some of the inconsistencies currently existing in the literature, we conduct a *select* meta-analytical integration of organizational buying behavior research. More specifically, we examine the strength, significance, and generality of relationships between the nature of the *purchase situation* and (a) *buying center structure* and (b) *buying center involvement* (see Fig. 1). We also examine several study design characteristics that may moderate the relationships between these antecedent and outcome variables.

The work reported here makes several specific contributions. First, we provide a systematic investigation of the extant literature examining the relationship between the nature of the purchase situation and buying center structure and involvement. Second, we identify unresolved questions within the literature stream and provide some clarification to these disputed topics. Third, we add to this body of knowledge by identifying and investigating seven study design characteristics as potential moderators of the effect sizes found across studies. Our results should help both academic and industry researchers better understand how these design characteristics can influence their studies (cf. Lynch, 1999).

The remainder of this article is organized in the following manner. First, we define the *research domain*. Second, we provide a *summary of inconsistencies* found in prior research. Third, we describe our *investigative procedures*.

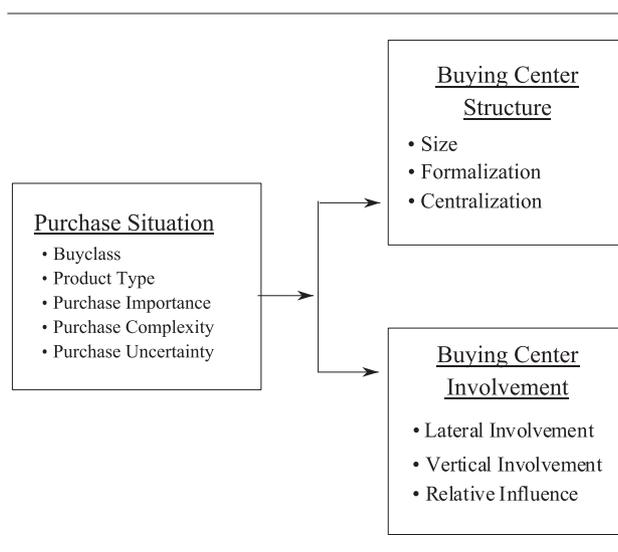


Fig. 1. The meta-analysis research domain.

Fourth, we discuss the *results* of our analyses. Finally, we review the *implications* and *limitations* of our study.

2. Research domain

2.1. Antecedent variables: purchase situation

Across the empirical work reviewed for this meta-analytical effort, the nature of the ‘purchase situation’ was the most frequently examined antecedent construct found (79.5%). The distant second and third frequently examined antecedents were organizational size (11.8%) and buyphase (8.7%). Because of this—and because of the relatively small respective cell sizes related to these latter two constructs—we decided to focus the effort in this study on the group of antecedent constructs characterizing the *purchase situation*.

In our review, five purchase specific constructs were used repeatedly (but with mixed success) to represent the type of purchase situation under consideration: (1) buyclass, (2) product type, (3) purchase importance, (4) purchase complexity, and (5) purchase uncertainty. It is interesting to note that throughout the literature these five situation constructs often are compared and intertwined. Select examples of this are included in the following discussion.

2.1.1. Buyclass

First, numerous studies have examined the influence buyclass (i.e., new task, modified rebuy, straight rebuy) has on buying center structure and involvement (e.g., Reese and Stone, 1987; McWilliams et al., 1992). Many of these studies suggest that “organizational buyers regard new tasks as important” (e.g., Dholakia et al., 1993, p. 283), and “new tasks are perceived as high risk” (e.g., Anderson et al., 1987, p. 72). Additional research characterize new task purchases as being more complex (e.g., Lund, 1989), and associated with greater uncertainty (e.g., Bunn, 1993). In contrast, rebuy situations frequently are characterized in the literature as being less complex and uncertain, and associated with less risk (e.g., Mitchell, 1998; Jackson et al., 1984).

2.1.2. Product type

Second, the type of product involved in a purchase situation also has been used in studies to explain variance in buying center structure and involvement. Over the years the product type schema has been expanded to include seven categories ranging from major capital equipment to business services (cf. Johnston and Bonoma, 1981; Lilien and Wong, 1984). Some researchers have proposed a commonality between buyclass and product type. For example, Bellizzi and McVey (1983) observe that there may exist a conceptual overlap between product type and buyclass. They go on to compare major capital equipment and major materials with a new task purchase situation, minor capital equipment and minor materials with a modified rebuy situation, and routine operating supplies with a straight rebuy purchase situation.

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