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## **WORKING PAPER**

# **Combined Influence of Selective Focus and Decision Involvement on Attitude-Decision Consistency in a Memory-based Decision Context \***

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# **Combined Influence of Selective Focus and Decision Involvement on Attitude–Behavior Consistency in a Context of Memory–based Decision Making**

## **ABSTRACT**

Marketers often use salient stimuli to draw consumers' attention to a specific brand in the hope that a selective focus on the own brand increases the sales of this brand. However, previous studies are inconsistent concerning the impact that selectively focusing on a specific brand has on final brand choice. To offer an explanation for these inconsistent results, this paper introduces decision involvement as a moderator of the relation between selective focus and attitude-decision consistency. Two studies indicate that selectively focusing on a not most preferred alternative indeed alters choice decisions, but only when decision involvement is low. Study 1 further shows that this interaction effect between selective focus and involvement takes place in the selection rather than the brand consideration stage. By introducing level of processing next to decision involvement, Study 2 shows that the interaction effect emerges even in limited processing conditions. The study also reconciles different explanations for the negative effect of selective focus on attitude-behavior consistency. Selectively focusing on a not preferred choice option when consumer are low involved and use limited processing seems to lead to inconsistent choices because of an increased accessibility of the focal option, whereas selective focus on a not preferred option when consumers are low involved and use deep processing lead to inconsistent choices because of attitude polarization.

## **KEYWORDS**

Attitude-behavior relation, consideration set, decision involvement, accessibility

The objective of many marketing actions is to change people's attitudes towards certain brands, products or behaviors. Marketers do this in the assumption that inducing a positive attitude towards a brand will turn out in attitude-consistent buying behavior and increased sales (Chattopadhyay & Nedungadi, 1990; Brown & Stayman, 1992). However, a multitude of studies have already shown that behavior is often not in line with the reported attitudes (e.g., Fazio et al. 1982; Sivacek & Crano, 1982; Smith & Swinyard, 1983; Kraus, 1995; Glasman & Albarracin, 2006). For instance, a consumer with positive attitudes towards sustainable products may not buy them because of the low perceived availability of these products, whereas consumers with negative attitudes may buy them because of social pressure (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006).

Although changing consumers' choice decisions by changing their brand attitudes can be a fruitful approach, there is also evidence that brand choices can be significantly altered simply by making a brand more salient than its competitors in the decision context (Nedungadi, 1990). Previous research shows that enhancing a brand's salience increases the consideration of this brand (Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986; Nedungadi, 1990), as well as the choice for this focal brand (Nedungadi, 1990; Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, & Ho, 2002). For example, Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, and Ho (2002) show that selectively focusing on the second most preferred choice option sways choice in favor of that option and away from the option that was initially most preferred. Hence, attitude-decision consistency decreases when the selective focus is on a not most preferred choice alternative.

In contrast to the foregoing, Coates, Butler, and Berry (2004) found that selective focus had an influence on brand consideration, but in none of their three studies did this effect extend to choice itself. Given these inconsistent results, a first objective of the current research is to extend prior knowledge on the conditions under which the effect of selective focus on choice behavior can be expected by introducing decision involvement as a moderator. In view of the

pervasive influence of choice involvement on consumers' information processing and decision making (cfr., ELM, HSM), it is indeed conceivable that the impact of selectively focusing on a certain product alternative will be different in a low versus high involvement decision situation.

In addition, the current research also addresses at which stage in the decision process this moderation takes place. Because selective focus and decision involvement may exert their influence in the brand consideration and/or brand selection stage, investigating the level at which these factors moderate the attitude-behavior relation is a second objective of this study.

Finally, this research also investigates the level of processing of the focal brand that is necessary for the selective focus effect to emerge. Consumers can attend to the focal brand in a shallow or deep way. Previous studies on the role of selective focus did not acknowledge differences in processing styles and most often they used conditions of forced, focused attention and elaborate processing of the focal brand (Nedungadi, 1990; Posavac et al., 2002; Del Missier, Ferrante, & Constantini, 2007). Given the expectation that selective attention giving is more effective to alter the choice decisions of low involved consumers, it is necessary to investigate whether this effect also occurs when the focal brand is processed superficially. Thus, this research attempts to address three key questions:

(1) Does decision involvement moderate the influence of selective focus on choice decisions?

(2) At what stage in the decision process does this interaction take place? In other words, how is the process of decision making affected by selective focus and decision involvement?

(3) Is a shallow, superficial level of processing of the focal brand sufficient in order to attain an effect of selective focus on decision making?

By investigating these questions, the current research makes the following contributions: First, investigating the effect of paying attention to marketing stimuli, presented

in the decision context, on decision making helps managers in their development of effective communication strategies. By identifying a boundary condition for the effect, communication managers can more effectively decide whether generating a most liked or generating a most prominent brand is more essential. Second, this research adds to the knowledge on selective focus and decision making, on the one hand by identifying involvement as a moderator and investigating at what stage in the decision making process the interaction effect emerges and, on the other hand, by investigating the necessary level of cognitive processing of the focal brand. The latter is especially important because selective focus is most likely to affect choices of low involved consumers. These consumers are not motivated to carefully process decision relevant marketing stimuli. This contrasts sharply with the induced elaborate processing in previous studies on selective focus.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Combined Influence of Selective Focus and Decision Involvement on Attitude-Behavior Consistency**

Consumers are, literally, surrounded by numerous marketing stimuli, such as advertisements, commercials, direct mails, and point-of-purchase materials, all competing for the consumers' attention (Lee & Lee, 2007). To help manage this volume of information, consumers control their own information processing and engage in selective attention, which leads to processing only a limited number of communication stimuli and ignoring many others (Posavac et al., 2002; Taylor, Franke, & Bang, 2006). How this selective attention for contextual marketing stimuli has an effect on consumers' behavior is critical knowledge for marketers in order to design effective marketing communications (Holden & Vanhuele, 1999).

Posavac et al. (2002) showed that selectively focusing on certain alternatives may indeed have an influence on choice and thereby also on attitude-behavior consistency.

Selectively focusing on a brand prior to choice may result in an alternate decision.

Consequently, attitude-decision consistency may increase or decrease, depending on the initial position in the preference ranking of the focal brand. If consumers attend to their most preferred choice option, attitude-decision consistency may increase because the highlighted option may be particularly likely to be chosen. However, if consumers attend to a not most preferred choice option, attitude-decision consistency may decrease because the likelihood the focal option is chosen increases, which decreases the likelihood that the most preferred option is chosen (Posavac et al., 2002). However, selectively focusing on a specific choice alternative does not always have the previously described effect. Coates, Butler, and Berry (2004) indicate that selectively attending to a certain brand may affect brand consideration, but not brand choice. Their work suggests that simply focusing on a not most preferred alternative prior to choice may only in some instances be sufficient to alter brand choice. Therefore, the current paper introduces the level of involvement with the choice decision as a potential moderator of the influence of selective focus on attitude-decision consistency.

Zaichkowsky (1985, p. 342) defined involvement as ‘a person’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests’. This concept of involvement, applied to decision research, pertains to ‘the perceived relevance or importance of the decision to an individual’. Generally, the level of involvement with purchase decisions is associated with systematic variations in the extensiveness of information search and information processing. The more involved individuals are, the more cognitive effort and time they will allocate to decision making in order to arrive at a valid decision (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Krosnick, 1988). Hence, the more involved individuals are with a decision, the more systematic they will be in their decision making, and the less susceptible they will be to peripheral cues. Several studies already indicated, in line with the assumptions of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980), that

high involved individuals' behavior is more attitude-consistent than the behavior of their low involved counterparts (Kokkinaki & Lunt, 1997). Building on the foregoing, an interaction effect between selective focus and decision involvement seems likely (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Selectively focusing on a certain alternative prior to decision making, will only influence brand choice when subjects are uninvolved with the decision. More specifically, selectively focusing on a not most preferred choice alternative will only reduce the degree of attitude-behavior consistency when involvement is low. When individuals are highly involved and fully evaluating each alternative, they will end up choosing the alternative to which they hold the most positive attitude. Thus,

H1. Decision involvement moderates the effect of selective focus on the attitude-decision relationship. When involvement is low and selective focus is on a not most preferred attitude-decision consistency will be lower than when involvement is high and/or selective focus is on the most preferred alternative.

### **A Two-Stage Decision Process**

This article focuses on memory-based choice situations, which means that the choice options are not displayed in the decision context (Lynch & Srull, 1982; Posavac, Herzenstein, & Sanbonmatsu, 2003). For example, when thinking of a nice restaurant to make reservations for the evening dinner, it is not plausible you have a list of all possible restaurants at your disposal. Instead, it is much more likely that you have to recall the restaurants you know and then you can select one to visit this evening. When choice is memory-based, it is clear that consumers have to do more than simply assess the different choice alternatives or behavioral options and pick the one they prefer the most. Possible choice options first have to be constructed or retrieved from memory (Posavac et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important to take possible consideration set effects on brand choice probabilities into account. From this point of

view, it is advisable to divide the choice model in two stages: a brand consideration stage and a brand selection stage (e.g., Bronnenberg & Vanhonacker, 1996; Nedungadi, 1990; Urban, Hulland, & Weinberg, 1993). Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized influences of selective focus and decision involvement on brand consideration and brand selection.

Insert Figure 1 about here

### ***Influence of Selective Focus and Decision Involvement on Brand Consideration***

In the brand consideration stage consumers put their consideration set together. ‘Consideration set’ as used here, refers to ‘the set of brands brought to mind on a particular choice occasion’ (Nedungadi, 1990). The composition of the consideration set depends on the memorability of the choice options. In order to consider an alternative, it is a precondition that this alternative is accessible from memory (Nedungadi, 1990).

Usually, the strength and favorability of an attitude towards a brand correlates positively with its accessibility. Therefore, more liked alternatives generally have a greater chance of consideration than disliked alternatives (Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, & Fazio, 1997). In addition, strongly liked brands have a greater chance of consideration than weakly liked (or disliked) brands (Priester et al., 2004). It is, however, not guaranteed that all consumers retrieve their most preferred brands from memory, because it is not always the case that the most preferred options are the most accessible ones (Posavac et al., 1997). Recent exposure to a particular brand increases its ‘saliency’ (defined as ‘the prominence or level of activation of a brand in memory’) and thereby increases a consumer’s ability to recall this brand (Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986). For instance, social or marketing interventions in the context of the decision making process may increase the saliency of a not most preferred brand and may thereby make this brand more accessible, relative to other, more preferred, choice options. Therefore, selectively focusing on a particular brand can alter the composition of the consideration set. Inducing a consumer to selectively focus on a brand prior to decision making

may increase the chance on retrieval of this brand regardless of the fact that the focal brand is the most preferred or a not most preferred one.

H2: Selectively focusing on a brand positively influences the presence of this brand in the consideration set

Given the overall expectation of an interaction effect between selective focus and decision involvement on attitude-decision consistency, it is possible that this interaction already originates at the brand consideration level. Support for this proposition can be found in the fact that high involved consumers' latitudes of acceptance for alternative brands are generally rather narrow (Rothchild & Houston, 1977). Their willingness to consider less preferred alternatives is smaller. Selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand may consequently be less effective in terms of brand consideration when involvement is high versus low. In contrast, involvement motivates consumers to consider and process more brands for final choice in order to diminish the perceived risk of excluding an optimal choice from the consideration set (Gronhaug, 1973; Chakravarti & Janiszewski, 2003; Konstandoulaki & Kokkinaki, 2009). Therefore, selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand may increase the admittance of the focal brand in the consideration set when involvement is high versus low. Given these two opposite lines of reasoning, selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand may turn out to be more, less or equally effective in altering the composition of the consideration set of both low and high involved consumers.

RQ1: What is the impact of selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand on consideration of this focal brand for low and high involved consumers?

### ***Influence of Selective Focus and Decision Involvement on Brand Selection***

Furthermore, accounting for the expected interaction effect of selective focus and decision involvement on attitude-decision consistency, this interaction may not only be produced at the brand consideration level (*RQ1*), but also at the brand selection level. In this

second stage of the decision process, the brand selection stage, consumers turn to assessing the brands they included in the consideration set and one brand is selected for purchase (Nedungadi, 1990). To arrive at a final choice, consumers can use a variety of decision rules. A general assumption is that, irrespective of the precise choice process, consumers will select the most positively evaluated brand included in the consideration set. Attitude-consistent choice then requires accessing the attitudes towards the considered alternatives, and choosing the most favored option.

Thus, an increased chance of retrieving a choice option does not automatically transfer into an increased choice of this brand. The current research proposes that decision involvement may affect this transfer of brand consideration to brand selection, by exerting an influence on the extensiveness of brand evaluations. Respondents may devote more effort on the evaluation of different choice alternatives when decisions are perceived as highly consequential. And, to the extent that consumers devote effort to the assessment of alternatives, the attitudes towards the alternatives are more likely to determine the choice decision (Posavac et al., 2003). In contrast, when decision involvement is low, consumers may not want to allocate much time and effort to decision making and thereby they may choose the option that came to mind first or they may misattribute the salience of the brand to brand liking (cfr. mere exposure) (Zajonc, 1980). It is in this circumstance that an increase in retrieval probability of a not most preferred choice option, due to selective focus, may lead to brand choice.

H3: The increased admittance of a not most preferred choice option in the consideration set will be more likely to result in an inconsistent choice decision when decision involvement is low (versus high)

Taken together, distinguishing between a brand consideration and a brand selection stage enables an investigation of the processes that underlie brand consideration and brand selection. Brand choice influencing factors can have a different level of importance in these

two stages in the choice process (Nedungadi, 1990). According to the predictions in this research, selective focus and decision involvement can both alter the composition of the consideration set. It is however unclear whether selective focus is equally likely to alter the composition of the consideration set for both low and high involved individuals. Further, this research predicts the level of involvement to moderate the influence of selective focus in the brand selection stage. When consumers are highly involved, consumers may spend more time and effort on decision making. And thus, admittance of a not most preferred brand in the consideration set does not cause a decrease in attitude-decision consistency. Inclusion in the consideration set is not a sufficient condition for brand choice. An increase in the retrieval probability of a not most preferred choice option may only transfer to brand choice under low involvement conditions. Hence, besides investigating the combined influence of involvement and selective focus on attitude-decision consistency, the object of Study 1 is also to address at which stage in the decision process these factors moderate the attitude-behavior relation.

## **STUDY 1**

### **Method**

The first study consists of two moments of data collection, separated from each other by one week. In the first phase, the respondents reported their attitudes towards 14 different charities, i.e., the focal object of this research. The second phase began with the selective focus manipulation. Subsequently, the participants were induced to choose one charity to receive a donation, and hereafter the level of involvement with the choice decision was measured. The experiment was a 2 x 2 between-subjects design, with a manipulation of selective focus at two levels (focus on the most preferred brand vs. focus on the fourth most preferred brand), and a distinction between two levels of involvement (low involvement vs. high involvement).

### ***Participants***

846 students received an e-mail with an invitation to participate in the experiment in exchange for a movie ticket. In the first phase 346 respondents voluntarily filled in the questionnaire.

About 254 (113 men and 141 women) of these participants (73.4%) also completed the second questionnaire.

### ***Procedure and Manipulations***

***Pretest.*** A pretest was run to get an overview of the charities people are aware of. More specifically, the goal of this pretest was to identify those charitable organizations that people are most likely to retrieve from memory spontaneously. Given that this study wants to determine whether participants make memory-based choices that are consistent with their attitudes, it was necessary to define a set of charities that is 1) limited enough to make a concise questionnaire, but 2) at the same time extensive enough to capture the majority of the charitable organizations that participants will mention in the memory-based choice decision task. In this pretest, about 40 students listed all the charities they knew. Only nationally operating charities that were mentioned by at least five students were retained. This resulted in a list of 14 well-known charities.

***First Experimental Phase.*** In the first data collection phase respondents filled in a web-based questionnaire that contained basic demographic questions, questions with respect to their buying behavior in general and the degree to which they were familiar with buying products in four different categories. Subsequently, respondents received lists of brands/organizations, which reside within these four categories, with the task of rank ordering these brands/organizations according to their preferences, starting with their most preferred brand/organization. By means of this rank ordering task, an indication of the relative favorableness of participants' attitudes was obtained, with lower values indicating greater favorableness (Posavac et al., 2003). This indication of the relative preference of each participant for the 14 charitable organizations was then used to determine the most and fourth

most preferred charity (i.e., the focal charities) for each individual. Besides charitable organizations, participants also had to rank order different brands of soft drinks, mobile phones, and newspapers. These distracter categories were admitted in the questionnaire to obscure the fact that charitable organizations were the focus of this research. Further, attitudes towards each object were not only measured in a relative, but also in an absolute sense, by a 1-item 7-point Likert scale (e.g., How would you describe your attitude towards the [charity]? with -3 = very negative and +3 = very positive).

***Second Experimental Phase.*** The participants received a second questionnaire one week after they completed the first one. In this questionnaire the researchers informed the participants they needed more data on each brand in all four categories, but that each respondent only had to answer more detailed questions on one brand. They did this in order to make the participants less suspicious of the research goal, but in reality this was the selective focus manipulation. Following Posavac et al. (2002), the manipulation consisted of six attitudinal questions, either on their most preferred charitable organization or on their fourth most preferred charitable organization (e.g., How much do you know about the [focal charity]? How important do you consider the functions served by the [focal charity]?). Posavac et al. (2002) have illustrated the adequacy of asking multiple attitudinal questions as a manipulation of selective focus. Following the selective focus manipulation, participants decided on a charitable organization to receive a donation of 250 euro. Subsequently, the level of involvement with the choice decision participants had to make was measured. Participants indicated the perceived importance of the decision on a 1-item 7-point scale (How important was the selection of the charity to you? with -3 = very unimportant and +3 = very important). Participants were then split in two groups, based on the median of the perceived importance of the decision ( $M_{low} = -1.11$ ,  $M_{high} = 1.64$ ,  $t(252) = -20.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Next, the participants listed the other charities they could retrieve in a descending order (from more to less preferred).

Hereafter, they reported again their (absolute) attitudes towards each charity on the same 1-item 7-point Likert scale as in the first phase. Besides this, the participants also indicated how much attention they had paid to each charity on a 1-item 7-point Likert scale (How much attention did you pay to [focal charity] while filling in the questionnaire? with -3 = very little and +3 = very much). Participants that selectively focused on their most preferred choice option reported to have paid more attention to this focal option compared to participants that selectively focused on their fourth most preferred choice option ( $M_{\text{focus\_option\_1}} = 1.93$ ,  $M_{\text{focus\_option\_4}} = 1.53$ ,  $t(255) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .011$ ). Participants that selectively focused on their fourth most preferred choice option reported to have given more attention to this focal option compared to participants that selectively focused on their most preferred choice option ( $M_{\text{focus\_option\_1}} = .72$ ,  $M_{\text{focus\_option\_4}} = 1.17$ ,  $t(255) = -2.77$ ,  $p = .006$ ). This finding indicates that the selective focus manipulation was successful. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were probed for suspicion. None of the respondents realized what the real goal of the study was.

## **Results**

### ***Attitude–Decision Consistency***

Attitude-decision consistency was defined here as a binary variable that indicates whether the option that was most preferred in the first phase was also selected in the second phase. First, a  $\chi^2$ -test investigated the hypothesis regarding the moderating impact of involvement on the effect of selective focus on attitude-behavior consistency under the condition that decision involvement is low (*H1*). Results show that significantly more attitude-inconsistent choices were made when low involved participants focused on a not most preferred choice option (74.5%) compared to high involved participants (46.2%) ( $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 9.58$ ,  $p = .002$ ). When the focus was on the most preferred choice option, low and high involved participants were equally likely to make an attitude-inconsistent choice (50.0% vs. 38.8%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .231$ ). These results lend support to *H1*. The following

analyses can now verify at what stage in the decision process these two choice influencing factors (selective focus & involvement) exert an influence and cause this interaction effect.

### ***Brand Consideration Stage***

In order to perform the appropriate analyses regarding the effect of selective focus on brand consideration, five dependent variables were constructed. These five dichotomous variables indicate whether a charity, that made it to the top five in the first phase, was retrieved from memory in the second phase. The first variable gives an indication of whether or not the charity, that was most preferred in the first phase, was retrieved from memory in the second phase. The second, third, fourth and fifth variable indicate the same, but then for the rest of the charities that constituted the top five in the first phase.

First,  $\chi^2$ -tests examined whether selectively focusing on a brand led to a higher chance of brand retrieval (*H2*). The tests reveal significant differences between the two selective focus conditions in the number of respondents that took the most preferred option into consideration ( $\chi^2(1, N = 253) = 33.32, p < .001$ ) and in the number of respondents that took the fourth most preferred option into consideration ( $\chi^2(1, N = 252) = 46.18, p < .001$ ). About 97.6% of the participants in the condition with the selective focus on the most preferred option took this most preferred choice option into consideration, versus only 71.4% of the participants in the condition with the selective focus on the fourth most preferred choice option. On the other hand, the proportion of participants that considered the fourth most preferred choice option was much higher in the condition that selectively focused on this option (86.5%), compared to the condition that selectively focused on the most preferred choice option (46.0%). In accordance with expectations, no significant differences between the two selective focus conditions in the consideration of the second ( $\chi^2(1, N = 252) = 0.38, p = .611$ ), third ( $\chi^2(1, N = 251) = .00, p = 1.000$ ), and fifth ( $\chi^2(1, N = 250) = 1.03, p = .375$ ) most preferred choice option were perceived. In accordance with *H2*, retrieval of the most preferred choice option (the fourth most preferred

choice option) was significantly higher when participants had selectively focused upon this most preferred choice option (fourth most preferred choice option) (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Another  $\chi^2$ -test examined whether selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand led to a higher, lower or equal chance of brand consideration for high versus low involved individuals (*RQ1*). The test reveals that both high and low involved participants were equally likely to consider the fourth most preferred choice option after they were induced to selectively focus on this option ( 83.3% vs. 91.7%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 126) = 1.77, p = .184$ ). This finding indicates that selectively focusing on a not most preferred choice option affects brand consideration set composition, irrespective of the level of involvement.

In summary, selective focus significantly influences brand consideration. Selectively focusing upon a certain brand increases the chance that this brand will be retrieved from memory prior to choice. Furthermore, the increased admittance of a not most preferred, focal brand in the consideration set is equally likely for both low and high involved participants. The interaction between involvement and selective focus, confirmed in *H1*, does not take place in the consideration stage.

### ***Brand Selection Stage***

So far, the data indicate that selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand influences brand retrieval probabilities, irrespective of the level of decision involvement. But, to reduce attitude-decision consistency, participants not only have to consider a not most preferred choice option, they should also choose this option. Decision involvement can play a significant role in this brand selection phase, as hypothesized in *H3*.

*H3* assumes that the increased admittance of a not most preferred choice option in the consideration set is more likely to transfer to brand choice when decision involvement is low (versus high). The analysis to test this proposition included only participants that selectively

focused on their fourth most preferred choice option and also subsequently considered this option. A  $\chi^2$ -test shows that the selected participants in the low involvement condition were more likely to finally make an inconsistent choice decision (74.4%) compared to the selected participants in the high involvement condition (44.6%). The difference between the two decision involvement conditions is significant ( $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 9.35, p = .002$ ). Figure 3 graphically presents this finding that the interaction effect between selective focus and decision involvement takes place in the brand selection stage, and not in the brand consideration stage.

Insert Figure 3 about here

## **Discussion**

The results of this experiment indicate that merely selectively focusing on a not most preferred brand alters the consideration set composition and can also affect the subsequent choice decision. The latter is more likely when decision involvement is low (versus high). Hence, when involvement is low, simply increasing the accessibility of a not most favored brand might lead to a final choice of this brand. On the other hand, irrespective of brand focus, when decision involvement is high, consumers are very likely to retrieve their most preferred brand and to rely on their previously formed attitudes to select the brand they really like the most.

Given this finding that selective focus has an effect on choice for low-involved consumers, it would be a non sequitur to assume profound processing of the focal brand. Consumers may interpret stimuli with different processing styles, depending on the level of their motivation (Obermiller, 1985). Low-involved consumers are often not motivated to carefully process decision relevant marketing stimuli (Coates, Butler, & Berry, 2004). Stating that merely selectively focusing on a certain brand in the decision context can alter brand choices when decision involvement is low is only a useful finding for marketers when this effect is also bound to occur when the focal brand is only superficially attended. Therefore,

Study 2 addresses how the depth of processing of the selectively presented brand affects our findings of Study 1.

## **STUDY 2**

Study 2 is designed to 1) validate the occurrence of an interaction between involvement and selective focus, and 2) extend this finding by investigating what level of cognitive processing of the focal brand is necessary for the effect under study to occur.

Several psychological studies have already investigated the effect of the depth of processing on memory and recall (e.g., Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975; Challis, Velichkovsky, & Craik, 1996). In general, the level of processing can affect (brand) retrieval, but it especially has an influence on the duration of the effect. Although a deeper level of processing has a more enduring effect on brand retrieval, even a lower level of processing should affect brand memory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). This paper focuses especially on the influence of selectively focusing on a brand immediately prior to decision making. Therefore, limited processing of the focal brand may still have an effect on brand retrieval. The same saliency and processing biases arguments that were used to develop the hypotheses for Study 1, lead to the expectation that limited processing of the focal brand will not only have an effect on brand retrieval but that this effect will also transfer through to brand choice under conditions of low involvement. Thus,

H4: Limited processing of a not most preferred, focal brand decreases attitude-decision consistency, but only when decision involvement is low (vs. high)

Further, when elaborate processing of the focal brand occurs, the choice behavior of low involved participants may also change. However, the mechanism by which this occurs may be different as compared to a limited processing situation. Inducing a person to think about one's attitude may produce beliefs that are evaluatively consistent with the prior attitude and this may

lead to more polarized attitudes (Tesser & Conlee, 1975). Therefore, deep cognitive elaboration on the attitude towards a certain brand, may instigate a change in the attitude towards this brand. If an attitude is positive, it may become more positive by selectively focusing on this option and therefore the chance that this option will be chosen may also increase (Posavac et al., 2002). Brand preferences are especially likely to alter when involvement is low. Highly involving attitudes are less likely to succumb to the influence of situationally accessible beliefs, while less involving attitudes are to a relatively greater extent based on beliefs made contextually accessible (Krosnick & Schuman, 1988; Lavine et al. 1998). Based on this reasoning, the authors expect that choice decisions will be altered when decision involvement is low, due to extensive processing of the focal, not most preferred brand. While this expectation regarding the effect of selective focus on choice after extensive processing is comparable to our expectation in the case of limited processing, the attitudinal processes that underlie this effect may be different. Extensive processing of the focal brand makes the attitude more extreme, and does not merely increase the accessibility of the attitude toward the focal alternative. In short,

H5a: Elaborate processing of a not most preferred, focal brand decreases attitude-decision consistency significantly more when decision involvement is low (vs. high)

H5b: The decrease in attitude-decision consistency when involvement is low (vs. high), due to elaborate focusing on a not most preferred brand, is caused by a change in the attitude toward the focal option

This, of course, brings us back to the often-studied evaluative route to behavior change.

## **Method**

Study 2 consisted of two phases, separated from each other by a 15-minute filler task. The respondents started off with reporting their attitudes (towards the 14 charities) and their level of involvement with decision making among charities. For the participants in the experimental conditions, the second phase began with a selective focus manipulation, accompanied by

instructions on how to process the focal brand (limited vs. extensive). No selective focus manipulation, and therefore also no processing instructions, were presented to the participants in the control condition. Subsequently, all participants chose one charity to receive a donation. The experiment was a 2 x 2 (+ control conditions) between-subjects design, with a manipulation of the level of processing at two levels (limited vs. extensive), and a distinction between two levels of involvement (low involvement vs. high involvement).

### ***Participants***

To recruit participants for this study, 1000 participants of the universities on-line panel received an invitation to participate. In total 500 men ( $M_{Age} = 36.6$ ) and 500 women ( $M_{Age} = 37.9$ ), were contacted. About 184 participants, 70 men (response rate = 14%;  $M_{Age} = 35.14$ ) and 114 women (response rate = 22.8%,  $M_{Age} = 35.80$ ), completed the on-line questionnaire. In exchange for participating in the study they could win a movie ticket.

### ***Procedure and Manipulations***

The procedure was by and large the same as in Study 1. Again the experiment consisted of two experimental phases, but these were now separated from each other by a 15-minute filler task in stead of one entire week.

***First Experimental Phase.*** In the first part of the questionnaire all participants were addressed with questions about their past donation behavior, their attitude towards charitable organizations in general and their level of involvement with decision making among charities. In order to measure decision involvement, participants had to respond to the 10-items from the Revised Personal Involvement Inventory (Zaichkowsky, 1994). The median of the mean scores on this measurement scale was further on used to divide the participants in a low and high involvement group. Hereafter, participants indicated to which degree they knew each of the 14 charities under study (that were also used in Study 1) and how positive or negative their attitude was towards each of these charities on a 1-item 7-point Likert scale. Next, each participant

composed a top-3 of most preferred charities. To this end all 14 charities appeared on the screen and participants had to click on their most preferred charity. On the next page the 13 remaining charities appeared on the screen and participants were asked to click on their second most preferred charitable organization. The same procedure was repeated one more time in order to make a selection of the third most preferred charity. Hereafter, the participants answered to a number of filler questions, which took them 15 minutes on average.

***Second Experimental Phase.*** Immediately after the filler task, the two experimental manipulations took place. First, the computer program randomly assigned two third of the participants to the experimental condition that received a selective focus manipulation, and assigned the other third of the participants to the control condition. Subsequently, the computer program split the experimental group, which received the selective focus manipulation, up in two subgroups based on a manipulation of the degree of processing (limited vs. extensive). This resulted in an experimental design with three conditions, i.e., a control condition, an experimental condition with a limited level of processing of the focal brand and a condition with an extensive level of processing of the focal brand. To this end, the participants in the experimental conditions received the information that this research was not only investigating the attitudes towards donation behavior and the different charities, but also the charities' advertising effectiveness. The instructions for the participants stated that a large number of existing print ads were selected for each charity under investigation, but that each participant only had to look at three ads for one charity. At this moment the participants in the experimental conditions in fact received a selective focus manipulation in the form of a series of ads that depicted their second most preferred charitable organization. They all looked at three fictitious ads, which only varied across participants with respect to the organization name that was depicted. All three ads are unrelated to the functions served by each charitable organization. For instance, one ad promoted the 'charity gift certificate', which enables the

receiver to donate the value of the gift certificate to a charity of his/her preference. This ad then simply indicates that the focal ad can receive donations through the use of this ‘charity gift certificate’. The participants in the control condition skipped this part of the questionnaire and were not addressed with any selective focus manipulation. Hence, this study contained a more realistic manipulation of selective focus, which increases the value of the findings for practical applications.

Furthermore, the participants in the experimental conditions also received instructions on how to look at the information in the ads. At this moment the ‘degree of processing’ manipulation was inserted. This holds that half of the participants in the experimental condition with extensive processing of the focal brand received the instructions to look at each ad carefully and then report all the associations (at least 5) that popped up in their head while looking at the ad. The participants in the other experimental condition were asked to count the number of times the letter ‘a’ was depicted in the ad, and to select one of the three possible answers as fast as possible (Coates, Butler, & Berry, 2004). The manipulations for a ‘structural’ (a form of limited processing) and ‘associative’ (a form of extensive processing) level of processing, that were used by Obermiller (1985), served as a reference for the manipulations of the degree of processing used in this study. Immediately after these manipulations, participants choose one charity that was going to receive a substantial amount of money. Therefore, they typed in the name of the charity, which they would like to receive the donation, in the box that was depicted on the page. Hereafter, the participants in the experimental conditions, that saw the ads, reported on the likeability of the ads. This was assessed on a 3-item 7-point semantic differential scale, anchored by the following adjectives: ‘not attractive-attractive’, ‘not appealing-appealing’, ‘bad-good’ ( $\alpha_{Ad\_1} = .86$ ;  $\alpha_{Ad\_2} = .89$ ;  $\alpha_{Ad\_3} = .81$ ). Next, the participants again responded to the 14 items that measured the attitude towards each of the charities. At the end, respondents were thanked for their participation and probed for suspicion. None of the

respondents realized what the real goal of the study was or expressed any suspicion with respect to the presented ads.

## **Results**

### *Preliminary analyses*

Prior to analyzing the participants' choice decisions, the time participants in the 'limited level of processing' condition spent looking at the ads was investigated. The time spent, in milliseconds, counting the occurrence of the letter 'a' in the advertisements was recorded for the participants in the 'limited level of processing' condition, while the time participants spent listing associations was recorded for the participants in the 'extensive level of processing condition'. Participants in the 'limited level of processing' condition spent significantly less time looking at each of the three advertisements, compared to the participants in the 'extensive level of processing condition' ( $M_{\text{limited}} = 10198.26$  vs.  $M_{\text{extensive}} = 41525.06$ ,  $t(128) = -6.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{limited}} = 15977.42$  vs.  $M_{\text{extensive}} = 33686.34$ ,  $t(128) = -3.912$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{limited}} = 6782.59$  vs.  $M_{\text{extensive}} = 21912.88$ ,  $t(128) = -5.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Further, a binary variable 'decision involvement' was constructed in order to distinguish the low from the high involved participants. To this end, the mean score for each participant on the 10 items of the Revised Personal Involvement Inventory ( $\alpha = .92$ ) was calculated (Zaichkowsky, 1994). A participant was subsequently defined as being 'lower involved' when the mean score was below the median and as 'higher involved' when the mean score was above the median ( $M_{\text{lower\_involvement}} = 4.33$  vs.  $M_{\text{higher\_involvement}} = 5.99$ ,  $t(190) = -19.87$ ,  $p < .001$ )<sup>\*\*</sup>.

### *Attitude-Decision Consistency*

First, we investigated whether the results of Study 1, concerning the interaction between involvement and selective focus, could be replicated. A  $\chi^2$ -test checked whether selective focus

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<sup>\*\*</sup> The mean level of involvement for the 'low involved' participants is higher than the mean of the measurement scale. Although, this is not surprising given the product category under study is 'charitable organizations', it is more appropriate to distinguish between a 'lower' and a 'higher' involvement group in this study than to refer to a low vs. high involvement group.

alters attitude-decision (in)consistency when decision involvement is low, and not when decision involvement is high. In effect, more participants made inconsistent choices due to the selective focus manipulation when decision involvement was low ( $\chi^2(1, N = 79) = 7.45, p = .006$ ) versus high ( $\chi^2(1, N = 87) = .62, p = .433$ ). Table 2 presents an overview of the percentages of inconsistent choices as a function of selective focus and decision involvement.

Insert Table 2 About Here

After establishing the validity of this finding, it was tested whether *H4* could be confirmed by the collected data. Does focusing on the second most preferred choice option also increase the number of inconsistent choices for low involved participants, even if the attention given to the focal brand was limited? The data appear to confirm this hypothesis. 50.0% of the low involved participants in the limited brand processing condition made an inconsistent decision, while only 17.9% percent of the low involved participants in the control condition made an inconsistent decision ( $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 5.61, p = .018$ ). An equal number of high involved participants in the control condition and in the experimental condition made an inconsistent decision (25.8% vs. 34.3%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 66) = .56, p = .454$ ). These findings confirm *H4*.

*H6a* expresses the expectation that the number of inconsistent choices will also increase for low involved participants when the focal brand was processed extensively. Hence, two more  $\chi^2$ -tests investigate whether an increased number of inconsistent choices can be perceived in the low involvement group when a not most preferred brand is focused upon extensively prior to decision making. The results indicate that also *H5a* can be confirmed. Low involved participants make more inconsistent choices, after focusing their attention extensively on the second most preferred brand (48.4%), compared to the low involved participants in the control condition (17.9%) ( $\chi^2(1, N = 59) = 6.12, p = .013$ ). This while there is no difference in inconsistency for high involved participants that did, or did not, process three ads for their

second most preferred choice option extensively (33.3% vs. 25.8%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 52) = .35, p = .557$ ).

Although the predicted outcome for limited and extensive processing of the focal brand in terms of inconsistent choices was the same, this paper predicted the intervening processes to be different. Extensively focusing on a not most preferred brand should not only increase the accessibility of the attitude toward the focal alternative, but also the favorability of the focal brand. This implies that respondents in the elaborate processing condition do not necessarily act inconsistently by deciding on a previously not most favored choice option, when this option was prompted to be selectively considered. Indeed, this choice option can have gained relative standing in the consideration set. Consequently, respondents may be inconsistent with their previously owned attitudes, but consistent with their recently obtained attitudes. In order to further test this proposition, stated in *H5b*, six paired sample t-tests were conducted. These tests compare the initial absolute attitude towards the second most preferred choice option to the second measurement of this attitude, and this within each group of participants formed by a combination of the level of involvement (low vs. high) and the degree of processing (control condition, limited processing and extensive processing). The results of these analyses indicate that the initial attitude and the final attitude towards the second most preferred choice option remained constant in each condition, except when decision involvement was low and the ads for the second most preferred alternative were processed extensively. In accordance with expectations, the attitude towards the second most preferred choice option became significantly more positive in this experimental condition ( $M_{\text{Initial\_attitude}} = 2.51, M_{\text{Final\_attitude}} = 2.92, t(36) = -2.37, p = 0.023$ ). In the other conditions, no significant changes in the attitude could be observed. This finding also indicates that the increase in inconsistent choices for low involved participants, after limited processing of the ads, can not be accounted for by actual changes in preferences.

## **Discussion**

The results of this second experiment confirm the initial finding that both selective focus and involvement interact in their influence on consumers' choice decisions. A simple selective focus manipulation is more effective in altering the choice decisions of low involved participants, but not for high involved participants. Furthermore, Study 2 extends the findings of the first by taking into account the level of processing of the focal brand that is necessary in order to establish an alternate choice decision. The findings indicate that elaborate processing of the focal brand is not a prerequisite for a change in the choice decision to occur. Even a limited level of processing of the focal brand can alter choice decisions. The underlying process by which this change is brought about, however, is different in the limited versus elaborate processing situations. The results indicate that the focal brand is valued more positively, compared to the initial evaluation, after extensive processing of the three ads for this brand. This finding is in accordance with the explanation for the influence of selective focus on decision making that was proposed by Posavac et al. (2002). They proposed and found evidence for the fact that respondents do not act inconsistently by deciding on a previously not most favored choice option, when this option was prompted to be selectively focused upon, because this choice option can have gained relative standing in the consideration set. The results of this study can confirm their finding, but at the same time also nuance it, because this process explanation does not hold for the participants that used limited processing of the focal brands. Limited processing of the three ads for the focal brand did not lead to a change in the preferences for this focal brand. This finding is in line with the findings of Nedungadi (1990). In contrast with Posavac et al. (2002), Nedungadi (1990) showed that choice decisions may be altered, without altering brand evaluations, through variation in the consideration of brands. Study 2 reconciles the findings of both Posavac et al. (2002) and Nedungadi (1990). A change in the choice behavior of low involved participants, due to selective focus, can occur through

two distinct mechanisms. When the focal brand is extensively processed, the attitude towards this brand increases and this may result in an increased choice for this brand. However, when the focal brand is only processed in a limited manner, brand choice is also significantly altered, but this happens outside the traditional evaluation-based route.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The results of the two reported experiments clearly demonstrate that selective focus, together with decision involvement, has important implications for the choices consumers make. The results of prior studies on selective focus were not consistent. While some studies showed a clear influence of selective focus on choice decisions, others found that the effect was limited to an alteration of the consideration set (Posavac et al. 2002; Coates et al. 2004). Introducing decision involvement as a possible moderator leads to a clearer understanding on how decision making is influenced by selective focus. When involvement is low, simply focusing on a not most favored brand can lead to a final choice of this brand. On the other hand, irrespective of brand focus, when decision involvement is high, consumers are very likely to retrieve their most preferred brand and to rely on their previously formed attitudes to select the brand they really like the most.

Further, the consumer choice literature has frequently characterized the decision-making process as involving at least two distinct stages, a brand consideration and a brand selection stage (e.g., Nedungadi, 1990; Shocker et al., 1991; Suh, 2009). Given this importance accorded to consideration sets in the consumer choice literature, it is important to assess the influence of selective focus and decision involvement for both the brand consideration and brand selection stage separately. In line with our expectations, the results showed that highly involved participants, compared to less involved ones, were more likely to retrieve their most

preferred brand from memory. Further, results also revealed that selectively focusing on an alternative, prior to choice, alters the composition of the consideration set. More specifically, selectively focusing on a brand is likely to increase the chance that this brand will be retrieved from memory, irrespective of the level of involvement with the decision. But, this effect of selective focus will only transfer to brand selection in certain cases of decision involvement. Only when decision involvement is low, the accessibility of an attitude may gain the upper hand over the favorability of an attitude in the selection of a choice option.

Finally, the Study 2 also investigated whether a more profound level of processing of the focal brand was a precondition for the influence of selective focus to transfer through to brand choice. The results indicate that both a lower and a deeper level of processing of the focal brand can alter the choice decisions of low involved consumers. Although limited and extensive processing of the focal brand lead to the same changes in the choice decisions, they do so by different attitudinal mechanisms. While merely superficially attending the focal brand alters choice decisions without changing the actual attitudes consumers hold, profound processing of the focal brand is more likely to exert its influence on decision making by improving the preferences for the focal brand. Consequently, in the latter instance, respondents can be regarded as inconsistent with their previously owned attitudes, but consistent with their recently obtained attitudes.

### **Managerial Implications**

First, investigating the effect of paying attention to marketing stimuli, presented in the decision context, on decision making helps managers in their development of effective communication strategies. Generating a positively valued brand has long time been the main focus of marketing communications. Based on these findings, it is clear that generating a more prominent brand may also be essential and have direct consequences for decision making, especially when decision involvement is low. By merely being present in the consumers'

decision context, and attracting a limited level of attention, low involved consumers' decision making may be altered. Our findings also coincide with the 'recency planning' idea (Ephron, 1997). Ephron (1997) indicated that effective media planning is not only a case of 'how many times' a consumer has to be reached, but also 'when' does a consumer have to be reached. The results confirm that there is indeed a window of advertising opportunity preceding each purchase. Most importantly, placing advertisements close to the point of sale may especially be beneficial to alter the choice decisions of low involved consumers. Because of this, means of communication that hold the potential of being placed close to or in the point of sale, such as billboards and in-store floor graphics etc., become very important in this respect (Taylor, Franke, & Bang 2006).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The two conducted experiments used existing charitable organizations to enhance the external validity. Consequently, the level of involvement was measured and not manipulated. For future research, it may be interesting to see whether our findings can be replicated by manipulating, rather than measuring, decision involvement.

Second, in the reported experiments a 'not most preferred' choice option was still a 'favored' option. It might be taking it a bridge too far supposing that a disliked alternative may end up getting chosen under conditions of low decision involvement, just because it is the most accessible alternative. Slight indications in this direction can be found in Posavac et al. (2002). They did not obtain an effect of selective focus when the initial attitude toward the focal alternative was negative. But, they did not make a distinction between high and low decision involvement. Hence, further research is also needed to find out how far the influence of selective focus on a not favored brand might reach under differential conditions of decision involvement.

Further, in order to control the selective exposure and the level of attention paid to the focal brand the propositions were tested in two experiments. In fact, much of the current theoretical work on low involvement processing and low attention advertising effects is based on experimental findings (Grimes, 2008). Therefore, along with Grimes (2008) the authors plead for an exploration of this emerging and important area with applied consumer research of all types.

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## TABLES

**Table 1. Hypothesized Attitude-Decision Consistency as a Function of Decision Involvement and Selective Focus**

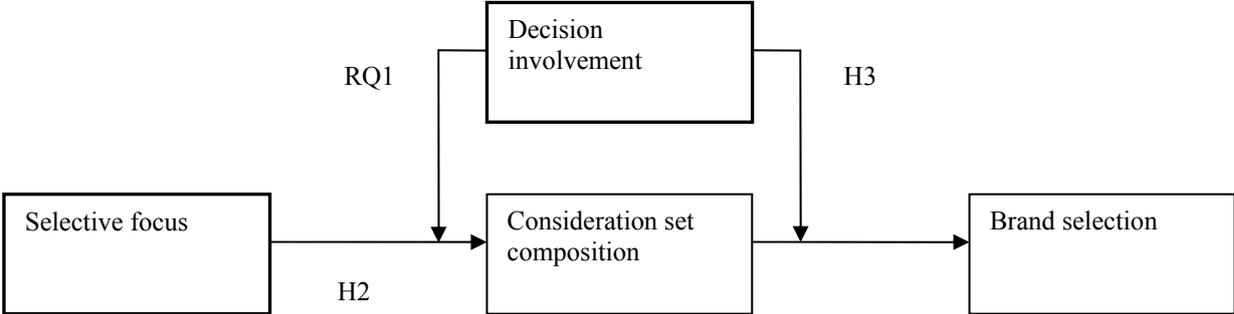
Decision Involvement	Selective Focus	
	Most Preferred Alternative	Not Most Preferred Alternative
Low	High	Low
High	High	High

**Table 2. The Percentage of Participants Making Inconsistent Choices as a Function of Decision Involvement, Selective Focus and the Degree of Processing (Study 2)**

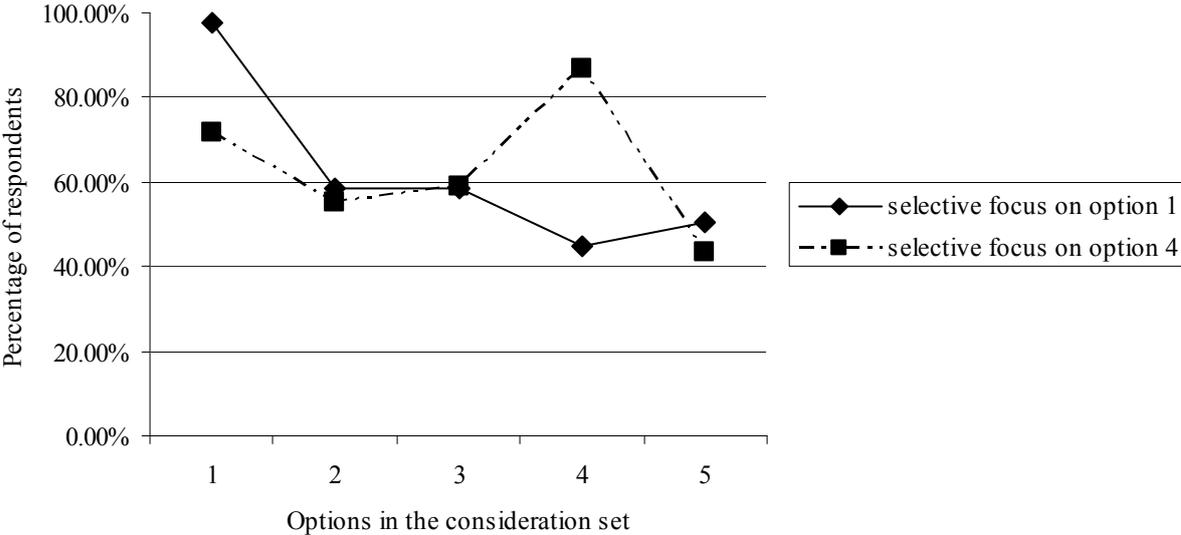
Decision Involvement	Selective Focus			
	No Selective Focus	Selective Focus on the Second Most Preferred Alternative		
		Overall	Limited Brand Processing	Extensive Brand Processing
Low	17.9 %	49.0 %	50.0 %	48.4 %
High	25.8 %	33.9 %	34.3 %	33.3 %

**FIGURES**

**Figure 1. Overview of the Conceptual Background and Hypotheses (Study 1)**



**Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents that considers their Five Most Preferred Choice Options According to the Selective Focus-Condition**



**Figure 3. Percentage of Respondents that Considers the Focal Option and Makes an Inconsistent Choice after Focusing on a Not Most Preferred Choice Option According to the Level of Involvement**

