

Discounting, Rebate, or no Promotion? A Behaviorist Assessment of Consumer Promotion Choice

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Resumo

Consumer behavior is dependant of the context and reinforcing stimuli can produce different responses in closed or open behavior settings. We present a behaviorist assessment of consumer response in laboratory and natural environments. Promotion choice was the behavior under analysis in two experiments where consumer setting, reinforcers (discounting or rebates) and schedule (purchase value) were manipulated. The study supports three hypotheses: promotion choice rates are significantly lower at natural environments and reinforcers rates are significantly diverse in different behavior settings and under several schedule and reinforcement presentation. Results are theoretically important for the behavior analysis of consumer choice because unveil the dynamics of consumer behavior in the marketplace. Research findings are particularly important to owners of small retailers involved with managerial uncertainty regarding promotions perceptions and performance in-store. These implications comply with the recent demands about more relevance in consumer behavior research.

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ABSTRACT

Consumer behavior is dependant of the context and reinforcing stimuli can produce different responses in closed or open behavior settings. We present a behaviorist assessment of consumer response in laboratory and natural environments. Promotion choice was the behavior under analysis in two experiments where consumer setting, reinforcers (discounting or rebates) and schedule (purchase value) were manipulated. The study supports three hypotheses: promotion choice rates are significantly lower at natural environments and reinforcers rates are significantly diverse in different behavior settings and under several schedule and reinforcement presentation. Results are theoretically important for the behavior analysis of consumer choice because unveil the dynamics of consumer behavior in the marketplace. Research findings are particularly important to owners of small retailers involved with managerial uncertainty regarding promotions perceptions and performance in-store. These implications comply with the recent demands about more relevance in consumer behavior research.

Keywords

Behavioral economics; Consumer behavior; Consumer choice; Promotion choice; Sales per transaction.

1. Introduction

A surge for realism in consumer behavior research is moving the field towards the measurement of actual behavior (Morales, Amir, & Lee, 2017). The updated vision of *The Journal of Consumer Research* underscores a call for consumer-relevant consequential dependent variables that manifest individual reactions to relevant stimuli (Inman, Campbell, Kirmani, & Price, 2018). This urge is a result from Pham (2013) argument about the absence of relevance from the research produced to the business community.

Behavioral economics can address this outlook because presupposes that decision making does not occur in a vacuum (Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz, 2012). Consequently, economic behavior is subjected to controlling variables and one area where behavior is dependant of the context is consumer behavior (Foxall, 2016). According to Foxall (1998, p. 41), “behaviour is explicable and predictable in so far as it is assumed to be environmentally determined”. When behavioral economics meets the marketplace, the existent tools of this framework can be used by behavior analysts to examine consumer choice (Foxall, & Sigurdsson, 2013).

The integration of behavioral economics with a psychology research tradition more oriented to measure actual behavior led to the development of a research program that establishes consumer behavior as an output of the interaction between the environment and individual experience (Foxall, 2016). The objective is to put into perspective the principles of the behavioral tradition to real-world managerial marketing situations (Wells, 2014). Hence, this research program vindicates the application of the behavioral paradigm and methods to marketing problems, specifically to characterize human behavior in the marketplace as a substantive problem to managers and decision makers (Wertenbroch, 2015).

This article presents an empirical research that accede to these directions. We define choice as the main consumer outcome under analysis, as choice is defined as an observable behavior (Gneezy, 2017) inside the consumer decision making framework (Foxall, 2015). However, we opt to analyze a subset of this behavior, promotion choice, which is fundamental in retailing. The design of effective promotions to consumers is an established research area in retail research (Grewal et al., 2011) and behavioral economics can assist to the understading of

this reality in the context of a small retailer, where there are severe resource constraints and lack of promotional activities (O'Donnel, 2011).

The methodology involved the development of a laboratory and a field experiment designed to test three hypotheses and analyze the dynamics of consumer promotion choice between two different forms of promotional in-store stimuli, discounting or rebate, in the marketplace. According to behavioral economics framework, behaviors operate in a given environment generating consequences (Foxall, 2016) and this is the reason why our study delimitation involved changing the setting (field and laboratory experiments) and schedules of the presentation of both stimuli (discounting or rebate) to investigate how promotion choice operates in these settings. The article is organized as follows. After this brief introduction, we present the research outline and hypotheses. Section 3 presents the main characteristics of the experiments, followed by the results. Finally, we present research implications to the behavioral perspective of consumer behavior.

2. Research outline and hypotheses: consumer behavior as a result from open or closed settings

Shopping involves a “see-touch-feel-select” sequence (Sinha, & Uniyal, 2005) and consumer behavior occurs in a continuum of relatively open or closed settings that assists in shaping this behavior (Foxall, 1992). Situational influences are responsible for eliciting responses that will give rise to motor and verbal approach or avoidance (Foxall, & Yani-de-Soriano, 2005). These influences are recognized as discriminative stimuli which compose the setting and signal probable outcomes of approach responses (Foxall, & Yani-de-Soriano, 2005).

Accordingly, retail price promotions such as discounting and rebates involve complex combinations of decisions, such as pricing and promotion (Grewal, & Levy, 2007) and it is acceptable to assume that shopping behavior is caused by variables in the store (Sinha, & Uniyal, 2005), elements which serve as discriminative stimuli “in the presence of which the individual emits responses” (Foxall, 1992, p. 189). Continuous response from the consumer (e.g. choice) is the result from these reinforcing stimulus (Furrebøe, & Sandaker, 2017).

Research which assesses retail environmental effects on behavior resorts to the stimulus-organism-reponse (S-O-R) paradigm (Turley, & Milliman, 2000). Operant (or instrumental) conditioning is the behavioral psychology approach used for some researchers to understand marketing and consumer behavior phenomena derived from Skinner behavioral act that define: a response/behavior (R), the reinforcement/punishment (S^+) and a discriminative stimulus (S^d) (Wells, 2014). Reinforcement is the presentation or withdrawal of a certain stimulus and operant behavior is the result from the interaction between the individual and the environment (Furrebøe, & Sandaker, 2017). Hence, operant denotes behaviors that operate on the environment to generate consequences (Foxall, 2016), the human observable behavior in naturally occurring settings subjected to marketing influence (Foxall, & Sigurdsson, 2013). In real-life situations reinforcements are provided on a schedule usually intermittent when marketing activities such as price and promotions decisions are considered (Wells, 2014).

Considering that situational influences may produce different responses from consumers, as behavior is shaped by consequences (Foxall, & Sigurdsson, 2013), our study hypothesizes that promotion offers such as discountings or rebates are different reinforcers that produce different responses in open or closed behavior settings (Foxall, & Sigurdsson, 2013; Foxall, & Yani-de-Soriano, 2005). Additionally, the manipulation of the schedule of the reinforcer in a controlled environment is also important to understand how consumer behavior occurs, as “different ways of arranging this behavior-environment relation produce characteristic patterns of responses” (Furrebøe, & Sandaker, 2017, p. 319). Given the theoretical framework presented, Hypotheses 1-3 are presented as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Consumer response rates (promotion choice) are significantly different in open and closed behavior settings

Hypothesis 2. Reinforcers (discounting and rebate) rates are significantly different in open and closed behavior settings

Hypothesis 3. Reinforcers (discounting and rebate) rates vary when reinforcement presentation and schedules are randomized

3. Method

The methodology approach involved the development of two experiments, the first one in-store and the second in a laboratory setting. The research design chosen was a form to overcome the natural problem for academics to gain access to stores (Sigurdsson, Larsen, & Fagerstrøm, 2016) and build an empirical framework where field and laboratory experiments could complete each other, as stated by Gneezy (2017). Furthermore, the research was operationalized in a Latin-American country (Brazil), where attitudinal models are predominant. Behavioral research is needed to evaluate shopping patterns that differ from developed countries where consumers frequently opt to small retailers (Sandoval-Escobar, & Medina, 2016).

3.1 Study 1 – Field experiment

The first empirical study encompassed the organization of a field experiment in a small children's clothing store during 32 sequential days, between September and October 2016, in a Brazilian city located in the Midwest. Research methodology was developed to answer one primary question: what drives consumer promotion choice amongst the presentation of three options simultaneously: discounting, rebate or the option to not participate the promotion. The definition of promotion choice as the primary variable under analysis addresses Morales et al. (2017) concern about informative behavioral measures that carry some form of consequence inside the retail context. Field experiment protocol was defined after a series of research group meetings and a pre-test phase where members of this group evaluated broad (experimental design) and specific (standardized interviewing procedures for salesmen and question wording) procedures of the investigation approach. Pre-test phase encompassed 17 questionnaires collected during a single day in September. The complete field experiment lasted 32 days, between September the 9th and October the 5th. The protocol definition was delineated to reflect a real consumer situation according to Fagerstrøm and Sigurdsson (2016).

3.1.1 Operational procedures of Study 1

Study 1 is clearly defined as a natural field experiment because consumers were unaware that they were taking part in a study (Al-Ubaydli, & List, 2017; Gneezy, 2017). Consumers waiting in the register queue right after shopping were inquired by store salesmen if they wanted to participate in a promotion, choosing between one of two options: a 15% immediate discount or a 15% rebate to be used in a future purchase occasion. The promotion chosen would only be available if this consumer chose at least one more item of the store before paying at the counter. Hence, the option of not participate was also possible to be computed as a choice. Salesmen were trained beforehand to register, in a paper form, a series of demographic and behavioral variables while interviewed consumers in the queue.

The value of 15% was not arbitrarily defined. It was established by researchers because it represents a real managerial dilemma to the store owner, who is not sure about which promotion is more effective in generating responses from consumers (Foxall, 2016). The uncertainty demonstrated by the owner is common amongst retailers, that usually decide

promotions based on intuition and untested assumptions (Bogomolova, Szabo, & Kennedy, 2017). Additionally, although marketing is recognized as an important driver of competitive advantage, marketing function as a whole is not as well developed or influential in small businesses as it is in large corporations (Walsh, & Lipinski, 2009). Correspondingly, the use of discounting and rebate as simultaneous promotion options was not by chance. Discounts or temporary price-cuts effects are immediate, while rebates are expected to be beyond the immediate sales bump (Heerde, & Neslin, 2017). In a behavioral perspective interpretation these two forms of promotion could be different reinforcers that occur in open behavior settings (Foxall, 1992), marked by social and physical environments (Foxall, & Yani-de-Soriano, 2005), where the additional item is also a reinforcer and the promotion choice is the consumer response, supposed to be under stimulus control (Foxall, 2016).

One of the questions registered by salesmen during the field experiment was a beforehand information: they should register if the purchase (before promotion offering) was above or below R\$ 78, the sales per transaction average, previously calculated by the researchers using sales revenue information and purchase quantity from the three preceding months. This *dummy* variable was developed to compare the possible effects resulted from the experiment with a baseline information from the store, what retail sales would be in the absence of a promotion (Abraham, & Lodish, 1993). This represents a methodological alternative to manipulate factors in the environment and observe the resulting outcome (Gneezy, 2017).

3.1.2 Results of Study 1

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics (frequencies) of the factor variables used in the field experiment. A considerable proportion of consumers opted not to participate the promotion (72.5%). Discounting was the preferred promotional option when presented concurrently with rebate (24.3% against 2.3%) suggesting different weights for the two reinforcers available in the open behavior setting. Most consumers paid in cash (60.1%), were female (87.3%), with a household income ranging from R\$ 1.760,01 to R\$ 3.520,00. Purchases in general were below R\$ 66, one standard deviation below the sales per transaction average (R\$ 78) calculated in the three preceding months of the experiment. Almost half of the sample (48.7%) were on their first purchase. Finally, more than a half of the consumers were one of the responsables for purchasing clothes for a child between 0 and 12 (53.4%), the market segment targeted by the children's clothing store.

The one-sample Chi-Square test on Promotion choice variable levels (Discounting, Rebate and Don't want to participate the promotion) rejected the null hypothesis of equal probabilities ($\chi^2 = 143.07$, $p = .00$). The same test was applied to the purchase classification considering the sales per transaction average. Purchases below one standard deviation from R\$ 78, purchases near R\$ 78 and purchases above one standard deviation from R\$ 78 also occur with different probabilities (null hypothesis of equal probabilities rejected, $\chi^2 = 43.66$, $p = .00$). Based on these results, we developed a Multinomial Regression Model defining Promotion choice (Discounting, Rebate or Don't want to participate the promotion) as the unordered qualitative dependent variable. We included two independent variables in the model: a simple *dummy* variable for purchases above or below the sales per transaction average and the three level factor variable regarding Form of payment (Cash, Debit or Credit).

Table 1.

Frequencies of factor variables of the field experiment

Variable	Levels	Proportions
Experimental manipulation (Reinforcers: Promotion choice in-store)	Discounting	24.3%
	Rebate	3.2%
	Don't want to participate	72.5%
Form of payment	Cash	60.1%
	Debit	17%
	Credit	22.9%
Genre	Female	87.3%
	Male	12.7%
Household income ^a	To R\$ 1.760,01	35.4%
	From R\$ 1.760,01 to R\$ 3.520,00	42.3%
	From R\$ 3.520,01 to R\$ 8.800,00	19.6%
	Above R\$ 8.800,01	2.6%
Purchase classification considering the sales per transaction average ^b	Purchases below 1 standard deviation from R\$ 78	55%
	Purchases near R\$ 78	13.8%
	Purchases above 1 standard deviation from R\$ 78	31.2%
Purchase frequency	First purchase	48.7%
	Once in two months or more	37.6%
	Once a month	6.9%
	Twice or more a month	6.9%
Purchase motive		
"Are you of the responsables for purchasing clothes for a child between 0 and 12"?"	No	41.3%
	Yes	53.4%

Note. N = 189 actual purchases

^a Household income intervals in the research reproduced the values of the Minimum Brazilian Wage criterion proposed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)

^b Sales per transaction average (R\$ 78) and standard deviation of R\$ 12 were calculated in the three preceding months of the field experiment (June, July and August 2016). We used a simple standard deviation measure to transform and compute proportions of a continuous variable.

The results of the model provided on Table 2 implies that individuals whose purchases were above the sales per transaction average of R\$ 78 tend to choose a promotion (discounting or rebate) compared to the ones who opted not to choose any promotion. The interpretation of the beta coefficients for this variable in the multinomial model asseverates a higher influence for discounting than rebate: odds are multiplied by a factor of 1.85 in discounting choices and 1.67 in rebate choices.

3.2 Study 2 – Laboratory experiment

Study 2 is a laboratory experiment designed to solve two potential issues that had arisen in Study 1. First, a theoretical question which regards different weights in reinforces in the context of behavioral economics (Foxall, 2016), since a large propotion of consumers signalized being more favourable to the discounting option when presented simultaneously with rebate (24.3% against 3.2%). Second, a derived endogeneity methodological problem where fixing promotional choices led to a potential correlation between observations and the error term (Ebbes, Papies, & Heerde, 2016). A form to prevent this issue is randomize the options splitting observations into groups (Jean, Deng, Kim, & Yuan, 2016), a blocking procedure that assures

that observations of the same block are collected under similar experimental conditions (Dean, & Voss, 1999).

Table 2.

Results of the Multinomial Regression Model (Study 1) which identify the predictors of promotion choice

Promotion choice ^a	Variable	Beta	Std. Error	Sig.	Exp(B)
Discounting					
	Intercept	-1.31	.43	.00**	
	Purchase above the sales per transaction average	1.85	.39	.00***	6.38
	Form of payment: Cash	-1.04	.44	.01**	.35
	Form of payment: Debit	-.50	.54	.35	.60
	Form of payment: Credit	.0 ^b			
Rebate					
	Intercept	-2.96	.92	.00**	
	Purchase above the sales per transaction average	1.67	.91	.06*	5.31
	Form of payment: Cash	-1.07	.88	.22	.34
	Form of payment: Debit	-20.00	.00	^c	2.05E-9
	Form of payment: Credit	0 ^b			

Note. * $\leq .10$; ** $\leq .05$; *** $\leq .00$. Pseudo R-Square (Nagelkerke): .27

Purchase above the sales per transaction average is a dummy variable, while form of payment is a factor variable with three levels

^a Promotion choice is the qualitative unordered dependent variable of the model. Don't want to participate in the promotion was set up as the reference category

^b Parameter is set to zero because it is redundant. The other values of this factor variable must be interpreted considering this level (payments in credit)

^c Unexpected singularities in the Hessian matrix prevented the calculation of the significance for this singular case

We developed eight different scenarios considering values above and below the sales per transaction average of the children's clothing store. An acceptable statistical criterion to define these values is to use a consistency measure, based on standard deviations (Shankar, & Bolton, 2004). The scenarios were then developed varying one or four standard deviations (R\$ 12) from the value of R\$ 78, the sales per transaction average. Accordingly, the methodological approach also varied promotion choices, discounting and rebate, against the option of not participate the promotion. Table 3 details lab experiment conditions.

Data were collected using supervised self-administered questionnaires. Sample for this case was non-random convenience 258 observations, selected by the researchers on the basis of availability (Doane, & Seward, 2011). However, some procedures were performed to avoid forms of bias. First, the laboratory experiment was validated after a series of written drafts, meetings and proposals in a marketing research group (Cochran, & Cox, 1957). The blocking procedure resulted in the eight conditions detailed on Table 3 and forced the definition of a minimum of 30 observations in each group to comply with the Central Limit Theorem (CLT) (Doane, & Seward, 2011).

Table 3.

4x2 table detailing lab experiment conditions (Study 2)

Purchase value manipulation (Reinforcer schedules)	Promotion type	
	Discounting	Rebate
Purchases way above the sales per transaction average (4 standard deviations above R\$ 78)	Condition 01 Value of the purchase: R\$ 126 15% Discounting	Condition 02 Value of the purchase: R\$ 126 15% Rebate
Purchases above the sales per transaction average (1 standard deviation above R\$ 78)	Condition 03 Value of the purchase: R\$ 90 15% Discounting	Condition 04 Value of the purchase: R\$ 90 15% Rebate
Purchases below the sales per transaction average (1 standard deviation below R\$ 78)	Condition 05 Value of the purchase: R\$ 66 15% Discounting	Condition 06 Value of the purchase: R\$ 66 15% Rebate
Purchases way below the sales per transaction average (4 standard deviations below R\$ 78)	Condition 07 Value of the purchase: R\$ 30 15% Discounting	Condition 08 Value of the purchase: R\$ 30 15% Rebate

Note. Sales per transaction average (R\$ 78) and standard deviation of R\$ 12 were calculated in the three preceding months of the field experiment (June, July and August 2016).

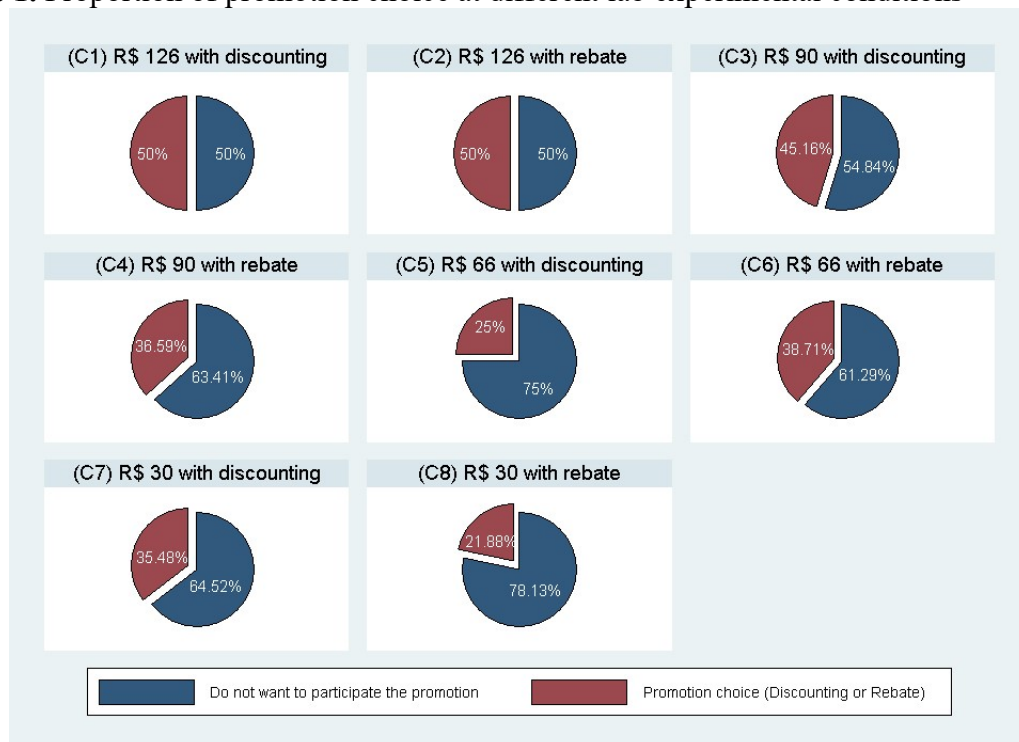
The two last procedures referred to data collection. Individuals were asked to answer a four paper printed form under the supervision of a researcher, who should not assist in the responses provided. The first page presented the research with a brief paragraph and the second page included an instructional manipulation check to avoid satisficing. We used a methodological procedure inspired on the one validated by Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko (2009) to ensure that participants were reading and following the instructions. The second page included a brief text about promotional choices and a text box that should be filled with the word “Experiment”, according to the instructions in the last sentence of the text. Participants who inadvertently filled the questionnaire without filling the box or answered the manipulation check question (Question 01, 52 observations) had their answers removed from the final sample.

The last two pages of the form had six questions. The first one detailed the same methodological procedure used in Study 01 (field experiment): the participant was a consumer waiting in the register queue right after shopping and was invited by a store salesmen to participate in a promotion. Page three had a color photograph of the children’s clothing store entrance to increase the internal validity of the laboratory experiment findings (Cozby, & Battles, 2015). In the last page of the paper form the participant should register if he chose the promotion or not - considering the value of the purchase and the promotion type presented (conditions 01 to 08 summarized on Table 3), and specific demographic questions. The final sample consisted of 258 participants, at least 30 assigned to conditions 1 through 8.

3.2.1 Results of Study 2

Due to space constraints, we will not present the basic descriptive statistics of Study 2. Figure 1 details different proportions of promotion choice at the eight different lab experimental conditions defined. Overall promotion choice was 37.6% (97 individuals out of 258) in the laboratory experiment, against 27.5% (52 consumers out of 189) in the field experiment. A difference in proportions test rejected the null hypothesis of equality ($z = 2.23$, $p = .02$). Hence, hypothesis 1 of the study is supported.

Figure 1. Proportion of promotion choice at different lab experimental conditions



Accordingly, rates for Reinforcers (discounting and rebate) are significantly different in open and closed behavior settings. Rebate choices were extremely low in the open behavior setting (6 consumers out of 189, 2.3%) while they represented 49 choices using conditions 2, 4, 6 and 8 of the laboratory experiment (rebate against don't want to participate the promotion). This returns an overall percentage of 36.6% (49 out of 139 manipulated rebates options). Difference in proportions for this case returned a statistic located more than eight standard deviations away from the expected mean ($z = -8.20$, $p = .00$). The same result was observed for discounting choices. They represented 46 choices of 189 (24.3%) on the field experiment against 48 choices out of 124 manipulated conditions (38.7% on conditions 1, 3, 5 and 7 of the laboratory experiment) of Study 2. The difference in proportions test rejected the null hypothesis of equality ($z = -2.71$, $p = .00$), allowing the support of hypothesis 2 of the research.

Finally, reinforcers rates vary when reinforcement presentation and schedules are randomized. It is possible to observe a positive pattern towards promotion choice, at both promotion types (discounting and rebate), when the value of the purchase is four standard deviations away (R\$ 126) from the sales per transaction average (R\$ 78). Proportions start to rise on purchases located one standard deviation above (R\$ 90) the sales per transaction average (R\$ 78) and establishes on about half percent at laboratory conditions 1 and 2 (see Figure 1). These results support hypothesis 3 of the study.

4. Implications of the results to the behavioral perspective of the consumer behavior

Consumer behavior research manifests a concern about how individuals interact with the environment in a consumption context (Morales et al., 2017). Simultaneously, behavioral researchers are underscoring opportunities for broadening research in marketing (Wertenbroch, 2015). According to them, this could enlarge the capacity of behavior analysis to shed light on the human activity in open behavior settings (Foxall, & Sigurdsson, 2013). Our research provides explanation on how marketing decisions operate in open and closed settings. Results are theoretically important because unveil the dynamics of consumer behavior in the marketplace. Research findings are also important to owners of small retailers involved with managerial uncertainty. This is an evident limitation of retail management in Brazil, where behavioral assessment of consumer behavior is scarce (Sandoval-Escobar, & Medina, 2016).

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