Approach-Avoidance Conflicts in Consumer Behavior: Towards a Conceptual Framework

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Approach-avoidance conflicts have attracted significant attention in psychology but rather less in consumer behavior research, apart from the environmental issues associated with retail settings. Our aim was to identify the key features of the products (as well as the influential characteristics of the retail situations) which led consumers to identify their experiences as uncomfortable, and which thus stimulated ‘approach-avoidance’ conflicts. Our starting point was a small-scale empirical study, using stories to elicit consumers’ experiences of approach-avoidance behaviors. We also investigated the different ways which consumers reacted when faced with approach-avoidance. From here we conceptualized the main components of approach-avoidance conflicts.

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Approach-avoidance conflicts have attracted significant attention in psychology but rather less interest in consumer behavior, except for some studies in retail environments. Very little attention has been paid to how the combination of personal, environmental and product features generate approach-avoidance conflicts for consumers. This is the gap which we seek to address.

Literature Review Consumers’ decisions can have both positive and negative consequences. This means that purchase decisions often involve a psychological conflict (Miller, 1944, 1964) caused by a ‘competition between incompatible responses’ within an individual (Miller, 1944, p. 431). Donovan and Rossiter (1982, p. 37) used Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) model to distinguish four aspects of approach or avoidance (AP-AV) in a retail environment. Whilst considerable research has been undertaken using the M-R model to understand approach-avoidance behaviors in response to environmental factors, rather less attention has been paid to the interactions between the nature of the product or service or the consumer’s disposition.

Methodology
We applied theoretical sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 28) to achieve cross-national comparability and homogeneous samples to examine young adult consumer behavior (18+) in Austria and the U.K. We collected written stories (Hopkinson and Hogg, 2007), employing the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Hopkinson & Hogarth-Scott, 2001). A series of questions were used to evoke associations with regard to past online and offline purchase situations. 41 offline stories (20 U.K. and 21 Austrian) and 37 online stories (17 U.K. and 20 Austrian) were collected. All the stories were content analysed to establish aspects behaviors in approach-avoidance conflicts.

Findings
We begin by drawing some direct comparisons between the different sources of approach-avoidance conflicts generated by the online and offline retailing channels. From here we describe an example of approach-avoidance conflict, illustrating the interactions amongst the environment; the product; and consumer’s disposition.

Sources of potential approach-avoidance conflict
Environment: In the online environment all respondents mentioned the importance of clear interfaces and easy navigation. The offline shopping environments evoked uncertainty and approach-avoidance conflicts which were characterised by the atmosphere (e.g. over-bright lights) and the social situation (represented by friends, fellow customers or the service personnel).

Nature of product or service: The online purchases which provoked uncertainty and discomfort usually involved buying subscriptions or tickets, accommodation or travel packages. The offline purchases which provoked discomfort revolved around mainly ‘adult’ products (male respondents); and predominantly around ‘technical’ products; gifts and fashion or clothing (women respondents).

Consumer dispositions: Emotions amongst the online customers showed a mixture of positive and negative reactions, with some differences between men and women. The online stories reported more excitement and arousal in general, compared with the offline stories. Offline customers overwhelmingly described negative feelings when writing about the emotions that they experienced in relation to the potential approach-avoidance conflicts. Some offline customers reported positive feelings as well, such as trust.

Perceived risk: varied between offline and online situations, both in terms of different types of risk, and the stages within the purchase cycle at which perceived risk was experienced. In online stories perceived risk was usually strongest towards the end of the purchase cycle just before the goods were received. Amongst the offline stories perceived risk varied across the consumption cycle. Psychological risk was one of the most important characteristics of offline purchases, especially for men. For women, offline issues were linked either to technological risk; or psychological and monetary risk (e.g. purchasing gifts and services).

Consumers were regularly confronted with ‘fight or flight’ pressures (roughly equivalent to approach versus avoidance behaviors). Consumers were motivated to purchase for either personal (e.g. buy a product or service for personal use and consumption) or social reasons (buy a product or service for someone else, often, but not always, as a gift). Where there was an important social context for the purchase then consumers were more likely to stay and complete the purchase (approach behaviors) rather than succumb to the often overwhelming personal desire to flee (avoidance behaviors).

Approach-avoidance conflicts: Approach-avoidance conflicts included, firstly, the desire to please someone else; secondly, the desire to stay and complete a purchase on someone else’s behalf; thirdly, the desire to complete the purchase (because of personal need for the goods).

Our participants’ stories illustrate the interaction between product, environment and consumer disposition and the difficulties of separating these into independent constructs. The experience of Carl, for example, demonstrates the importance of combining these when investigating behavior in approach-avoidance conflicts. Carl felt uncomfortable because of the nature of the product (he was very unfamiliar with lingerie; was embarrassed that there were so many bras and knickers on display; felt that his product choice would communicate his taste (or lack of it)). He was also uncomfortable with the shopping environment, notably the atmospherics (e.g. shop was very busy); fairly bright lights (he would have preferred a darker room); and lots of lingerie on display. He had mixed feelings about his fellow customers (he was pleased to see so many men, but felt that they were all expert shoppers); and he was very uncomfortable with the sales staff. Finally,
Carl’s story illustrates the importance of the psycho-social risks which were perceived to be attached to this type of purchase.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Our study examined behavior in approach-avoidance conflicts in relation to the product, the situation and the individual and their complex interaction. Results also indicated a multi-dimensionality of behavior in approach-avoidance conflicts, supporting Babin et al.’s argument (1998), and revealed different drivers of these conflicts. Based on these results we propose a conceptualization which captures the multi-dimensional aspects of approach-avoidance conflicts.

**SELECTED REFERENCES**


