Consumer Cognition At the Point of Sale: Results From a Process Tracing Study

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Video-cued thought protocols were examined as a method for process tracing of cognition at the point of sale. 128 customers participated in the study. Correlations between data on cognitions and behavioral data indicate convergent and discriminant validity. Dependent on motivational state, customers differ in the way they process information. Customers with a particular intention to buy are mainly concerned with realizing their goals. Browsing customers are more open-minded towards new information. Furthermore, data on cognitions are able to predict the final purchase decision. The results suggest that video-cued thought protocols are a useful technique for consumer research.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13765/eacr/vol7/E-07

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Despite the common assumption that the processes underlying consumer behavior are dynamic in nature (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998; Jacoby et al. 1994), most of the research is conducted using static methodological approaches (Jacoby, Johar, and Morrin 1998). This is especially noticeable for research at the point of sale and might be attributed to the lack of adequate process tracing techniques. Therefore, we examined a method for process tracing consumer cognition with regard to its value for consumer research at the point of sale.

For process tracing consumer cognition, we applied video-cued thought protocols (Silberer 2005). The core idea of this technique is to use a video of the shopping episode as a recall aid when assessing verbal reports on cognitions retrospectively. Assessing thoughts retrospectively should minimize reactivity, which is the main argument against applying thinking-aloud at the point of sale (cf. Russo, Johnson, and Stephens 1989). Moreover, the video should help to overcome the pitfalls of unaided retrospective reports such as forgetting and fabrication of thoughts (Silberer 2005). For analyzing consumers’ thoughts, we developed a system of categories which consists of various classes of thoughts referring to information processing, decision making, goal-directed behavior, orientation in the store, and artifacts produced by the method or setting of the study (e.g. Bettmann et al. 1998; Büttner and Mau 2004; Carver & Scheier 2002; Jacoby et al. 1994; Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Titus & Everett 1996)

The first research question was to assess the validity of video-cued thought protocols by examining convergent and discriminant relationships between certain classes of thoughts and certain classes of observable behavior (Jacoby et al. 1978). Second, we wanted to assess the value of video-cued thought protocols for predicting the pivotal outcome of a shopping episode: whether a customer buys something or not. Furthermore, we wanted to analyze the interplay between consumers’ motivational state and information processing.

For the latter, we drew on the model of action phases and corresponding mind-sets (Gollwitzer 1996). According to the model, the process from wishes to desires can be segmented into different phases. In each of these phases, different cognitive activities are more dominant as a result of the different mind-sets of the individual. In our study, we distinguish between two groups of customers (purchasing goal vs. browsing goal) who are supposed to differ in their motivational state and, thus, the way they process information. On the basis of this assumption, we derived hypotheses on the differences between these two groups with regard to types of thoughts. We proposed that those who come to the store with the particular intention of buying something will express more thoughts related to orientation in the store, selecting alternatives, problems with goal achievement, and evaluating goal achievement. Browsing individuals were hypothesized to be more concerned with intentions, searching/perceiving alternatives, and evaluating alternatives.

One hundred twenty-eight visitors to a store for electronic and electrical goods participated in the study. At the entrance to the store, they were asked to participate and, if they agreed, followed and filmed during their visit to the store. Immediately afterwards, the video was presented on a laptop computer and participants were asked to verbalize the thoughts they remembered having during the shopping episode while the video ran. The resulting reports were coded using the system of categories. Assessment of inter-rater-consistency indicates acceptable reliability of the coding. Furthermore, behavioral data were coded from the videos with regard to certain types of action, such as touching products.

The correlations between classes of thoughts and classes of actions are mainly in accordance with convergent and discriminant validity. Testing differences between the two groups of customers with regard to the proportion of thoughts from the respective categories by t-tests yielded support for five of the seven hypotheses. Browsing individuals are more open-minded regarding information whereas customers with a particular purchase goal are more concerned with pursuing their goal. This is consistent with research on motivation and information processing (Gollwitzer 1996). These findings indicate that goals and resulting motivational states should be considered when studying consumer behavior at the point of sale because they affect customers’ way of information processing in the store.

Furthermore, we analyzed whether data on customers’ thoughts were able to predict whether individuals with a particular intention to purchase actually did buy or not. Logistic regression yielded a significant model with three predictors. Running the same procedure with behavioral data instead of cognitive data did not result in a significant model. This finding highlights the importance of process tracing consumer cognition at the point of sale.

From these results we conclude that applying process tracing in the field can contribute to a better understanding of consumer behavior at the point of sale and that video-cued thought protocols are suitable for this purpose.

REFERENCES


