Extending Understanding of Consumer Ambivalence in Different Shopping Environments By Investigating Approach-Avoidance Conflicts

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In order to contribute to the debate about consumer ambivalence, we propose a conceptualization which captures the multidimensional aspects of approach-avoidance conflicts faced by shoppers in changing retail environments. Using a cross-country study we tested the influence of the situation, product, reference group and individual dispositions on shoppers’ intentions. We also examined the role of approach-avoidance conflicts as possible moderators of these influences on shoppers’ decisions; and tested for differences in the effects of the various influences on shoppers’ decisions on two different retail formats by comparing traditional brick & mortar contexts with online shopping situations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
Ambivalence involves mixed emotions. In general, consumers strive to manage the mixed emotions they experience. We conceptualize and investigate the multi-dimensional aspects of approach-avoidance conflicts in order to capture the complexity of consumer ambivalence.

Literature Review & Conceptualisation
Most studies of approach-avoidance have concentrated on consumers’ experiences within the retail environments, rather than examining the conflicts that shoppers experience in relation to the situation; the product or service; social influences; and psychological aspects. These all influence intentions to purchase from a store; generating emotional states such as arousal, pleasure, enjoyment and the desire to explore the retail environment. We conceptualize a possible linkage between ambivalence and conflicts that originate from approach and avoidance tendencies evoked by situational cues, product specific aspects, influences from the reference groups and the individual’s personality within two retail environments. Earlier research has shown that a certain level of arousal is indispensable to evoke emotions, such as pleasure, joy or happiness and their negative opposites, in contrast to Donovan and Rossiter (1982) who argued that arousal has positive effects only in pleasant environments while unpleasant stores might lead to negative emotions.

Methodology
To extend understanding of consumer ambivalence we investigate approach-avoidance conflicts by testing four hypotheses which link consumers’ intention to behave in a store to situation, product, reference groups, and psychological aspects respectively. The fifth hypothesis linked differences in the effects of the various influences (H1-H4) on two different retail formats (online and offline).

Scales were adapted from existing literature in developing an instrument that captured the possible sources of conflicts, and approach-avoidance emotional states and behaviours in conflicts. Using convenience sampling, participants were approached either in person or via e-mail. There were 335 usable questionnaires (Austria n=127, Greece n=111, U.K. n=117), 171 answers referred to traditional shopping contexts, 184 answers were for online shopping.1

Major findings
In order to derive a manageable number of dimensions, factor and reliability analyses were conducted. Explained variance was above 50% for all scales and Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .60 to .92. The extracted dimensions were the basis for Regression Analysis (RA). The fit indices of the RA allowed the model to be accepted. Each source of conflict contributed to predicting the intention to shop in and/or recommend the store i.e. situation, product, reference group and psychological influences. The condition, online versus traditional offline shopping situation, did not seem to influence the intention to shop. There are, however, significant differences of the retail format in the effects of various influences, thus partly confirming our H5. The situation when shopping online is perceived as more complex. Product specific influences were found in the performance risk, which is perceived as lower in the traditional store. Both forms of product involvement were higher in the traditional store. Finally, regarding the approach-avoidance conflict, pleasure, arousal and dominance/control were higher in the traditional store, whereas the desire to return and explore the store was higher in the online store.

In order to find out how the emotional states pleasure, arousal, enjoyment related to each other and how they correlated with consumers’ willingness to return and explore the store, correlation analyses were run; separately for the two conditions (online versus offline). In the online condition, arousal (mean=2.58, SD=.72) was significantly correlated with pleasure (mean=2.37, SD=.72): the higher the arousal the higher pleasure (r=.31, p<.00). Furthermore, the higher the arousal the less consumers enjoyed the store (mean=3.04, SD=.90; r=-.16, p<.05), and the less likely consumers were to return and explore the online store (mean=3.80, SD=.96; r=-.22, p<.00). In the traditional store, arousal and pleasure (mean=2.69, SD=.74) were not correlated. The higher the pleasure however, the less enjoyment was perceived (mean=3.13, SD=86; r=-.38, p<.00). Finally, enjoyment correlated with the willingness to return and explore the store significantly (mean=3.55, SD=95; r=-.30, p<.00).

Discussion and Conclusion
Our findings confirmed the effect of mixed emotions on consumers’ experiences and move us some way towards a better understanding of consumer ambivalence. Earlier research on ambivalence indicated that attitudes are based on separate positive and negative components and had problematized the conceptualization of attitudes and emotions along a bipolar continuum. Petty, Wegener and Fabrigar (1997, p. 613) had argued that the assumption that “positive and negative evaluative reactions are reciprocally activated” is not necessarily tenable but rather “positive and negative responses should be viewed as a bivariate evaluative plane (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994)””. Our findings supported this as well as Babin et al.’s argument (1998) “that positive and negative affects are often but not always unipolar rather than bipolar dimensions... one cannot, consequently consider negative affect as simply the opposite of positive affect” (Maxwell & Kover, 2003, p. 554). Our findings also support Cacioppo and Berntson’s (1994) view of “the inability of traditional bipolar attitude scales to fully differentiate among these possibilities [i.e. positive and negative responses] and ... that future research use separate measures of the positive and negative bases of attitudes” (Petty et al., 1997, p. 613).

Earlier qualitative work on approach-avoidance had identified, if not explicitly, disorientation and resolution within the context of consumer decision-making. This current study provides further evidence of the importance of understanding consumers’ disorientation, exploration and resolution (Harrist, 2006) when faced by the complex experience of mixed emotions in shopping channels. We would suggest the application of approach-avoidance theory to shopper behavior will potentially contribute to our under-

1We would like to thank Christina Wastlbauer and Christina-Isidora Kyritsi who undertook the data collection for this study.
standing of consumer ambivalence, and thereby extend Smelser’s (1998) view that ambivalence can provide a “more nuanced understanding of the human condition” (Harrist, 2006, p. 85) to the arena of consumer decision-making.

References