Games Bargain Hunters Play: an Update

Robert Schindler, Rutgers University, USA

Price promotions can powerfully affect consumer choice. Two waves of depth interviews with deal-prone shoppers suggest that consumer game playing is important in price-promotion effects. Verbal reports from these interviews are used to name, describe, and present a taxonomy of bargain-hunting games. For example, the game “Wait” involves waiting for the price of a desired item to decrease, betting that the item will remain available; the game “Santa Claus” involves buying discounted items in order to give them away, thus stimulating conversation about the purchase. Implications are drawn for how everyday games are elicited and how they act to motivate consumers.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14222/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
SESSION OVERVIEW
With the exception of Bergadaa, Faure, and Perrien (1995), previous research has framed involvement within the context of the consumer’s involvement with a particular product or product class (see for example Richins, Bloch and McQuarrie 1992). While the link between product involvement and purchase behavior is clear, we propose in this session to extend Bergadaa, Faure, and Perrien’s work by bringing together three different, though interrelated, perspectives on consumer involvement with shopping in general. By focusing on involvement at this level, we hope to provide additional insights into consumers’ shopping motivations that will impact retailers’ sales promotion, advertising, and pricing strategies.

This session considers shopping involvement within the context of a new typology that addresses the inadequacy of the traditional distinction between situational and dispositional factors in motivation. In the new typology, involvement ranges from situational excitement, through enduring enthusiasm, to obsessive fixation and beyond.

In our first paper, Schindler updates his previous work on consumers’ bargain hunting games (situational involvement), and concludes with recommendations for eliciting game play, as well as a tentative framework for how games may motivate consumers.

In our second paper, O’Donnell and Strebel identify a segment of consumers—the sport shopper—whose shopping prowess goes beyond the situational context of bargain hunting games, and over time becomes an integral part of their self identities (enduring involvement). This research provides a profile of sport shoppers’ unique motivations, attitudes and involvement with shopping.

Finally, Albanese, Jewell and Murtha describe a typology that distinguishes between four categories of shoppers who vary in their degrees of shopping involvement from situational to enduring to obsessive. Within the framework they provide, game players and sport shoppers would be categorized in the normal to neurotic obsessive. Within the framework they provide, game players and sport shoppers would be categorized in the normal to neurotic obsessive. Within the framework they provide, game players and sport shoppers would be categorized in the normal to neurotic obsessive. Within the framework they provide, game players and sport shoppers would be categorized in the normal to neurotic obsessive.

These papers bring together disparate lines of research to provide a richer and more comprehensive examination of shopping involvement and to extend our understanding of consumer motivation.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Games Bargain Hunters Play: An Update”
Robert Schindler, Rutgers University, USA

Considerable work on the marketplace effects of price promotions has shown that discounts and other forms of price deals have a marked ability to influence consumer choice (e.g., Blattberg and Neslin 1990; Pauwels, Hanssens, and Siddarth 2002). Past research has also suggested that “smart-shopper feelings” and other experiential variables play an important role in these effects (e.g., Schindler 1998; Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent 2000; Bardhi and Arnould 2005). To further explore how these experiential variables have a motivational impact, a sample of consumers who are highly involved in activities designed to obtain price discounts and a sample of consumers who enjoy shopping on the Internet were interviewed in depth. A total of 37 consumers were interviewed. The resulting transcripts of over 38 hours of interviews were then analyzed by interpretive methods (e.g., Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

It was apparent that the concept of the game plays a key role in how deal-prone consumers experience their bargain-hunting activities, and that the games involved can be systematically described (as in Berne 1964). There appears to be at least two types of bargain-hunting games. The first is a solitary game, against an impersonal seller. The goal is to obtain a valued item at a price lower than what you would have otherwise paid. The second is a social game, played with or against other consumers. A common goal of this second type of game is to have your bargain-hunting successes recognized by other consumers. A consumer is likely to play a complex mixture of these two types of games.

A common game of the first type could be called, “Wait.” In this game, the consumer identifies a particular desired item, and then waits for its price to decrease substantially, hoping that this will occur before the item becomes unavailable. After describing successful play of this game concerning a pair of boots, one informant described the thrill of the experience: “I guess it’s like bungee jumping … scary but exhilarating.”

A common game of the second type could be called, “Guess What I Paid For This.” In this game, the consumer shows a second player (e.g., a friend or family member) a recent purchase and asks the second player to indicate what one would expect to pay for the item. Since responding with a low price disparages the quality of the purchase, most second players respond with a high price, to which the first player responds with delight. Play of this game can become quite involving since it invites the second player to play again later, with the tables turned.

Numerous other games were identified in these interviews. For example, in “Diamond in the Rough,” the player purchases an item that is discounted because of an apparent defect, and then attempts to show the defect to be inconsequential to the benefits provided by the item. In “Radar,” the player systematically scans for bargains by repeatedly carrying out a predetermined sequence of shopping activities, thus working to defeat retailers’ efforts to make discount offers unpredictable. In “Tag Team,” the players clips coupons or finds discount ads for friends or relatives to use, thereby enjoying the bargain vicariously and avoiding the inconveniences of actually obtaining the items. In “Santa Claus,” the player purchases numerous items on deal for the purpose of giving them away, expecting to stimulate conversation about the source of this generosity.

The interviews provided some insight on how consumer game-playing behavior is elicited and maintained. At the current point in this research, it seems that there are at least three important aspects of everyday game elicitation:

1. Actions with intrinsic appeal. For many people, searching advertisements and/or stores for discounts are easy and pleasant activities.
2. A goal that seems attainable. The desired outcome of these price-search activities—to pay less for something for which you would have otherwise paid more—seems, for many people, to be easily within their reach.
3. Clear feedback as to how well you do. Because a retail price is so specific and objective, even a small gain or loss becomes not only readily apparent, but also publicly observable.
The descriptions of these shopping games also suggest a tentative framework of how games may act to so effectively motivate consumers. The motivational mechanisms include (1) the ability of game play to set the agenda for one’s actions, (2) the ability of a game to recruit energy, both mental and physical, and (3) the ability of a game to affect one’s evaluations, both by distracting attention and by bending perceptions.

“Sport Shoppers: An Important New Segment”  
Kathleen O’Donnell, San Francisco State University, USA  
Judi Strebel, San Francisco State University, USA

Marketers have long realized that the majority of retail shoppers are motivated by more than simply the acquisition of goods and services. In an effort to extend the previous research that has examined the dual role of economic and hedonic motives on retail shopping behaviors (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980, Westbrook and Black 1985, Schindler 1998, Arnold and Reynolds 2003, Bardhi and Arnold 2005, Guiry, Magi and Lutz 2006), this study explores a unique retailer whom we have christened the “sport shopper”. For this segment, shopping is similar to sports participation in that the shoppers compete for great deals, they train to improve their performance, they experience a “high” when they perform well, and they are able to recreate that feeling both by continuing to compete and by sharing the tales of their successes with others.

This exploratory research suggests that sport shoppers are unique from other shoppers in terms of the type and nature of the competitiveness they exhibit in the shopping arena, their desire to tell others about their shopping behaviors, and the trait-like nature of the positive affect they experience from self-identifying as sport shoppers. Based on our interpretation of the cognitive responses provided by 94 students at a large western university, who were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about bargain shopping (Lincoln and Guba 1985), we find that sport shoppers take great pleasure and pride in their ability to uncover exceptional bargains by carefully combing the racks of department, specialty and discount stores. Unlike recreational shoppers, sport shoppers do not enjoy all shopping, just shopping for great deals. The thrill of victory they experience with each find reinforces their motivations to shop and to boast about the bargains they’ve uncovered. For them shopping is an arena in which they can compete, not against other shoppers per se, but against the retail system and their own past performance. Each shopping trip brings with it the opportunity to refine and improve their bargain shopping skills, thereby motivating them to continue participating in their “sport” (Ryckman and Hamel 1995).

In order to increase the likelihood of “winning”, sport shoppers develop a set of skills which includes the creation and maintenance of a vast body of knowledge about both the products (e.g. current fashion trends, brand popularity and pricing) and retail stores in the marketplace (e.g. assortment, quality and layout of each location), as well as “pre-game” strategies based on products of interest at the time, budget and time available for shopping.

Unlike their thrift-shopping counterparts, sport shoppers compete to find the best deals on new products in a wide array of retail environments including discount retail stores (e.g. T.J. Maxx, Nordstrom Rack and Marshalls), traditional department and specialty stores (e.g. Macy’s, Nordstrom, Anthropologie), and online venues (e.g. eBay and Bluefly). While they may enjoy shopping in the occasional thrift or consignment store, new products are the gold standard for sport shoppers, as they allow for the most objective determination of the savings earned.

Unlike other bargain hunters, sport shoppers compete to save more, rather than to spend less. While no particular skill is necessary to buy a $20 pair of jeans at Target, the sport shopper prides herself on being able to find the coveted $300 designer jeans for $100. Though she’s paying more for her jeans on a relative basis, her $200 savings and the prestige of the premium label make her feel competent, talented and happy. Sport shoppers make a game out of shopping, perceiving the great deal as a victory over the system. They obtain greater pleasure from bragging about their bargain-hunting prowess than they would from letting others believe they paid full price for the item.

Sport shoppers are motivated to share the tales of their triumphs with others because doing so allows them to prolong or relive the positive affect they experienced at the time of the purchases, but it also earns them the additional positive feelings resulting from the admiration of the people they tell. Because they are motivated by the amount of money they save, sport shoppers tend to remember with exceptional vividness, the details of the various purchases they make.

Rather than experiencing smart shopper feelings only on those occasions when they feel responsible for getting a deal (Schindler 1998), the intensity, duration and frequency with which sport shoppers experience positive affect over their shopping “careers” creates an ongoing involvement with bargain shopping that becomes more trait-like over time. The ongoing nature of their involvement with sport shopping allows them to stay motivated and to continue identifying as sport shoppers, even when they have not gotten a great deal, or shopped lately. Unlike compulsive shoppers (O’Guinn and Faber 1992), they do not need to make a purchase on each outing, and they are able to rationalize an unsuccessful trip as either an information gathering opportunity or another form of savings.

Based on our preliminary research, we believe that this previously ignored shopper segment is unique, formidable and deeply committed to its sport, and as such it is important for both academicians and retailers to better understand the motivations and behaviors they exhibit. Using the insights gained thus far, the second phase of our research will include field observation, video ethnography and in-depth interviews, with the long-term goal of developing a sport shopper scale.

“A Typology of Four Qualitatively Different Patterns of Shopping Behavior”  
Paul J. Albanese, Kent State University, USA  
Robert Jewell, Kent State University, USA  
Katie Murtha, Corbett Accel Healthcare Group, USA

What has been missing from the rich literature on compulsive buying is a theoretical framework that differentiates between qualitatively different patterns of shopping behavior. Without a substantive theoretical foundation it has been difficult to differentiate true compulsive buying from other problematical patterns of shopping behavior that appear similar from the descriptive or observable aspects of the buying behavior when considered in isolation. This article contributes a theoretical typology of four qualitatively different patterns of shopping behavior based on the Personality Continuum (Albanese 2002, 2006). The Personality Continuum is an integrative framework for the interdisciplinary study of consumer behavior (Albanese 2002, 2006). The Personality Continuum is divided into four qualitatively different levels of personality development that are hierarchically arranged in descending order from highest to lowest level: normal, neurotic, primitive, and psychotic (Albanese 2002). With respect to shopping behavior, the qualitatively different patterns based on the Personality Continuum are the normal consumer, neurotic shopper, compulsive buyer, and psychotic spender. Normal Consumers spend less than they earn, save for future purchases they cannot afford in the present, and
prudently plan consumption activities. Neurotic Shoppers spend an excessive amount of time shopping for just the right purchase, exhausting anyone who shops with them, often not buying anything, and when a purchase is made, it is sometimes returned. They typically spend money they have and do not seriously impair family and social relationships. Compulsive Buyers are driven to spend money they do not have on things they do not need in repetitive buying binges, and then hide their purchases away, often in the original packaging with the price tags left on. The shopping behavior impairs family, social and professional relationships, and results in serious financial problems. Psychotic Spenders engage in episodic spectacular spending sprees that result in serious financial and legal problems that severely impair family, social, and professional relationships, and sometimes result in hospitalization or incarceration.

The purpose of imposing the Personality Continuum onto compulsive shopping is to allow critical evaluation of shopping categories uncovered via the various existing compulsive buying scales. Without a theoretical framework as a foundation, there is no way to evaluate the output of the various scales in other than psychometric terms. The results are presented for five instruments designed to measure compulsive shopping behavior: 1. Compulsive Buying: Original Measurement Scale developed by Valence, d’Astous, and Fortier (1988) consists of thirteen items rated on a five-point Likert scale; 2. Clinical Screener for Compulsive Buying developed by Faber and O’Guinn (1992) consists of seven items rated on a five-point Likert scale; 3. Edwards (1992, 1993) Compulsive Buying Scale consists of 13 items rated on a five-point Likert scale; 4. Questionnaire about Buying Behavior developed by Lejoyeux and Ades (1994) consists of 19 dichotomous items; 5. The Yale-Brown Obsessive-Compulsive Scale—Shopping Version developed by Monahan, Black, and Gabel (1996) consists of ten items rated from 0 to 4. The five measurement instruments were administered to a convenience sample of 128 college students (68% female; 95% between the ages of 19-23) at a large Midwestern university using an online survey to explore to what extent the four qualitatively different patterns of shopping behavior would emerge in the two-stage cluster analysis. The results demonstrated that only the Questionnaire about Buying Behavior (Lejoyeux et al., 1994, 1996) yielded three different groups that represent the normal consumer (41 subjects or 33.6%), neurotic shopper (36 subjects or 29.5%), and compulsive buyer (36 subjects or 29.5%). No psychotic consumer (41 subjects or 33.6%), neurotic shopper (45 subjects or 36.9%), and compulsive buyer (36 subjects or 29.5%). No psychotic shopper (45 subjects or 36.9%), and compulsive buyer (36 subjects or 29.5%). No psychotic shopper (45 subjects or 36.9%), and compulsive buyer (36 subjects or 29.5%). No psychotic shopper (45 subjects or 36.9%), and compulsive buyer (36 subjects or 29.5%).

The failure to differentiate between qualitatively different patterns of shopping behavior is problematic because the shopping behavior of neurotic shoppers and psychotic spenders are lumped together with true compulsive buyers. This makes understanding etiology and motivation for compulsive buying behavior difficult. While the prevalence of psychotic shoppers may be relatively small quantitatively, it is important to understand this level of personality development to delimit the lower boundary of true compulsive buying behavior. The challenge now is the refinement of the measurement of the four qualitatively different patterns of shopping behavior by combining items from the existing instruments, modifying existing items, and adding new items to reflect the full typology of shopping behavior.

REFERENCES

