Ambivalence in Consumption: the Case of Anticipatory Emotions

Colleen Bee, Oregon State University, USA
Robert Madrigal, University of Oregon, USA

The current research uses cognitive appraisal theory to investigate the effect of information congruency on emotional responses, specifically anticipatory emotions. A measure of objective emotional ambivalence was created and related to subjective ambivalence, which was found to mediate the relationship between objective ambivalence and confidence. We also consider the dynamic nature of consumption and examine the effect of information congruency at two different points in the consumption process. Congruency and timing of information presentation were found to influence emotional ambivalence and confidence. Information congruency has differential effects across the purchase-consumption experience.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Emotion plays an important role in marketing, particularly in understanding consumer behavior. In fact, it may be difficult to identify a purchase situation where multiple emotional elements are not present. This research examines factors that affect emotional ambivalence in the consumption experience. Appraisal theory is used as a theoretical foundation in the current research. Cognitive appraisal theorists believe that emotions are elicited from an appraisal of a situation or event and it is not the specific event that produces the emotion, but the appraisal of the event (Roseman and Smith 2001; Smith and Ellsworth 1985). Key appraisals considered in this research are congruence, which determines valence based on goal desirability, and outcome probability, which identifies the specific emotion within a congruence appraisal. Two categories of emotions studied in this research are anticipatory emotions (optimism and worry) and outcome-based emotions (joy and anger). In the only research that explicitly examines anticipatory emotions, Baumgartner, Pieters, and Bagozzi (2008) differentiated between anticipatory and anticipated emotions and related both to behavioral intentions. However, optimism and worry have not been explicitly examined in marketing and consumer behavior research, yet these emotions seem particularly relevant in purchase and consumption decisions as many consumption situations involve elements of uncertainty and differing levels of desirability.

The purpose of study 1 is to consider information congruency appraisals and examine the relevance of anticipatory emotions in consumption. The first hypothesis proposes that conflicting information (i.e., congruent and incongruent) will lead to higher levels of emotional ambivalence. Second, we propose that the anticipatory emotions of optimism and worry will be experienced more strongly than the outcome-based emotions of joy and anger emotions, as discrete emotions and as emotional ambivalence. Finally, we expect that optimism-worry objective ambivalence will be a better predictor of subjective ambivalence than discrete emotions or joy-anger objective ambivalence.

The results in study 1 indicate that information congruency significantly affects the valence of emotions and that conflicting information significantly increases the experience of emotional ambivalence. Anticipatory emotions were experienced more strongly than outcome-based emotions. Although multiple emotions are experienced, the anticipatory set of mixed emotions was a better predictor of subjective ambivalence.

In study 2, we consider how congruency appraisals affect ambivalence and confidence at different points in time in the consumption process. Additionally, the mediating role of subjective ambivalence is considered. Although the experience of conflict is similar among dissonance, attitude ambivalence, and emotional ambivalence, a key differentiating factor is that dissonance typically occurs after a commitment has been made, whereas emotional ambivalence can occur prior to making a commitment or decision (van Harreveld et al., 2009). In fact, van Harreveld et al. propose that level of commitment to an available alternative is the primary distinction between ambivalence and dissonance. In this case, feelings of conflict and discomfort related to ambivalence will be most pronounced when a choice needs to be made. When a situation does not involve choice, there is not as much reason for ambivalence and subsequent discomfort. Ambivalence should therefore be enhanced with the prospect of a decision.

The consumption process is dynamic and changing, where consumers receive multiple pieces of information at different stages of the process. As a result, not only is it expected that ambivalence will be affected by the information presented but also by the timing of this information. van Harreveld et al. (2009) suggest that when people are forced to make a discrete choice that they anticipate possible negative and positive outcomes associated with each alternative. This indicates that perhaps a choice situation can lead to modest levels of ambivalence even in the absence of conflicting information. Ambivalence and confidence levels are expected to fluctuate based on the information presented and the timing of this information.

In the second study, information congruency and time of information were found to interact in their influence on ambivalence and confidence. Specifically, prior to a favorable purchase, ambivalence is higher than prior to consumption as consumers anticipate positives and negatives. In contrast, ambivalence is lessened prior to an undesirable purchase when compared to consumption as there are few positives. With conflicting information it is difficult to integrate contradictory evaluations and ambivalence persists throughout a consumption experience. Confidence was found to have an inverse relationship with ambivalence. Finally, the discomfort that consumers feel in the form of subjective ambivalence mediates the effect of optimism-worry emotional ambivalence on confidence.

Optimism and worry are two categories of emotion likely to be elicited during purchase and consumption experiences. However, these two emotions have not been explicitly examined in previous consumer behavior research. In the current research, optimism and worry are future-directed emotions that were found to be important in influencing feelings of ambivalence, discomfort and confidence in decision making. Additionally, extending appraisal theory, consumers presented with conflicting information experienced more emotional ambivalence than those presented with consistent information. Consumption is dynamic and, in addition to information congruency, the stage of the purchase process is important in determining the level of ambivalence experienced. Finally, the experience of emotional ambivalence is associated with feelings of conflict and uncertainty. These feelings of conflict were found to mediate the effect of emotional ambivalence on confidence.

REFERENCES


