

Exploring the Role of Attitudinal vs. Situational Ambivalence in Consumer Choice

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there is an upsurge of interest in the concept of ambivalence in consumer research (Bee and Madrigal 2013; Cornil et al. 2014; Cowley and Czellar 2012; DeMarree et al. 2014; Hong and Lee 2010; Hormes and Rozin 2011; Penz and Hogg 2011; Sharma et al. 2015; Ursavas and Hesapci-Sanaktekin 2013). Ambivalence reflects the co-existence of positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object (Nowlis, Kahn, and Dhar 2002). However, empirical findings about its impact are mixed (Van Harreveld, Nohlen, and Schneider 2015); with some studies showing ambivalent attitudes as weak and less predictive of behavior (Conner et al. 2003) and less resistant to persuasion (Armitage and Conner 2000); whereas others find them to be more predictive of behavioral intentions (Jonas, Diehl, and Broemer 1997). Prior research also does not empirically examine the relationships among ambivalence, indifference and dissonance despite their similarities and differences with each other. We address these gaps with a conceptual framework based on an extensive review of consumer ambivalence literature and two experimental studies that explore the role of consumer ambivalence in consumer choice. We also discuss the conceptual contribution of our findings as well as their managerial implications for marketers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Consumer Ambivalence

Otnes et al. (1997, p. 82-83) introduce consumer ambivalence as “*the simultaneous or sequential experience of multiple emotional states, as a result of the interaction between internal factors and external objects, people, institutions, and/or cultural phenomena in market-oriented contexts, that can have direct and/or indirect ramifications on prepurchase, purchase or postpurchase attitudes and behavior*”. Otnes et al. (1997) also distinguish different types of consumer ambivalence based on their origins, namely psychological, sociological and cultural ambivalence. Psychological ambivalence is defined as the simultaneous or sequential experience of mixed emotions and it focuses on the internal feelings toward an object or person. In contrast, sociological ambivalence focuses on how external factors such as the social structure (e.g., social norms and social roles) may trigger mixed feelings. Finally, cultural ambivalence relates with the conflicting cultural values held by members of society.

Prior research exploring the attitude-behavior link conceptualizes attitude as a unidimensional, univalent, bipolar construct; wherein individuals are expected to have a neutral, positive, or negative attitude toward any object or behavior (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Kraus 1995). People are likely to engage in behaviors toward which they have favorable attitudes and avoid those toward which they have negative attitudes. In other words, this view assumes positive attitudes to be the exact opposite of negative attitudes. However, others have argued that individuals may simultaneously hold both negative and positive attitudes that may not correlate with one another (e.g., Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997); and this notion has been conceptualized as attitudinal ambivalence (Priester and Petty 1996; Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995) or consumer ambivalence (Otnes et al. 1997). According to Thompson et al. (1995), ambivalence may originate from different types of conflicts, including cognitive (‘mixed beliefs’), affective (‘mixed feelings’), and cognitive-affective (‘incongruent beliefs and feelings’) conflict.

Attitudinal vs. Situational Ambivalence

Ambivalent attitudes are generally weaker and less predictive of behavior (Conner et al. 2003) and less resistant to persuasion (Armitage and Conner 2000). Thus, ambivalent attitudes are less stable over time, less predictive of behavior, more pliable, and have less impact on information processing, compared to univalent attitudes. However, others have distinguished between potential (attitudinal) versus felt (situational) ambivalence to show that attitudinal ambivalence may be related with mere cognitive inconsistency whereas felt ambivalence is the one that would relate with actual experience of discomfort (Newby-Clark, McGregor, and Zanna 2002). Based on these, we argue that attitudinal ambivalence may be more likely to lead to indifference whereas situational ambivalence is more likely to lead to dissonance. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1: Attitudinal (Situational) consumer ambivalence has a stronger positive effect on consumer indifference (dissonance).

Coping with Dissonance vs. Indifference

Researchers have also explored the ways consumers cope with ambivalence. For example, Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, and Yael (2009) use their model of ambivalence-induced discomfort (MAID) to show that ambivalence is experienced as being particularly unpleasant when the ambivalent attitude holder is confronted with the necessity to make a choice concerning the ambivalent attitude object; then, incongruent evaluative components of the attitude become accessible, and feelings of uncertainty about the potential outcomes arise, which may involve the anticipation of aversive emotions. People deal with such unpleasant experience or discomfort induced by ambivalence using emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies. Based on this discussion, we argue that the consumer dissonance induced by situational ambivalence is likely to lead to greater uncertainty about the target object of the task on hand compared to the indifference induced by the attitudinal ambivalence. This in turn would lead to a significant difference in the effects of dissonance and indifference on the evaluation of the task by the consumers. Accordingly, we hypothesize as follows:

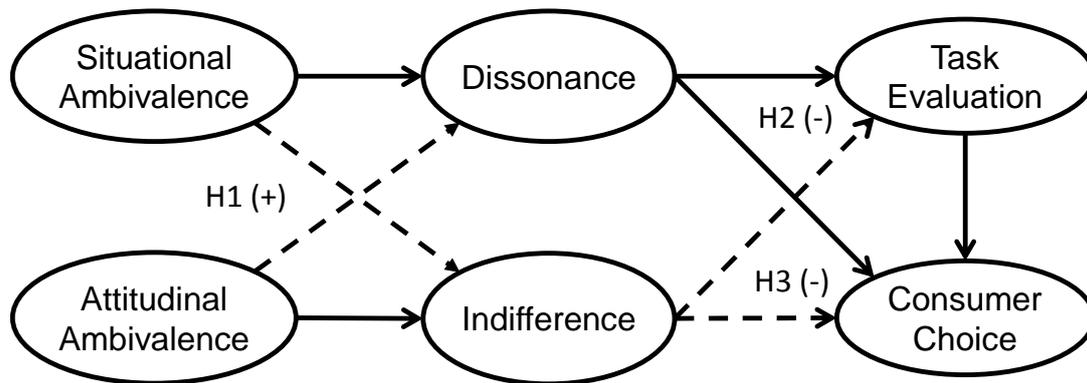
H2: Consumer dissonance has a stronger negative effect on task evaluation than consumer indifference.

Consumer Choice - Hedonic vs. Utilitarian

Consumers choose among different products and services based on two types of motivations; affective (hedonic) gratification from the sensory attributes, and cognitive (utilitarian) evaluation of functional attributes (Batra and Ahtola 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Subsequent studies show that consumer choice between hedonic and utilitarian goods is influenced by the nature of the decision task (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Specifically, the relative salience of hedonic dimensions is greater when consumers decide which of several items to give up (forfeiture choices) than when they decide which item to acquire (acquisition choices). In this context, we combine the above findings with the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989) to argue that consumer indifference resulting from attitudinal ambivalence would lead to a more heuristic style of processing and result in a greater preference for hedonic (vs. utilitarian) choice. In contrast, consumer dissonance resulting from situational ambivalence would decrease the confidence in the attitudes toward behaviors involving the target object and leads to greater systematic processing of the relevant information, which in turn would lead to a greater preference for the utilitarian (vs. hedonic) choice. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Consumer indifference (dissonance) has a stronger positive effect on preference for the hedonic (utilitarian) choice.

Figure 1 – Conceptual Model and Hypotheses



METHODOLOGY

We used two lab-experiment based studies (n=120 each) to test the above hypotheses. In both studies, we manipulated situational ambivalence and consumer choice (hedonic vs. utilitarian), using imaginary scenarios related to the choice of an automobile in first study and the choice of a group member in second study. Specifically, we first measured the attitudinal ambivalence of the participants and then described the two options using a mix of hedonic and utilitarian attributes. After this we asked the participants to choose one of the options. Finally, we recorded demographics information, such as age, gender, occupation and income.

We analyzed the data from both our studies and found support for all the three hypotheses. Specifically, attitudinal (vs. situational) ambivalence has a significantly stronger positive effect on indifference ($\Delta\beta = .26, p < .001$ and $.37, p < .001$), situational (vs. attitudinal) ambivalence has a significant stronger positive effect on dissonance ($\Delta\beta = .32, p < .001$ and $.27, p < .001$). Similarly, dissonance has a significantly stronger negative effect on task evaluation ($\Delta\beta = -.38, p < .001$ and $-.29, p < .001$). Finally, indifference has a stronger positive effect on the preference for hedonic choice ($\Delta\beta = .21, p < .001$ and $.23, p < .001$) whereas dissonance has a stronger effect on the preference for utilitarian choice ($\Delta\beta = .31, p < .001$ and $.34, p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

Overall, our findings show that attitudinal and situational ambivalence do vary in their effects on consumer choice between hedonic and utilitarian options. We also show that consumer dissonance and indifference play important roles in this process. These findings extend current research on consumer ambivalence as well as on consumer choice by distinguishing between the roles of the two types of ambivalence and the roles of consumer dissonance and indifference on the choice between hedonic and utilitarian options. Besides the above conceptual contributions, our findings also have important managerial implications for marketers of hedonic versus utilitarian products and services. For example, marketers of hedonic products and services should try to reduce the level of indifference by providing more hedonic cues in the shopping or the service environment, such as attractive posters and displays, and attractive looking well-dressed sales or service employees. In contrast, marketers of utilitarian products and services could reduce the dissonance and situational

ambivalence by providing more utilitarian cues such as price labels, product information booklets, and serious looking, knowledgeable employees.

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