

UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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Ciclo XXX

S.S.D: SECS-P/08 – ECONOMIA E GESTIONE DELLE IMPRESE

Consumer Ambivalence in Shopping Experience:
New Perspectives and Opportunities

Tesi di Dottorato di Stefano Prestini

Matricola: 4411451

ANNO ACCADEMICO 2016-2017



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Summary

Consumers generally choose to buy products or experiences that generate positive emotions; these emotions are felt thanks to the functional or hedonic benefits of the purchased product or service. People look for positive emotions and avoid negative ones (Higgins, 1997). This is a natural and logic thinking. *Why should I look for experiences that include both positive and negative emotions?* At first glance, I thought there were no reasonable motives. Then, one day, I was taking a walk in Milan doing some shopping, I was in Quadrilateral of Fashion area and I stopped in front of a boutique window, admiring some beautiful shoes. I really liked them, I desired to enter in the boutique and try them. *Wow, it's an elegant boutique and this brand is so exclusive!* I hesitated. *Am I well-dressed today? Will luxury sales assistants screen me while and during my shopping trip?* Boutique's doors were opened by the doormen who greeted me. I entered, I looked around, I asked to the sales assistants the pair of (expensive) shoes I saw in the window, I bought them and I left the boutique. I had my luxury shopping experience. *Yes, that experience was so exciting! Did I feel positive emotions? Yes and no: I felt mixed emotions. I felt self-esteem and pleasure but I also felt awe and guilt too.*

This personal shopping experience made me ask myself if people voluntarily choose to experience particular situations in which they know that they are not going to feel only positive emotions. I wondered which positive and negative emotions emerge in these types of consumption experiences. How do these opposite valenced emotions co-occur? Which impact do they have on consumer outcomes? Are companies aware of this emotive ambivalence? Furthermore these questions represent an issue that other researchers and literature are investigating on, called *consumer ambivalence* by Otnes et al. (1997) in their seminal article on this topic. My thesis is composed by three different papers and consumer ambivalence represents the common theme of my whole research. Indeed, the beginning of this research thesis starts with the identification and theoretical definition of this mixed emotional state. Otnes et al. (1997) define 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"* (pp. 82-83). Coherently with the logic thinking that consumers look for positive emotions and avoid negative ones, previous literature states that consumer ambivalence

reduces important consumer outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty (Olsen, Wilcox, & Olsson, 2005).

However, some previous literature shows that there are situations in which the presence of ambivalent emotions is part of the experience itself, in a holistic approach. By canalizing emotions in real time, in laboratory experiments, Andrade and Cohen (2007) found that, when consumers view an horror movie, they can experience happiness and fear simultaneously. Similarly another example of consumer ambivalence was found in people watching *Life is Beautiful*; the students who took part in that experiment experienced both sadness and happiness at the same time (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001). Indeed, co-occurrence of opposite valence emotions is present also in extreme sports, where fear and risk are converted in positive emotion. In this case, without fear, no positive feelings were felt by these sportsmen (Allman, Mittelstaedt, Martin, & Goldenberg, 2009). However, literature on consumer ambivalence seems underrepresented in several relevant industries and in the relative shopper experiences whose characteristics could elicit this particular emotional state and consequent impact on final consumer outcomes. For this reason, I chose to investigate consumer ambivalence in two important contexts: luxury shopping experiences, pure expression of an hedonic setting, and ethical food purchasing process. In both contexts consumer ambivalence were previously investigated, sometimes named as mixed emotions, but quite superficially. In fact main research findings in hedonic (Ramanathan, & Williams, 2007) and ethical settings (Hassan et al., 2013) evidence that consumer ambivalence has just a negative impact on consumer outcomes (Olsen, Wilcox, & Olsson, 2005). I chose both settings because there are characteristics that ease the emergence of contextual negative and positive emotions, although the value of both markets is increasing positively. This fact invites me to better explore consumer ambivalence in these two settings. All the more reason, there is a lot of attention on these industries from different stakeholders. Global luxury industry turnover in 2016 is still increasing (+4% than 2015) and the total market value is 1.081 billion of euros (Altagamma-Bain 2016), although the current is a period of economic crisis. Ethical consumer market displays a similar trend (although data are not global but focused on UK market): 38 billions £ in 2015. Ethical sales grew up to 8,5% with respect to the previous year, making 2015 the thirteenth year of consecutive growth (UK Ethical Consumer Markets Report, 2016). Even if numbers show that these industries have success in global and national markets, literature manifest how relative shopping experiences have intrinsic components that facilitate not just positive emotions, but also negative ones.

Indeed, literature identifies particular luxury distinctive characteristics such as exclusivity, unicity, scarcity, premium price, excellence in quality and aesthetic, conspicuousness and status symbol (Allèrès, 1995; Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008; Kapferer, 1998; Mortelmans, 2005; Nueno, 1998; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) that are fully embodied in the luxury boutiques. All these characteristics can potentially generate both positive and negative emotions to the shopper in this hedonic setting. For example, exclusivity expresses the aspects of belonging or not belonging to a specific élite. This could generate both pleasure of being included and anxiety to be rejected. Moreover luxury shoppers feel sense of awe because luxury retail environment is more producer rather than consumer oriented (Dion & Arnould, 2011). According to that, luxury brand boutique employs an auratic power which achieves the sacralization of the luxury brand (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013). By choosing luxury shopping experience as setting, in the first paper I try to answer to the following research questions: *Which consumer ambivalences do emerge from hedonic shopping experiences? How do negative emotions co-occur with positive ones in hedonic retail experiences? Which types of outcome do the found consumer ambivalences generate in pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase retail shopping experience?* I adopted a qualitative multimethod approach, according to an interpretative epistemology. To explore consumer ambivalence, I investigated the phenomenon both inside and outside the boutiques through Shopping With Consumers and Zaltman Metaphor – Elicitation Technique methods. The first combined in-depth interview and participated observation in luxury boutique and the second entailed the use of images and metaphor to better elicit luxury shopper emotions. I interviewed twelve luxury shoppers, with different shopping frequency, generating almost 19 hours of in-depth interviews and 8,5 hours of participated observations, that are 268 pages of transcription considering both interviews and field notes. Findings reveal that three types of consumer ambivalence emerge in the hedonic setting of luxury shopping experience: Self-esteem & Awe; Comfort & Uncertainty and Pleasure & Guilt Ridden. For each consumer ambivalence I elicited the corresponding propositions. Proposition 1 (Self-esteem & Awe): *in the compresence of awe and self-esteem, the first activates the other when related to the sense of exclusivity in luxury shopping experience. It entails that shopper plans a sure purchase and a deep preparation for the luxury shopping trip.* Proposition 2 (Comfort & Uncertainty): *in the compresence of uncertainty and comfort, the two emotions are both present pre and during the shopping experience for High Frequency Shopper (HFS). They are particularly related to the high expectations on a specific luxury brand's shopping experience. It entails that HFS shoppers plan the visit informing the boutique and creating special relationship with some sales assistant.*

Proposition 3 (Pleasure & Guilt Ridden): *In the compresence of guilt-ridden and pleasure, the first reinforces the other when related to the personal gratification in luxury (hedonic) shopping experience. It entails that shoppers associate that purchase to special events or particular life moments. This type of consumer ambivalence is amplified in LFS and MFS.*

These insights offer a new perspective on the relationship between concurrent positive and negative emotions and the consequent consumer outcomes. In some contexts, hedonic in particular, negative feelings can activate or reinforce positive emotions as it happened in all the three consumer ambivalence cases during the luxury shopping experience. Concretely, retail managers could benefit from this insights maintaining or stressing the sense of exclusivity in luxury shopper experience, contributing to generate consumer ambivalence. This strategy raises the shopper's awe together with the desire and aspiration for the luxury brand, coherently to Ward and Dahl (2014). This leads the shoppers to buy something and consequently increase their feeling of self-esteem.

In the second paper, the study is focused on consumer ambivalence in luxury personal selling. In fact, given the importance that sales assistants has in the interaction with shoppers, my aim was to deeply explore consumer ambivalence in this specific area of luxury shopping experience. Personal selling is an interaction grounded on the selling situation as well as the specific capabilities and behaviors of the salesperson, which affect the relationship with the final customer (Kidwell, McFarland, & Avila, 2007; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz, Sujana, & Sujana, 1986). Literature states that consumer ambivalence can emerge from the interplay between buyer and seller. Sales assistants have been stereotyped as manipulative, untrustworthy, and out for their own personal gain (Wood, Boles, & Babin, 2008). Consequently, consumers have become increasingly savvy and skeptical about persuasive attempts by salespeople (DeCarlo, Laczniak, and Leigh 2013), generating negative emotions. However, despite these negative elements, salespeople still provide a wealth of product and services knowledge (DeCarlo, 2005), creating positive emotions in consumer. But literature only analyses consumer ambivalence on the consumer prospective. So, my research goals are to explore if sales assistants are aware about the consumer ambivalence they contribute to generate in shoppers, if they recognize this particular emotional state in different shoppers in the personal selling interaction and how they react. Luxury shopping experience is maintained as setting of this second study. In fact, luxury boutique represent an ideal field where identify consumer ambivalence in personal selling. According to Ward et al. (2014) shoppers often cope with negative feelings of rejection (or perceived rejection) caused by sales assistants, trying to be accepted by that elite world and elevate their social status. To investigate the

phenomenon a qualitative method was adopted. Two focus group with 12 luxury sales assistants were recorded and lasted respectively 155 mins and 160 mins. These focus allowed participants to inspire one another and provide insightful, intriguing live discussions of the topic (Coolican, 2014). ZMET technique was used because particularly suitable in identifying the deeper, abstract, and therefore more unconscious and elusive aspects such as feeling and emotion in consumption contexts and purchase experiences (Zaltman, 1997). Findings manifest that sales ambassadors recognize consumer ambivalence in shoppers during their luxury shopping and personal selling experience. Indeed, consumer ambivalence is part of the luxury personal selling DNA. It's an "Odi et amo" affair: a love story in which positive and negative emotions coexist. Luxury sales assistants are aware that often shoppers cannot and must not be pleased for each request. Moreover, sales assistants identified a typology of four luxury shoppers that experience diverse consumer ambivalences, which they contribute to generate through personal selling interaction: 1) the top expert customer, 2) the top confident customer, 3) the exhibitionist and 4) the fashionista. These categories are found thanks the crossing of two variables. First variable is represented by shopper conspicuousness and need of belonging to the luxury élite. The second variable emerges from the primary interest of luxury shoppers: focus on the product or focus on the relation. According to the findings, the study suggests that retail managers should make salient to all sales assistants that consumer ambivalence is an unavoidable emotional state experienced by luxury shoppers in the luxury personal selling context. They should select and train contact personnel with particular levels of sensitivity in order to recognize consumer ambivalence in different shoppers and appropriately react to this. Moreover, shoppers' behavior and emotional state can be better managed through a coherent holistic strategy that contemplates the shopper omnichannel approach: offline and online, within company's channels (company web site and sales assistant CRM) and extra-company point of contact (forum, blog, post work sales assistants' relationships).

In the third paper, I switched to the ethical context, previously mentioned, and explored consumer ambivalence in ethical packaged food industry. In fact, in this setting, emotions have a pivotal role in the purchasing process and this field has characteristics that facilitate the elicitation of positive and negative emotions. For example, Gregory-Smith et al.'s (2013) and Antonietti et al. (2014) argue that emotions, such as pride, contentment, regret, embarrassment and guilt determine discrete influence on consumers' ethical intentions and choices. Moreover, consumer ambivalence can be easily originated in a context of trade-off between a higher functional performance product and a sustainable one. This represents a

situation in which the shopper is faced with a difficult choice (Luchs & Kumar, 2017) and often entails a cognitive dissonance (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013). In this case, the positive emotion (e.g. Self-esteem) of buying the ethical product would be experienced together with the negative emotion related to buying a lower performance product (e.g. Distress). My goal for this third study is to answer to the following research questions: *Which types of consumer ambivalence emerge in the intention-behavior process? In which phases of the intention-behavior process does consumer ambivalence intervenes more?* Through two focus group with 13 ethical minded consumers, I gather data transcribing all discoursed generated by group dynamics about ethical shopping experience and related emotions. The two focus groups lasted in total 3 hours, resulting in 60 pages of transcribed discourses. Participants were invited to share their experiences about the phases and the steps of their personal intention-behavior process in the ethical purchase different projective techniques were used to elicit their emotions, feelings and thoughts. Roleplay was used, an expressive technique in which respondents incorporate some stimulus into a novel production (Lannon & Cooper, 1983). Shoppers simulated the decisional process experience through the evaluations of 11 ethical packaged food products. At the end, the moderator drawn the ethical intention-behavior process that they adopted and discussed it with the group in order to confirm and summarize the choice process, through the lens of consumer ambivalence. Main results reveal that consumer ambivalence is present along all the ethical choice process from Intention to Behavior and beyond: an integration of Carrington et al.'s (2010) model is proposed. Consumer ambivalence is felt also in post-purchase, consumption and post-consumption phases, influencing initial intentions to buy ethical products. Consumer ambivalence represents an inevitable part of an ethical shopping experience and is mainly expressed through three types of mixed emotion combinations: 1. Self-esteem & Skepticism; 2. Pride & Sense of Sacrifice and 3. Sense of Justice & Regret. Each consumer ambivalence leads to specific shopper reactions. For the first combination shopper has the desire to reduce skepticism caused by negative past experiences and implement vindictive reaction toward "fake" ethical companies. The second combination shows that Sense of Sacrifice coactives and reinforce pride in the shopper emotional state. The third consumer ambivalence manifests that Regret (deprivation, no taste gratification) coactives Sense of Justice. However this last combination does not work with pure indulgent food. As main managerial implication I observe that often ethical product advertising tends to stress only positive emotions trying to hide negative ones. Counterintuitively, company communication strategy should evidence

how consumers can feel really proud to buy ethical food, stressing the sacrifice they experience spending more money for the benefits of the purchased ethical products.

Through all these three studies, I deeply explored consumer ambivalence in different aspects and settings, understanding its role and its impact on shopper behavior and companies reactions. The main contribution of this whole research thesis, both theoretical and empirical, is that, in specific contexts, consumer ambivalence should be recognized in its different archetypes. It should be not considered just as something to avoid, as previous literature state, but something to aim for and leverage on in order to adopt the best retail strategies in the points of sales, according to different shoppers and relative consumer ambivalences.

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