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Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jretconser

Shopping in discount stores: The role of price-related attributions, emotions and value perception

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 25 May 2013

Keywords:

Attribution
Discount stores
Emotion
Price image
Retailing

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the impact of price-related attributions, emotions and value perception on the intention to shop at grocery discounters in an integrated framework. Moderating effects of price consciousness are also analyzed. The results show that the proposed model explains almost three quarters of intentions to shop in discount stores. Value perception has the strongest total effect, which is partly mediated by enjoyment, shame and guilt. Attributions influence the shopping intention indirectly via value perception and emotions. The inferior quality attribution has the strongest total effect, followed by the efficiency of the business model attribution. The unfairness to stakeholders and the tricks in price communication attribution mostly influence the shopping intention for less price-conscious customers.

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1. Introduction

Discount retailers have received increased attention in recent years. Grocery discounters especially hold considerable market shares in many European countries. They usually offer lower prices than other store formats (e.g. super- and hypermarkets), while the quality of products (mostly private labels) is often comparable to national brands. In Germany, for example, grocery discounters hold a share of more than 40 percent in universal food retailing, compared to 29.7 percent in 1997 (Metro Group, 2007). Discount grocery shopping is also playing a growing role in the US. Discounters such as Aldi claim to offer prices which are 40 to 50 percent lower compared to most supermarket chains and 16 to 24 percent lower compared to the well-known, big discount department stores (Brown and Bury, 2008). Currently, Aldi operates over 1100 stores in the US, serving more than 20 million customers every month (Tron, 2011).

Reflecting on these observations, developing a deeper understanding of why customers shop in discount stores and why they refuse to do so is extremely important to discount retailers and their competitors. Discount retailers can continue their growth strategies if they sell more to their existing target group of extremely price-conscious customers or if they are able to attract broader customer segments from all social classes and income

levels. The latter also include less price-oriented people who may have concerns about the causes of low prices in discount stores. However, traditional retailers should also try to understand why their customers buy at least some of their products in discount stores and which arguments can prevent them from doing so.

As the understanding of the discounter phenomenon is very important, researchers mostly discuss the success of grocery discounters from a strategic perspective, including store format competition and positioning issues (e.g. Colla, 2003; Deleersynder et al., 2007; Denstadli et al., 2005; González-Benito et al., 2005; Morschett et al., 2006; Rondán Cataluña et al., 2005; Wood and Pierson, 2006). A few behavioral studies focus on motivations for discount shopping (Schmitz, 2009) or the relationship between shopping value, satisfaction and loyalty in discount department stores (Carpenter, 2008; Carpenter and Moore, 2009). However, previous studies do not analyze the psychological impact of the low price positioning of retailers in general and discount stores in particular. Price image research shows that value perception is a central variable in explaining intentions to shop in discount stores, but value still explains only a part of the variance in shopping intentions (Zielke, 2010). The present paper aims to extend this basic relationship by adding price-related attributions and emotions and analyzing them in an integrated model.

The relationship between pricing and emotions is a relatively understudied research field. The few existing studies show that emotions play an important role in price-related contexts (O'Neill and Lambert, 2001) and that they can mediate the impact of price perceptions and expectations on shopping intentions (Peine et al.,

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2009; Tsiros and Hardesty, 2010; Zielke, 2011). However, these studies were not conducted in discount settings in particular. Low prices and inferences drawn from them can influence different customer goals, such as getting a good deal, social status and social responsibility. Building on cognitive theories of emotions (e.g. Lazarus, 1966; Roseman et al., 1990), the achievement of these goals results in specific emotions, such as enjoyment, shame or guilt, which should therefore play a major role in understanding discount shopping. Considering these positive and negative emotions is important, as it makes a difference if people enjoy the low prices in discount stores or if they feel ashamed or guilty because they think (for example) that they are accepting a violation of social responsibility goals by the retailer for the sake of paying lower prices.

Attributions are causes customers ascribe to observed phenomena (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973), which can influence cognitions and emotions (Kelley and Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1985, 1986). Hence, analyzing attributions to low prices in discount stores may help to understand differences in value perception and price-related emotions. Accordingly, a few studies have shown that attributions influence cognitive or emotional reactions to discounts or price promotions (e.g. Burton et al., 1994; Lichtenstein et al., 1989; Xia et al., 2010). However, this research has focused on the impact of general attributional dimensions, while the role of specific attributions (causes) is more interesting, especially from a managerial perspective. This paper sheds light on four possible causes for low prices in discount stores: an inferior product quality, the exploitation of suppliers and employees, and tricks in price communication (negative causes), but also the efficiency of the business model (positive cause).

Thus, this paper closes a research gap by suggesting specific attributions to low prices and analyzing relationships between these price-related attributions, emotions and value perception, and their impact on shopping intention. Previous studies have not analyzed these relationships in an integrated model in a discount context. While the integration of emotions should increase the explained variance in shopping intention, the integration of attributions contributes towards understanding why customers differ in their perceptions and resulting emotions. Analyzing these variables in an integrated framework helps to identify the most important drivers of shopping intention which retailers should influence with priority. As customers differ in their response to prices (Lichtenstein et al., 1993; Völckner, 2008), moderating effects of price consciousness are also considered. Analyzing these effects is important to identify different mechanisms influencing the shopping intentions of the price-conscious core target segment and less price-conscious customers.

In the remainder of this paper, a respective theoretical framework will be developed and tested using structural equation modeling. The results confirm the central role of value perception as an antecedent of shopping intention, the mediating role of emotions and the relevance of specific attributions for understanding discount buying. The inferior quality attribution has the strongest total effect on the shopping intention, followed by the efficiency of the business model attribution. The unfairness to stakeholders and the tricks in price communication attribution mostly influence the shopping intention for less price-conscious customers.

2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

The conceptual framework assumes that price-related attributions influence value perception and emotions, which have an impact on shopping intention. In particular, the framework builds on research on price perception and price-related emotions

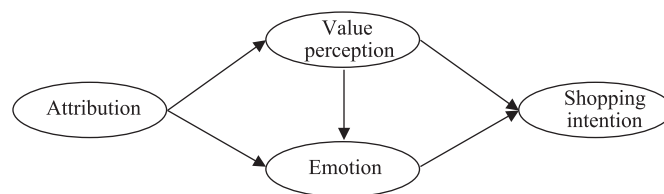


Fig. 1. General framework.

(e.g. O'Neill and Lambert, 2001; Peine et al., 2009; Tsiros and Hardesty, 2010; Zielke, 2011), assuming that emotions mediate the impact of value perception on different dependent variables, such as the shopping intention. More generally, this research stream is based on cognitive theories of emotions (e.g. Lazarus, 1966; Roseman et al., 1990). Furthermore, the framework extends the cognition–emotion–intention link by integrating attributions as antecedents of value perception and emotions. This part of the theoretical framework builds on attributional theories, investigating the impact of attributions on cognitions and emotions (e.g. Kelley and Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1985, 1986). Fig. 1 summarizes the general framework. In the following, a more specific model will be developed step by step.

2.1. Value perception

Recent price image research suggests conceptualizing price images as multidimensional constructs and analyzing the impact of price image dimensions on intentions to shop in different store formats (Zielke, 2010). Price level and value perception are central dimensions of a retailer's price image. Price level perception refers to the amount of money customers have to spend for a certain basket of goods, while value perception is defined as a trade-off between sacrifices and utilities derived from product and store attributes (e.g. Chaudhuri and Ligas, 2009; Dodds and Monroe, 1985; Zeithaml, 1988). For discount stores, price image research shows that value perception has a strong direct impact on shopping intention while price level perception only has indirect effects. Therefore, it seems reasonable to concentrate on value perception, assuming a positive effect on shopping intention. This hypothesis is surely not new, but a central relationship in the proposed framework.

H1. Value perception has a positive impact on the intention to shop in discount stores.

2.2. Emotions

Value perception can influence the shopping intention directly, but also via affect and emotions (Peine et al., 2009; Zielke, 2011). In a discount context, relevant emotions are enjoyment of low prices, and shame and guilt related to discount shopping in general. These cover positive and negative price-related emotions as well and have been proved to be important in price-related contexts (Zielke, 2011).

Enjoyment is a positive emotion that results from success in achievement-related activities (Weiner, 1985, 1986). Enjoyment was selected as a general positive emotion resulting from low prices or the opportunity to get a good deal in particular. Most previous studies on price-related emotions include enjoyment (e.g. O'Neill and Lambert, 2001; Zielke, 2011) or related constructs, such as positive price affect (Peine et al., 2009), good feelings (Schindler, 1998) or hedonic store affect (Chaudhuri and Ligas, 2009; Ligas and Chaudhuri, 2012).

Shame and guilt were selected to cover the negative emotional consequences of low prices. Shame and guilt are emotions which

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