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Retail shopper confusion: Conceptualization, scale development, and consequences<sup>☆</sup>Marion Garaus <sup>\*</sup>, Udo Wagner <sup>1</sup>

Department of Marketing, University of Vienna, Oskar-Morgenstern-Platz 1, A-1090 Vienna, Austria

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## ABSTRACT

Although considerable research discusses the phenomenon of consumer confusion, extant literature lacks a validated scale to assess confusion experienced in shopping situations. The present research conceptualizes the construct retail shopper confusion and develops a scale that assesses confusion as expressed through the affective, cognitive, and conative subsystems. Five studies analyzed with multiple methods confirm the reliability and validity of the retail shopper confusion construct. Furthermore, this research provides empirical evidence that retail shopper confusion leads to avoidance behavior. The results of this study provide a new measurement instrument that explains negative consumer in-store reactions and offer several theoretical and practical implications.

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## 1. Introduction

The rising trend of online retailing and discount stores puts enormous pressure on bricks-and-mortar retailers (see Weltevreden, 2007, for a review). To compete with these changes in the retail environment, many merchants turn their attention to the physical store environment and focus on creating multi-sensory shopping experiences, entertainment, fun, and hedonic value (e.g., Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). Aware of the significant influence of ambient and design factors on consumer behavior at the point of sale (POS), many retailers use countless creative ways to get shoppers into their stores. Huge flagship stores, colors, music, artist performances, new technologies, and outsized promotional messages all increase shoppers' arousal levels at the POS and create unforgettable experiences. However, if shoppers perceive a store environment as too arousing or inappropriate, they may become confused and overloaded (Beverland, Lim, Morrison, & Terziovski, 2006; Garaus, Wagner, & Kummer, 2015).

Most studies focus on the positive aspects of arousing store environments, a surprising stance as research reveals that negative information outweighs positive information (Mizerski, 1982) and that negative emotions during shopping situations affect satisfaction more strongly than positive emotions (Babin & Darden, 1996). Even when researchers acknowledge the negative impact of too arousing stores (e.g., Kaltcheva

& Weitz, 2006), the pleasure–arousal–dominance (PAD) scale (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) represents the predominant measurement instrument to assess emotional responses (Richins, 1997). However, research claims that the PAD scale does not capture the specific experiences in consumption situations and calls for an investigation of consumers' distinct emotions that trigger different consumer reactions (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). Following this call, some researchers conceptualize and explore specific emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, helplessness; Gelbrich, 2010). Other studies explore confusion during shopping situations (Garaus et al., 2015; Mitchell, Walsh, & Yamin, 2005; Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, & Mitchell, 2007; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). However, most research conceptualizes confusion as a personality trait and measures this state through its product-related causes (e.g., perception of too many different brands). In contrast, Garaus et al. (2015) concentrate on identifying store-environmental confusion causes and their influence on shopping value. They offer initial evidence for the three-dimensional nature of the retail shopper confusion construct but lack a profound discussion of the underlying theory. They also do not offer any insights into the development of a measurement instrument used to assess confusion in retail settings. To overcome these drawbacks, the present research attempts to answer the following research question: how can retail shopper confusion be measured by capturing its affective, cognitive, and conative dimensions? In particular, this study aims to conceptualize and develop a measurement instrument for retail shopper confusion.

The conceptualization of confusion as a three-dimensional construct, the development of a scale that measures confusion in shopping situations accordingly, and the relationship between retail shopper confusion and shoppers' behavioral responses are of relevance for three primary reasons. First, the predominant conceptualization of confusion

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43 1 4277 38021; fax: +43 1 4277 838021.

E-mail addresses: marion.garaus@univie.ac.at (M. Garaus), udo.wagner@univie.ac.at (U. Wagner).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +43 1 4277 38012; fax: +43 1 4277 838012.

as a cognitive personality trait in extant literature (Walsh et al., 2007) does not allow the assessment of confusion as a state of mind by considering all relevant confusion dimensions (Mitchell et al., 2005).

Second, despite the acknowledgment that confusion negatively affects shoppers' behavior (e.g., Walsh & Mitchell, 2010), research that relates actually experienced confusion during shopping situations to negative consequences is scarce. The lack of an established measurement instrument assessing confusion as a state of mind might account for this shortcoming in the literature. Garaus et al. (2015) represent an exception by demonstrating that retail shopper confusion negatively affects shopping value. However, for both researchers and practitioners, the influence of confusion on further shopping outcomes, such as expenditures or repeat shopping intentions, is of interest as well.

Third, the increasing number of articles in both scientific journals and trade magazines indicates the relevance of confusion for scholars and practitioners. The emerging concept of confusion during shopping situations raises concerns about the generally acknowledged positive impact of an arousing store environment. Knowledge of specific behaviors associated with confusion would inform retailers about why shoppers react negatively in arousing shopping situations.

Against this background, the present research contributes to extant literature through a theoretically guided conceptualization and development of a measurement instrument of this retail shopper construct. Five studies constituting the different stages of the scale development process offer confidence in the new scale's assessment of confusion. This research contributes not only from a theoretical perspective, by incorporating psychological insights and psychological theory (i.e., the trilogy of mind) into the conceptualization of confusion, but also from a methodological point of view. In particular, the application of a projective technique in the item generation stage identifies several new items and thus underscores the relevance of considering the proposed kind of data collection. More importantly, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to employ canonical correlation analysis (CCA) to offer empirical evidence on the convergent validity of the developed scale. Finally, the article expands prior literature by demonstrating that retail shopper confusion results in avoidance behavior and thus highlights the importance of avoiding confusion during the shopping process.

## 2. Theoretical background of consumer confusion

Psychological and medical literature describes confusion as a mental state expressed by impairment of orientation and inability to act or speak coherently (see De Smet et al., 1982). Confusion experienced in shopping situations, though not of such a severe nature, impairs shoppers' behavior as well. Extant research defines confusion as "as a state of mind which affects information processing and decision making" (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999) and as a "consumer's failure to develop a correct interpretation of various facets of a product/service, during the information processing procedure" (Turnbull, Leek, & Ying, 2000). Mitchell and colleagues (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1997, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2005; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010) argue that product-related stimuli cause consumer confusion, in terms of overload (e.g., too many products), similarity (e.g., identical or related packaging), and ambiguity (e.g., misleading product information). Thus, most contemporary literature uses the term "consumer confusion" to describe product-related confusion. Researchers agree that confusion leads to undesirable consumer behavior, and for product-related confusion, such negative consequences include purchase abandonment (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999), purchase postponement (Mitchell et al., 2005), attainment of additional information (Matzler, Waiguny, & Füller, 2007), and decreased trust (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010).

Garaus et al. (2015) show that the store environment might induce confusion as well, which in turn decreases shopping value for customers. This severe consequence highlights the importance of avoiding confusion in shopping situations. However, studies that consider

confusion as a mediating construct between antecedents and consequences to provide an explanation for consumers' negative responses are scarce. The lack of a reliable and valid scale to assess the confusion potential during shopping might explain this deficiency in existing literature.

## 3. Conceptualizing retail shopper confusion

Garaus et al. (2015) are the first authors to consider the affective, cognitive, and conative components in their confusion definition. The present research follows this conceptualization but offers further theoretical evidence from various disciplines on the multi-dimensional nature of the confusion construct and on each confusion dimension. In particular, this study draws on the trilogy of mind, introduced by Hilgard (1980), which also represents the basis for attitude theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In line with this theory, affect, cognition, and conation constitute the three components of the human mind that establish mental functioning.

In psychological literature, scholars acknowledge the interplay of affect, cognition, and conation during the state of confusion by identifying confusion as an intellectual emotion (Darwin, 1965), as a feeling of not knowing associated with metacognition (Hess, 2003), as a cognitive feeling state that informs the body about its state of knowledge (Clore, 1992), and as a state of mind that signals that one is overloaded with information and uncertain about behavioral intentions (Rozin & Cohen, 2003). Thus, changes in all three subsystems (emotion, cognition, and conation) constitute the mental state retail shopper confusion. The body communicates changes in these three subsystems by feelings (Harmon-Jones, 2000; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011), defined as a "generic designation for all kinds of internal signals" that provide conscious feedback (Clore, Wyer, Dienes, Gasper, Gohm, & Isbell, 2001). The following subsections conceptualize the emotional, cognitive, and conative dimensions of retail shopper confusion in detail and refer to feelings that reflect confusion in each mental sub state.

### 3.1. Emotion

The emotional component of retail shopper confusion captures all affective feelings that accompany this state of mind, such as anger, frustration, self-reproach, irritation, or anxiety (Mitchell et al., 2005; Walsh et al., 2007). Because consumers experience confusion as unpleasant, only negative emotions occur. All emotions experienced during retail shopper confusion negatively affect (utilitarian or hedonic) shopping goal achievement (Garaus et al., 2015) but disappear as soon as the state confusion disappears as well.

### 3.2. Cognition

Cognition captures thought-related processes and mechanisms (e.g., reasoning). Confusion requires cognitive processing to some extent (Clore, 1992). Resource matching theory suggests that cognitive processing is most efficient when the required processing effort matches the available cognitive resources (Anand & Sternthal, 1989). During the state of retail shopper confusion, cognitive processing abilities are exceeded (Schweizer, Kotouc, & Wagner, 2006), making consumers feel less efficient. With little time for a thorough evaluation of all information, shoppers feel less careful during the shopping task (Zeithaml, 1988).

### 3.3. Conation

Conation represents the intentional component of the mind. Behavioral intentions differ from actual behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Regardless of the shopping goal (experience seeking or purchasing products), retail shopper confusion reflects a misinterpretation of environmental stimuli and thus has a negative effect. Shoppers experience

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