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Australasian Marketing Journal

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

The effect of salespersons' retail service quality and consumers' mood on impulse buying

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 November 2016

Revised 9 December 2016

Accepted 9 December 2016

Available online

Keywords:

Impulse buying

Purchase intentions

Store-revisit intentions

Salesperson's retail service quality

Mood

Mediation test

ABSTRACT

This study uses an experiment with 102 Singaporean working adults to examine the effects of salespersons' retail service quality (SRSQ) and consumers' mood on impulse buying (IB) and store-revisit intentions. The results show that consumers receiving good SRSQ exhibit greater IB and store-revisit intentions than do those receiving poor SRSQ, and consumers in a positive mood show greater IB than do those in a negative mood. Mood fully mediates the effect of SRSQ on IB in terms of purchase quantity and partially/complementarily mediates the effect of SRSQ on IB in terms of purchase intentions and store-revisit intentions. This research offers insights into the affective and cognitive mechanisms of IB and store-revisit intentions in a specific retail context. The findings help retailers facilitate purchase behavior and improve customer satisfaction in services. Ethical consumption policies and practices could also incorporate the IB mechanism reported in this study. Future research opportunities are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Marketers have realized that shoppers are largely making buying decisions at the store, and shoppers who talk to a salesperson and try on something are twice as likely to buy as those who do neither (Underhill, 1999). Such purchase decisions are usually made without prior intentions, and the consequential behaviors are called impulse buying (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998), which is hereafter referred to as IB.

The importance of IB can be seen from the huge sales it generates. For instance, a survey (Consumer Reports, 2009) found that 60% of women bought something on a whim in the previous year with their most recent IB averaging out to US\$108. Clothing was the most recent impulsive item (25% of respondents). A recent survey reported that three out of four Americans made impulse purchases, 10% of which exceeded US\$1000 (Merzer, 2014).

Previous studies focused on IB of goods (Agrawal and Schmidt, 2003). Although several studies discussed theoretical frameworks of IB in services (Sharma et al., 2014a, 2014b; Xiao and Nicholson, 2011) and investigated the effects of service quality factors (Agrawal and Schmidt, 2003; Hui et al., 2013; Kacen et al., 2012; Mohan et al., 2013; Peck and Childers, 2006; Pornpitakpan and Han, 2013), empirical evidence still seems insufficient to understand IB in different

service contexts. Given that services are playing an important role in economic growth worldwide, and the purchase of goods may involve services in terms of information search, sales, delivery, and maintenance, IB research in services is essential.

Occasionally involving a multi-method (Hausman, 2000) and multi-disciplinary (Xiao and Nicholson, 2011) task, IB research suggests that the antecedents of IB include variables such as the store's atmospheric conditions (Agrawal and Schmidt, 2003; Mattila and Wirtz, 2008), customers' pre-purchase affective state (Ozer and Gultekin, 2015; Sinha and Wang, 2013), the product category (Pentecost and Andrews, 2010), and individual impulsivity traits (Sharma et al., 2014a), and normative evaluation of engaging in IB (Rook and Fisher, 1995). This study contributes empirical evidence to this research area (see Amos et al., 2014 for a meta-analysis on the antecedents of IB). Using apparel-retailing contexts, it proposes that IB is subject to an atmospheric factor – salespersons' retail service quality (hereafter referred to as SRSQ). In addition, as the value co-creation process in retail services is between the salesperson and the customer, the study also investigates how the perception of SRSQ is influenced by consumers' pre-purchase mood.

Moreover, previous studies often measured mood before the manipulation of experimental stimuli (e.g., Maier et al., 2012). As mood states may be induced by consumption experience (Gardner, 1985; Mano and Oliver, 1993) and service providers' performance (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Mattila and Enz, 2002; Pugh, 2001), this research measures consumers' mood after exposure to SRSQ.

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2. Literature review

IB refers to a sudden, compelling purchasing behavior in which the rapidity of the decision process precludes thoughtful, deliberate consideration of all information and choice alternatives. Compared to planned buying behavior, IB is less deliberate and more arousing and irresistible (Rook, 1987).

IB is attributed to environmental factors (Mohan et al., 2013; Turley and Milliman, 2000) including store signs that allow consumers to touch the products (Peck and Childers, 2006), perceived crowding and employee assistance (Mattila and Wirtz, 2008), in-store travel distance (Hui et al., 2013), and SRSQ (Pornpitakpan and Han, 2013). In this research stream, IB is often ascribed to arousal.

Affect has been discussed to understand IB from a psychological perspective. Both positive affect such as pleasure and excitement (Rook and Gardner, 1993) and negative affect such as distress and anger (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998) were found to influence IB. Accordingly, IB is considered a solution for mood improvement (Atalay and Meloy, 2011) or a result of resource depletion and self-regulatory change (Verplanken and Sato, 2011; Vohs and Faber, 2007).

Besides unplanned purchases, store-revisit intentions are important consequences during and after IB. In general, purchase behavior signifies customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers tend to stay with the current provider and to repurchase the product or service in the future (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Nevertheless, because IB may also lead to regret (Spears, 2006) and reduced subjective well-being (Silvera et al., 2008), which might influence store-revisit intentions, this study examines store-revisit intentions apart from IB.

2.1. Effects of salespersons' retail service quality on impulse buying

This section explains the elements of SRSQ and reviews the regulatory focus theory and regulatory fit theory as theoretical justifications for the hypotheses about the effects of SRSQ on IB.

2.1.1. Elements of salespersons' retail service quality

Researchers have long discussed the role of salespersons and their interactions (i.e., mutual or reciprocal actions) with customers in service quality. Service employees perform several roles including marketers because they "physically embody the product and are walking billboards from a promotional standpoint" (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996, p. 304). The quality of interactions between service employees and customers has become so important that customers base a large part of their assessment of overall quality and/or satisfaction on these interactions (Bitner et al., 1990). In order to differentiate personal interactions from statistical interactions and thus preventing confusion, this study uses the term *personal interactions* whenever the sense allows.

A retail store offers a mix of products and services. The term *retail service quality* is defined as consumers' evaluations of the overall excellence of the service experience from a retail store and includes reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurances, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Grönroos (1984) viewed service as comprising expected service, delivery, and perceived service, while Baker et al. (1994) identified three dimensions: merchandise quality inferences, service quality inferences, and store image. Dabholkar et al. (1996) proposed five dimensions: physical aspects, reliability, personal interactions, problem solving, and policy. Brady and Cronin (2001) further suggested three sub-dimensions: interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality.

This study integrates the elements of personal interactions from the above models because personal interactions are often the primary stimulation consumers encounter idiosyncratically in retail services. In addition, personal interactions may occur before, during, and after the purchase. Specifically, SRSQ in this research encom-

passes various elements in personal interactions, namely, the salesperson's perceived friendliness, pleasantness, empathy, courtesy, attentiveness to customers, and willingness to help customers through the purchasing process.

2.1.2. Regulatory focus theory and regulatory fit theory

Regulatory focus theory may explain the effect of SRSQ on IB. According to this theory, different factors can motivate individuals during goal pursuit, and people self-regulate their methods and processes during their goal pursuit (Higgins et al., 2003). The regulatory focus is essentially the way in which people approach pleasure but avoid pain. Two types of regulatory focus exist: (a) a promotion focus based on hopes and accomplishments, also known as gains, and (b) a prevention focus based on safety and responsibilities, also known as non-losses. The promotion focus concentrates on aspirations to ensure against missing gains, and the prevention focus emphasizes security and safety by following the guidelines and the rules (Higgins et al., 2001). Accordingly, a goal in a promotion focus is termed a promotion goal, and a goal in a prevention focus is termed a prevention goal (Aaker and Lee, 2001, 2006). In consumer behavior contexts, a promotion goal may be making a purchase to seek pleasure, whereas a prevention goal may be avoiding a purchase to prevent the pain of expense. To explain how individuals decide to pursue a promotion or a prevention goal in a specific situation, Higgins (2000) proposed the theory of regulatory fit, that is, a person's motivation to attain a goal is enhanced when the manner (e.g., pleasant personal interactions with retail service providers) in which people pursue a goal (e.g., seeking pleasure through IB) aligns with their regulatory focus. Regulatory fit brings on the feeling of rightness about goal pursuit and encourages task engagement (Aaker and Lee, 2001, 2006; Higgins et al., 2003).

Empirical findings suggest the effect of regulatory fit on consumer behavior. For example, consumers were willing to pay over 40% more for the same product when the marketing strategy fit their regulatory focus orientation than when it did not fit (Avnet and Higgins, 2003). Regulatory fit and more-favorable brand attitudes were elicited among promotion-focus individuals by information presented at the high, abstract construal level and among prevention-focus individuals by information presented at the low, concrete construal level (Lee et al., 2010).

In the context of IB, regulatory focus reflects people's internal conflict between immediate possession and self-control (Vohs and Faber, 2007). Regulatory focus theory suggests that because the resources (e.g., time, affect, and cognitive effort) that people exert for self-regulation in IB are finite, consumers may deem one goal as desirable and another goal as undesirable by using cues and heuristics (Vohs and Faber, 2007). A cue can induce regulatory fit and facilitate persuasion if the cue is consistent with the recipient's regulatory focus orientation (Cesario and Higgins, 2008).

Regulatory fit also exists in personal interactions and goal pursuit. Empirical evidence (Righetti et al., 2011) indicates that when a person has a promotion focus, he or she can be motivated by a partner with a promotion focus (e.g., an eager and helpful salesperson). Asymmetrically, however, an individual with a prevention focus is not influenced by a partner with a prevention focus (e.g., an indifferent salesperson). It can be inferred from these results that good SRSQ could induce interpersonal regulatory fit for consumers with a promotion focus, so the corresponding promotion goal (e.g., seeking pleasure, being respected, self-enhancement) may override the prevention goal (e.g., saving money, avoiding the post-purchase remorse), hence increasing IB. In contrast, poor SRSQ induces regulatory non-fit for promotion-focused consumers and thus discouraging their promotion goal. Meanwhile, poor SRSQ does not motivate prevention-focused consumers. The combined effects of poor SRSQ is that both types of consumers may focus on self-control and abandon pleasure seeking, thence reducing IB.

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