The post-purchase communication strategies for supporting online impulse buying

Chia-Chi Chang [a,1], Ai-Hua Tseng [b,*]

[a] Department of Management Science, National Chiao Tung University, 1001 Ta Hsueh Road, Hsinchu 300, Taiwan
[b] Department of Hospitality Management, Chung Hua University, 707, Sec. 2, WuFu Road, Hsinchu 300, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

As online impulse buying and the consequent cognitive dissonance can be a critical determinant of consumer e-satisfaction, effective post-purchase communication (arguments) to reduce post-purchase cognitive dissonance of impulsive buyers hence warrants further exploration. The current research focuses on the determinants of perceived persuasion of the post-purchase arguments and impulsive buyer e-satisfaction. The purpose of this study is to investigate the persuasion of post-purchase arguments on online impulsive buyer satisfaction. A 2 (number of arguments) × 2 (argument strength) experimental design was employed in order to examine whether the persuasion of arguments (e.g. the number and strength of arguments) would vary upon consumers' tendency to regret. The results indicated that an increased number of arguments provided after the purchase had a stronger positive effect on e-satisfaction when arguments were strong than when arguments were weak. Such an impact would be less pronounced for low tendency-to-regret consumers than for high tendency-to-regret consumers.

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1. Introduction

The latest technology development (e.g. APP software) has empowered e-tailers to provide customers with even more convenient, user-friendly online venues as well as more secure mechanisms to make a purchase (e.g. according to seller rating to make an online purchase decision), consumers thus have more opportunities and are more likely to purchase online impulsively. A recent research reported U.S. online retail sales will reach $370 billion by 2017 (which is up from $262 billion in 2013—Forrester, 2013). Among them, prior research estimated over 50% of consumers purchase impulsively online in the United States (GSI Commerce, 2008). Apparently, online impulse sales are expected to continue rising along with the increasing volume of online sales. The issue relevant to online impulse buying warrants further examination.

Impulse buying has been studied for almost five decades, and most have focused on the analyses of individuals' impulse buying behavior (e.g. trait impulsiveness, see Jones, Reynolds, Weun, & Beatty, 2003; Rook & Fisher, 1995; Stern, 1962); and techniques to induce impulse buying (Bayley & Nancarrow, 1998; Cobb & Hoyer, 1986; Hoyer & MacInnis, 1997) such as price promotion (Dholakia, 2000; Piron, 1991) and product display in the store (Abratt & Goodey, 1990; Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). While previous research has demonstrated the consequences of impulse buying, including perception of guilt, regret, and unnecessary spending (Brockman, Taylor, & Brockman, 2008; Lee & Kacen, 2008; Pirog & Roberts, 2007; Rook, 1987), limited studies have shed some light on how to reduce negative perception (e.g. post-purchase cognitive dissonance) and how to enhance impulse buyers' e-satisfaction after online purchases.

Past research has suggested that impulsive buyers are more likely to need reassurance to justify their decisions (Warden, Wu, & Tsai, 2006); otherwise, they are more likely to feel dissatisfied. This issue is particularly salient to virtual shopping environment where customers cannot physically inspect the product prior to purchase (Korgaonkar & Karson, 2007; Lee, 2007; Warden et al., 2006). Furthermore, consumers might have less chance to devote cognitive effort to evaluate the product in the cyberspace (Mattila, 2003). Consequently, consumers are more likely to find the purchased item not living up to pre-purchase expectations, thereby generating gaps in cognitions. Thus, consumer post-purchase attitudes (e.g. repurchase intention, satisfaction) toward the product are more likely to be negatively influenced (Marshall, Na, State, & Deuskar, 2008). It is important for firms to learn how to provide persuasive post-purchase messages to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +886 9 21636076; fax: +886 03 6570873.
E-mail addresses: chiachi801@gmail.com (C.-C. Chang), esther07@chu.edu.tw (A.-H. Tseng).
[1] Tel.: +886 9 37913130.

support impulse buyers' decisions after online purchases. The study manages to understand the determinants of persuasion of the post-purchase messages and the impact of individual differences to help e-tailers to enhance impulsive buyer e-satisfaction.

Persuasive communications are likely to enhance consumers' positive reaction (Nadeem, 2007). In McCloskey's research (as cited in Maxwell & Dickman, 2007), such persuasive marketing promotions contribute to 28% of American Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Hence, most researchers tend to focus on the determinants of perceived persuasion of the information. For example, past researchers have maintained that the persuasion of information is contingent upon the number of arguments (McDonald, Samuels, & Rispoli, 1996; McDonald & Stenger, 1993; Sloman, 1994), argument strength of arguments (Alba & Marmorstein, 1987; Harkins & Petty, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983), and individual differences of the consumers (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Soutar & Sweeney, 2003; Wheeler, Petty, & Bizer, 2005). In general, multiple arguments are more persuasive than a single argument and better at prompting satisfaction. Nevertheless, whether such post-purchase marketing messages would remain the same influence is still unanswered. After the online purchases, do multiple post-purchase arguments still work better than a single argument? Is it possible that consumers become too desperate to rationalize their purchase decisions that even a single argument provision would work as effective as multiple arguments provision? Would the effectiveness of post-purchase arguments vary upon individual differences? Combined with different argument strength, the questions as to how persuasion variables would interact to influence consumer satisfaction after impulse buying in the cyberspace remain unsolved.

Although past studies provide important information about how persuasion variables interact to influence individuals' attitude (Andrews & Shimp, 1990; Harkins & Petty, 1981; Moore & Reardon, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Schwarz, 2004), most studies focused on the effect of pre-purchase communications on consumer pre-purchase attitude (Alba & Marmorstein, 1987; Andrews & Shimp, 1990; Chan & Cui, 2011; Chiou & Ting, 2011). Research in this field cannot address questions about online post-purchase situations: those in which online impulsive consumers are more likely to generate post-purchase cognitive dissonance (Pirog & Roberts, 2007; Rook, 1987), thereby needing persuasive communications after online purchase decisions (Hunt, 1970; Milliman & Decker, 1990; Nadeem, 2007). Prior research showed that consumer' post-purchase actions (e.g. in searching for information and deliberating messages) are rarely rational when they experience dissonance (Eiser, 1990). Under such circumstance, it remains unclear whether consumers processing of post-purchase persuasive messages remain the same as the processing of information in pre-purchase phase.

Since the complex process of persuasion is contextually, and individually dependent (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999), it is essential to understand how persuasion processes function in different conditions (e.g. after online impulse buying, how high vs. low tendency-to-regret consumers might deliberate post-purchase messages). The current study focuses on how the effective post-purchase communications can enhance consumer satisfaction by employing a 2 × 2 factorial design. We examine how different factors affect the persuasion of post-purchase communications by manipulating number (multiple vs. single) and argument strength of the arguments (strong vs. weak). Additionally, we also test whether the effect of such arguments would vary upon individual differences (high vs. low tendency-to-regret) in the context of online impulse buying. This paper will propose answers to these questions by applying the cognitive dissonance theory and persuasion theory. The results provide an expanded view of persuasion as

well as highlight some applied insights that emerge from the current framework, which suggest how practitioners might provide more effective post-purchase communication strategies to reduce post-purchase cognitive dissonance after online impulsive buying.

2. Background literature

2.1. Online impulse buying and post-purchase cognitive dissonance

Research has suggested that impulse buying can lead to negative outcomes (e.g. financial risk, unnecessary spending, or post-purchase regret) (Pirog & Roberts, 2007; Rook, 1987). According to prior research, impulsive buying was recognized as rapid decision-making, typically unplanned in nature and without a great deal of reflection (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Piron, 1991; Rook, 1987). Online impulsive buyers are more likely than planned purchasers to preclude thoughtful deliberation of information and choice alternatives (Cobb & Hoyer, 1986; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Rook, 1987). Online impulsive buyers at times might doubt their choices, finding that their selected option has undesirable elements that they must now accept. Thus, consumers who purchase online impulsively are likely to experience post-purchase anxiety, which is caused by the post-purchase apprehension of possible unexpected consequences (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Oliver, 1997). As such, they even doubt that "whether I have selected the appropriate one" and are likely to aware that "it was unwise to purchase the item impulsively". According to Sweeny, Hausknecht, and Soutar (2000), when consumers experience above situation, they are likely to experience inconsistent cognitions soon after the purchase. In other words, online impulsive buyers are likely to generate cognitive differences between pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase experience of the product (Pirog & Roberts, 2007; Rook, 1987). Hence, under the circumstance, the current study aims to examine tactics that reduce the psychological discomfort caused by online impulsive buying.

2.2. The effect of providing customers with post-purchase communications on reducing post-purchase cognitive dissonance

Prior research has revealed that individuals experiencing cognitive dissonance, a psychological discomfort, would generate a motivation to reduce their dissonance (Elliott & Devine, 1994; Festinger, 1957). In the online consumer setting, when consumers experience cognitive dissonance, they are likely to be dissatisfied (Montgomery & Barnes, 1993). Hence, firms should try to assist consumers in altering their cognition or belief after online purchases in order to raise their e-satisfaction (Hunt, 1970; Koslow, 2000; Milliman & Decker, 1990; Nadeem, 2007; Stevens, 1971).

Prior studies have revealed that practitioners might mitigate consumers' post-purchase cognitive dissonance (PCD) by providing consumers with reassurance after purchases (e.g. post-purchase information provision, see Hunt, 1970; Koslow, 2000; Milliman & Decker, 1990; Nadeem, 2007; Stevens, 1971). However, prior studies have documented mixed results about the effect of post-purchase information provision on reducing consumers' PCD (Hunt, 1970; Milliman & Decker, 1990; Nadeem, 2007; Stevens, 1971). Some research supported the positive effect of post-purchase information provisions. For instance, retailers who mailed a letter to reassure customers were able to improve customers' attitudes toward the products and dealers (Milliman & Decker, 1990; Nadeem, 2007; Stevens, 1971). Nonetheless, previous research counterargued the effect of inconsequential post-purchase information (i.e. such specious reassurance appeared to be ineffective in increasing customer satisfaction, see Hunt, 1970). Online impulsive buyers are more likely to regret owing to they cannot