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Predicting consumer behavior with two emotion appraisal dimensions: Emotion valence and agency in gift giving



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ABSTRACT

Decades of emotion research have demonstrated the unique influences of many specific emotions on consumer behaviors. These countless numbers of emotion effects can make it difficult to understand the role of emotions in consumer behavior. The current research introduces a parsimonious framework that can predict the effects of emotions on the consumer behavior of gift giving with just two appraisal dimensions: valence and agency. A series of studies examining gift giving reveals that positive emotions exert positive effects on gift giving, independent of their agency. In contrast, agency does predict the effects of negative emotions on gift giving. Negative self-caused emotions increase gift giving, whereas negative other-caused emotions decrease gift giving. These findings seem to hold for inactive and active emotions, and for uncertain and certain emotions. Together, these findings make a unique theoretical and empirical contribution to the understanding of emotions in gift giving. Moreover, it provides a pragmatic framework for both academics and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, numerous studies have shown how specific emotions can influence consumer behaviors. For example, we currently know that feelings of anger may motivate consumers to complain about a company (Nyer, 1997), that feelings of pride can encourage people to buy public display products (Griskevicius, Shiota, & Nowlis, 2010), and that dissatisfied customers experiencing regret may switch to a different service provider (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). With at least twenty emotions that play a role in marketing settings (Richins, 1997), it can be difficult for marketing academics and practitioners to identify and understand the influences of all these emotions on consumer behaviors. It is uncertain whether it is necessary to distinguish between similar emotions such as regret and disappointment, or shame and guilt when examining the influences of emotions on consumer behaviors. Some emotion scholars suggest that we should make this distinction (e.g., De Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2007; Griskevicius, Shiota and Nowlis, 2010; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). The present research proposes that it is possible to predict the influences of

emotions for at least some consumer behaviors on the basis of a limited number of emotion appraisal dimensions.

According to most scholars, emotions can be defined with a restricted number of cognitive or emotion appraisal dimensions. These include, for example, whether the emotion is positive or negative (valence), whether the outcomes are certain or uncertain (certainty), and whether the person feels powerful or powerless (power) (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Emotion valence (the extent to which an emotion is positive or negative) and emotion agency (the extent to which an emotion is caused by oneself or caused by another person) are the two central appraisal themes that form the basis of the current research. Numerous emotion researchers have proposed valence and agency as appraisal dimensions (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2002; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Because these appraisal dimensions separately have been found to influence prosocial behaviors and altruism (e.g., Butt & Choi, 2006; Chaudhuri, 1997; Fredrickson, 2001; Kelley & Hoffman, 1997; Moll et al., 2007), the present research suggests that the interaction between valence and agency can predict, to a certain extent, the influence of specific emotions on a consumer behavior that generates millions of dollars every year: gift giving. Many scholars have examined the emotions that influence gift giving (e.g., Belk, 1976; Komter & Vollebergh, 1997; Ruth, 1996; Schwartz, 1967), but there is hardly any empirical work that studies the effects of multiple different emotions on gift

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giving. The current research also includes the appraisals of emotion activity (the extent to which an emotion makes the person feel active or inactive) and emotion certainty (the extent to which the outcomes of the emotion-generating situation are certain or uncertain), to test whether the effects of valence and agency generalize to active and inactive as well as certain and uncertain emotions.

The present research consists of studies which examine the effects of four different emotions on gift giving. These effects concern integral emotion influences, such that givers experience emotions towards receivers. The findings reveal that, at least for most of the tested emotions, the effects on gift giving decisions can be predicted on the basis of just two appraisal dimensions: valence and agency. More specifically, it appears that positive valence exerts positive influences on gift giving, independent of the agency. In contrast, the effects of emotions with a negative valence depend on the agency of the emotion. Negative emotions caused by the giver generate positive effects on gift giving, but negative emotions caused by the receiver generate negative effects on gift giving. This framework also holds when including emotion activity (Study 5) or emotion certainty (Study 6) as a third appraisal dimension. Thus, emotion valence and agency seem to be able to predict most emotion influences on gift giving in a parsimonious way, making it easier for marketing practitioners and academics to understand and to apply emotion influences in consumer settings.

2. Gift giving and emotions

Gift giving has been studied by scholars from anthropology, psychology, marketing, economics, sociology, and philosophy (for overview see Banks, 1979; Belk, 1982). According to most disciplines, gifts can be understood as goods or services that are voluntarily provided from one person to another person or to a group (Belk, 1979). Usually, this provision takes place in ritual-like situations, such as birthdays, weddings, or Christmas settings, and the gifts may involve physical gifts, immaterial gifts (such as time or services), or cash gifts (Belk, 1976). The gift giving process takes place in three general stages: a gestation stage in which the giver searches for and buys gifts, a prestation stage in which gifts are exchanged, and a reformulation stage in which gifts are consumed or rejected, and in which the relationship between the giver and the recipient may change (Sherry, 1983).

Numerous factors can influence gift giving (Belk, 1976; Sherry, 1983), and emotions are considered to be one of those factors. Most theories and empirical research on emotions in gift giving focus on emotion effects *during* the gift giving process (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Belk, 1996; Ruffle, 1999; Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2004; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999; Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1993; Wooten, 2000). Instead, the current research focuses on how emotions generated *before* the gift giving process can influence the purchase of gifts during the gestation stage. These emotions concern the giver's emotions in relation to the receiver and thus reflect integral emotion effects. Gift giving theories mention that love, joy, penitence, sadness, and gratitude might stimulate gift giving to express emotional states (Cheal, 1988; Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Ruth, 1996; Sherry, 1983), or that gifts communicate feelings of love, affection, care, esteem, and friendship (Belk & Coon, 1993; Goodwin, Smith, & Spiggle, 1990; Komter & Vollebergh, 1997; Otnes, Ruth, & Milbourne, 1994; Wolfenbarger & Yale, 1993). A giver may express feelings of joy and pride with gift giving after a recipient has achieved something (Ruth, 1996; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), and may try to lessen feelings of guilt by purchasing gifts (Wolfenbarger, 1990). A number of empirical studies support the notion that emotions might influence gift giving in the gestation stage. The positive emotions of pride and confidence have been found to stimulate self-gift giving (Mick & Faure, 1998), and feelings of (agapic) love have been shown to exert an effect on the money, time, and effort that is spent on finding a gift (Belk & Coon, 1993; Goodwin, Smith and Spiggle, 1990). Thus, many different emotions seem to influence gift giving during the gestation stage, although little empirical research has examined the effects of

multiple different emotions on gift giving. If different emotions indeed exert different effects on gift giving, how can these emotion influences be summarized in a parsimonious framework?

In general, emotions arise in response to evaluative judgments and interpretations of events that are relevant for consumers' well-being (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Nyer, 1997). Put differently, emotions reflect a goal that is potentially threatened (in the case of negative emotions) or served (in the case of positive emotions) (Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008). Different combinations of these evaluative judgments, often called cognitive appraisals or emotion appraisals, yield different emotional responses (Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Clore and Collins, 1988; Roseman, Antoniou, & Jose, 1996; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Most scholars mention the existence of five emotion appraisal dimensions: valence or pleasantness (the extent to which an emotion is positive or negative), activity or arousal (the degree to which one feels active or inactive), certainty (the degree to which the outcome of the event is certain or uncertain), power or control (the degree to which one feels powerful or powerless), and agency (the degree to which the emotion is caused by oneself or by other people) (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Frijda, 1986; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Of these appraisal dimensions, I argue that the two appraisal dimensions of valence and agency can be used to predict emotion effects on gift giving.

The appraisal dimension of valence makes a distinction between positive emotions and negative emotions (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Frijda, 1986). Research has demonstrated that a distinction between emotions on the basis of their positivity or negativity is essential in understanding emotion influences on many different kinds of behavior that are related to altruism and prosociality (e.g., Chaudhuri, 1997; Fredrickson, 2001; Gino & Schweitzer, 2008; Reizenzein & Hofmann, 1990, 1993; Ruth, Brunel and Otnes, 2002). For example, compared to negative emotions, positive emotions have been found to encourage cooperation in groups and in social dilemma games (Haselhuhn & Mellers, 2005; Hertel, Neuhof, Theuer, & Kerr, 2000). They have also been shown to increase prosocial actions, to increase helping, to increase altruistic behaviors towards colleagues, and to reduce harmful actions towards others (Batson, 1998; Isen & Levin, 1972; Kelley & Hoffman, 1997). Because gift giving is considered to be a form of prosocial or altruistic behavior (Fischer, Gainer, & Arnold, 1996; Homans, 1961; Otnes & Beltramini, 1996), these findings indicate that the appraisal dimension of valence should be taken into account when predicting emotion effects on gift giving.

Since gift giving is an inherently social process that involves at least one other person (the receiver), I claim that the social aspects of emotions should also be taken into account when explaining the role of emotions in gift giving. The appraisal dimension of agency (also named causality or responsibility) is the social aspect of emotions, and it distinguishes emotions that are caused by the self (self-caused emotions) from those caused by other people (other-caused emotions) (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Clore and Collins, 1988; Roseman, Wiest and Swartz, 1994). Translated to the giver's perspective in a gift giving context, agency distinguishes self-caused emotions that result from actions of givers and other-caused emotions that result from actions of receivers. Previous research has found that agency is an important appraisal dimension for emotions in a social context (Lazarus, 1991; Reizenzein & Hofmann, 1993; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1986). For example, agency has been found to predict collaborative and competitive motives and subsequent compromise behaviors in negotiations (Butt & Choi, 2006; Butt, Choi, & Jaeger, 2005). It has also been demonstrated to influence social behaviors such as helping (or avoiding) others, attaching to others, correcting other people's mistakes (Moll et al., 2007), complaining and protest behaviors towards companies (Grappi, Romani, & Bagozzi, 2013; Soscia, 2007), and concerns with the welfare of comparable others (Choshen-

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