

## **Attitudinal Ambivalence: Do Consumers Choose Manage It?**

When consumers simultaneously evaluate an attitude object both positively and negatively, they are said to be ambivalent (Kaplan 1972; Priester and Petty 1996; Locke and Braun 2009; Rudolph and Popp 2007; Jewell 2003; Zemborain and Johar 2007; Armitage and Arden 2007). Such consumers may hold an overall attitude that is positive or negative (called dominant reactions), but will also carry with them feelings that are opposite of their dominant reactions (called conflicting reactions). Ambivalence appears to be quite common in consumers and has been reported in purchase behaviors of wedding products (Otnes et al. 1997), fashion products (Thompson and Haytko 1997) and technological products (Priester, Petty and Park 2007). At least two consequences of ambivalence have received significant support in the literature – a reduction in attitude-behavior correlation and a sense of discomfort in the holder of an ambivalent attitude.

Research shows that people prefer attitudes to be in accordance with each other, as well as attitudes with behavior, and so ambivalence is experienced as unpleasant and leads to discomfort (Harreveld, Pligt and Liver 2009; Newby-Clark, McGregor and Zanna 2002). Because ambivalence is unpleasant, people, unsurprisingly, have been shown to reduce their ambivalence using different strategies (e.g., Harreveld, Plight and Liver 2009). Harreveld et al. developed a Model of Ambivalence-Induced Discomfort (MAID), which illustrates how ambivalent attitude holders go through different stages that can help them get rid of ambivalence. They showed that individuals when face ambivalence they either enter emotion coping behavior like avoiding the decision, counterfactual thinking and denial of responsibility or problem focused strategies like changing the possessed attitude itself. Interestingly, much of the research on ambivalence seems to assume that ambivalence just happens, and people try to reduce it when they experience discomfort associated with that ambivalence. In line with this thinking, contemporary research has advanced the notion of latent or interpersonal ambivalence (the existence of positive and negative evaluations about an attitude object in memory) and felt or interpersonal ambivalence (the feeling of discomfort when an ambivalent attitude is accessed in a decision making context).

### Latent and Felt Ambivalence

Priester and Petty (1996) found that individuals' possessed evaluations, emotions or thoughts of opposite valence at the same time, and could of different strength. The evaluations strongly possessed were termed dominant reactions and the weaker evaluations were termed as conflicted reactions. The proposed Gradual Threshold Model of Ambivalence (GTM) predicted, for a given object the dominant reactions get accessible faster and could form an overall attitude towards the object (Priester and Petty, 1996). This happens even if some conflicting attitudes get accessible. Ambivalence would be caused only if conflicting reactions are accessible at the same speed and magnitude sufficient enough to cross the threshold. In sum, GTM predicts, ambivalence would be if conflicting reactions are accessible at same rate as the dominant reactions and simultaneously the conflicting reactions should be able to cross the threshold. Otherwise, ambivalence would not occur in individuals.

Newby-Clark et al. (2002) found the evidence that potential to feel ambivalent (potential ambivalence, interpersonal ambivalence) caused or lead to the feelings of ambivalence (felt ambivalence) and discomfort. They showed that Individuals can possess opposite evaluations or emotions without getting affected by them but when both the dominant and conflicting reactions

for an attitude object got accessible, simultaneously, it lead to felt ambivalence. Most important aspect of this finding was that unless an individual is not able to access the opposite reactions simultaneously, he or she may not derive discomfort from the object. Newby-Clark et al. (2002) also showed that the simultaneous accessibility of inconsistent attitudes or thoughts was not the only cause for feeling torn; in fact, they found that preference for consistency in individuals directed the activation of torn feelings. They showed that even if the inconsistent thoughts are accessible at the same time it would not affect people who do not prefer their thoughts to be consistent while on the other hand they showed that when people who prefer their thoughts to be consistent i.e. individual with preference for consistency, get opposite thoughts about the object simultaneously feel extremely torn.

Latent ambivalence is measured by asking individuals about their positive and negative reactions, separately, towards the attitude object and then combining the separately measured scores through an mathematical formula into an index, called ambivalence score (Kaplan 1972; Priester and Petty 1996; Zemborain and Johar 2007). For example, to measure ambivalence towards French fries, individuals would be asked to rate their positive evaluations of French fries with the question, “considering only the positive attributes of French fries and neglecting all the negative attributes, how would you rate French fries” and in the similar way the negative evaluations would be obtained by asking individuals, “considering only the negative attributes of French fries and neglecting all the positive attributes, how would you rate French fries”. These positive and negative scores would then be entered into a mathematical formula to obtain the ambivalence index.

Whereas, felt ambivalence on the other hand, also referred as subjective ambivalence, identifies the extent to which ambivalence is experienced by an individual or the extent to which an individual is feeling a conflict towards the attitude object (Priester and Petty 1996). Priester and Petty (1996) developed the scale to measure the feelings of ambivalence, which comprises of conflicted, mixed and indecisive components rated by individuals. These components belong to the tripartite model of attitudes i.e. indecision is the indicator of the conative basis, mixed is the indicator of cognitive basis and conflicted is the measure of affective basis. The ratings of all these components, by an individual, are averaged to obtain an ambivalence score.

## Hypothesis

The present research focusses on what happens when consumers anticipate making a decision in future? We propose that there are situational variables that prompt people to anticipate future decision-making involving an attitude, and therefore adjust their attitudes at the formation stage to be less ambivalent. That is, people may employ ambivalence-reduction strategies as they form their attitudes rather than resort to such methods when they retrieve those attitudes. For ambivalence reduction to occur during the formation of attitudes, it is critical that people believe they will use that attitude in the future. We focus on the existence of choices as a moderating variable for ambivalence reduction to occur during attitude formation. Thus, when people are exposed to positive and negative information about a choice alternative which they will be interacting with in the future, and they know they have no other choices available, they see no value in being ambivalent about it. Therefore, they will encode the information in a way that will reduce ambivalence; such encoding may involve biased interpretation of ambivalence-causing information. In contrast, when people know they have choices in the future, they see no

anticipated discomfort in the future because of an ambivalent attitude about one of the choices, and therefore will not distort their interpretation of information to stay less ambivalent. They will encode the information as presented and will report ambivalent attitudes. Thus, the existence of choice in a decision-context is an important moderator of whether people store ambivalent attitudes or whether they will reduce their ambivalence during attitude formation. In that sense, ambivalence appears to be strategically managed by people rather than something that is passively experienced.

Hypothesis 1: When an alternative designed to create an ambivalent attitude is presented to an individual:

- The individual will express more ambivalence if the alternative is one of many he can choose from.
- The individual will express reduced ambivalence if the alternative is the only one he has available to him.

Further, if the ambivalence is managed by consumers it is essential to know what is process. Is it that consumer consciously and deliberately bias the evaluation process or the process happens sub-consciously?

Hypothesis 2: Is the process of ambivalence management conscious or sub-conscious?

- If the process is conscious, memory retrieval effect would be significant.
- If the process is sub-conscious, memory encoding effect would be significant.

Overall, the studies are conducted and reported in the following order. Study 1 tests whether consumers evaluate objects differently due to availability of choices. Study 2 further tests the process i.e. are consumers aware they are doing ambivalence reduction and Study 3 shows when the moderator is removed from the situation the effect goes away.

## **Study 1**

The objective of this study was to show that consumers evaluate an attitude object differently when under different choice conditions. More specifically, given an object designed to create ambivalence is presented, consumers having only one choice and anticipating they might use the evaluations for making future decisions, would evaluate the current alternative in a biased way. Whereas, when consumers know they have multiple choices they don't need to do biased processing.

### **Design and Method**

Study 1 was a 3 (Experience: positive, mixed, negative) X 2 (Choice: once, many) between subjects design. The stimulus consisted of a scenario about a Chinese restaurant in a new town that the study participant will be living in, and there is either only one Chinese restaurant or several Chinese restaurants in town. In the positive (negative) experience condition all attributes of the restaurant were stated positively (negatively). The attributes consisted of complete restaurant experience i.e. service, ambiance, starters, food etc. For mixed experience, both positive and negative attributes of the restaurant were presented to the participants. Participants were asked to imagine that they were having this experience in the Chinese restaurant. For

choice manipulation, in the stimulus, the waitress told participants that the restaurant was either only one Chinese restaurant in the town (one choice) or the restaurant was one of the eleven restaurants in the town (multiple choices).

After exposure to the stimulus, attitudinal ambivalence, attitudes and beliefs towards the Chinese restaurant were measured. Our prediction was that participants will express higher levels of ambivalence about the Chinese restaurant in the mixed condition when they are told there are multiple Chinese restaurant choices than when they know there is only one Chinese restaurant, in town. We did not expect any effects in the positive and negative conditions as when all the attributes of the restaurant are positive (negative), the evaluations would be positive (negative) and ambivalence would occur, giving the attitude behavior consistency.

### **Dependent variables**

Both latent and felt ambivalence were measured towards the restaurant. Latent ambivalence was measured by separately asking participants their positive and negative evaluations for the restaurant. The positive evaluations were measured by asking participants to consider only the positive attributes (aspects) about the restaurant and rate how positive they feel about the restaurant on a four point scale with 1 being least positive and 4 being highly positive, whereas, negative evaluations were measured by asking the participants to consider only the negative attributes of the restaurant and rate how negatively they felt about the restaurant on a four point scale rating from 1 to 4, 1 being the least negative and 4 being highly negative. The positive scores were named as [P] and negative scores were named as [N] were entered into the ambivalence formula  $[(P + N) - 2 * \text{abs}(P - N) + 1]$  to create an latent ambivalence index for all participants.

Petty and Priester (1996) subjective ambivalence scale was used to measure felt ambivalence of participants. Participants were asked how conflicted, mixed and indecisive their feelings were towards the Chinese restaurant on an eleven point scale ranging from 1 to 10 with 1 being the least and 10 being the highest. The scores on each i.e. conflicted, mixed and indecisive scales were averaged to form a felt ambivalence index for all participants.

Attitudes were measured on a -3 to +3 scale by asking participants how they evaluated the restaurant on very negative/ very positive, very bad/ very good, very nice/very awful and how likely are they to go to the restaurant i.e. extremely unlikely/extremely likely. The ratings for all these scales were averaged into one attitude score.

Beliefs towards the restaurant were measured by giving the statements about restaurant attributes and asking participants on their agreement on -3 to +3 pointer scale with -3 being strongly disagree and +3 being strongly agree. The scores to individual belief scales were averaged into one score for each participant. In the study, participants saw only the verbal measures i.e. strongly disagree or strongly agree and not the numerical values i.e. -3, +3 or 1-4.

### **Results**

One hundred sixty participants participated in study one and the results are supportive of our expectation.

*Attitudinal Ambivalence:* A one-way ANOVA was using a 3(Experience: Positive, Mixed and Negative) X 2 (Choices: One, Multiple) between subjects design was conducted. The analysis revealed differences in mean . As expected, felt ambivalence was unaffected by availability of choice in positive and negative conditions as there was no significant difference in means of participants for positive experience and negative experience with choice manipulations, respectively. We found significant difference in mixed experience condition. As shown is figure 1a, ambivalence in one choice condition (Mean=5.61) was significantly less than in multiple choice condition (Mean = 6.77). Participants having the same scenario with a difference in choices expressed differential felt ambivalence. Also, there was no significant different in latent ambivalence which means inconsistent thoughts and reactions were equally possessed by participants in both cells but ambivalence felt was significantly different. Attitudes and beliefs were consistent with the ambivalence results as, when people are more ambivalent attitudes and beliefs are weaker and when attitudes and beliefs are stronger ambivalence is less. In sum, ambivalence is inversely related to attitudes and beliefs. The attitudes and belief results are same as expected as shown in figure 1b. The average attitude in one choice (Mean =1.18) was significantly higher than multiple choice condition (Mean= 0.30). Simultaneously, average beliefs in one choice (Mean = 1.43) were stronger than multiple choices condition (Mean = 0.77) as shown in figure 1c.

Figure 1a: Felt ambivalence expressed

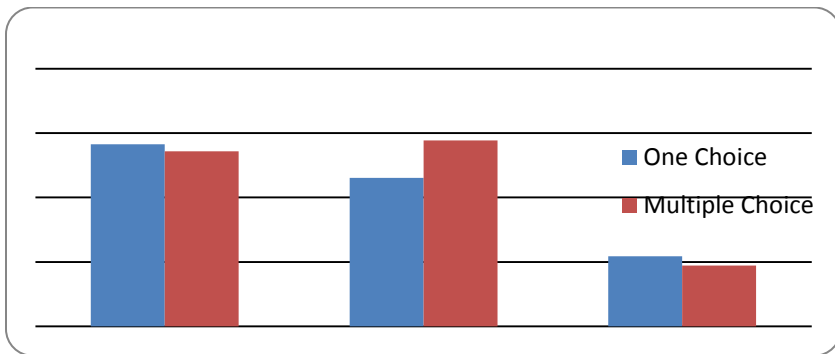


Figure 1b: Attitudes reported

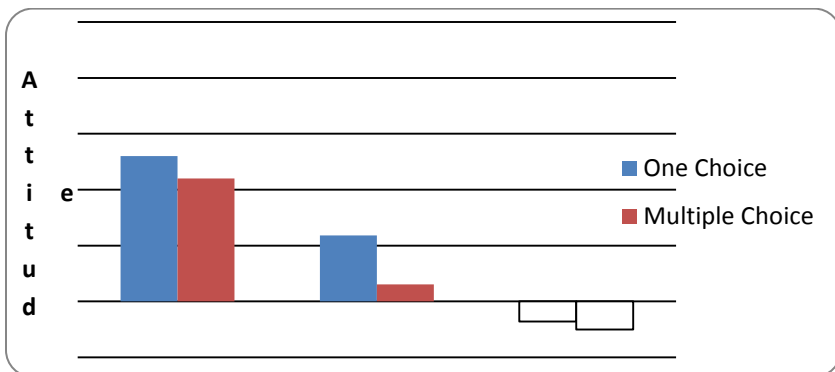
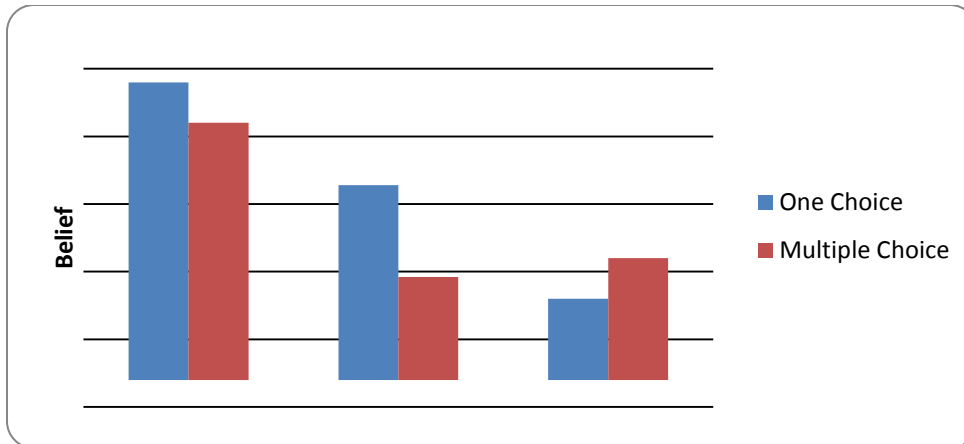


Figure 1c: Beliefs reported



Discussion: Study 1 shows the evidence for the effect of choice on ambivalence. Individuals when anticipate they have only one choice available to them and they might use the attitudes to make future decisions, they evaluate the current object in a biased way to keep their attitudes positive and not face ambivalence and associated discomfort at the point of future decision making situations. Even though we found significant results which shows that people manage their ambivalence, an alternative explanation for these results could be that because attitudes and beliefs became extreme a change in ambivalence is seen. Our theory posits that ambivalence changes due to the effect of choice irrespective of change in attitudes and beliefs. Hence, it is essential to see for ambivalence change without a changing the attitudes and beliefs. Study 2 was designed to cater to this alternative explanation.

## Study 2

There were two objectives for conducting study 2. First, to see whether choice information leads to change in ambivalence without changing the attitudes and beliefs. Second and more important objective was to see are consumers aware of this ambivalence management process. In essence, is the process of managing ambivalence a conscious process or sub-conscious process?

### Method and Design:

Study 2 was designed to: a) see whether ambivalence changes occur without changes in attitude, and b) see whether the attitude adjustment in the mixed condition is relatively sub-conscious. The same Chinese restaurant scenario was used in this study with a slight modification. To make the results more robust and conservative the scenario was made a little shorter and negative attributes were made stronger. This change would reduce the delay in processing time, making the process more quick. To test the latter, information about choice (one vs. multiple restaurants in town) was given either before participants read the scenario or after. Recall in study 1, the information about choice was given by waitress serving in the restaurant. In study 2, the choice information was manipulated by telling the participants about billboard placed outside the restaurant. The billboard has the choice information and said either this is the only Chinese restaurant in town vs this is one of the eleven Chinese restaurant in town. In before experience condition, participants saw the billboard before entering the restaurant and in after experience condition, participants saw the billboard when they were leaving the restaurant after dining there.

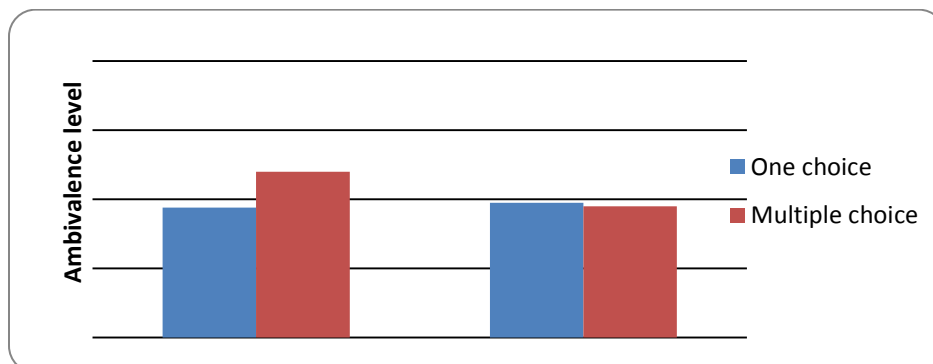
Based on our theory, if ambivalence adjustment is sub-conscious then encoding effect would be significant. In the encoding process, information gets encoded into the memory as it gets processed and then the overall attitudes get reported i.e. When participants are informed first about the choice restriction before the experience all the information would get encoded in sequential order and according to choice restriction ambivalence would get reported. Whereas, if, consumers are managing their attitudes consciously, the retrieval effect would be found. In retrieval process, people process the information and store information in memory and when needed, would go back to memory, retrieve the information essential i.e. modify their evaluations and then report them. If retrieval process is used then the order of providing the choice information would not matter as such participants can go back to memory and change the attitudes. Hence, if managing ambivalence is a conscious process then giving the choice information before or after experience would not matter and participants would show bias evaluation in both before and after conditions. Overall, if the process is sub-conscious then encoding effect would be found with ambivalence management in choice information before choice condition only and if the process is conscious it would lead to retrieval process where ambivalence management would be significant in both conditions.

Study 2 was 2 (Choice: One, Multiple) X 2 (Order of choice information: Before experience, After mixed experience) between subjects design. The mixed Chinese restaurant scenario was used with modification as discussed earlier with the same dependent measures of study 1. The results of the study are reported.

#### Results:

The first objective of the study was fulfilled as we did not find any significant changes in reported attitudes and beliefs. For testing second hypothesis, is the process of ambivalence management conscious or sub-conscious we conducted a 2 (Choice: One, Multiple) X 2 (Order of choice information: Before experience, After mixed experience) between subjects ANOVA and found the means were significantly different. Further analysis was done and the results supported a sub-conscious adjustment view as shown in figure 2. Ambivalence in one choice scenario (Mean= 4.76) was significantly less than in multiple choices scenario (Mean= 5.79), but only when choice information was presented before participants read the scenario. Further, no difference was found in beliefs about the restaurant or attitude toward it. Simultaneously, there was no difference in ambivalence when information about choices available was given after the experience.

Figure 2: Felt ambivalence in before and choice condition



## Discussion:

Study 2 was conducted with the objective to cater to possible alternative explanation for ambivalence management by change in attitudes and beliefs themselves. The results in study provide evidence that ambivalence is changed due to choice restriction without changes in attitude and belief. This is a robust and novel evidence as consumers are separately managing their attitudes and they are not aware of this process. Significant encoding results show that when information is faced by individuals they just process it and more interesting is, choice information automatically leads to management of attitudes. Consumers are not consciously sitting there and thinking about what should they do with the information, rather, as soon as the restricted choice situation is faced, automatically this biased process operates which further leads to positive attitudes towards the object. The results are consistent even when processing length and time is reduced and strengths of negative arguments is reduced. The results indicate that as soon as the restricted choice information is provided, automatically futuristic decision making with the current choice is perceived and ambivalence management is done.

## Study 3

Study 3 tested whether the choice effects can be mitigated if participants knew they would not be making choices in the future. The proposed theory postulates when consumers get the restricted choice situation, they anticipate using the current attitudes in making future decisions which would lead them to evaluate current attitude object in differential manner, to avoid discomfort in future. Study 3 was used a 2(Condition: Tourist, Resident) X 2( Choices: One, Multiple) between subjects design. A new mixed scenario about a hair salon was presented in one vs. multiple choice conditions, but participants read it either as potential tourists or future residents of the town. As a tourist, even if the restricted choice scenario is presented, consumers may not anticipate coming to the same place as they are not permanently residing there and so would not evaluate the object in a biased manner, keeping the negative information as a contrast in memory. Based on the theory proposed, consumers in resident condition should exhibit ambivalence manipulation whereas; in tourist condition the effects would go away. Currently, the study is designed and ready to go. We are waiting for next semester to get the student pool.

A final study is being also being designed to examine the processes behind ambivalence adjustment; if it is not attitudes or beliefs that are adjusted, what are the psychological processes behind ambivalence adjustment? This study would use same Chinese restaurant scenario and same conditions. The reason, we would replicate the study as a whole and we plan to add an importance measure, in addition to all the dependent measures we used in study 1. More specifically, we will ask participants to rate how important they feel for all the restaurant attributes i.e. service, ambiance, lighting, taste etc, same attributes as used for belief measurement. The rationale behind using importance as dependent measure is to look for,if, something is changing. Our current prediction is that participants in one choice mixed experience scenario would rate either some or all the attributes as less important than participants in multiple choices situation. If so, we would be able to find evidence, that consumers do actually reduce important of some product attributes to manage their ambivalence and that too sub-consciously.



## Conclusion

In the current research, we propose that as ambivalence is aversive and uncomfortable it is not necessary that consumers cope with the ambivalence at the point of decision making as inferred from the current literature. Hence, we suggest that it is possible that information about choices available to consumers moderates the whole process i.e. when consumers face a product which is the only choice available they may anticipate making future decisions based on the current attitudes and so they evaluate the current product in a differential manner to keep their attitudes positive and avoid ambivalence in future. We found evidence in study 1 that an object designed to create ambivalence is presented to participants with one choice alternative or multiple choice scenario, participants evaluated the same restaurant more positively when they know it is the only available to them and they will make future decision with it. In study2, we found evidence that participants manage ambivalence without changing the attitudes and beliefs and the whole process is sub-conscious. Consumers are not aware that they are evaluating the product in a biased manner and this is very interesting. In study 3, we expect to replicate the effects in resident condition whereas we expect the effects to go away in tourist condition. Finally, in study 4 we expect to find the mechanism which helps consumers to successfully manage their evaluation.

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