



No problem, I'll just return it! Purchase effort, product returns, and cognitive dissonance

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*Introduction.* As the benefits of liberal product return policies on sales and profitability are recognized, retailers are balancing the loss from product returns with loosening return policies to encourage buying. Although returning products is part of the consumption process, most studies have been from economic and logistical perspectives; only a few studies on the psychological impact of returning products can be found and similar research on apparel product returns is limited. Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, this study examines the influence of product purchase *and* return effort on cognitive dissonance. In addition, as shopping interest strongly corresponds to sensitivities related to the overall shopping experience, this study also examines how recreational shopping influences feelings of cognitive dissonance. This study fills the void in the literature on apparel product returns and offers retailers insight into how negative feelings related to product returns is connected to the purchase and return process.

*Theoretical background and hypotheses.* Two dimensions of dissonance - product and emotional - are found to be causes for product returns (Power & Jack, 2013; Sweeney, Hausknecht & Soutar, 2000). Product dissonance (*PdtD*) occurs when consumers question the product purchased in comparison to alternative outcomes. Emotional dissonance (*EmotD*) concerns feelings of frustration and disappointment. Consumers who experience post-purchase dissonance may seek to resolve negative feelings by undoing the underlying reason for the cause and return the product (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). While cognitive dissonance may have a direct effect on product returns, consumer effort put into the purchase and return process affects dissonance levels which would subsequently influence future purchase intentions. Research by Maity and Arnold (2013) suggest a connection between prepurchase product search behavior and return behavior. When consumers put more effort into the purchase shopping process, higher levels of product and emotional dissonance are expected due to the conflict between the amount purchase effort (*PurchaseE*) and dissatisfaction with the product (*H1: PurchaseE → PdtD, H2: PurchaseE → EmotD*). Specific product return barriers such as liberal return policies have been found to lessen the level of dissonance felt (Powers & Jack, 2013). As such when consumers perceive more effort in returning a product (*ReturnE*), the level of product and emotional dissonance is expected to be greater (*H3: ReturnE → PdtD, H4: ReturnE → EmotD*). Also, emotional dissonance is hypothesized to be based on product dissonance (*H5: PdtD → EmotD*). As customers alleviate their cognitive dissonance by returning the product, it is predicted that as the source of their negative feelings, cognitive dissonance will have a negative effect on future purchase intentions (*PI*) from the retailer (*H6: PdtD → PI, H7: EmotD → PI*). Next, recreational shoppers engage in experiential shopping and consider shopping to be essential to oneself and an expression of own values (Guiry, Magi, & Lutz, 2006). As such, because shopping is central to their self-definition, recreational shoppers (*RecS*) are expected to have higher sensitivities to negative feelings associated with product returns (*H8: RecS → PdtD, H9: RecS → EmotD*).

*Methods and Results.* 227 female participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a nominal payment. Prior research notes samples from this online panel to be more diverse demographically and more representative of the U.S. population than standard Internet or convenience samples typically used in academic research (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The participants were U.S. citizens (100%), white (79%), and 18-44 years old (81%). Most had at least some college credit (91%) and 50% had a Bachelor's or higher degree. Participants were asked to think of a clothing product returned within the last 9 months and complete an online survey. Survey items measured (1) product purchase effort, (2) product return effort, (3) product dissonance (Powers & Jack, 2013), (4) emotional dissonance (Powers & Jack, 2013), (5) recreational shopper identity (Guiry et al, 2006), and (6) purchase intentions. Items for purchase/return effort and purchase intentions were developed for the study by the researcher. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the measurement of the six constructs in the hypotheses; fit indices, factor loadings, construct reliabilities, and AVEs were all acceptable. Cronbach's alphas for items ranged from .741 to .931. Structural equation modeling using AMOS tested the hypotheses. Goodness of fit indices indicated an acceptable model fit (Goodness of Fit Statistics:  $\chi^2=231.014$  (d.f.=123,  $p=.000$ ), RMSEA=.062, NFI=.915, TFI=.948, CFI=.958). H3 (b=.162), H4 (b=.256), H5 (b=.225), H8 (b=.154) and H9 (b=.146) were accepted at .05 level of significance. No evidence of interaction or moderating effects of RecS was found.

*Conclusion and Implications.* Results show the effort consumers put into the purchasing of the returned product does not contribute to feelings of dissonance. Findings offer evidence that apparel shopping is "experiential" instead of work-oriented; effort invested in the shopping for a typical apparel product does not influence consumers' level of disappointment. Perceived effort in product returns contributed to both product and emotional dissonance suggesting the task of returning products is considered an activity that has no gratification value and can lead to feelings of discomfort. Most interestingly, neither cognitive nor emotional dissonance influenced consumers intentions to purchase from the retailer suggesting that product returns for apparel is considered a normal part of the consumption process and does not affect the consumer-retailer relationship. Finally, results show recreational shopper traits to be linked to stronger negative feelings regarding product returns and hence a higher level of consumption involvement.

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