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Seeking Emotion Enhancement or Uncertainty Resolution? A Dual-System Approach to Examining Post Purchase Information Search

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Product information search is typically assumed to follow the recognition of a purchase need and to occur before decision making. Once a sale transaction is completed, searching for information (e.g. price) on the purchased product seems futile and even irrational. Real-life observation and prior research (e.g. Russo and Leclerc 1994), however, suggest that such post-purchase search behavior is pervasive among consumers despite having no apparent consequence. In this research, we examine the prevalence of post-purchase information (particularly prices of already purchased products) search behavior in shopping and its underlying motivations. We propose two distinct reasons for this behavior—(1) to resolve uncertainty and ascertain that the right purchase decision has been made (Shani and Zeelenberg 2007); and (2) for emotion-enhancement particularly if consumers are confident of having made the right purchase decision. We draw upon Epstein's (1994) Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory (CEST) as an integrative conceptual framework for these two accounts, and investigate whether the two information-processing styles (experiential or cognitive) may differentially drive post-purchase information search. Specifically, we hypothesize that, while consumers who rely more on cognitive processing during decision making would seek post-purchase product information when they are uncertain about having made the right decision, consumers who rely more on experiential processing focus on their current shopping experience and tend to seek such information for emotion-enhancement purposes, particularly when they are reasonably confident that they have made the right purchase decision. We tested our hypothesis in two experiments. In experiment 1 (N=86), we traced participants' real-time search behavior in a two-stage online shopping experiment using the mouselab paradigm (Payne, Bettman and Johnson 1993). Participants were endowed with \$10 and asked to shop at an online shopping website selling five desktop toys (e.g. stress ball, wood cube puzzle), each presented in the form of a picture, a short description, size specification, and price. Participants had to purchase one item with the given cash. After making their purchase, participants were asked to shop at a second store selling ten desktop toys including the five they had already seen in the first store. (We counterbalanced which five of the ten products participants could buy in the first store.) After a short filler task, participants had to complete the Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI) as a measure of their information-processing style (Epstein et al. 1996). To manipulate participants' degree of confidence in whether they were paying a good price for their purchase in the first store, we told half the participants that the prices were discounted by 50% ("large"), and the other half, 10% ("small"). We found a significant crossover interaction between discount size and participants' information processing style on

their propensity to search within the second store for the price of the product they had already purchased in the first store ($p=.05$). Planned comparisons further revealed that whereas rationally-oriented participants were more likely to engage in post-purchase price search when the discount in the first store was small (57%) than when it was large (32%), experiential oriented participants were more likely to engage in post-purchase price search when the discount was large instead (43% vs. 27%). We replicated this result in experiment 2 ($N=273$) in which we manipulated participants' information-processing style prior to shopping. Participants were asked to complete two purportedly unrelated tasks. In the first task, half the participants were asked to describe a difficult decision they had to make in the past and in which they decided based on careful thinking and it turned out to be the right decision, while the other half were asked to describe a difficult decision they had to make in which they used their feelings instead. Next, participants were asked to imagine that they needed a new MP3 player and decided to buy one after looking at various models at an electronics store; they were told that the store was having a semi-annual clearance sale with the discount size being 5% ("small") or 50% ("large"). Subsequently, they saw another store that sells the same model of MP3 player they had just bought and had to indicate whether they would enter the store to check out the price of the player. Again, we found a significant crossover interaction between discount size and information-processing style on participants' likelihood to seek out the price of the MP3 player they just purchased ($p=.004$); while cognitively-oriented participants were more likely to search when the discount in Store A was small (61%) than when it was large (50%), experientially-oriented participants were more likely to search when the discount was large (64%) than when it was small (45%). Together, these findings lend a first look at two contrasting motivations that spur consumers to seek post-purchase information that might appear non-consequential, suggesting disparate situations under which different types of consumers would engage in such behavior.