Customer Experience Management in Retailing: Understanding the Buying Process

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Abstract

Retailers recognize that greater understanding of customers can enhance customer satisfaction and retail performance. This article seeks to enrich this understanding by providing an overview of existing consumer behavior literature and suggesting that specific elements of consumer behavior—goals, schema, information processing, memory, involvement, attitudes, affective processing, atmospherics, and consumer attributions and choices—play important roles during various stages of the consumer decision process. The authors suggest ways in which retailers can leverage this understanding of consumer behavior. Each of these conceptual areas also offers avenues for further research.
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Keywords: Consumer behavior; Postpurchase; Goals; Information search; Retail environment; Attribution theory; Attitudes; Affect and mood; Involvement; Attitudes; Decision process

The importance of understanding consumer behavior has never been more important to retailers. Whereas consumer research once was a task left to manufacturers of consumer packaged goods, retailers have embraced this responsibility, spending millions of dollars to research, understand, and influence consumer behavior. As we outline, academic research confirms the importance of such practices and we summarize the results of those efforts. Further, this paper develops an ongoing consumer research agenda that provides the authors' views as to the most important consumer issues worthy of retailers' attention.

As theoretical work in consumer behavior becomes more refined, retailing must keep pace and remain vigilant in the pursuit of deeper customer understanding. Building on the existing activities of retailers, we seek to provide a theoretical foundation for retailers' consumer research efforts. This overview suggests some specific consumer behavior theories retailers can use to inform and illuminate their customer understanding, ensure greater predictability, and identify sustainable retail advantages.

Specifically, our review of consumer behavior and retailing research suggests the following topic areas offer the greatest breadth of insights into consumer behavior in retail environments: (1) goals, schema, and information processing, (2) memory, (3) involvement, (4) attitudes, (5) affect, (6) atmospherics, and (7) consumer attributions and choices. We organize this existing research according to the five primary decision process stages to highlight the greatest contributions of the theoretical domains.

In Fig. 1, we propose an organizing framework. For each stage of the consumer decision process, we note the theoretical domains that have informed it and areas that offer the greatest opportunity for understanding customers. For example, memory research investigates just two decision process stages, though it may inform other stages as well. Although a host of theoretically

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Consumer Decision Process

	Need Recognition	Information Search	Evaluation	Purchase	Post-Purchase
Goals, schema, and information processing	•	•	•	•	•
Memory		•	•		
Involvement	•	•	•		
Attitudes			•	•	•
Affect	•	•	•	•	•
Atmospherics			•	•	•
Attributions and choices			•	•	•

Fig. 1. Consumer Decision Process.

critical perspectives might bear on our understanding of retail customers, space constraints prompt us to focus on a subset to undertake greater depth in our discussion.

We discuss each of the topic areas in turn, seeking to provide a concise overview of the nature and structure of these theoretical concepts to emphasize our research contributions to retailing, as well as the potential influences on retail practice, and note areas that demand further research.

Goals, schema, and information processing

Few human behaviors are as purposeful as shopping. To understand retailing and consumer experiences, we must realize that consumers attempt to achieve some goal by purchasing and using a particular product or service (Ratneshwar, Mick, and Huffman 2000). Consumers shop for various reasons, which may not include a specific need for a product or service (Tauber 1972); for example, they may need entertainment, recreation, social interaction, or intellectual stimulation (Arnold and Reynolds 2003). Regardless of the specific goals, they establish the progression of the experience, the consumer's perception of the retail environment, and consumer satisfaction with the experience. The same retail environment may produce very different outcomes and feelings, depending on the consumer's goals. For example, a crowded retail establishment may be exciting and stimulating for a consumer seeking entertainment but create a perception of poor service and frustration for a consumer who wants to purchase a specific product to meet an immediate need. Consumer goals also may vary as a function of the shopping occasion, such as whether they want to stock up or just fill in on that trip.

Nature and structure of goals

One of the earliest efforts to identify and classify the reasons people shop (Tauber 1972) suggests that personal and social needs motivate shopping, beyond the simple need to acquire some product. In the context of online shopping, Rohm and Swaminathan (2004) find that specific goals (e.g., variety seeking) prompt online shopping, whereas a desire for immediate possession motivates in-store shopping. Consumers seeking an authentic experience might be drawn to Trader Joe's, whereas those seeking a treasure hunt may visit TJMaxx.

Most work attempts to identify "typologies" of shoppers on the basis of their general orientation toward shopping and the relative value of specific goals for either consumers or types of shopping environments. Such taxonomies can help explain why consumers engage in various types of shopping behavior and thus may aid retailers considering a store repositioning or new opening. For example, a recreational shopper motivated by adventure or new ideas may want sales personnel and sensory experiences, whereas an economic optimizer would find such characteristics unnecessary and instead shop by mail or catalog. These typologies tend to be very general and offer little insight into how the goals of an individual consumer in a specific shopping situation influence his or her shopping behavior and experience. Moreover, new trade classes (e.g., Victoria's Secret, Wal-Mart) serve previously unrecognized goals, suggesting these typologies are dynamic.

Role of goals in consumer judgment and decision making

Goals influence how consumers perceive the retail shopping environment and its individual elements, their shopping behavior, and their satisfaction with the shopping experience. Specifically, goals affect the need recognition, information search, evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages (see Fig. 1). Morales and colleagues (2005) find that in familiar product categories, greater congruency between shopping goals and the store's external layout produces higher perceptions of variety and satisfaction with product choices, whereas in unfamiliar categories, congruency decreases perceptions of variety but increases satisfaction. According to Lee and Ariely (2006), goal-evoking promotions are more effective in influencing consumers' behavior when goals are less concrete, such as early in the shopping process. Research should articulate how congruity between consumer goals and the retail environment influences consumer evaluation, search, and shopping behavior, as we note in Table 1.

Cognitive psychology research offers a general approach for understanding how goals influence consumers' perceptions and behavior; goals reside at the center of a network of information and affect associated with products and retailers (Barsalou 1991). Goals depend on the consumer's needs and thus establish a context for organizing knowledge in memory (for more on memory see the section that follows). They also provide explanatory links between attributes of the shopping schema that facilitate cohesive categories and behavioral directions. By providing an organizational structure for other elements in the

Table 1
Summary of important issues worthy of further research.

Goals
- How does congruity between the shopping goal and the retail environment affect consumers' evaluation, search, and shopping behavior?
- How do environmental factors (e.g., economic conditions) influence consumer motives?
- How might the retail context facilitate shopper need recognition through in-store communications (e.g., point-of-purchase displays)?

Memory
- How do sensory memories interact with other memories to determine evaluations?
- How does this relationship depend on the environmental context?
- How does short-term memory affect evaluations when the online environment allows almost instantaneous access to information and comparative choices?
- Does the storage mechanisms used in long-term memory differ in their impact on processing and evaluations? If so, which model is most appropriate in different retail settings?
- What cues should retailers use to enhance customer evaluations, purchases, and loyalty?

Involvement
- Which types of in-store activities can retailers use to increase involvement (e.g., sampling, trials)?
- What is the effectiveness of offering food samples to increase involvement, trial, purchase, and satisfaction in grocery settings?
- Can retailers increase experiential trial through merchandise, such as when music stores allow consumers to sample and listen to music prior to purchasing CDs?
- Are experiential trials more effective when they include a host of products?
- What are the benefits of deeper processing for retailers that carry more merchandise and consumers who shop there?

Attitudes
- How should retailers or brand managers update their attitude models to reflect the balance between prior store/brand associations and new information?
- What are the trade-offs associated with different attitude assessments (e.g., conjoint versus Likert scales), and which best reflect consumers' evaluations?
- If attitudes are stored in memory, what cues can retailers use to evoke positive prior assessments when managing bad news or crises?
- How do retailers establish equity after they have reverted to a "sale after sale" mentality?
- How might retailers use research on reinvigorating old brands to save brands that once had both high awareness and very positive associations, when they have become less positive but awareness remains high?
- How can retailers employ attitudinal measures to predict the subsequent behavioral intentions and actions of their prospects and consumers?

Affect
- How does affect/mood influence information search, shopping behavior, and channel preferences?
- Does a negative mood result in shopping in comfortable/familiar channels, or does it result in visiting new and unfamiliar retailers?
- What makes a shopping environment more or less engaging/arousing to customers? What is the role of product assortment, service, and atmosphere in generating arousal/engagement? In what circumstances does customer engagement translate into higher sales and/or profits?
- What can be done to make the shopping experience fun, desired, and a treat?
- How do affect-laden signage/displays/end-caps influence consumer evaluations and choice? Is their effectiveness a function of consumers' inherent mood states?

Atmospherics
- What role does consistency between exterior atmospheric cues (e.g., parking lot, store exterior, signage, and window treatments) and interior atmospheric cues (i.e., ambient, design, social) play in shopping and retail patronage?
- What role does consistency between the atmosphere of the store and its Web site play?
- Do thematic designs within stores serve as attracting or avoidance destinations?
- What is the role of emerging ambient elements (e.g., scent, temperature)?
- How to atmospheric factors influence metrics such as sales and profits, in addition to evaluations and intentions?

Attributions
- How can retailers increase customer satisfaction through attributions to retail employees for positive events?
- How can retailers overcome consumer skepticism toward friendly employee behavior?
- What tactics as part of a service recovery strategy can prevent customers from blaming the retailer or in the case of a genuine mistake, how can the retailer help the customer forgive the retailer?

associative network, goals determine the relative salience of product and retailer features, as well as more abstract characteristics shared by products and shopping environments. Because they serve as an organizing context for cognitions and affect, goals may provide a general approach to understanding influences on shopping behavior and experience.

Research in cognitive psychology also considers goal motivators and organizing forces in the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of cognition and affect. Murphy and Medin (1985) argue that without some guiding force, people cannot determine which properties are relevant and useful for creating meaning; without direction and constraint, consumers might attend to an almost endless number of features while shopping. Goals can focus attention on, for example, the retail environment and exclude other properties as irrelevant; thus, they provide both motivation to seek and organize information (create meaning) and the organizing structure for forming associations. In this sense, goal-derived category structures are associative networks in memory, organized around a salient goal and constructed as people seek information and make inferences and evaluative judgments in pursuit of that goal. Within the framework of the consumer decision process (Fig. 1), these associative networks facilitate need recognition and information processing. The salience of the goal enables a hypothetical grocery shopper

to focus on buying ingredients for dinner and not be distracted by every promotion, product, and end-cap display.

Pervin (1982) defines goals as combinations of cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that organize and regulate behavior. The cognitive aspect is the mental representation of the goal and the paths to achieve it, whereas the affective component refers to the associations of a goal with particular attributes (e.g., "ideal" characteristics) or courses of action for its fulfilment. Thus, our grocery shopper may be more likely to notice the roasted chickens and have a positive association with putting something good on the table for the family dinner. Finally, the behavioral aspect involves the plan for goal acquisition (i.e., purchase intention).

Goal-derived categories do not emerge fully formed; early in a goal-driven constructive process, people form ad hoc, poorly organized categories based on the best information available (Barsalou 1991). More experience with a goal creates a goal-derived category structure, in which information relevant to a goal links more strongly to the goal and goal-relevant cognition and affect. When experience shows that some stimulus properties, such as specific elements of a retail environment, are irrelevant to a particular goal, consumers eliminate them from the category. Thus, associative structures span a continuum from loose, temporary, ad hoc structures to tightly integrated, permanent, goal-derived categories. Therefore, the grocery store shopper may learn to skip the bakery department but has always skipped cosmetics as locations that do not fit the dinner category.

The degree of fit between specific elements and the goal-derived category (category membership) is prototypicality, which reflects a graded structure. In retailing, prototypicality is the degree to which a consumer associates a particular retail environment or characteristic of that environment with a particular goal. When buying bulk commodity products, for example, a consumer may sense a strong association with the name and characteristics of a warehouse store, though a secondary goal also may be in play. Specifically, warehouse store consumers may have a primary goal of saving money but a secondary goal of hunting for treasure.

When engaging in goal-directed behavior, consumers often create specialized concepts. Purposeful consumers engage in shopping behavior to achieve certain goals or solve identified problems; the concept of goal-derived categories explicitly addresses why particular associative networks may arise and offers a theoretical basis for their organization and structure. This explication has significant implications for retailer image and the degree to which retailers can adjust that image. For example, customers might visit a beauty supply store to shop for beauty products even though those products are a better value at a grocery store. Consumers also choose one convenience store over another, even though both offer generally the same products. It appears grocery and convenience channels may need to make more concerted efforts to signal that they carry a broad range of products.

Goals also represent the organizing framework by which consumers identify the meaning of their retail experience and its elements. For example, Sam's Club should enjoy success if it develops associations with the goals related to the core retailer,

Wal-Mart. Instead of relying on factors such as store image and atmospherics as organizing elements, this approach suggests that goals linked to the shopping experience and individual retailers define consumer experiences. If consumers do not link a retailer with their goals, then to store information about that retailer, they must construct an ad hoc category structure, which lacks an organizing framework. The retail setting itself may provide meaning for the shopping experience, but this meaning is unlikely to be long lasting or motivational, which indicates the retailer is unlikely to be part of consumers' consideration sets in future.

Goals and goal-derived categories also provide a useful way of organizing and conceptualizing other dimensions of consumer behavior. For example, the organization and retrieval of information in memory relies on goals, and motivation and the search process are directed by them. Attitudes and affect are part of the network of associations with goal-derived categories, and the very meaning of cues in the retail environment (atmospherics) depends on the goals of the shopper. Understanding these dimensions requires an initial understanding of the purposiveness of consumer behavior and the goals that drive shopping activities. As Fig. 1 indicates, goals affect consumer behavior and assessments of how well a retailer's products satisfy consumers' needs.

Memory

As a field dedicated to the function of the mind, psychology has long studied memory and the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information. The following brief review of memory research addresses these key constructs with significant implications for consumer behavior and retailing, including how information enters memory, how information is retained in memory, and how it is accessed from memory when needed. The association between retailing and memory crosses all three stages.

Nature and structure of memory

Encoding

Encoding depends on the level at which people process information, ranging from preattentive to elaboration (Craik and Lockhart 1972). The dominant type of processing depends on the motivation, ability, and opportunity to process information (MacInnis and Jaworski 1989), and people typically encode information according to its sensory meaning (e.g., color, shape), sense of familiarity, or semantic meaning (Solomon 2008). Various retailers capitalize on the power of memory by creating a strong link between the brand and a color or icon (e.g., Target's red bulls-eye, Wal-Mart's yellow smiling face).

According to Zajonc (1980), preferences can develop through mere exposure and sensory-level processing. While some brand and ad evaluation research supports this contention (Janiszewski 1993) others suggests that at least a minimal level of processing is required to form affective evaluations (Obermiller 1985). For example, Leigh (1992) finds that people consider sensory inputs easier to process when they agree in modality.

Consumer research also uses sensory processing to clarify the role of imagery in consumers' learning, choices, and satisfaction (MacInnis and Price 1987) and posits that it relates more to positive than to negative affective reactions (Herr and Page 2004).

Storage

In the storage stage, memory is sensory, short-term, or more long-term (Solomon 2008). High-capacity sensory memory often is automatic, but it also is very temporary and based on simple perceptions. Short-term memory is characterized by brevity and capacity, often referred to as working memory (Craik and Lockhart 1972). Finally, long-term memory involves the relatively permanent storage of information with an almost unlimited capacity and long or permanent duration.

Retrieval

Retrieval may depend on factors such as physiological attributes (e.g., age), situational factors (e.g., pioneering effects, mnemonics), contextual factors (e.g., primacy, recency), and psychological states (Solomon 2008). Older adults tend to use retrieved memory schemas to process incoming information, whereas younger adults process in a more detailed manner (Yoon 1997). Descriptive brand names lead to better retrieval and agreement with the benefits claimed by a brand (Keller, Heckler, and Houston 1998), and well-placed retrieval cues enhance memory for brands and evaluations of previous advertising (Keller 1987). Attitudinal models often incorporate contextual issues, such as attitude generation and retrieval (Cohen and Reed 2006). Finally, mood congruence can enhance recall for mood-consistent information, which enhances subsequent attitudes (Murray et al. 1990).

Consumer research also differentiates short- and long-term memory effects according to their processing (Biehal and Chakravarti 1986). Age may affect short-term memory capacity (John and Cole 1986), which can influence subsequent choice processes and decisions (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998). Thompson and Hamilton (2006) find that advertising imagery often succeeds when consumers use low-level processing and base their reactions on short-term memory. Another recent study indicates that capacity limitations have downstream effects on memory- versus stimulus-based choice decisions (Rottenstreich, Sood, and Brenner 2007). A rich tradition of consumer research indicates that for marketing stimuli to affect consumer behavior, they must induce enduring thoughts and evaluations.

Role of memory in consumer decision process

The level at which an item gets stored in memory affects its degree of influence on new experiences related to that item (Kerin, Jain, and Howard 1992). As the degree of abstraction moves from low to high, the item weighs more heavily on subsequent decisions. Sharma and Levy (1995) note how salespeople categorize customers who frequent their stores and the effect of those classifications on sales tactics and success. In short-term memory, retail prices have an effect at the point of purchase but then disappear; many shoppers cannot recall prices they paid immediately after purchasing an item (Dickson and Sawyer 1990). Vigilant consumers can recall prices because they process the information at a deeper level and move the price information into their long-term memories (Wakefield and Inman 1993). (For more on the role of pricing in retail, see Kopalle et al. 2009.) Thus, in the context of Fig. 1, recall of information about a product or previous shopping evaluation affects consumer behavior.

Schemas (Fiske 1982) may be the dominant storage mechanism for long-term memory about retail, though research calls for an updating of old stereotypes. Traditional schemas of male shoppers—requiring speedy service, complaining while waiting, and fear of the feminine—clearly have been violated (Otnes and McGrath 2001). Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor (1997) confirm that gender stereotypes provide poor predictors of service experience satisfaction, which implies that gender stereotypes for particular types of services may influence evaluations. Organizations also may create schemas that influence language, such as "brand codes" (e.g., Starbucks' "Frappuccino"), used in place of other product names (Schau, Dellande, and Gilly 2007), which causes consumers to order a Frappuccino at a Dunkin' Donuts. As Table 1 reveals, research should establish how retailer cues might positively influence customer evaluations, purchases, and loyalty, particularly by investigating how long-term memory storage (e.g., schemas) might differ with regard to its impact on processing and evaluations.

A positive relationship between schema typicality and evaluations often emerges in a retail setting. Ward, Bitner, and Barnes (1992) find that when stores are prototypical relative to the schema for their category, consumers evaluate them more positively, and Yim, Chan, and Hung (2007) find that people evaluate service options more positively when the focal service matches their self-schema. Barone, Norman, and Miyazaki (2007) show that schema congruity leads to positive outcomes for retailers when consumers perceive the motivation for supporting the cause is positive, regardless of the cause's popularity. Other factors moderate the relationship between schema congruity and evaluations (Morales et al. 2005), such as congruency between consumers' internal organization schemas and store layouts. Employees also develop scripts for service encounters, and adhering to those scripts can affect employee satisfaction and turnover (Arndt, Arnold, and Landry 2006; Solomon et al. 1985). Schema congruity may exist more among incumbents than newcomers, as successful retailers that break the mold show (e.g., Urban Outfitters). Despite their incongruency with established retail norms, these newcomers may align better with consumer goals. For instance, consumers may lack long-term memory schema that include the quirky collection of products featured at Urban Outfitters, yet they may seek individualized looks, which suggests Urban Outfitters can meet their needs.

Finally, retrieval processes have several retail applications, including reference prices (internal memory-based cues), stimulus prices, and context (Moon, Russell, and Duvvuri 2006). Price sensitivity is significantly higher among consumers who use memory- versus stimulus-based processes, because their reference price depends on past prices, whereas a stimulus-based choice defines price relative to those of competitors. Recent research also suggests the ease of retrieval of prices influences

price images of a store among knowledgeable consumers (e.g., more recall of higher prices, greater price image; Ofir et al. 2009).

Retrieval research often centers on reference prices (Kumar, Karande, and Reinartz 1998; Mayhew and Winer 1992); both memory of and confidence in price cues influence subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Mazumdar and Monroe 1992). Research beyond the reference price includes other retrieval cues, such as memory for stores and brands (Grewal et al. 1998). When consumers assess a multiple unit price promotion (e.g., 5 for $5), they draw on memory in a slightly different way, mediated by anchor-consistent knowledge (Manning and Sprott 2007). However, some retailers encourage reference price usage; Wal-Mart often posts clippings of competitors' circulars; Marshalls notes that they sell "Brand Names for Less"; Ross suggests we can, "Dress for Less." This suggests an indirect comparison. As Table 1 notes, further research could clarify how off- and on-line price transparency interacts with short-term memory to illuminate the role of memory in the purchase and postpurchase satisfaction stages (see Fig. 1).

In summary, memory encoding, storage, and retrieval play key roles in determining consumer behavior. Sensory, short-term, and long-term memory influence consumer decision processes uniquely. Research documents memory's effects on information search and evaluation, but more investigation should address its impact in need recognition, purchase, and postpurchase stages. For example, how can retailers trigger long-term memory schemas that allow consumers to recognize their need?

Involvement

Much of what retailers do seeks to attract attention and communicate a message—a point-of-purchase display, weekly circular, or Web site. Attributes of communication contribute to attracting consumers' attention, but an equally important attribute lies with the consumer: the degree to which he or she is involved, engaged, or views the message as important. These factors drive consumers' inherent motivation to attend to retailers' communications.

Nature and structure of involvement

Involvement refers to the degree to which consumers are inherently interested in information about a product and motivated to learn more about it (Zaichkowsky 1985). As an example, a shopper buying a suit is likely to spend a significant amount of time looking though suits, checking the labels to ascertain their quality, and trying on a few. In contrast, a shopper buying a t-shirt likely spends only a fraction of this time and effort. By encouraging consumers to "Have it your way," Burger King tries to increase the personal relevance of its products to make consumers more involved.

When people pay more for something, are accountable to others for the decision (e.g., buying cookies for the office), or make a personally important decision (e.g., sunglasses to reflect a personal style), they are highly involved in the decision.

Retailers proactively enhance involvement by personalizing the experience. Wawa allows customers to personalize their sandwiches, Starbucks allows customers to personalize their coffees, and many cell phone companies have found a new source of revenue by selling customized ring tones. In practical terms, highly involved consumers are interested in gaining more information about the product and processing product information in greater detail, presumably because they are more concerned about making the right decision.

Involvement then motivates processing. Highly involved consumers engage in more elaborate, extensive thoughts about a product, such that a consumer who might take home an advertised product engages in more in-depth processing of ads (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983) to learn more about each product and choose the best one. In contrast, low involvement consumers engage in superficial processing, influenced by basic positive or negative cues.

Role of involvement in consumer judgment and decision making

Need recognition

Involvement can interact with demographic variables to influence the need recognition stage of the consumer decision process. For low involvement (e.g., dry cleaning) but not high involvement (e.g., legal) services, consumers who strongly identify with being Hispanic are more likely to seek Hispanic vendors (Donthu and Joseph 1994). Among adolescents and their social networks, involvement with a retail channel (e.g., mall) significantly increases their communication about, the time and money they spend in, and their future intentions to shop in that channel (Lueg et al. 2006). Involvement also may be moderated by goals. A consumer motivated to find the right product naturally is more involved in the decision.

At the intersection with affect, involvement can influence motivation, such that high-involvement consumers regulate negative moods more than low-involvement ones (Puccinelli 2006), perhaps to scrutinize the product or advertising attributes more closely. Involvement also seems to moderate mood's effect on evaluation. When in a good mood, involved consumers evaluate the shopping experience more favorably (Swinyard 1993), whereas a bad mood prompts them to evaluate the experience more negatively.

Information search

Involvement affects consumers' subjective search experience; when highly involved for example, shoppers feel more excitement at the mall (Wakefield and Baker 1998), which can be fueled by in-store sampling. Some levels or types of involvement may appeal more; for example, consumers might seek an optimal level of product variety, as the success of limited assortment players such as Crate & Barrel seem to confirm (for the role of product assortment, see Mantrala et al. 2009). As highlighted in Table 1, further research should consider how retailers can increase involvement to this optimal level.

Involvement also moderates the effect of an advertised reference price on perceptions (Chandrashekaran and Grewal 2003),

such that only low-involvement consumers show a greater effect of assimilating advertised reference prices into their internal reference prices. When consumers are highly involved, they make greater prestige distinctions between stores (Dawson 1988); for an expensive briefcase, a consumer likely prefers a high-end department store to a computer store.

Evaluation

In an online setting, when consumers are highly involved, they tend to be more satisfied with a chat group (Van Dolen et al. 2007). They also judge the reliability and speed of the technology more favorably, which further contributes to their satisfaction. Another way retailers increase consumer involvement is by featuring ratings and reviews. Overstock.com found that including unbiased consumer reviews significantly increased the popularity of its site. Insights from practice also suggest that people trust consumer reviews more than expert analyses, perhaps because they offer more experiential comments. As Table 1 indicates, further research might suggest how to increase the effectiveness of experiential trials.

Collectively, involvement research suggests several ways retailers can engage consumers and make shopping fun. For example, consumers want concrete information about durable goods, whereas convenience goods consumers appreciate light-hearted, superficial cues about product attributes and qualities. Thus, both high and low involvement may suit consumer needs at different times. Currently, evidence of involvement's effect on need recognition, information search, and evaluation are well-documented, yet more research is needed to understand its role in purchase decisions and postpurchase satisfaction. For example, when and how might retailers benefit from deeper consumer processing (e.g., a store with greater product variety)?

Attitudes

Retailers expend significant effort trying to evoke positive attitudes toward their outlets and sites, as well as to the goods and services they carry. The logic is that if people have a positive attitude, they may be more likely to engage in behavior that benefits the retailer. While the theory of attitudes is well-established throughout marketing, research supporting the attitude–behavior link is equivocal. Yet most researchers still stop their inquiries at the level of attitudes without explicitly testing the link to desired behaviors.

Nature of the attitude construct

The study of attitudes dates back to the early 1900s, when they represented a focal point of psychology research. Early research in both psychology and consumer behavior viewed attitudes as multiattribute summaries of an item and the strength assigned to each feature (Schwarz and Bohner 2001); a summary reportedly could predict behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). This approach enabled a straightforward measure that consumer behaviorists could use in experimental work, instead of conducting field studies to observe real choice behavior. This trade-off became typical in publications that prioritized internal valid-

ity and control over external validity or managerial applications (Lynch 1982).

More recent attitude research focuses more on evaluation and less on predicting behavior (Schwarz and Bohner 2001). The early summation approach (cf., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) has been replaced by an assessment-based model (cf., Eagly and Chaiken 1993) that describes attitudes as assessments without a behavioral link. Thus, current research questions the validity of the attitude–behavior link across consumer scenarios (Park and MacInnis 2006). Like both psychology and consumer behavior research, retail studies on attitudes began with a debate as to whether attitudes predicted behavior or simply provided an evaluative measure.

Role of attitudes in the consumer decision process

A key contribution to the field of retailing that uses the multiattribute approach to attitudes is the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). SERVQUAL proposes that service quality provides an overall evaluation, similar to an attitude, of the service experience offered by a retailer. Because service quality influences patronage, it follows the predictive model of attitude and behavior. Retail research also finds that relationship efforts improve attitudes and store patronage, even among loyal customers (De Wulf and Odekerken-Schroder 2003). Retail loyalty programs increase customer lifetime duration and consumer expenditures (Meyer-Waarden 2007). Interestingly, patronage behavior does not necessarily lead to analogous improvements in customers' attitudes toward the retailer (Korgaonker, Lund, and Price 1985).

Both evaluative and behavioral models of attitudes suggest that attitudes must endure over time to have an effect; yet studies investigating attitude persistence remain strikingly absent (Sengupta et al. 1997), even though such research could validate that attitudes remain stable rather than providing a temporary accommodation to situational demands (Cook and Flay 1978). Their enduring nature underscores the origin of attitudes in stable consumer attributes. For example, education level and employment positively influence attitudes toward electronic coupon redemption rates (Chiou-Wei and Inman 2008). Similarly, younger consumers' attitudes toward a service consistently deteriorate in the presence of older consumers if the service requires physical ability (Thakor, Suri, and Saleh 2008). As outlined in Figure 1, attitudes influence the evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages, though more needs to be done to understand how retailers can employ attitudinal measures to predict subsequent behavioral intentions and actions.

Most studies examine only situational demands and short-term assessments and consider them representative of evaluations. Literally hundreds of studies address such factors and in general, they tend to investigate the effects of different types of consumers, contextual antecedents, and marketing communications on resulting attitudes. Consumer attitudes also seem greatly influenced by memory factors, as discussed previously. If consumers recall previous product use to form their attitudes, the content of memories may determine attitudes. The retail environment presents a ripe arena for investigating questions associated

with measurement issues, such as whether attitudes are stored assessments or formed continuously online, how stable attitudes are, and when to expect attitude–behavioral links.

Retailing studies also feature situational variables that affect short-term measures, such as personal experience with a product. The ability to touch merchandise influences product attitudes such that when consumers cannot touch merchandise they exhibit decreased confidence and increased frustration with the buying scenario (Peck and Childers 2006). Touch also provides an important diagnostic tool in consumers' opinions (Grohmann, Spangenberg, and Sprott 2007). Other research considers the effects of individual variables on attitudes related to retail products or retail formats. For example, an older consumer might find it difficult to develop a positive attitude toward Urban Outfitters, whose slogans seem offensive and oversized pants and shirts appear slovenly.

Context plays an important role for consumer attitudes, especially in retail environments. Perhaps the most studied contextual element in retail is atmospherics (Bitner 1992), as discussed subsequently. Yet context also can affect specific products. Broad-level context effects include the country-of-origin and the influence of patriotism or nationalism, national versus private-label brands, and shopping format (e.g., Garretson, Fisher, and Burton 2002). Low and Lichtenstein (1993) reveal that double deals affect attitudes positively only when they concur in their valence. Thus, the retail context can affect attitudes in various ways and as retailers seek to create an environment that promotes cross-buying, they must consider how retail store cues interact with the characteristics of the focal product (Kumar, George, and Pancras 2008).

From a marketing communication perspective, a retailer's voice may influence consumer attitudes. Research examines the impact of specific types of messages on attitudes, including Achabal et al.'s (1987) finding that nutritional information can affect attitudes, even when consumers ignore the information. In their summary of ten years of retail research, Grewal and Levy (2007) call for greater understanding of how health-related claims might affect consumer attitudes and subsequent behavior. Thus, the messages consumers receive can affect their attitudes, yet as noted in Table 1, retailers may need to update attitude models to understand how important new information (e.g., health promotion) can be integrated into prior associations.

Attitude's long history in marketing suggests many ways it might affect the consumer decision process. Efforts to examine its influence have yielded SERVQUAL and challenged the attitude–behavioral link. The effects of attitudes on the evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages are clear, though their influence on need recognition and information search remains less well understood.

Affective processing

Affect has gained prominence as consumer behavior and retailing researchers identify more opportunities to evoke it through the retail environment, employee interactions, and advertising. However, the time has come to identify how retailers can develop affect and make retail experiences fun. Affect is virtually ubiquitous; occasions in which people are truly in a neutral state are rare. Its influence on behavior appears similarly commonplace, such that affect may influence attitudes, evaluations, and risk taking (Cohen et al. 2008).

Nature and structure of affective processing

The omnipresence of affect in everyday life makes it critical to understand its role in driving customer behavior. Affect refers to an internal feeling state (Russell and Carroll 1999) and represents a general term used to refer to the collection of moods (low intensity, diffuse affective states) and emotions (differentiated, intense affective states with clear causes). Despite a century of thought and research on this topic, researchers still cannot answer a seemingly simple question: Do people run because they recognize that a bear is dangerous, or do their bodies automatically react to the bear (i.e., pounding heart, sweaty palms), which causes them to run? The question may seem outside the realm of a retailer's influence, yet research on the retail environment suggests otherwise. Loud music may cause a customer's heart to race, which implies either a signal to leave the store or a cue to an exciting environment.

Role of affective processing in consumer judgment and decision making

In the buying process, affect influences customers in several ways during the need recognition, information search, evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages (Fig. 1). During the first two stages, affect may determine where consumers shop; after a bad day, they likely resort to a familiar place and make a quick purchase, whereas a good mood may motivate them to try a new store and search its inventory comprehensively. Affect around the holidays seems to lead consumers to prefer more premium or nostalgic channels, accounting for the drop in Wal-Mart's food share during Christmas. In the evaluation stage, positive affect triggered by a product (e.g., suntan oil prompts thoughts of vacation) improves product evaluations. Finally, during the purchase stage, affect influences risk aversion and experimentation; an anxious consumer likely engages in risk-averse behaviors and chooses a familiar, comforting brand. Similarly, a drop in consumer confidence may lead them to favor value-oriented channels. Anecdotal evidence finds that negative consumer perceptions of the economy predict changes in buying behavior long before changes in consumer purchasing power occur.

Affect also may be a motivation for purchasing a product; unlike nonsurprise gifts, enhanced pleasure underlies the selection of surprise gifts (Vanhamme and de Bont 2008), in that gift givers are motivated to buy because they anticipate pleasure in giving a surprise gift. Affect may also play a role in determining how people shop. If we assume consumers seek to minimize travel distances during multidestination shopping trips to minimize the negative affect associated with longer travel distance, we can infer that affect drives the behavior displayed by consumers' multistop routes (Brooks, Kaufmann,

and Lichtenstein 2008). Thus, mood influences the channel consumers will choose; within that channel, the retail environment may make consumers more engaged or aroused.

Need recognition and information search

Early in the search process, advertising appeals often influence consumers through feelings, so the mood prompted by an ad can influence persuasion. If an advertisement causes a consumer to feel good, he or she is less likely to scrutinize the factual details of a message and be more persuaded by superficial attributes, such as the physical attractiveness of the spokesperson (Batra and Stayman 1990). Thus, how an advertisement makes consumers feel provides an important predictor of ad effectiveness (Edell and Burke 1987) and perhaps their attitudes toward the store. Prospective guests at a resort who received a video highlighting the enjoyment they would experience were significantly more likely to report that they enjoyed their stay than those who never saw a video (Naylor et al. 2008). These affective reactions may be similar for less rich media (Goodstein, Edell, and Mooren 1990), such as signage, displays, and other promotional materials that influence affect, customer experience, and customer behavior. Consumer affect may trigger affect-congruent memories, such that a happy person is more likely to remember happy times. The positive mood of a group of coworkers thus may lead them to choose TGIFridays for dinner, because their celebratory mood combines well with the upbeat environment.

Evaluation

As consumers move into the evaluation stage, affect likely influences how they perceive and evaluate products. A positive mood generally pushes consumers to think in a broader, more abstract fashion (Labroo and Patrick 2008), which can make them more open to new products, especially those that serve long-term goals (e.g., a gym membership). Positive mood may lead them to focus more on peripheral cues, be persuaded by packaging rather than product attributes (Schwarz and Bless 1991), and show greater tolerance of incongruence between a product and a brand (Braun-LaTour, Puccinelli, and Mast 2007). Product attributes that match a cognitive representation with a positive association can provoke more positive assessments of product quality (Compeau, Grewal, and Monroe 1998). For example, Sears and CVS appear on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* in hopes of affiliating themselves with a program that many viewers regard positively. As we note in Table 1, more research is needed to understand the influence of affect on evaluation and channel preferences and its interaction with the retail environment.

Purchase and postpurchase

In the purchase stage, affect may serve an informative function, especially if the feeling appears relevant (Pham et al. 2001), by exerting a mood-congruent weighting of product attributes (e.g., happy consumers weight positive attributes more heavily; Adaval 2001). Good mood also emphasizes biases for preferred brands (Meloy 2000). To make customers feel more positively about its service, BestBuy prioritizes service; when they gain

a positive feeling about the service, customers use this information to influence their decision about purchasing a service warranty.

Consumers who experience distress report greater purchase intentions (Mano 1999), whereas those experiencing boredom express higher purchase intentions only when the shopping experience is good. These implications of affect may be limited by consumer involvement, as discussed in a previous section. Moreover, younger consumers susceptible to information influences (e.g., recommendation from a knowledgeable friend) are more likely to enjoy shopping with friends and shop more often (Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol 2004), whereas their susceptibility to normative influences makes them less likely to shop with friends and enjoy the experience.

In a retail context, consumer mood has several implications for brand and product evaluations, including the likelihood of extreme evaluations: The good seems better and the bad worse (Adaval 2003). People in bad moods avoid stores hosting celebrations, choose more negative products, and pay less for products endorsed by a positive spokesperson (Puccinelli 2006; Puccinelli and Grewal 2008), and anxious customers are more likely to receive and positively evaluate supportive provider services compared with angry customers (Menon and Dube 2004). Thus, evaluations of a provider's response appear to mediate the relationship between affect and satisfaction with the service encounter.

Affect also may be facilitated by context; music playing in a store can prompt happy memories (Baker and Cameron 1996), and a Website with a cluttered or confusing layout can induce frustration. Several retailers identify ways to prompt a mood that can carry over to more important decisions. Banks give away free pens or offer cookies to children as a mood lever that they hope will move up to loan decisions, for example.

Finally, elements of the retail experience, other than atmosphere, can influence customer emotions. Search regret, which occurs when a customer cannot find the product he or she wants (Reynolds, Folse, and Jones 2006), is stronger when the consumer engages in greater search efforts; it is no accident that retailers often ask at checkout, "did you find everything you were looking for?" Such affect may depend on a consumer's motivation; consumers who come to look for and buy products in a craft market experience the context as more pleasurable and arousing than those who do not seek to look and buy (Dawson, Bloch, and Ridgway 1990). Choice confirmation may also be an important part of postpurchase satisfaction. Retailers such as Coach and Brighton have begun focusing on this after-sales dimension, telling customers that the purchased item looks great on them.

Affect, moods, emotions, and feelings thus clearly influence all stages of the consumer decision process. When people feel good, they process and prefer different information and products than when they feel bad. Their mood also affects how consumers interact with personnel in a retail environment. The nature of the impact of affect is complex and requires more investigation to comprehend how consumers can be engaged, aroused, and entertained through product assortment, service, and atmosphere.

Atmospherics

As noted in previous sections, atmospherics can impact the consumer decision process in many ways. Fig. 1 depicts its effect on the evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages, likely due to its integral role in retailing. It is difficult to imagine a retailer in the absence of its environment, yet some retailers clearly do more to enhance their atmosphere for consumers.

Nature and structure of atmospherics

Atmospherics, or the retail store environment, refer to both tangible and intangible aspects of a retail store design and can alter the customer experience. An array of retail environmental features influence the subjective experience of consumers, especially their pleasure and arousal (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). Specifically, environmental stimuli (e.g., store lighting) can influence a consumer's emotional state (e.g., pleasure, arousal), which in turn drive the consumer's approach or avoidance behavior (e.g., willingness to buy) (Baker, Levy, and Grewal 1992). For example, a retail store with soothing, dim lights might lead a consumer to experience the store as more pleasant and stay longer.

Design, ambient, and social cues

Research on the retail environment identifies three primary sets of cues: design, ambient, and social (Baker and Cameron 1996). Researchers consider external variables such as window displays, internal variables such as flooring, and decoration within design cues (Turley and Milliman 2000). To enhance this aspect, Crate & Barrel retains a designer for each store, charged solely with managing the store display and merchandise layout, despite the loss of central control. Layout, equipment, furnishings, signage, and the style of décor can affect consumers' perceptions of a retail environment and thus their likelihood of approaching or avoiding the product or store. For example, Trader Joe's and Starbucks' "handwritten" signs may attract customers by signaling a more authentic experience. Store layout may also influence consumers' expectations about search efficiency (Titus and Everett 1995), such that a large store with long, tall aisles may lead consumers to believe they need longer to find what they want. CVS has opted for shorter shelves at a significant loss in inventory capacity, yet the more positive atmosphere they create for their primarily female shopper appears worth it. As noted in Table 1, we require more research to know how the consistency between elements of the retail store atmosphere, such as design cues, and exterior atmospheric cues (e.g., store exterior, signage) influence consumer evaluations and purchase intentions.

Ambient cues influence merchandise value and store patronage intentions (Baker et al. 2002); for example, a wine store playing classical music sells more expensive wine than when it plays top 40 music (Areni and Kim 1993). Such ambient cues may signal the identity of the store's clientele to other consumers (Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg 2000). Lighting that is too bright can increase perceived wait times (Baker and Cameron 1996); the scent of apple pie may remind shoppers of home and prompt the purchase of brands from their childhood. We must learn more about these emerging ambient elements.

Social cues have been investigated only modestly (Turley and Milliman 2000), mostly in terms of crowding—too few or too many staff can negatively affect customer experiences (Baker 1965). Employee attributes also may be important and signal service quality (Baker et al. 2002), and customers' perceptions and interpretations of employees' behavior alters expectations (Cowley 2005). If consumers perceive that employees listen to them, they may develop trust, though effective listening requires actively sensing, interpreting, and responding, which can enable the employee to empathize more with customers (Stock and Hover 2005).

The interpersonal nature of the interaction between the customer and employee thus may be key to customer satisfaction in a retail environment (Goodwin 1996). Relationships between employees and customers that enable rapport and increase employee responsiveness result in greater customer satisfaction (Menon and Dube 2000). Recent research further indicates that reading customers' nonverbal cues enables employees to identify and respond to customer needs (Puccinelli 2008). Research also seeks to understand the drivers of satisfaction among customer contact employees (Bitner, Booms, and Mohr 1994). To create a more satisfying experience, high customer contact retailers have developed programmatic conversation starters, such as including the employees' country of origin on their nametags. Similarly, produce managers identify "my favorites" among their products, and waiters at Macaroni Grill write their name upside down on the tablecloth when they greet a table. These actions prompt customers to register greater personalization, which may enhance their retail experience (for more on the interpersonal component of atmospherics, see Verhoef et al. 2009).

Role of atmospherics in consumer judgment and decision making

Consumers appear to perceive servicescapes in an ambient, holistic manner, such that they have direct and provider-mediated effects on outcomes (Morin, Dube, and Chebat 2007). Music reinforces holistic perceptions and makes a provider stand out; pleasant music causes consumers to view the servicescape as more pleasant. Communicating a holistic image through music also increases the perceived consistency between the exterior and interior elements of a retail store.

Store atmosphere can interact with consumer perceptions to affect behavior. In particular, store atmosphere perceptions positively, whereas wait expectations negatively, predict patronage intentions (Grewal et al. 2003); customer density, consumer gender, number of employees, and number of customers affect patronage intentions indirectly through wait expectations, but customer density, music, and number of customers affect patronage indirectly through perceptions of the store atmosphere. At least one other person in a store is better than none, but if there are three people who stand too close to a consumer, the consumer's experience is less positive. Researchers have also suggested that atmosphere in the form of store format may interact with a

retailer's pricing strategy to affect consumer behavior (Gauri, Trivedi, and Grewal 2008). Communication styles that alter sensory experiences also may interact with product type, such that vivid pictures are best for "experience" products (e.g., MP3 player), but shopper control is more effective for "search" products (e.g., natural supplements; Weathers, Sharma, and Wood 2007). Thematic designs within stores could serve as attracting or avoidance destinations, as suggested in Table 1.

A broader consideration of consumer experience implies firms should strive to account for consumer co-creation, or how consumers deploy their own cultural resources, aided by the retailer's resources, to pursue personal identity and communal projects (Arnould 2005). A Utopian marketplace combines several specific elements: sensing displace (travel between two worlds), creating playspace, and performing artscape (Maclaran and Brown 2005). To attain "mythological appeal," as the flagship ESPN Zone in Chicago has, firms must create mindscape-related themes that combine entertainment, therapeutics, and spiritual growth (Kozinets et al. 2002). Consumers will even pay for co-creation, or at least the opportunity to be part of the last step of product assembly, as when children finish their American Girls or Build-A-Bears. A more recent model proposes that co-creation relates to customer loyalty (Auh et al. 2007).

Atmospherics online

When the first few pages of a Web site elicit greater pleasure, consumer approach behavior and exploration improves (Menon and Kahn 2002). However, a site that elicits stimulation, such as through lots of color and information overload, has a negative impact on further exploration. The importance of retail atmosphere extends to social cues online as well; for example, avatars' inherent social cues induce perceptions of Web site sociability, increase pleasure and arousal, and positively predict patronage and perceived value (Wang et al. 2007). As noted in Table 1, the importance of consistency between the brick-and-mortar store and the click-and-mortar site remains an open question.

Atmospherics focuses on the design, ambient, and social cues in the physical space in which retail consumer decision processes occur. Research documents clear effects on evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages but not its role for need recognition and information search as highlighted in Fig. 1. For example, how might the thematic design of a store influence information search?

Consumer attributions and choices

In the final stages of the consumer decision process, consumer attributions and choices become central to consumer behavior. Consumers' perception of causality as it relates to a retailer and its products can have a substantial impact on their perceptions of the retailer and their intentions to return to a store. For added complexity, consumers might have a positive experience, but if they attribute that experience to their own actions, rather than the retailer's, the experience is unlikely to enhance their view of the retailer.

Nature and structure of attributions

Attributions involve assigning a cause to an event, which can be related to the retailer, a product manager, customer, or any other entity. For example, when a retailer offers a sales promotion, if consumers believe it is a response to overstocking due to low demand, they likely think the products offered on sale are not good quality (Raghubir and Corfman 1999). Attribution theory encompasses diverse theories describing how people assign causality to events and draw corresponding inferences about causal entities. Attribution research has investigated the process by which causes get imputed to events, the information gathered, and its combination (Jones and Davis 1965; Kelly 1967, 1972). Whether consumers engage in attributional thinking and what causes they impute affects whether a specific event will lead to certain inferences that can feed into attitudes and future behaviors.

The attribution process suggests consumers behave as intuitive scientists, for whom unexpected events trigger attributional thinking (Hastie 1984). A retailer's behavior may be unexpected because it diverges from what others do or from its own past behavior. When events, such as promotions, are not unusual, attributions may not occur (Hastie 1984) or, if they exist, apply only to situational factors that affect all retailers equally, without affecting judgments.

Heider (1958) suggests that observers are more likely to attribute another person's behavior to their intrinsic properties (i.e., personal disposition) than to external factors (e.g., the situation), even when it can be attributed to the latter. He refers to this bias as the "fundamental attribution error." Kelly (1967, 1972) also proposes three factors that govern the manner in which people assign cause to events: distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus.

Distinctiveness reflects whether all salespeople use the same script at checkout or only a few do; more distinctive behavior likely gets attributed to the person or retailer for which they work. Consistency indicates how frequently the person engages in the behavior, such as when clerks always or only occasionally ask customers if they need help; consensus captures whether the behavior is performed for all or just a few customers. The interaction of these three factors leads to different types of attributions. If just one clerk is helpful to just one customer all the time (distinctive, consistent, low consensus), the attribution likely suggests the clerk has a special relationship with that customer (e.g., friendship). If all the clerks in the store behave the same way to that one customer (low distinctiveness, high consistency, low consensus), the attribution may indicate the customer is a VIP. If all clerks behave the same way at all times to all customers (low distinctiveness, high consistency, high consensus), the store likely receives the attribution—it must be store policy that all clerks should ask all customers whether they need assistance. These three factors help examine various retailing attributions, including price promotions (Raghubir and Corfman 1999), product failures (Mattila and Patterson 2004), and brand quality (Folkes 1988).

Attributional valence refers to whether the causes of a behavior are favorable, neutral, or unfavorable toward the entity

performing the behavior. The valence of an attribution affects not only the direction of the inference (e.g., brand evaluation) but also the processing of information about the context (i.e., industry and historic norms). Social psychology research indicates that even the most value-neutral words and behaviors have an evaluative dimension (Bargh 1992), such that ambiguous behaviors (e.g., crying, due to joy or sorrow) get disambiguated using situational or contextual cues (Trope 1986). As noted in Table 1, more research is needed to understand how retailers might increase customer satisfaction through positively valenced attributions to retail employees.

Rothbart and Park (1986) also find that the frequency of behaviors and the ease of imagining confirming or disconfirming trait-relevant behaviors both affect whether the observation of behaviors leads to trait inferences. In a retailing context, Raghubir and Corfman (1999) find that a positive behavior must be performed more often for a relevant trait to be ascribed to the person, perhaps because negative behaviors occur less frequently, which creates an expectation of positive behavior. The retail atmosphere also could facilitate attribution; a consumer who experiences happiness while shopping could note the store's well-designed displays and attractive salespeople and thus attribute the happy mood to the retailer. However, individual differences also affect the likelihood of attributional thinking (Cowley 2005), the assignment of causality to events, and the valence of the inference. For example, U.S. consumers are more likely than East Asian consumers to believe that a service failure is the provider's fault, presumably because Asians tend to attribute negative outcomes to an external situation (Mattila and Patterson 2004).

The manner in which consumers assign causes to events also invokes the idea of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994). When do consumers believe that actions reflect the choice of a brand, retailer, the situation, or marketing efforts to increase sales? Campbell and Kirmani (2000) highlight key issues that govern when a marketer's action might prompt persuasion knowledge (e.g., beliefs about the motives of marketers) that could affect consumer responses, both negatively and positively.

Role of attributions in consumer judgment and decision making

In the overall process outlined in Fig. 1, attributional thinking affects every stage, though most research focuses on the evaluation, purchase, and postpurchase stages.

Need recognition

A consumer can recognize a need due to intrinsic (e.g., hunger) or extrinsic (e.g., marketing communication) factors. Messages that suggest consumers under-consume a product (e.g., a spa weekend) could lead them to think about why they buy. If they decide they under-consume spa packages because they are frugal, the message might be persuasive. However, if instead they suspect the message is pushing them to over-consume on a luxury, it will not evoke a need.

Information search

During a search for information, the manner in which a firm has behaved in the past or its competitors behave may enable the consumer to assign a "market-related" or "firm-specific" cause to an event. For example, if a company frequently offers free gifts of a trial pack with complementary products (e.g., hair gel with shampoo), consumers likely infer it wants them to sample the product and convince them to purchase it later at full price. Alternatively, they could believe that this behavior is simply a widespread market practice.

Evaluation

The type of cause assigned to an event can influence the overall evaluation of a product or retailer. For example, the cause assigned to charitable gift giving could be positive that "the firm is trying to help others" or negative that "the firm is exploiting a cause just to look good and fool customers". For example, inferences that consumers draw about product line extensions affect their evaluations of the extended product (Lei, de Ruyter, and Wetzels 2008). Attribution also extends to perceptions of price-matching fairness, such that the perceived motive for a price-matching policy affects consumers' perceptions of fairness and retail shopping intentions (Kukar-Kinney, Xia, and Monroe 2007).

Purchase

The likelihood of purchase, purchase quantity, and purchase timing, as a function of a specific marketing action (e.g., new product introduction, product recall) depend on the reasons assigned to the event. For example, if consumers believe a price increase results from changes in the costs of production, they will likely accept it, whereas they may reject the increase if they believe that the firm just wants to increase its profits.

Postpurchase

Finally, consumers assign reasons for their purchases, which can affect their overall evaluation of the product, satisfaction with the purchase experience, and intention to repurchase. In the service recovery domain, Grewal, Roggeveen, and Tsiros (2008) demonstrate that the effects of compensation on repurchase intentions depend on attributions of the locus of responsibility; compensation is effective as a recovery strategy when consumers attribute the failure to the firm and view it as a frequent issue. As we suggest in Table 1, service recovery strategies will need to manage customer inclinations to blame and forgive the retailer.

In summary, the attributions for why a firm behaves the way it does affect all stages of consumer decision making, from need identification to postpurchase satisfaction. Some questions remain regarding the manner in which attributions might affect the customer experience in retailing (see Table 1). For example, how can retailers increase customer satisfaction through attributions of positive events to retail employees? If a retail employee helps a customer find a great pair of pants, how can the retailer ensure the customer infers that returning to that retailer will lead to similar success?

Conclusion

This review summarizes the contributions of various important consumer behavior theories and research streams pertaining to shaping and influencing customer experiences. The key domains we discuss (goals, schemas, and information processing; memory; involvement; attitudes; affective processing; atmospherics; and consumer attribution and choice) are not exhaustive, yet they offer a wealth of insights for the retailing arena. We hope this overview stimulates additional research into the host of retailing issues discussed herein and outlined in Table 1. These topics demand further research that can enrich existing retailing theory and practice.

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