Toward an Understanding of Consumer Ambivalence

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A case study of wedding planning is used to explore the concept of consumer ambivalence. Focus groups, in-depth interviews, and shopping trips were employed to generate text. A formal definition of consumer ambivalence is provided. Our analysis revealed four antecedents of consumer ambivalence: expectation versus reality, overload, role conflict with purchase influencers, and custom and value conflict. These antecedents were then linked to particular coping strategies that informants employed to manage the ambivalence that was generated. Suggestions of how future research might explore consumer ambivalence are offered.

In 1991, a young research assistant was conducting a study of wedding planning. Previous research had suggested that this experience is often intensely emotional. So, as part of her standard package of questions, the assistant asked: "Did you experience any positive emotions when shopping for wedding-related items?" One bride, Lynn, responds:

> Probably the biggest joy that I got was my dress. . . . I was . . . up in Chicago. . . . [It was] the second dress I tried on . . . and the people there were just very, very rude, so I didn't get the dress up there. . . . So the girl ordered it for me here. . . . So when we got the dress, it was like the generic version [of] the original dress I tried on. What had happened was . . . it was during [the Persian Gulf] war . . . [and] people were pushing their weddings up so far, and so fast. So instead of the actual hand-sewn dresses, they were mass-producing them. . . . So, I sat in the showroom, and just cried and cried because I mean, I didn't need the dress right away, you know. And they ended up giving my money back, and I went up and bought the sample in Chicago. It was a frustrating time, but it all worked out. (1991, Int. 1)[1]

What is especially noteworthy about this example is that

although Lynn identifies her dress as her "biggest joy," her description of the purchasing process also clearly reveals anger, disappointment, and regret.

Many studies have examined the effect of one specific emotion or valence in consumer contexts. However, the vignette offered above—as well as other recent studies (e.g., Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Otnes, Ruth, and Milbourne 1994; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993, 1995)—clearly illustrates that consumers' mixed emotions, or ambivalence, are also salient in the marketplace. And although some scholars have recently argued that consumer researchers should attempt to measure ambivalence (e.g., Priester and Petty 1993; Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995), to date no one has conceptualized how consumers experience mixed emotions, nor have the antecedents or consequences of mixed emotions been explored.

We believe a better understanding of the ambivalence that pertains specifically to consumer behavior is warranted for several reasons. First, the desire to experience mixed emotions may actually motivate individuals to participate in certain activities (e.g., Celsi et al. 1993). Conversely, our own research indicates that mixed emotions often result directly from interactions in, or structural features of, the marketplace and that ambivalence may in fact be a hindrance to consumers during the purchase process (Lowrey and Otnes 1994a).

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[1]We use the following notation throughout this article: the year during which the research took place (1991 or 1995), whether the source of text was an interview (Int.), shopping trip (ST), or focus group (FG), and the number of the encounter (e.g., "ST1" is the first shopping trip for an informant). The full text of the transcripts is available from the first author upon request.

In an effort to better understand this construct, this article reviews the existing literature on ambivalence, offers a theoretical framework and definition to guide further study of consumer ambivalence, employs a case study to illuminate the types of ambivalence that are unique to consumer behavior, and suggests ways to further explore this topic.

THE CONSTRUCT OF AMBIVALENCE

Although ambivalence may be underexplored in consumer research, it has a rich history in other disciplines—notably, psychology and sociology. However, the emphasis of each discipline with regard to this construct is both different and distinct.

Psychological Ambivalence

Bleuler ([1911] 1950) coined the term "ambivalence" when explicating characteristics of schizophrenia. Of the three forms he identified, the one that also occurs in "normal" individuals is "affective ambivalence," or the simultaneous experience of "pleasant and unpleasant feelings" for the same object (p. 53). This form is now synonymous with "psychological ambivalence," in which the emphasis is on the internal experience of mixed emotions. However, as we discuss below, three major points of contention exist with respect to psychological ambivalence.

Nature of Ambivalent Emotions. Both Sigmund Freud (1918) and Kris (1984) constrain the notion of ambivalent emotional conflict to the coexistence of love and hate. This restriction may stem from the fact that Freud often studied familial relationships, where intense instances of these emotions were no doubt highly visible. Others broaden the potential loci of ambivalent emotions to include all possible positive and negative variants (e.g., Bleuler 1950; Kernberg 1976; Meehl 1964; Sincoff 1990). However, no research truly addresses what types of emotions may be mixed. Thus, the issue of whether mixed emotions need be opposite in valence (e.g., if sadness and guilt are mixed, or are merely different manifestations of the same basic negative emotion) remains unresolved.

Simultaneous versus Sequential Emotions. A second controversial issue is whether mixed emotions must be experienced simultaneously, or whether ambivalence also occurs when individuals experience one emotion after another in the same context. Some limit ambivalence to simultaneously experienced emotions (Bleuler 1950; Minkowich, Weingarten, and Blum 1966; Sincoff 1990). However, others argue that ambivalence also encompasses sequential emotional experiences:

> It is not surprising that [complex objects] have the capacity both to attract and to repel, to excite and to inhibit, either successively or simultaneously. When the object is so many-sided as a person this is obvious. Our experiences with our human associates are practically never all pleasant

or all unpleasant and this is the more apt to be true the longer and the more intimately we know them. Consequently, objects would *through experience* . . . become ambivalent. (Rosenzweig 1938, p. 224; emphasis in original)

Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988) concur, observing that when individuals evaluate others toward whom they have ambivalent feelings, they consider "the situation from . . . different perspectives at different moments so that some of the resulting emotions may cooccur and some will occur in sequences" (p. 21).

The Resolution of Emotional Conflict. One final point of contention involves whether and how individuals can resolve emotional conflict. Opinions appear to depend on whether normal or pathological ambivalence is being discussed. Meehl (1964), Raulin (1984), and Sincoff (1990) all argue that the inability to resolve mixed emotions is a symptom of many forms of mental illness. Likewise, researchers describing normal ambivalence state that acknowledging and resolving mixed feelings are signs of maturity and mental health (Freud 1965; Holder 1975; Kernberg 1976).

In sum, all definitions of "psychological ambivalence" focus on internal, conflicting emotions toward an object or person. Yet the exact nature of this phenomenon is still open to debate.

Sociological Ambivalence

After psychological ambivalence was identified, sociologists advocated a broader definition of the construct. In particular, they argued that the issue of internal emotional struggle is not the only salient factor to be addressed. Rather, the study of ambivalence should also focus on how external forces, such as the existing social structure, can be sources of mixed feelings.

Many sociologists argue that a person's behavior in a social system may be best understood as the expression of multiple social roles, which are defined as a "set of patterned, functionally interdependent social relations between a social person and a social circle involving duties and personal rights" (Lopata [1991, p. 4], paraphrasing Znaniecki [1965]). Because of the centrality of role theory to modern sociology, and because many sociologists (e.g., Banton 1965; Znaniecki 1965) argue that individuals may simultaneously express multiple social roles that are governed by disparate norms, it is not surprising that sociologists located a prime source of ambivalence in the conflict among individuals' "complex role clusters" (Lopata 1991, p. 8).

For example, Hajda (1968) first described "social or structural" ambivalence as due to the "inherently contradictory . . . manifestation of simultaneous independence and interdependence of social relations, roles, and status[es] and the multiple loyalties, conflicts and pressures thereby created" (p. 23). Merton and Barber (1976) elaborated on this construct, which they termed "sociological ambivalence," as follows:

In its most extended sense, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors assigned to a status (i.e., a social position) or to a set of statuses in society. *In its most restricted sense* [it] refers to incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a single role of a single social status (for example, the therapist role of a physician as distinct from other roles). . . . *In both [senses]* the ambivalence is located in the social definition of roles and statuses, not in the feeling-state of one or another type of personality. (Pp. 6–7; last emphasis added)

Thus, individuals must often reconcile conflicting demands placed on them as they attempt to enact various social roles—each characterized by norms and counternorms that govern role behavior. When such norms clash, ambivalence often results.

Sociologists have also argued that as society becomes more complex, role conflict (and therefore sociological ambivalence) should increase as well. For instance, Gluckman (1962) observes that individuals in modern societies do not live their lives "on the same comparatively small stage, [nor do they experience] the relatively great development of special customs and stylized etiquette to mark the different roles which a man or woman is playing at any moment" (p. 27). Thus, sociological ambivalence may become even more evident as the boundaries between roles become blurred.

Cultural Ambivalence

A third type of ambivalence that has been identified is cultural ambivalence. Whereas sociological ambivalence is conceptualized as resulting from conflicting social roles and norms, cultural ambivalence pertains to conflicts between cultural values (Hajda 1968). Yet, the often ambiguous distinction between social norms and cultural values (e.g., cultural values are often expressed through social norms) is reflected in Merton and Barber's (1976) explication of three forms of sociological ambivalence that are clearly based in value conflict: "contradictory cultural values held by members of society," "the disjunction between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing those aspirations," and individuals who have lived in "two or more societies and so have become oriented to differing sets of cultural values" (pp. 10–11). Thus, the boundaries between sociological and cultural ambivalence remain indistinct.

Summary

Although the study of ambivalence is clearly salient in the social sciences, it is evident that controversy exists over definitions of this construct. Disagreements over the "proper" dimensions of psychological ambivalence and over the distinctions between sociological and cultural variants remain. However, we tend to agree with Hajda (1968) that "rather than trying to determine which behavioral level generates 'ultimate' causes of ambivalence, it

seems more fruitful to recognize that the origins of each kind . . . are intertwined with the other" (p. 25). In keeping with this position, our explication of consumer ambivalence not only focuses on the origins (antecedents) of consumers' mixed emotions but also pays particular attention to this intertwining or interplay between the antecedents.

CONSUMER AMBIVALENCE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION

As previously mentioned, a few studies have discussed ambivalence as an emotional outcome of consumer behavior. For example, Celsi et al. (1993, p. 15) report skydivers' experience of the "affective contrast of thrill and risk, of pleasure and fear." More recently, studies of gift giving describe the mixed emotions that emerge both during dyadic exchanges (Otnes et al. 1994; Sherry et al. 1993) and self-gifting (Sherry et al. 1995).

However, what is missing from the consumer behavior literature is an explication of the processes by which ambivalent emotions may be generated in the marketplace. Moreover, the distinction between psychological, sociological, and cultural ambivalence in the literature may mislead researchers into thinking that either internal or external factors are sufficient conditions for mixed emotions. Rather, emotions are always felt internally by individuals, and we will discuss how, at least in consumer contexts, what triggers ambivalent emotions is typically the interplay between internal and external components.

Equally interesting is the question not only of what triggers ambivalence but also of how consumers resolve their mixed emotions as they move through (or abandon entirely) the stages of the buying process. For if it is true—as psychologists argue—that individuals seek ways to minimize the inherent tension resulting from mixed emotions, this fact may have direct ramifications for consumer behavior.

Thus, our article seeks to extend the research that has focused primarily on ambivalence as an outcome of consumer behavior. As such, we explore the antecedents of consumer ambivalence, the internal and external components of these antecedents, and the coping strategies used to manage mixed emotions in consumer contexts. Moreover, because we are interested in how coping strategies pertain to consumer behavior, we have focused on behavioral coping strategies rather than on those that may be emotional or cognitive in nature.

Because the study of mixed emotions in consumer contexts is nascent, we offer the following definition of consumer ambivalence:

Consumer ambivalence is the simultaneous or sequential experience of multiple emotional states, as a result of the interaction between internal factors and external objects, people, institutions, and/or cultural phenomena in market-oriented contexts, that can have direct and/or indirect rami-

fications on prepurchase, purchase or postpurchase attitudes and behavior.

Sincoff (1990) observes that although a "broad definition [of ambivalence] sacrifices some degree of clarity and precision, it allows more complete understanding of a complex phenomenon" (p. 46). Our definition recognizes that ambivalence is characterized by the interplay between internal and external phenomena. Moreover, because emotions with similar valences (such as guilt and sadness) may have very different influences on consumer behavior, our definition allows the mixed emotions to be purely positive or purely negative.

METHOD

The Wedding as a Case Study for Exploring Consumer Ambivalence

The initial purpose of our research was to explore the ways in which aspects of Rook's (1985) framework for consumption rituals were salient to brides and grooms during wedding planning. This framework consists of ritual artifacts, or items used in a ritual context; ritual scripts, which guide the use of these artifacts; ritual performance roles, which entail individuals' participation in these rituals; and the ritual audience, or those who witness an event but who do not enact specific performance roles in it. Early on, however, we observed that brides expressed strong emotions during the wedding-planning process. Initially, we categorized these experiences as positive or negative. But in so doing, we could not account for the mixed emotions we observed in instances such as Lynn's account of her wedding dress, which served as the opening vignette of this article.

Given the paucity of consumer research that focuses on mixed emotions, we decided that a significant contribution would be to use our wedding-planning context—one that is rich in both personal and social meaning—to explicate consumer ambivalence. Or, in Wells's words (1993, p. 495), we chose to "start small and stay real" in order to explore a construct that might have broad ramifications for consumer behavior.

Research Design

Our project featured three stages: stage 1, in which same-sex focus groups were conducted with brides and grooms in June and July 1991; stage 2, in which nine of those brides were interviewed in-depth and accompanied by us on shopping trips; and stage 3, which consisted of a follow-up study of four additional brides in June 1995. Lowrey and Otnes (1994b) discuss the fact that although grooms may be somewhat involved in shaping the wedding, the bride is still the primary planner. Thus, we recruited only brides for the in-depth stages of our research.

Altheide and Johnson (1994) offer a template for interpretive researchers to follow, in order to explicate all aspects of the research project. Below, we follow this template in describing our research methods.

1. *Contexts (History, Physical Setting, Environment).* Research was conducted in a midwestern city in the United States (population 100,000), where a major state university (approximately 30,000 students) is located. In 1991, the country had been involved in the Persian Gulf War and was recovering from economic downturn; these events often affected wedding planning that year. Focus groups were conducted in a seminar room at the university. Interviews were held in informants' homes or other locations of their choice. Researchers also accompanied informants to bridal shops, florists, caterers, fabric stores, and other specialty shops.

2. *Number of Participants, Key Individuals.* Four focus groups (two each of brides and grooms) were conducted. Nineteen women and 15 men participated; group sizes ranged from six to 10, as recommended in the literature (e.g., Krueger 1988). Participants were paid $25 each. The 13 key informants were paid an additional $40. In stage 2, a researcher/informant ratio of 1 : 3 was maintained; in stage 3, this ratio was 1 : 4. With one exception, all participants were white, were between the ages of 18 and 35, and were either enrolled at the university or working full-time.

3. *Activities.* Focus groups explored wedding artifacts, scripts, performance roles, and the role of the audience (Rook 1985), and also helped generate questions for the in-depth phases. Groups were videotaped, and the conversations from the videotapes were transcribed. Personal interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were audiotaped, and the conversations were transcribed. Interviews were structured following guidelines by McCracken (1988); informants were also encouraged to discuss any topic related to wedding planning that arose. During shopping trips, researchers observed brides selecting gowns, flowers, catering menus, and other items. Shopping trips lasted 45–90 minutes. Researchers created detailed field notes immediately after each trip. In all, over 600 pages of text were generated. To ensure the trustworthiness of our interpretation, we employed multiple researchers who had multiple encounters with informants in stages 2 and 3, triangulated interpretations across researchers and authors, and enrolled the second author as external auditor of the text (see Erlandson et al. 1993).

4. *Schedules, Temporal Order.* Focus groups were held in June and the first week of July 1991 and lasted 60–90 minutes. In stages 2 and 3, each key informant was interviewed, accompanied on

a shopping trip, interviewed again, and accompanied on a final shopping trip (see Otnes, McGrath, and Lowrey 1995).

5. *Division of Labor, Hierarchies.* Six individuals were involved in data collection: the first author (female), the third author (male), and four female undergraduates. The first author devised the research design and questions and moderated all but one of the grooms' focus groups (conducted by the third author). The undergraduate students were enrolled in a minority research program at the university. The students recruited informants by placing flyers in bridal salons in the community and also screened responses to ads placed in the campus newspaper. They observed all groups and were trained in interviewing and shopping with consumers via role-playing exercises. The first author met with the students for two to four hours each week during the project and offered suggestions and comments to improve interactions during the interviews. Students completed all fieldwork in stages 2 and 3. The first and second authors read over all field notes and interviews and interpreted text. The second author (female) was not involved in data collection and thus brought a fresh perspective to the interpretation of the text and to the write-up of the article. The third author also assisted in the interpretation and final write-up of the article.

6. *Routines and Variations.* We scheduled interactions with key informants so we could observe wedding planning as a process. Thus, whenever possible, interviews and shopping trips were spaced one week to 10 days apart.

7. *Significant Events: Origins and Consequences.* The most significant events observed were budgetary constraints that led some brides to exclude desired items from their weddings. We discuss how this situation was often accompanied by consumer ambivalence.

8. *Team Members' Perspectives and Meanings.* For two reasons, the stance of the students in the field could be considered "naive." First, none had ever planned a wedding, and only one had ever been in a wedding party. Thus, they were often unfamiliar with aspects of wedding planning. We believe this perspective was beneficial, because as brides carefully explained their activities, they often revealed (intentionally or unintentionally) their own attitudes and opinions toward them. Second, the students were all African-American females, whereas the informants were white. Students were thus trained to carefully note when their own values differed from those of informants. Although racial differences could con-

ceivably have caused reactance in the study, all informants were advised of the research program, and all willingly participated in the study. We held the following assumptions at the onset of this study: (1) all brides, regardless of age, would regard their weddings as key events in their lives (supported); (2) older brides would be more financially responsible for their weddings and would thus exhibit more control over decisions (only somewhat supported); and (3) wedding planning would be accompanied by intense emotions (supported).

9. *Social Rules and Basic Patterns of Order.* The brides in our study revealed that customs surrounding midwestern weddings dictated a sit-down dinner at the reception. As we will show, the inability to provide this dinner often led to dramatic (even traumatic) emotional experiences by the bride. Moreover, even though some brides planned relatively modest weddings and not all ceremonies were held in a church, all selected formal wedding dresses.

Analysis of Text

Within single interactions with informants, and across the wedding-planning process, consumer ambivalence was both recognized and unrecognized by our informants; thus, our interpretation is both emic and etic. The interpretive process went through several iterations (Huberman and Miles 1994), involving interresearcher negotiation in order to arrive at an agreed-upon meaning of the text. We then created a quasi-public text that we shared with two colleagues and the editor and reviewers of this journal (Denzin 1994), all of whom influenced the final article. Our article adheres to a mainstream realist style, resulting in an "analytic, interpretive text . . . that [is] single voiced" (Denzin 1994, p. 507).

CONSUMER AMBIVALENCE: ANTECEDENTS, COMPONENTS, AND COPING STRATEGIES

By employing "critical incidents" from our text (Lincoln and Guba 1985), we offer an interpretive explication of the antecedents (including both internal and external components) and coping strategies pertaining to consumer ambivalence. We do not organize our analysis by psychological, sociological, and cultural ambivalence. Rather, for each antecedent, we discuss the psychological, sociological, and cultural components where applicable. Table 1 summarizes the antecedents and coping strategies discussed below. It is worth noting that each of the four antecedents discussed is associated with unique coping strategies, with one exception.

TABLE 1

ANTECEDENTS AND COPING STRATEGIES PERTAINING
TO CONSUMER AMBIVALENCE

Antecedents	Coping strategies
Expectation versus reality:	
Product-specific expectations	Merchandise return
Retailer-specific expectations	Change of purchasing venue
	"Toughing it out"
	Assertiveness
Overload:	
Product overabundance	Simplification
Task overload	Seeking assistance
	Extensive information search
Role conflict with purchase	
influencers	Resignation
	Compromise
Custom and value conflict:	
Resistance to custom	Resignation
Desire for self-expression	Modification
Inability to provide customary	Defiant nonpurchase
items	

Expectation versus Reality

Our first category of antecedents captures the fact that our informants' internal expectations about potential marketplace experiences were not always met in reality. Internal expectations conflicted with two main external phenomena: products and retailers.

Product-Specific Expectations. Wedding-related products and services are often ordered from catalogs, samples, and other promotional materials. Thus, it is not surprising that the ways consumers envision a product or service are not always realized upon receipt. Indeed, manufacturer error often caused intense consumer ambivalence among our informants. Recall that in our opening vignette, the dress that Lynn receives is clearly inferior to the in-store sample she used in making her selection. And even though she remembers her dress as her "greatest joy," she clearly suffers during the process of acquiring it.

Moreover, consumers not only expect products to be "right," they often expect them to be perfect. When this ideal is not realized, consumer ambivalence can result. When asked whether she had ever experienced mixed emotions during wedding planning, Gerry replied:

> Oh, yes. I never felt like I actually found *the* dress, you know, this is my dress and I can't live without it. I bought a dress that I'm happy with and I'll be glad to be married in it. . . . It looks great on me and everybody says it looks great on me. . . . [But] when I was tired, I was about ready to cry or hurt somebody. Because . . . I was down

to three dresses, and I thought, "I'll just find it." And most people just didn't like them. And fortunately or unfortunately, that has affected me. And they were very logical in their reasons why. . . . But at the time I was so tired and disappointed. . . . That was the most unpleasant emotional part. . . . I had fun trying different things on. I guess the hardest part was you keep trying to find one and you would expect to have that "perfect dress" feeling. And I never did that. (1995, Int. 1)

This example reveals that conflicts between internal expectations and external products and services often emerge because brides believe they must select *the one* option that encapsulates their own personalities and tastes. Similarly, Kate expresses both anxiety and awe over having to choose a photographer:

> I was very nervous about photographs, because . . . I want them to be perfect. I mean, who's good? I asked, I called so many places, you know, and said, "Have you heard of this studio, are they good?" And so on. . . . So I don't know, it's probably not negative feelings, but more mixed emotions than anything. Gosh, I have to decide because this is my wedding (1991, Int. 2)

Thus, the mixed emotions that our brides experienced when products failed to live up to internal expectations were apparently due to the paradox of having to find a product or service that can "singularize" the bride (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) from among typically mass-marketed, mass-advertised, and mass-produced commodities or parity services (Kopytoff 1986). Moreover, our informants were conscious that many brides *do* experience moments of "hierophany" such as the "perfect dress feeling," and no doubt felt it was their right to expect a transformative experience when selecting certain wedding artifacts as well (Belk et al. 1989; Otnes and Lowrey 1993).

Retailer-Specific Expectations. Many of our brides referred to their weddings as a "once-in-a-lifetime event," even "your one day to be a princess" (1991, FG). Given these expectations, it is not surprising that prospective brides expected retailers to be equally excited about their weddings. Becky describes her enjoyment of being fawned over: "As soon as [retailers] find out that you're planning to get married they . . . bond with you . . . I'm real excited about that." Often, however, brides' internal expectations were not realized in actual retailer encounters, resulting in a shift from initially positive to negative emotions. Lynn describes how her initial anticipation of selecting items was dampened by her treatment in a retail setting, clearly resulting in a mixed shopping experience:

> I think [retailers] have taken a lot of the joy away from [shopping]. . . . Like when I went to one florist, I just kind of stopped in at the spur of the moment. . . . It was like I was putting her out of her job. . . . I think when you're dealing with a bride or a mother-to-be . . . that they [weddings] don't happen that often and I think people should really go over, overboard with it. (1991, Int. 1)

Likewise, Dawn's description of her mixed feelings seems to stem from unmet internal expectations of how she should be treated in a bridal salon:

> I wouldn't say that it should be like royalty or anything. That's what I expected . . . at these places you spend a lot of money and on the prospect that you may buy . . . you know, an $800 dress. . . . I would expect them to have been a little bit more considerate of me. I still have mixed feelings . . . I guess I didn't feel like I was getting any kind of personal touches . . . [separating] the store from any other . . . that I'd had experience with in the past. (1995, Int. 1)

Both of these experiences reveal that brides' excitement about wedding planning can clearly be stifled by what they perceive to be retailer apathy. Indeed, their comments suggest that when retailers treat as mundane events that consumers consider to be sacred, the net emotional outcome for the shopping experience is consumer ambivalence.

Although Lynn and Dawn clearly expected a singularizing experience in the retail setting, there may be another reason our informants had such high expectations of bridal retailers. Merton and Barber (1976) describe how sociological ambivalence often emerges when a person engages in a long-term relationship with an expert (e.g., a doctor or lawyer) who possesses specialized and often otherwise inaccessible knowledge. It is clear that bridal salespeople are often key orchestrators of one of the most significant days of many women's lives, and brides may therefore expect retailers to impart key information to them (Otnes 1996). However, the "social" recommendations made by these experts may not be synchronous with the bride's internal vision of her wedding. As Baumann (1991) observes:

> The expert bridges the gap between guarantees of being in the right (which can only be social) and making the choices that one wants (which can only be personal). In the ambivalence of his skills, he is, so to speak, resonant with the ambivalent condition of his client. (P. 199)

Thus, brides may experience consumer ambivalence when the roles they expect salespeople to play (e.g., teacher) are different from the ones expressed (e.g., dictator of the wedding). For example, Julie describes how her happiness over the selection at one bridal salon is tempered by frustration with the owner:

> I've heard many, many horror stories about this lady, that she had the entire wedding party in tears. . . . She said, "This looks horrible together, you can't do that . . . " [But] she has what the girls want. She has the big-name dresses, she has all the fancy beads. . . . So that's why people go there, and she had what I want. Because I knew she had the biggest selection in my town, she has the best prices. If you can get past her, it is the best store in town. (1991, Int. 1)

Clearly, brides were able to separate their positive affect toward products from the disappointment they felt toward stores and salespeople. Becky's description of buying her wedding dress also illustrates this point. After describing her delight with the gown itself, she reveals her anger toward the postpurchase process:

> I found the dress when I was in Canada. . . . And the store . . . shipped it UPS, and it went through a private customs broker. . . . The store valued it low, so I wouldn't have to pay an outrageous amount of duty on it. [But] I'm ending up paying . . . $100 in duty for that dress. And I think that's a little outrageous. . . . So that really left a bitter taste in my mouth. Horrible. (1991, Int. 1)

Thus, although brides acquire desired products, the fact that they do so in spite of some retailers' actions can clearly result in a net emotional experience in the marketplace that is characterized by consumer ambivalence.

Coping Strategies Relating to Expectations versus Reality. Our informants employed four strategies to cope with consumer ambivalence that results from the interplay of unmet internal expectations and external marketing phenomena. The first is *merchandise return.* After Lynn (see opening vignette) realized her dress was not the one she had ordered, she returned it for a refund. Likewise, after describing her experience with Canadian customs, Becky decided she would return the dress, rebuy it, and have it sent through U.S. mail.

A second strategy for coping with failed expectations is *change of purchasing venue.* Lynn returned to the original retailer for her dress. Likewise, Becky loves fresh flowers but was shocked by the initial bid she received from a designer florist. She then chose another florist—who, in the end, was no cheaper. However, Becky remarked that the original florist "did not seem to care and offered no support." She went on to say that the store she chose offered an assortment of books and tips that she could use, so she was more willing to give them her service (1991, ST2). Thus, when retailers meet consumers' internal expectations of service, it appears they can ward off ambivalent feelings that may be generated when products cost more than expected.

A third strategy in this category is *toughing it out.* Unlike Becky, other brides chose to retain retailers, even when they had mixed emotions about doing so. This decision was due to their willingness to trade off their unhappiness with a retailer for access to desired items. Dawn continued to patronize a bridal salon, even after the following incident:

> When we first came into the fitting room and I was gonna try on a dress . . . she [the salesperson] gave me undergarments to put on . . . and she was gonna help me do all this. . . . I guess that made me uncomfortable and might have been a little surprising 'cause I think, in the past, I've had experience with salespeople that consider your privacy. (1991, Int. 1)

The last strategy that emerged in this category, *assertiveness,* was used by brides who wanted to acquire mer-

chandise from less-than-desirable retailers, while retaining a high degree of control over the experience. Witness Julie's actions toward the salon owner with whom it was necessary to "get past":

> I thought, I'm gonna go in there and if I see something I like, and if she says something unkind to me, then I'm either gonna walk out the door, or I'm gonna say, "Look I'm paying for this. . . . I mean, you can give me your opinion if you think it looks bad, but don't tell me I can't buy it. I'm sure as heck gonna buy it." (1991, Int. 2)

Thus, the consumer ambivalence experienced when internal expectations of products, services, and retailers are not met in reality has clear consequences in terms of consumer behavior in the marketplace. Indeed, not only can consumer ambivalence often result in loss of sales, but it also can result in the loss of customer patronage. And even if consumers remain with a particular venue, they do so in spite of failed expectations.

Overload

A second category of antecedents to consumer ambivalence, overload, captures the tension between our informants' internal feelings of being overwhelmed or ill-prepared during the purchasing process and the sheer volume of purchasing decisions to be made. Two particular situations induced consumer ambivalence: product overabundance and task overload.

Product Overabundance. Our informants often approached the purchase of goods and services with initial excitement, but because of the sheer number of choices in the marketplace, became apparent victims of information overload (Jacoby 1984). Note Becky's description of selecting items for her bridal registry—an event that inspired both awe and frustration:

> The French have a phrase for this. . . . They call it "embarras du choix," not being able to choose among things. And I don't know whether it's a negative or a positive emotion. Because I looked for a long time before I chose, especially my formal dinnerware. So I guess that's kind of an ambivalent emotion, not quite knowing what to choose because there's so much out there *to* choose. (1991, Int. 2)

Becky's description captures the often daunting fact that Americans have more choices in most product categories than anyone else in the world and thus may experience "everyday ambivalence," where the individual faces a "dilemma . . . in which he or she needs to choose between competing alternatives" (Sincoff 1990, p. 46). Moreover, the social, economic, and cultural significance of the wedding may mean that brides perceive even the smallest differences between products to be critical—and the sheer abundance of products merely increases the time and effort needed to find the perfect item.

Task Overload. The second source of overload involves the variety of tasks facing brides (and sometimes grooms) as they plan their weddings. Julie clearly expresses both frustration and enjoyment over her planning duties: "Sometimes you have it up to here, and just want to tell everybody to go away and leave you alone. So once you calm down, it's fun" (1991, Int. 2).

Although many informants discussed the ups and downs of trying to make sure all essential decisions were made properly, Jan and Wayne are the couple that best exemplifies task overload. They were planning two weddings—one in the United States and one in England. Jan describes her fear and regret over this decision:

> A quick wedding [was] our original intention . . . well, one of the reasons, apart from neither one of us being great planners, was the fact that our parents were on different continents. And it all was just a bit awkward. And we were both trying to work up the courage to tell our respective parents that we were getting married at some point and we'd tell them afterwards. And his mum called up one day . . . and she said, "Have you had any thoughts about the wedding?" . . . so I told her the truth and we both ended up crying . . . and that's when I realized I didn't want to do it that way. (1991, FG)

Likewise, Wayne describes how their happiness at including both families was tempered by awe and fear, stemming from their feelings of being ill-prepared to create these events:

> Our initial intent was to just wake up one day and say, "Oh, today's a good day to get married." Because we knew we couldn't invite both families to the wedding. . . . The whole thing was to just wake up and do it. And then we said it would be really nice if we did have a wedding for each family, so they could be included. And that's when we came up with the idea for two weddings. But we still wanted to keep it. . . . "Well, let's wake up and do it." And then just call everybody up. And all of a sudden, people started saying, "Well, you need to get chairs and food, and make sure you invite people, and what about the gifts?" And then, we weren't expecting any of that, so it was such a shock to us that we really had to come to each other to decide how to do it. Because we weren't ready for anything. (1991, FG)

It is ironic that even though it appears that Jan and Wayne conceived of the dual-wedding idea, the more they had to plan for each event, the more the concept (and resulting task overload) generated consumer ambivalence.

Coping Strategies Relating to Overload. Brides (and grooms) employed three mechanisms for coping with the consumer ambivalence attributable to overload. The first, *simplification,* involves an attempt to minimize the fuss of the wedding. To get a handle on the voluminous number of products available, Becky registered for only a few items. Other brides, such as Kate, patronized bridal salons that served as one-stop shops to reduce the number of options they had to consider (Otnes 1996).

A second strategy that brides employed to cope with overload is *seeking assistance.* Jan describes her dependence on her parents for help with the details of her English wedding:

I basically told them to get done whatever is possible . . . before we get over there, or forget it, because we've got nine days when we get over there and we don't want to spend [them] running around like chickens. . . . It's his first time meeting my family, so I don't wanna spend the whole week trying to run around and do everything. (1991, FG)

Likewise, when asked if she received assistance while registering, Becky replies, "My mom helped me, and my fiancé helped me, and my sister helped me." Thus, in both situations, close relatives were enlisted to minimize overload.

The third strategy that informants employed is *extensive information search*, which was used as they juggled an overwhelming number of products and/or task decisions. Although Julie reported "having it up to here" with wedding-planning details, she also states:

Right after [getting engaged] I went out and bought every magazine in the world, and we just sat down and looked through them all and ripped them up . . . and we made stacks. A stack for dresses, one for flowers, one for this . . . we used a lot of the books, and read all of the articles. (1991, Int. 2)

The irony of this situation is that the more some brides felt overwhelmed, the more they engaged in information search—which may have left them feeling even more overwhelmed.

Given the hectic lives of most Americans, and given the number of choices in the marketplace, it is not surprising that consumer ambivalence is attributable to overload. The internal happiness and joy often associated with events such as weddings, coupled with so many external product and shopping tasks, often yields a mix of positively and negatively laden experiences. For instance, many scholars and writers in the popular press describe both the anticipation and frustration consumers experience during the holiday season (Barnett 1954).

Role Conflict with Purchase Influencers

Although Merton and Barber (1976) focus on internal role conflict as a source of sociological ambivalence, they also observe that this phenomenon can emerge through role conflict between individuals. Moreover, Costa (1995) has recently argued that researchers must more fully understand "consumer roles," or the "behaviors, rights, and obligations" associated with the purchase of particular products and services (p. 218). Our text revealed instances in which consumer ambivalence clearly arose as brides experienced consumer role conflict with others as they made purchasing decisions for their weddings.

Most of the consumer role conflicts we observed occurred with family members who were directly involved in wedding planning. In other consumer contexts, role conflict arising from peer and reference group interaction is no doubt salient as well. But given the importance of the wedding as both an individual and familial event and

given that many of these family members were contributing financially to the wedding, it is not surprising that family members would be the most obvious purchase influencers and that consumer role conflict would arise with them. For, as Weigart (1991) notes,

Crosscutting age and gender is the fundamental conflict for the collective self; namely, my individual gain and the group's good. . . . The total family is not an Elysian field of saccharine togetherness and supportive warmth. Hardly! It is a transindividual force that binds individuals together in intimate bonds of intensity. (P. 95)

In some instances, the bride's internal vision of how goods and services should be used in the wedding clashed with a family member's vision of how they should be employed, resulting in consumer ambivalence. Early in the planning process, Jody describes her vision for her reception:

The dream reception I would have would be, just a huge tent. We live on a farm with a lot of acreage, it's gorgeous, just throw a tent up in the backyard, a band, real casual, anyone could just walk through, ham sandwiches, finger-type food, you know, just a big bash. (1991, FG)

Later, Jody reports that the reason she did not have her dream reception was because "that didn't go over well with my parents. Just liability, and weather, and all of those things. And I'm probably not being realistic. It probably would have been a hassle." Thus, Jody's own desires as a consumer conflicted with those of her parents. And when her parents' vision won out, Jody's enthusiasm for her reception plans was clearly tinged with regret. On separate occasions Jody remarked how disappointed she was in her new plans for the reception but later described the setting as beautiful and the caterer as "cool."

Likewise, an ongoing example of role conflict with a purchase influencer emerged as the separate visions Julie and her mother created for the wedding continually clashed. Julie describes her mother's modus operandi during wedding planning:

She just presents to us about four or five ideas, and then I usually pick one, and she says, "Well, don't you think that other one's better?" "You give me a choice, and then you tell me, no, you don't like that choice." (1991, Int. 2)

Julie also remarks: "I'd say [the] most help has been my mom . . . mostly it's been my mom. My Mom's wedding. Occasionally I have to say, 'Mom, whose wedding is this?'" (1991, FG). Thus, as Julie's mother "oversuggested" products and services for the wedding, Julie found herself gravitating from feeling grateful for her mother's help to being frustrated over receiving too much advice.

Similarly, consumer ambivalence also arises when the bride's internal vision is in conflict with that of her in-laws. As brides attempt to establish positive bonds with their new relatives, their enthusiasm about doing so is often dampened as conflicts surface over wedding purchases. Barbara describes how she and her future father-in-law disagreed over

the wedding invitations, and her frustration and subsequent relief over resolving this situation:

> I showed his parents the wording that I'd chosen, but his father is extremely, extremely traditional and he was very upset—well, he wasn't upset, but he just wanted me to know that traditions were there for a reason and that traditions were good and I told him . . . why I thought it was important—and he didn't understand, but we finally came to a compromise. But for a while there, it was really negative. Because, you know, mine were more warm and informal, you know, "You're our friends, you've shared in our lives, we want you to come celebrate with us." (1991, FG)

This attempt at consumer socialization on the part of Barbara's father-in-law clearly conflicted with Barbara's internal desires. And as she attempted to satisfy both her father-in-law and herself, her excitement over her invitations became mixed with anxiety and unhappiness. Thus, differences in what Costa (1995) terms "familial role expectations," "role performances," and "role perceptions" can often lead to conflict over the selection of goods and services, and hence to mixed emotions during the selection of goods and services.

Coping Strategies Relating to Role Conflict with Purchase Influencers. Our text revealed two strategies for coping with the ambivalence emerging from consumer role conflict. With the first, *resignation,* our informants opted to please others rather than themselves—often concluding that they simply could not acquire the goods and services they desired without harming an important relationship. For example, Jody gave in to her parent's wishes for a more traditional reception. Likewise, Julie accepted the fact that her mother would probably offer more advice than Julie would like.

A second strategy designed to counter the ambivalence arising from consumer role conflict is *compromise.* For example, Barbara's desire to please her father-in-law led her to change her invitations. These coping strategies indicate that with regard to consumer role conflict, individuals may reach a "point beyond which the negative element becomes so strong that overt reaction . . . becomes psychologically too costly and is finally discontinued" (Zielyk 1966, p. 63).

Custom and Value Conflict

As the previous sections illustrate, brides experienced ambivalence when the norms that govern the roles they enacted with either retailers or purchase influencers conflicted. In our final category of antecedents, we examine instances where conflict arose between customs and/or values. For our purposes, customs are norms that govern specific cultural events (vs. norms that govern the expression of roles)[2] and are reflected in behaviors or expectations of behaviors. Values, on the other hand, are enduring

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[2]We thank an anonymous reviewer for this definition of custom.

beliefs about modes of conduct or end states of existence that function as prescriptions for normative beliefs and behaviors (Rokeach 1973). Thus, values (such as patriotism) are more abstract than customs (such as displaying the American flag in a particular manner).

Because the wedding is created within both a broad cultural context and a subculture that may communicate specific (and sometimes contradictory) customs, it is not surprising that many variants of custom and value conflict contribute to brides' experiences of consumer ambivalence. Moreover, the values guiding consumption can also be discrepant in a culture (and therefore, in an individual). Weigart (1991) observes:

> Consider some accounts persons give for consuming: I earned it, so I can do what I want with it; It belongs to me, so I have the right to use it for myself; As an American, I may use as much as I can afford; God allowed me to have it, so He must want me to enjoy it. . . . Against these accounts, there is another stream of American values: it is not fair that I have so much while others are starving. . . . I have an obligation to give to my Country which has given me so much; the American way is to work with others; God has given me so much so that I may help others; finally, No matter how much I have, it is best to live simply. (Pp. 111–112)

We discuss three particular types of custom and value conflict resulting in consumer ambivalence: resistance to custom, desire for self-expression, and inability to provide customary items. We also address the strategies that are used to manage the resulting ambivalence.

Resistance to Custom. As brides select products and services for their weddings, their internal values may often clash with culturally mandated customs. For example, serving an abundance of liquor at a wedding reception is clearly at odds with the increasing concern Americans have about drinking and driving. And although presumably happy about providing liquor for her guests, Kate reveals both fear and anxiety about doing so:

> We might have free beer . . . and then champagne punch. And then we're going to put bottles of wine or . . . champagne on the table for the toasts. . . . The alcohol, I don't want any, hardly, I don't drink. But that's going to be . . . I mean there would be like, "What, there is no alcohol at the reception?" So I mean it's just tradition, I guess. But I'm not going to have an open bar or anything. I'd just feel responsible if someone got too drunk and got in a wreck or whatever. (1991, Int. 2)

Thus, even though Kate intended to supply liquor, she expressed concern when considering the potential consequences. This situation may be even more salient in ritual contexts, because, as Driver (1991) notes, "ritual occasions are always fraught with the possibility that aggressions usually held in check by social pressure may come free" (p. 154).

Another example of mixed emotions toward (but nonetheless, adherence to) custom emerged in Jody's ambivalence toward the bridal registry. As the following discus-

sion reveals, Jody had clearly internalized the broader cultural value of *not* mandating what gifts one should receive. However, this value is in direct conflict with the whole purpose of the bridal registry. As a result, Jody struggled with both her dislike of this commercial custom, while admittedly enjoying the possibility of receiving desired items:

> *Jody:* I don't want to register, I want people to buy me gifts that they want to buy me. . . . I just felt like registering, I think it's stupid. To go with lists of things that you want to have. I think it's really dumb. Yuck. It's so cold . . . to go write down that you want this clock at $34.99 and this at $62.99, that takes a lot of spontaneity out of giving a gift.
> *Interviewer:* Why do you think you went ahead and did it anyway?
> *Jody:* Because of pressure from people, that they want to know what you want to get. And those were things that I knew I wanted. And as long as I knew for sure that I wanted those, I didn't feel funny putting it down. . . . And as long as people are going to buy you a gift, why not have them buy you something that 20–30 years down the road I can look back and say, "Oh, I got this from, you know . . . Aunt Lulabelle." (1991, Int. 2)

Our informants also resisted other types of products that are mandated by either the culture or subculture. For example, American weddings often feature sacred variants of more mundane items, such as a wedding cake versus a plain cake (Belk et al. 1989; Otnes and Lowrey 1993). Yet, it became apparent that some brides had not internalized the notion that these items are sacred at all. However, their decision not to elevate these items was often tinged with ambivalence. For example, Kate clearly reveals a love/hate relationship with invitations:

> I hate invitations. . . . I've received so many that I look at and think, "Oh, this is pretty," and then 10 minutes after I write it on my calendar it's in the garbage. (1991, FG)

But also:

> I figure, you know, I might save . . . two or three [invitations], my parents might save one, and people who save those kinds of things of course will save them. . . . So I mean, they do mean a lot, 'cause you know, it might give someone the impression of what the wedding is going to be like . . . and the invitations are going to be simple but they're going to be important. (1991, Int. 1)

Thus, although still including some artifacts, our informants often voiced their opposition to including products or services in their weddings that the culture may regard as mandatory but that they regarded as mundane. Nevertheless, the conflict between these internal values and external pressures to conform often resulted in consumer ambivalence.

Desire for Self-Expression. Value conflict also arose from the discrepancy between an individual's value of self-expression, and the cultural norm that dictates confor-

mity to particular customs. In such cases, a bride's happiness over planning the wedding her way can clearly be tempered by anticipated cultural sanctions. Lynn indicates how her enjoyment over including personal touches in her wedding was checkered with anxiety:

> I'm having so many different colors [in the wedding] and people are just like, they can't understand why I'm doing what I'm doing. . . . And then things like my dog is visiting the ceremony and I'm putting a little bow on him. . . . And it seems like all these things are important to me, I'm getting negative vibes about from other people. (1991, FG)

Likewise, Jody relates how her internal desire for self-expression was engaged in a battle with subcultural expectations:

> You know, my silk flowers at the table, I'm going to put them in LaCroix bottles with a bow on it, and I just feel like there are going to be people, especially my work friends more than anything. . . [who] would be like "Oh." You know, [I'm] just kind of cheap, or goofy, or whatever. . . . And, "Boy, my wedding is not going to be like that . . ." It's just a head problem that I have, thinking about people being like that, but . . . I wanted to keep it more old fashioned, just everybody come, have a good time, drink and be merry, and not get into all of this other stuff. (1991, Int. 1)

Two interesting facts about these informants is that both were older than the typical first-time bride (Lynn was 29, Jody 35), and both were well established in their careers. One might expect the emotional price for self-expression to be reduced as one's identity becomes more secure. Indeed, Jody remarks, "I think there is a lot of pressure from people. . . . I'm a little older, and I'm getting over it." However, both brides still clearly acknowledged the emotional pitfalls of bucking the system by including nonregulation items in their weddings.

Inability to Provide Customary Items. Brides also experience consumer ambivalence about customary artifacts they are not able to provide. One clear example of this conflict emerged in our text. Specifically, the fact that society (in this case, both the culture as a whole and the midwestern subculture) dictates the inclusion of a sit-down dinner at the reception was a topic of heated discussion at one focus group:

> *Lynn:* It's like everybody expects a dinner when they come to my wedding. Well, they're not getting a dinner. And I'm disappointing them in this. And it's a burden to have to think that people are going to be disappointed . . .
> *Cindy:* And the media just plays on that so much. I mean, they just pound you with it, there's no way out. You'll never have the money, but . . .
> *Jody:* The reason we're spending so much is because of other people's, or what we perceive to be other people's expectations. You know, like you said, they're coming expecting a meal. (1991, FG)

Throughout the planning process, it became evident that Lynn's disappointment over her inability to provide a dinner cast a shadow over her reception planning, even though she clearly enjoyed her interactions with the caterers for her scaled-down reception. The following passage is from our field notes during the first shopping trip:

> [The caterer] asked Lynn how she felt about the total so far and Lynn said she was unhappy in the first place because they could not have a sit-down dinner. She said she liked the station idea, but to tell her if there wasn't going to be enough food. She joked that they not say yes to increase their sale. (1991, ST1)

And later, during an interview:

> *Interviewer:* How about the caterer? How did you feel when you went there?
> *Lynn:* Oh, I think they're wonderful. I think they're the best. But I think that's them. . . . I think every occasion for them is special. (1991, Int. 2)

However, later in the same interview, it became clear that even as Lynn attempted to reconcile her feelings toward this issue, she still had mixed emotions about not being able to provide the dinner:

> *Interviewer:* These people that you mentioned earlier, who are "expecting a sit-down dinner." . . . What's your feeling about them?
> *Lynn:* Oh, I guess I hope on that day, the way I feel it's not going to matter . . . I'm hoping I can't feel intimidated by those people because I'm going to be so . . . on top of the world anyway that it's not going to matter. (1991, Int. 2)

Thus, the discrepancy between what customs the subculture considers mandatory and what the individual bride can offer, can often trigger mixed emotions while she plans the "happiest day of her life."

Coping Strategies Relating to Custom and Value Conflict. Our informants employed three primary strategies for coping with the consumer ambivalence resulting from custom and value conflict. First, in addition to being used to mediate role conflict with purchase influencers, *resignation* was also evident as Kate included liquor at her reception, and Jody registered for gifts. In these instances, informants apparently believed it was better to go along with custom than to adhere to their own internal values.

The second strategy is *modification,* where informants included mandated artifacts in their wedding but incorporated them in a nonconformist manner. Lynn used this strategy when she included bridesmaids' dresses of different colors, as did Jody, whose "vases" on her reception tables were actually mineral-water bottles.

The third coping strategy our informants used is *defiant nonpurchase* of sanctioned items, or the refusal not to give in to cultural customs or values. For example, Becky opted not to include flowers on her reception tables. And Jody's description of how she chose to omit certain items is poignant in the consumer ambivalence it captures:

> I'm not going to wear the garter. . . . And I'm not going to throw the bouquet . . . and I'm not having the traditional wedding cake. . . . And, who cares? I mean people eat them, and you know, maybe it is pretty. And yes, I would like to go to a wedding and see the pretty cake, probably. I mean, I wouldn't want everyone to be like me. (1991, Int. 1)

In summary, our text revealed that consumers can experience ambivalence resulting from conflict between their own values and the customs their culture or subculture requires, or when their abilities to create a consumption event conflict with cultural mandates. Whether our informants designed aspects of their weddings to please themselves, or resigned themselves to the fact that limited resources would not allow them to adhere to customs, brides' happiness about planning their event was often tinged with anxiety and regret.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our purpose in this article has been to provide a context in which to observe and analyze the processes by which consumer ambivalence can arise. We sought to pinpoint the antecedents of ambivalence, examine the internal and external components of these antecedents, and link the antecedents to specific coping strategies for dealing with mixed emotions in the marketplace.

As a consumer ritual, the wedding-planning context clearly contributes to the emergence of, or emphasis on, certain categories of consumer ambivalence. Weddings are unique consumption events in their extended planning time, expense, elaborateness, and sociocultural significance. Consequently, the sociological and financial import of consumer rituals in American culture may mean that consumer ambivalence is exaggerated in ritual contexts. Thus, although exploring mixed emotions within ritual contexts is obviously a fertile area of inquiry, researchers should also attempt to discern which products and services consumed in more everyday situations would be most likely to generate consumer ambivalence. Research should also focus on whether the categories we have identified are applicable to more mundane consumption scenarios—and indeed, whether different antecedents of consumer ambivalence, and the components and coping strategies that pertain to each, emerge in these settings.

Because our sample was relatively homogenous, we were unable to explore a wide range of cultural and subcultural factors influencing consumer ambivalence. However, others (e.g., Peñaloza 1994) have observed that acculturation and other cultural processes influencing consumption can be fraught with emotion. Given the increasingly heterogenous nature of American culture, we believe that the issue of how subcultural and cultural factors may conflict with internal values, and thus lead to consumer ambivalence, is worthy of study.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we investigated what we believe is an important yet overlooked aspect of the study of emotions in consumer behavior: consumer ambivalence. In offering a formal definition of this construct, we provide a specific orientation and framework for addressing mixed emotions in consumption situations. In addition, our case study is a rich context in which to observe consumer ambivalence, and our extensive data set enabled us to track the processes by which mixed emotions emerged in this context. We have shown how consumer ambivalence can result from the interplay between internal emotional states and expectations, and external components that are specific to the marketplace. We also identified specific coping strategies relating to these antecedents. We believe exploring such relationships is key to understanding the consumer ambivalence that may arise within any particular context. Moreover, an understanding of consumers' complex emotional states is a necessary step in advancing the study of emotions in this discipline. We hope that further emphasis will be placed on understanding mixed emotions in the marketplace and that more holistic and complete investigations of consumer emotions will follow. The challenge to fully articulate consumer ambivalence lies ahead, as researchers attempt to better understand this complex phenomenon.

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