Managing Online Post-Purchase Dissonance: Effects of Choice Closure Interfaces on Satisfaction and Product Return

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Abstract

"Autonomy and Freedom of choice are critical to our well being, and choice is critical to freedom and autonomy. Nonetheless, though modern Americans have more choice than any group of people ever has before, and thus, presumably, more freedom and autonomy, we don't seem to be benefiting from it psychologically." The Paradox of Choice – Why More Is Less (Schwartz, 2004)

"The average American says they will start to experience second thoughts about buying items in their shopping cart after just 22 seconds." (Schmall, 2018).

Online post-purchase dissonance refers to a pronounced feeling of discomfort after buying items online, resulting in high return rates of purchased products, and has received great attention from researchers and practitioners (Abdulla et al., 2019). Despite the criticality for effectively managing this psychological uneasiness of online consumers, according to a recent survey, only 18% of online retailers actively trying to mitigate it, inducing great regrets for their purchase decision and huge return rates (18.1%), which is worth for $102 billion out of $565 billion online sales. This study focuses on the dissonance arising from the continual comparison of forgone alternatives after a difficult choice from a large comparable product set and proposes a choice closure interface as an effective mechanism to alleviate this dissonance by helping reduce forgone alternative comparison and increase decision completeness perception.

Based on the literature on choice closure (e.g., Gu et al., 2013), we propose online closure interface alternatives that allow people to focus on their experience with the decision outcome and bring a perception of the end of a difficult decision process. We test the effects of these designs of manipulating different reinforcements including direct reinforcements (e.g., liberal return policy) and social reinforcements (e.g., quality feedbacks from peers) at different presentation time periods (e.g., right after purchase vs. 24 or 48 hours later) for different types of products (high involvement vs. low involvement products). In addition, we manipulate trustful human reinforcers (real trustful human face vs. stylized face, animation, cartooning) and examine its interaction effect with social reinforcements. Then, we examine the nomological networks between choice closure interfaces, perceived choice closure (a form of reduced dissonance measured by perceived decision completeness and reduced choice comparison), post-purchase satisfaction, and product return intention by conducting a series of controlled experiments. We expect the online closure interface can be an effective and efficient mechanism to alleviate post-purchase dissonance and reduce product return.

References

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