

CHECKOUT FRUSTRATION: INVESTIGATING CONSUMER REACTIONS USING FRUSTRATION THEORY

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SUMMARY

Over the years, a scholarly stream of research has investigated the interplay between goal pursuit, affective processes, and problem-solving processes in terms of frustration (e.g., Amsel 1958, 1962; Freud 1958; Meyer 1956; Meyer and Ellen 1959; Shorkey and Crocker 1981). Despite the insights gained, questions remain about the nature of goal pursuit and the frustration processes when goals are blocked. It is this area of research that presents opportunities for marketers seeking theoretical and practical means with which to address frustration experienced in a retail checkout environment.

Research

Previous studies identified two response patterns in a frustrating circumstance: (1) an adaptive response that works through a facilitating process to attain the desired goal; and (2) a maladaptive response that works through a debilitating process that impedes successful goal attainment (Alpert and Haber 1960; Butterfield 1964). The frustrating situation, in conjunction with individual psychological characteristics, determines resulting behavior (Freud 1958).

Shorkey and Crocker (1981) defined three frustration-elicited adaptive response strategies: (1) overcome the obstacle; (2) circumvent the obstacle; and (3) avoid the obstacle. Individuals choosing adaptive response strategies exhibit a facilitating process aimed at problem-solving to address the frustration object. A maladaptive response pattern works through a more affect-laden approach aimed at addressing the stress, leading to any of four response strategies: (1) aggression toward the obstacle; (2) regression back to a less mature behavior; (3) fixation or repetitive behavior; and (4) resignation leading to inertia or apathy (Shorkey and Crocker 1981).

The present research expands the current understanding of frustration response patterns by investigating the role it plays as an underlying process mechanism when goals are blocked, and investigates the sequence following a frustrating event in a retail checkout environment.

Because frustration responses are associated with the source of blame for the frustration event (Rosenzweig

1934; Shorkey and Crocker 1981), this should apply to both adaptive and maladaptive responses. Moreover, maladaptive response strategies follow a debilitating process and hinder goal pursuit (Alpert and Haber 1960), while negative attainment of goals decreases desire for achievement and any associated behavior related to goal attainment (Weiner 1986). In addition, frustration tolerance is the acceptance of the undesirable in an effort to achieve future goals, while intolerance is an individual's attempt to make reality fit desire (Harrington 2007). Because individual factors influence the frustration process (Smith and Lazarus 1990), the ability to tolerate, or not tolerate, frustrating events is related to one's tolerance levels. Therefore:

H1: Adaptive and maladaptive frustration response strategies are associated with the source of blame (external or internal).

H2: In the case of a maladaptive response, newly created blocks are associated with the source of blame (external or internal).

H3: Individual differences in frustration tolerance/intolerance will predict felt frustration in a checkout situation.

Results

Cognitive responses examined by a panel of judges showed that 71.8 percent ($n = 79$) of the study's participants chose an adaptive response to the frustrating situation, with the remaining ($n = 31$) choosing a maladaptive response. Coders followed the definitions provided by Shorkey and Crocker (1981) and were able to identify all three adaptive response strategies adopted by respondents. In each case, respondents returned to goal-seeking behavior, thus supporting previous research (Amsel 1958, 1962; Butterfield 1964; Shorkey and Crocker 1981).

Results of coding for the maladaptive process revealed that a resignation strategy was used 100 percent of the time, supporting the claim that resignation is the most common maladaptive response (Shorkey and Crocker 1981). Results also revealed the presence of three newly created blocks toward achieving the checkout goal: (1) helplessness; (2) anger (including impatience), and (3)

self-preoccupation (includes self-presentation, self-preservation, self-recrimination, and self-advancement).

A chi-square test of association between adaptive response strategies and source of blame was significant ($\chi^2 = 22.11$, $df = 2$, $p = .00$) providing support for H1. (Maladaptive responses were not tested because only one was found.) A chi-square test to examine external vs. internal blame against each type of newly identified secondary blocks (helplessness, anger, and self-preoccupation) was significant ($\chi^2 = 6.68$, $df = 2$, $p = .04$), supporting H2. Finally, a regression analysis to determine if individual differences in frustration tolerance predict felt frustration in a retail checkout context was significant ($F = 11.90$, $t = 3.45$, $p < .001$), supporting H3.

Discussion

This study confirmed that consumers choose either an adaptive or maladaptive response to frustration, followed by an initial resolution strategy in an effort to return to goal-seeking behavior. The results also suggest that frustration responses are associated with source of blame, with anger most often associated when the self is to blame, and self-preoccupation most when often when the store is to blame. Initial evidence suggested that individual differences in frustration tolerance are related to felt frustration in a frustrating checkout scenario. Findings also confirmed the presence of all three adaptive resolution strategies. References are available upon request.

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