

WHEN CONSUMERS GET UPSET: MODELING THE COST OF STORE AVOIDANCE

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ABSTRACT

Store avoidance is persistent exit caused by consumer dissatisfaction. Path analysis shows that the cost of unsatisfactory purchase, the degree of financial hurt, and the attribution of fault influence the degree of emotional upset. Emotional upset influences how many people were told and whether the store was told, which, in turn, influence how long the avoidance persists. The cost of the items to the seller over the length of avoidance ranged from \$2.50 to \$21,000, averaging \$636.45, with a median of \$37.50.

INTRODUCTION

One variant of Hirschman's (1970) "exit" is avoidance, which Huefner and Hunt (1992) defined as being persisting exit. Avoidance, like other exit behaviors, may co-occur with voice, but can also occur independently. Rodgers and Sweeney (1979) state that "Consumer satisfaction has become an integral part of store selection—or more to the point—store avoidance" (p. 153). This paper studies the broad area of persistent exit—brand or store avoidance—where the consumer not only exits the store or brand, but continues that exit over time. Accordingly, this work uses Huefner and Hunt's (1992) explanation of avoidance:

Personal introspection coupled with discussions with others quickly brings one to the realization that there are some brands and stores we repeatedly use and there are other brands and stores that we intentionally refuse to use. When we repeatedly use the same brand or store we refer to it as brand or store loyalty. When we intentionally refuse to use a brand or store we refer to it as brand or store avoidance. In some cases, what appears to be brand or store loyalty

is just repetitive behavior and not purposive. What appears to be avoidance may also be repetitive and not purposive. True brand or store loyalty and avoidance involve intentional positive and negative purchase decisions and are not just chance behaviors. (p. 228)

This article uses the Huefner and Hunt (1992) definition and explanation of avoidance based on avoidance due to dissatisfaction with a store or brand. Hunt and Hunt (1990) state that avoidance behavior occurs when a consumer stops buying from their regular store and begins buying from a competing store not because of a strong preference for the competing store, but rather to avoid the original store. Lessig (1973) pointed out that in some cases a decision to shop a particular store is actually because of avoidance of another store. Keeping Hunt and Hunt's (1992) definition of avoidance in mind, there are other definitions and uses of the term avoidance, some of them closely related to our use and some less closely related. Avoidance due to factors other than dissatisfaction has also been reported. For example, Dickson and MacLachlan (1990) reported that shoppers avoid general merchandise and apparel stores that are generally thought to be higher or lower than the shopper's social class. Many readers will recall avoiding a store higher or lower in social class than they considered themselves to be. As an explanation of this phenomenon, Huefner and Hunt (1994) propose that:

...brand/store choice is as much a matter of avoidance as it is of preference. Sometimes by the time the consumer has eliminated all the stores being avoided, there is a very limited set of reasonable alternatives remaining from which to choose. For some purchases the whole set of brand/store alternatives may fall in the to-be-

avoided category and the consumer is left with the difficult task of deciding which of the unacceptable alternatives is least unacceptable. (p. 268)

Lemon, White and Winer (2001), in their discussion of future decision making, point out that avoidance can occur because the consumer's expected future from the use of that product, brand, or service is inadequate to warrant continued use. Godwin, Patterson and Johnson (1995) explain that avoidance can be a coping behavior:

where a person chooses to escape from or avoid the distress [T]hey would choose an avoidance strategy, in which case they will put the incident to the back of their mind and effectively escape from the anger by doing something unrelated to the situation such as reading a book or going for a walk. (p.159)

For example, LaTour and Henthorne (1994) concluded that both women and men "were troubled" by female nudity in advertising and proposed that this psychological discomfort "could potentially lead to an avoidance of that product" (as cited in Henthorne and LaTour, 1995, p. 561). Aron (2001) points out that:

there are other reasons for . . . avoidance behavior, such as variety-seeking, unavailability of a product (such as stock-outs or a long wait for an appointment), or the purchase . . . because of a discount or other form of promotion. (p. 110)

Drew, Mani, Betz and Datta (1999) focused on intended avoidance that develops during the contract but will not become an action until the contract expires. Contract expiration enables the exit, acting on the avoidance.

In the consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior (CS/D&CB) literature, there are a number of related concepts that refer to individuals' reactions to unsatisfactory consumer experiences. These concepts include exit, voice, and grudgeholding. Exit and voice are usually mild actions, simply leaving the store for now or telling

the seller or others of your dissatisfaction. Exit and voice have been common topics since Hirschman (1970) introduced them.

Grudgeholding is extreme exit, it carries a heavy emotional loading, and it persists over long periods of time. Grudgeholding, though a newer concept, has face validity, is evident through introspection for many people, and has been documented in Aron (2001), Parry (2003), and the Hunt studies (1988; 1990). Grudgeholding is usually a composite of voice and exit exacerbated by extreme emotional upset. Avoidance includes grudgeholding, but is usually much milder. Just as most loyalty is not extreme, most of it just occurring, so also most avoidance is not extreme, and is certainly not grudgeholding.

In the parallel opposite behavioral responses to satisfaction and dissatisfaction, short-term avoidance is the parallel concept of short-term return and long-term avoidance is the parallel concept of long-term return.

Regarding the importance of emotion to all aspects of consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, Hunt (1993) states "It is emotion, not cognition, that drives CS/D&CB" (p. 40). Hunt further states the following:

Think of our key terms: negative word of mouth, positive word of mouth, loyalty, repatronage, grudgeholding, retaliation, avoidance. The more deeply we come to understand these concepts the more we find they are emotion driven. . . . [W]e fail to remember that confirmation and disconfirmation don't become action topics until coupled with emotion. The evidence is now overwhelming that emotion is the critical element in CS/D&CB. This is not to say that disconfirmation shouldn't be studied. Far from it. Disconfirmation or confirmation is a critical part of the paradigm. However, not much happens, positive or negative, until the disconfirmation or confirmation is energized with emotion. (p. 40)

Huefner and Hunt (1992) presented the first extended discussion of consumer avoidance behavior. They reported the types of stores and

Table 1
Parallel Opposite Behavioral Responses to Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

| <u>Satisfied</u> | <u>Dissatisfied</u> |
|--|---|
| do nothing | do nothing |
| positive comment to individual (compliment) | negative comment to individual (complain) |
| positive comment to manager/owner (compliment) | negative comment to manager/owner (complain) |
| short-term return (repurchase) | short-term avoidance (buy elsewhere/other brand) |
| long-term return (brand/store loyalty) | long-term avoidance (grudgeholding) |
| word of mouth - positive (alert others) | word of mouth - negative (negative - warn others) |
| word of mouth - benefit (aid/assist/help seller) | word of mouth - damage (harm seller) |
| substantial helping (do nice things, pick up) | substantial hurting (retaliation) |
| compliment to outside agency | complain to outside agency (BBB, FTC) |

Note. From "Consumer Retaliation: Confirmation and Extension" (p. 114). *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior*. Huefner, Parry, Payne, Otto, Huff, Swenson, and Hunt (2002). Copied with permission.

brands avoided and the reasons for avoiding these stores and brands. Their study included three primary sections within a questionnaire. The first section contained the respondent's qualitative story of consumer avoidance. The second section was comprised of eight self-report questions related to each story written in section one of the questionnaire. The third section contained demographic questions of age and sex plus a listing of the specific stores avoided by the respondent (see Appendix A for the entire questionnaire). The purpose of the Huefner and Hunt study (1992) was to:

- (a) introduce the concept of brand or store avoidance behavior, (b) document the existence of brand and store avoidance by gathering consumers' stories, (c) look at the content of these stories to see how different complaint types relate to different store and product categories, and (d) obtain some indication of the scope of the behavior within and across store categories (p. 228).

The Huefner and Hunt study (1992) only examined and discussed findings from sections one and three of the avoidance questionnaire, whereas this study examines section two.

METHOD

The subjects, procedures and instrument are the same as those reported in Huefner and Hunt (1992) and are copied here for the reader's convenience (see p. 229)

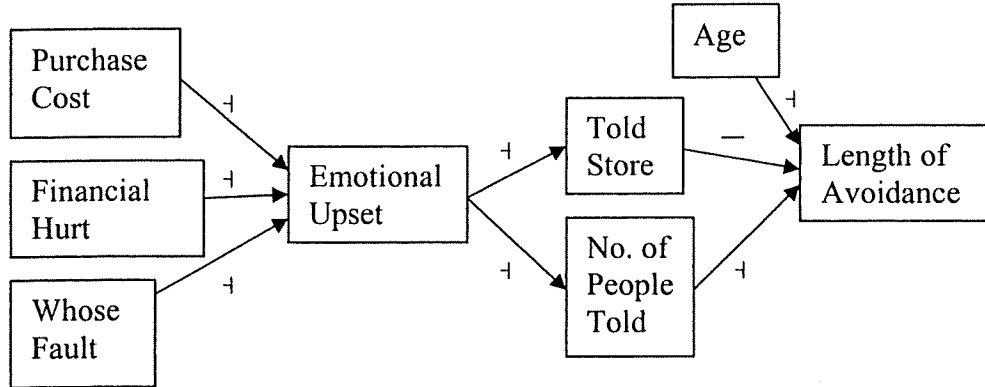
Subjects

Undergraduate students in a consumer behavior class at Brigham Young University, participating in an optional class research project, invited people to participate in a study. To assure a dispersion of ages, students were asked to find two respondents from each of four age categories: 15-18, 19-24, 25-55, and 56 and older. Students could substitute two individuals from other age categories in place of an individual missing in any age category. Thirty-eight students produced 333 questionnaire respondents. There were 63 subjects in the 15-18 age range (18.9%), 112 subjects in the 19-24 age range (33.6%), 113 subjects in the 25-55 age range (33.9%), and 45 in the 56 and older age range (13.5%). Of the 333 participants, 207 were females (62.2%) and 126 were males (37.8%).

Procedure

Students approached people and asked them if they would be willing to participate in a study of

Figure 1
An Emotion-Mediated Model of Consumer Avoidance Behavior



consumer avoidance. These people tended to be acquaintances of the students. Students emphasized the need for complete and detailed descriptions of the respondents' brand or store avoidance experiences. Respondents returned the completed questionnaires to the students who turned them in to the course instructor. A summary of the findings was provided to those participants who requested it. Students discussed the findings in class during the discussion of consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior.

Instrument

The complete instrument is shown in Appendix A. The focus of the current study is to analyze the eight self-report questions in section two that relate to the specific avoidance story in section one. The Age and Sex variables included in the current study come from section three.

Theoretical Model

Figure 1 presents the theoretical model of this study. We used the model to integrate the literature and to guide our research. This section provides an explanation of each component of the model and reviews the appropriate supporting theory and research.

The first part of the model proposes a positive relationship between three exogenous variables and how emotionally upset the consumer becomes. Prior

research supports this. For example, because consumers have preconceived expectations prior to a financial exchange with sellers (the price they expect to pay or quality of product and/or service), they are primed to be frustrated. Berkowitz (1989) defined frustration as "an external condition that prevents a person from obtaining pleasures he or she had expected to enjoy" (p. 31). Because frustrations are aversive events, they can generate negative emotions in people. As indicated by the fault variable, when a person expects to attain an objective, and that goal is deliberately thwarted by another person or object, the resulting displeasure is greater than an anticipated failure. Consequently, this stimulates a stronger provocation to negative emotion (Berkowitz, 1989).

The next relationship takes into account the aggressive instigation arising from negative affect. Emotion has long been viewed as a primary motivator of human behavior (see Zajonc, 1982). Negative emotions interact with and influence later psychological processes such as drive, motivation, and cognition (Izard, 1977). As negative emotion is triggered by some kind of personal offense, the resulting antagonism can be extremely intense and remain in memory for a long period of time (Schimmel, 1979). Therefore, this severe negative emotion can roll into the offende'e's cognitions and perceptions, which can make it difficult to avoid the instigation to aggress. For those who come to an awareness of their negative emotion, a sense of protest and defense arises (Hampton, 1988). This

sense of protest and defense does not diminish until those emotions are recognized and subsequently released (Bies and Moag, 1986). As suggested by Aron (2001), some of the most common manifestations of negative consumer emotion are complaining and negative word of mouth. Thus, in an effort to release the antagonistic feelings generated from the offensive experience, consumers will tell the store in order to seek redress and/or tell others to seek revenge.

The third part of the model examines the relationship between the behavioral manifestations of telling the store and telling others (acquaintances, friends, relatives, etc.) and the length of time of avoiding a seller. Telling the seller about the offensive experience is proposed to be negatively related to the length of time avoiding the seller. That is, if a dissatisfied consumer tells the store about their negative experience, their length of avoidance of that particular seller is shorter than if they don't tell the store. A possible explanation of the reduction of the length of avoidance could be that, by informing the store of the offensive experience, justice may be restored through an offer of an apology, refund of money lost, or some other restorative means. As support of this assertion, Goodwin and Ross (1992) found that positive store responses, such as an apology or monetary reimbursement, can increase consumers' perceptions of being treated fairly. Furthermore, research on dissatisfied consumers' repeat purchase behaviors has shown that if companies satisfactorily resolve consumers' complaints, then relatively high percentages of consumers indicate that they would be willing to do business with these companies again (Rust, Subramanian, and Wells, 1992; Spreng, Harrell, and Mackoy, 1995; Fisher, Garrett, Arnold, and Ferris, 1999). The opposite is proposed to occur when consumers tell other people about their negative experiences with a seller.

The number of people told is proposed to be positively related to the length of time avoided. Davidow (2003) explains this relationship as follows:

Can word of mouth actually influence satisfaction and repurchase intentions? Cialdini (1993) reported that public commitment can

lead to doggedly consistent future action. This seems to be applicable in high involvement situations because a commitment has been made. Word of mouth is in a sense a public commitment . . . Complainers would have a hard time spreading negative word of mouth and then repurchasing the product or claiming to be satisfied (unless there were no alternatives, such as a local phone carrier or other service monopoly). . . In other words, once consumers have made a choice (word of mouth valance), they will encounter internal pressure to behave consistently with that commitment. This principle of consistency is a powerful motivator for a complainant to behave in accordance with the word of mouth valance. (p. 71)

The TARP (1979a) study reported that "the greatest degree of continued brand loyalty [non-avoidance] was exhibited by those households that had complained about their most serious consumer problem" (p.12).

The final part of the model examines the relationship between age and length of avoidance. We simply wanted to account for the fact that the older a consumer is the greater the possibility for longer seller avoidance. Avoidance over a longer period of time is highly correlated with age, e.g. a consumer who has been avoiding for 20 years is not likely to be a teenager, whereas a shorter period of avoidance is independent of age.

RESULTS

A path analysis (AMOS) was conducted to test the relationships proposed in Figure 1. Purchase Cost, Financial Hurt, and Whose Fault predict the degree to which consumers were emotionally upset. This Emotional Upset strongly predicts negative word of mouth (Number of People Told) or the propensity to complain to the store (Told Store) where the purchase was made. Negative word of mouth then increases a consumer's intention to avoid the product purchased or store where the purchase was made, whereas complaining to the store decreases a consumer's intention to avoid the store or product. Lastly, as age increased so did consumers' intentions to continue avoiding a

Figure 2
Hypothesized Emotion-Mediated Model of Consumer Avoidance Behavior

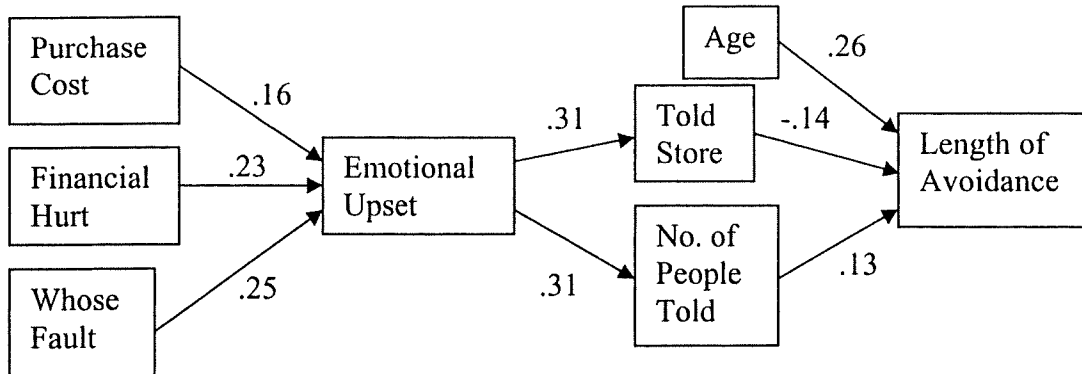
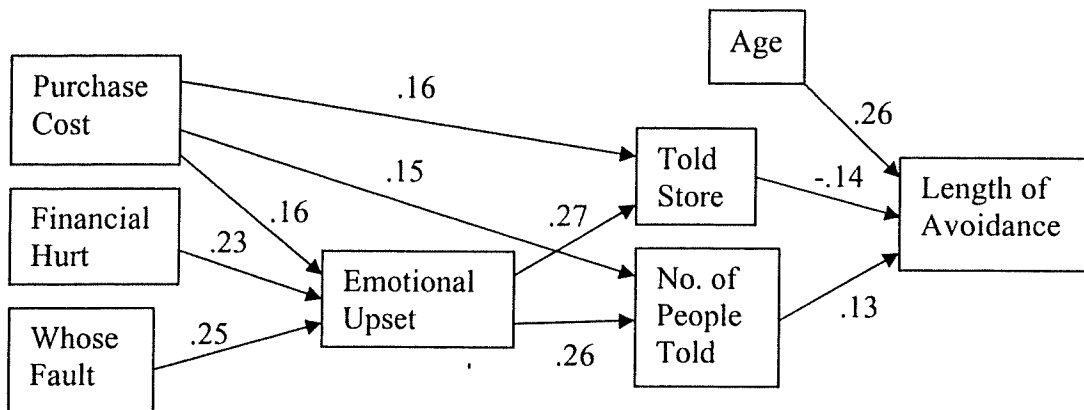


Figure 3
Adjusted Emotion-Mediated Model of Consumer Avoidance Behavior



product or store. The hypothesized model (Figure 2) resulted in an adequate fit (NFI = .921, CFI = .932, TLI = .854, RMSEA = .072, and $\chi^2(13) = 69.323$, $p < .0001$). Although we have reported the χ^2 statistic, there are known issues as to the validity of this statistic not holding true when sample size is large, such as in this research (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1993). Byrne has commented that, "findings of well-fitting hypothesized models where the χ^2 value approximates the degrees of freedom, have proven unreliable in most SEM empirical research....Researchers have addressed the χ^2 limitations by developing goodness-of-fit indexes that take a more pragmatic approach to the valuation process," (p. 81).

Modification indices revealed that there were significant direct relationships that had not yet been modeled between (a) Purchase Cost and Told Store, and (b) Purchase Cost and Number of People Told. This new model (Figure 3) shows the importance of cost related to avoidance regardless of emotion as a mediating variable. Individual relationships in the hypothesized and adjusted models and their critical values are depicted in Figures 2 and 3. All path coefficients in the modified model are significant. The fit indices for the adjusted model are as follows: NFI = .966, CFI = .976, TLI = .940, RMSEA = .046, and $\chi^2(11) = 34.163$, $p < .0001$.

DISCUSSION

Emotion is Critical

Different authors vary from article to article in how important they think emotion is to avoidance and other dissatisfaction responses. Huefner and Hunt (1992) and Malafi (1996) stated that avoidance is a form of persistent exit that lacks the emotional intensity of grudgeholding. Conversely, a year later, Hunt (1993) and, later, Aron (2001) stated that it is emotion that serves as the catalyst to behavioral responses to consumer dissatisfaction. Retaliation, avoidance, grudgeholding, repatronage, and word of mouth are all emotion-driven behavioral responses to consumer dissatisfaction.

We confirmed that emotion makes a critical difference. Referring again to Berkowitz' (1989) frustration-aggression hypothesis, consumers have an objective in mind prior to doing business with a seller. If this objective is perceived as being purposefully blocked by the seller, negative emotion often arises. This negative emotion instigates the propensity to aggress, which can be manifest in many forms, including negative word of mouth and complaining to the store. Because people tend to remain consistent with their behavior, the more people they tell about their negative experience the more perceived pressure they feel to remain consistent with their avoidance behavior. By informing the store of their negative experience, the length of avoidance is decreased. We suppose that this decreased length of avoidance could be due to the resolution of their negative experience through an apology and/or monetary compensation, but our data are inadequate to confirm this assertion. We now have a more clear understanding of the processes that lead from emotional upset through telling the store and through telling other people to the length of avoidance.

Monetary Loss to Seller

Our research is based on one avoidance story and the cost associated with that one avoidance. Actually, consumers do not usually avoid one item or service in a store. They avoid all items and services in that store over a period of time. We

leave it to the reader to conjecture what the total cost may be. For example, if you avoid your usual grocery store because you bought a 10 pound bag of rotten potatoes, you might not avoid only the potatoes at that store in the future, you might avoid everything at that store, thereby moving your patronage to a different store. Further, if that store you avoid belongs to a chain of stores, you might avoid that chain all together. For example, if a fast food restaurant serves you a bad hamburger, you may avoid all locations of that restaurant.

The following analysis reports the cost loss to the store of the avoidance stories in our study. Continue to keep in mind that we are reporting the revenue loss to the store of the avoided item, but not for any collateral losses. To ascertain the cost of consumer avoidance to a store, we computed a new variable by multiplying the Length of Avoidance and the Purchase Cost. The numbers that are subsequently reported are for the cost of avoiding one purchase. This new variable, Total Cost of Avoidance, represents the total dollar cost of lost sales to the store over time. This variable ranged from \$2.50 to \$21,000, with a mean of \$636.45 and a median of \$37.50. We recognize that this distribution is positively skewed. However, this distribution is based upon the avoidance of one purchase. As previously discussed, this estimate may be very conservative when compared to what total monetary losses can actually occur in consumer avoidance. To understand how these monetary losses varied as a function of emotion preceding either "telling the store" or "telling others," we reran the model in Figure 3 with the new variable, Total

Cost of Avoidance

Using the final model, depicted in Figure 3, we replaced the Length of Avoidance variable with the new variable, Total Cost of Avoidance, and reran the model. The following discussion is based upon the results of the unstandardized path coefficients obtained from the model. These path coefficients are interpreted similarly to unstandardized regression coefficients.

Based on the revised model, there was a \$259.33 incremental increase of revenue lost for every categorical unit increase in the number of people

told. The categories are "none," "1-2," "several," "many," and "everyone I can." Those who told 1-2 people cost the seller \$259.33 in revenue. Those who told several people cost the seller \$518.66. Those who told many people cost the seller \$777.99. Finally, those who told everyone they could cost the seller \$1037.32. Thus, negative word of mouth seems to intensify the monetary loss to the seller. Also, these results do not take into account any monetary loss caused by the effects of second and third party negative word of mouth.

Conversely, it was found that the seller could expect to lose \$78.78 of revenue if the consumer told the store about the negative experience.

In support of these findings, the TARP (1979b) study found that of their respondents "61.9% felt that a financial loss was possible.... Estimates of potential loss ranged as high as \$3,000. The average potential loss for the 504 households that believed economic deprivation would occur in the absence of problem correction was estimated to be \$142" (p. 9). These potential TARP losses are similar to the losses consumers reported in our study. In the current study, in a somewhat similar measure, the cost of the items to the seller that caused the avoidance ranged from \$0 to over \$1000 (our coding categories), averaging \$136.65. Inflation, since 1979, would lead us to assume a higher potential dollar loss than what the current study found. However, our conservative sixth category (over \$1,000) attenuates the distribution.

Managerial Implications

Management has to assess the tradeoffs between (1) making it very easy to complain so the store increases its potential of solving dissatisfaction before avoidance occurs and (2) increased complaints and expected reimbursements and other make-goods that could add to the store's costs of operations. The costs of avoidance and negative word of mouth are so great that it is in the store's best interests to do all it can to encourage and facilitate any consumer's complaint before avoidance has occurred so the store can make things more than right with the complaining consumer. In other words, a consumer is less likely to exhibit avoidance behavior if stores actively solicit ways to

mediate consumer complaints and reduce the emotional impact of the consumer's negative experience. It is especially important that managers instantly reduce negative consumer emotion to mitigate negative word of mouth and length of avoidance.

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Ad hoc editor:

JCS/D&CB thanks Newell Wright for serving as ad hoc editor for this article.

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Appendix 1

Page 1**BRAND / STORE AVOIDANCE CLASS RESEARCH PROJECT**

Many studies have been done and numerous books and articles have been written about brand and store loyalty - when a consumer buys the same brand or shops at the same store year after year after year. We are wondering if the opposite might also exist - when a consumer deliberately refuses to buy a brand or shop at a store year after year after year. We are calling this behavior brand / store avoidance.

Will you please tell us about three brands or stores which you intentionally avoid. You need to still be buying the product, but never this brand. You need to still shop at this type of store, but never at this specific store. We need to know the specific brand or store, and we need to know in as much detail as you can give us why you don't buy that brand or shop at that store. We've left you lots of room to write your explanation.

This is exploratory research. We don't know that we will find out. It is very important that you tell us all you can about each of the three examples. We will then search through all the stories to find the similarities and differences between them. The more you can tell us, the better chance we have of understanding brand / store avoidance behavior. We hope you will try to think of three quite different brand / store avoidance situations. Try to think of at least one brand example and at least one store example.

Thank you for your willingness to help us with this study. You may be contacted by more than one student asking you to participate. Please participate in this study only once.

You have our word that your response will be kept completely anonymous. We need your name, address, and phone number so we can contact you if we need to clarify anything in your questionnaire. As soon as your questionnaire is verified as complete we remove your identification from the questionnaire so no one, including us, can ever trace it to you. For this particular study anonymity isn't all that critical, but it is a sound research practice that we always follow.

Name:

Address:

Phone number:

If you would like us to send you a copy of our findings, check here

Student's name:

Page 2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SECTION I: Try to think of an example at least one year old. Be sure to describe the brand or store so completely that there is no chance we might confuse it with another brand or store.

Brand or store: _____ Type of product or store: _____

Please tell us all you can about why you avoid this brand or store. The more detail you can give us the more you help us understand avoidance behavior.
20 lines provided.

Please answer the questions on the back of this page.

Back of Page 2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SECTION II: You may have already mentioned it in your story on the other side of this page, but will you please answer the following specific questions about this specific avoidance example.

How long have you been avoiding this brand or store? (Circle one)

less than 1-2 3-5 6-10 11-20 more than
1 year years years years years 20 years

How emotionally upset were you at the time of the initial incident leading to your avoidance behavior? (Circle one)

not at all slightly somewhat very
upset upset upset upset

How frequently do you purchase this type of product or shop at this type of store? (Circle one)

Buy or shop Buy or shop First time
frequently infrequently buy or shop

If it was a specific purchase which caused your avoidance, how much did that purchase cost approximately? (Circle one)

\$0-9 \$10-24 \$25-99 \$100-500 \$500-1000 Over \$1000

How much did this hurt you financially at the time? (Circle one)

Not at all A little bit Quite a bit A major loss

How many people have you told that you avoid this brand or store and why? (Circle one)

None 1-2 Several Many Everyone I can

Did you tell the store or manufacturer? (Circle one)

Told Told Told both the store
store manufacturer and the manufacturer

As you think about the situation, whose fault was whatever went wrong? (Circle one)

All Mostly Both parties Mostly All
my my equally at their their
fault fault fault fault fault

Since you avoid this brand or store, which brand do you usually buy or which store do you usually shop at?

Pages three and four are identical to page 2

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SECTION III

Your current age:

Your sex: (Circle one) Female Male

For the following types of stores, please write down the names of any specific stores you intentionally avoid.

Grocery stores: _____

Department stores: _____

Convenience stores: _____

Automobile dealerships: _____

Banking services: _____

Gasoline stations: _____

Restaurants: _____

Furniture stores: _____

Sporting goods: _____

Hardware / home improvement stores: _____

Tape & CD store: _____
