18 Morally Questionable, Opportunistic Product Returns

An Analysis of the Consumer Behavior to Order Products on the Internet with No Concrete Purchase Intention

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Abstract: There are more and more consumers who order products on the internet without having a concrete purchase intention. Nevertheless, morally questionable and opportunistic product returns still remain a relatively underexplored research field. Due to the occurring negative consequences of increased product returns both for online retailers and the nature, it is relevant to address the motivation and attitude of the practicing consumers. Thus, the aim of the study is to find out what overall reasons and attitudes there are for consumers to generally order products on the internet with no purchase intention and if they make use of any justifications regarding their behavior (with reference to the neutralization theory of Sykes and Matza, 1957). As a research method, qualitative semi-structured interviews are conducted with consumers who occasionally act the indicated way. The results show that the consumers almost only refer to garments within their statements and that the predominant reasons for exercising the behavior is the need to compare various articles of clothing at home and the fact that the consumers commonly assume beforehand that not all products are going to meet their demands and expectations. Furthermore, they apply a range of justifications in order to dissolve the cognitive dissonance that results from the discrepancy between their attitude and the exerted behavior. In the end, three additional techniques of neutralization could be proposed: Comparison with other people or circumstances, Downplaying the negative consequences and Moderating own behavior.

18.1 Introduction

As the internet is increasingly becoming an area for trade, the electronic commerce has been gaining more and more importance and seems to be an indispensable part of the lives of today’s consumers (Heinemann, 2012). Furthermore, there are many users nowadays who occasionally order products on the internet with no concrete purchase intention (Keilmann, 2013; Hampe, 2014; Asdecker, 2016). Thus, numerous online shoppers already take a potential return into account while

According to the right of withdrawal, every consumer in Austria has the right to send any purchased item back within 14 days without giving any reasons (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, 2016). Therefore, customers have the possibility to consciously exploit those regulations, which is referred to as opportunistic behavior. Returns bring negative consequences with them, though. For the online retailer, there is additional cost with reference to the transport and processing of the returned goods. Both more employees and an operative return management process are needed (Pur et al., 2013; Asdecker, 2016). Besides, product returns have a negative impact on the environment regarding the emerging CO₂-emissions from transporting the respective goods.

While different thematic priorities concerning consumer ethics (e.g., Papaoikonomou, Ryan, & Ginieis, 2011; Gruber & Schlegelmilch, 2014), the general reasons for product returns (e.g., Foscht, T., Ernstreiter, K., Maloles, C., Sinha, I., & Swoboda, B., 2013; Lee, 2015) and the impact of different return policies on the consumer behavior (e.g., Ramanathan, 2011; Bower & Maxham, 2012; Powers & Jack, 2013) have been examined a lot so far, only a few researchers have combined those areas and specifically addressed morally questionable or unethical product returns in online shopping.

So far, most of the researchers have addressed themselves to the reasons of morally questionable returns only with regard to the so-called deshopping (King, Dennis, & Wright, 2008) or unethical retail disposition (Rosenbaum, Kuntze, & Wooldridge, 2011) which is referred to consumers who order a good, use it and send it back afterwards. But to the best of the knowledge and belief of the author, other reasons (as well as attitudes and justifications) regarding morally questionable, opportunistic returns have not been investigated so far. Thus, the aim is to elicit a first tendency here. The author of this paper pursues the target to take a closer look at this topic from the perspective of the practicing consumers. In detail, it is about goods which are purchased for one self and which are not being returned due to any defect.

This leads to the following research questions:

- Why do consumers order products on the internet with no concrete purchase intention?
- What attitude do they have with reference to this morally questionable, opportunistic behavior and what (if any) justifications do they utilize?