

Consumer emotional ambivalence: A state-of-the-art review

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Abstract: Emotional ambivalence has been examined across diverse consumption contexts, resulting in an extensive but fragmented body of research with irreconcilable findings on the role of emotional ambivalence in consumer behaviour. In this state-of-the-art review, we synthesise evidence from 87 manuscripts published in marketing journals that examine emotional ambivalence in consumer contexts. We clarify the conceptual boundaries of emotional ambivalence and define it as the integration of discrete emotions with opposing or contrasting valence. Challenging the view that ambivalence is inherently unpleasant, we highlight how consumers often seek out and enjoy ambivalent emotions. We propose an integrative framework in which customer emotional ambivalence gives rise to three distinct pathways, labelled *discomfort*, *resolution* and *cognitive processing*, each of which may lead to either negative or constructive consumer outcomes. We conclude by outlining a research agenda to guide future enquiry.

Keywords: ambivalence, mixed emotions, mixed feelings, consumer behavior, marketing communications.

Summary Statement of Contribution: The paper presents an integrative perspective on consumer emotional ambivalence, unifying previously separate and independent streams of research. This interdisciplinary approach reveals several important areas for further exploration, offering a coherent agenda to deepen our understanding of how contrasting, discrete emotions can influence consumer behaviour.

Introduction

Consumer evaluation of different types of *stimuli* is a key focus of marketing research and management. Scholars have devoted significant attention, for example, to examining the antecedents and consequences of brand evaluations (Kervyn et al., 2022), as well as consumers' evaluations of different marketing tactics (Isaac & Grayson, 2017). These long-standing research interests have led to the conceptualisation of consumption episodes as instances of consumer ambivalence, as they often comprise both positive and negative valence (Sipilä et al., 2018). For instance, a consumer who purchases a luxury car or indulges in a gourmet meal may feel excitement about the premium experience while simultaneously evaluating the purchase with negative feelings of guilt or discomfort over its indulgent nature (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007).

While the concept of consumer ambivalence has proven valuable in research, it includes a broad spectrum of evaluative experiences. Beyond the contrasting valence that characterises such experiences (Sipilä et al., 2018), different forms of ambivalence exert unique influences on consumer behaviour and pose distinct managerial challenges. For example, scholars have examined specific forms of ambivalence such as attitudinal ambivalence (Cacioppo et al., 1997; Conner et al., 2021; Millar & Tesser, 1989; van Harreveld et al., 2015), cognitive ambivalence (Guarana & Hernandez, 2016; Newby-Clark et al., 2002) and emotional ambivalence (Gardner, 1987; Larsen et al., 2001; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017). This article focuses on emotional ambivalence, a type of consumer ambivalence in which two distinct emotions of opposite valence arise from the same target or during the same consumption episode (Gardner 1987; Rothman et al., 2017).

The need to focus on specific forms of ambivalence is dictated by substantive theoretical concerns. In particular, the study of emotional ambivalence addresses specific theoretical

questions that are not germane to research on attitudinal or cognitive ambivalence. For example, researchers might examine the relative salience of negative versus positive emotions in a given episode (Larsen et al., 2001; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017), consider how or whether consumers can reconcile ambivalent feelings (Williams & Aaker, 2002), or investigate the effects of experiencing simultaneous yet distinct emotions with contrasting appraisals (Larsen et al., 2001; Schimmack, 2001). Such questions are less relevant to scholars focusing on attitudinal ambivalence or cognitive ambivalence, who tend to prioritise research questions more closely aligned with their respective conceptual domains of interest. Increasing theoretical specialisation suggests that, within the broad domain of consumer ambivalence, different psychological and evaluative concepts may call for tailored theoretical approaches to deepen our understanding of how contrasting valence shapes consumer responses across diverse marketing contexts (Sipilä et al., 2018).

This process of knowledge diversification and accumulation within the domain of ambivalence is well underway in psychology and management, where various forms of cognitive and/or emotional ambivalence have received focused scholarly attention (Priester & Petty, 2001; Rees et al., 2013; van Harreveld et al., 2015; Williams & Aaker, 2002). Yet, as noted by Sipilä et al. (2018), such developments are somewhat hindered in marketing due to a persistent lack of conceptual clarity in extant research. Many studies that focus exclusively on emotional ambivalence do not explicitly distinguish this concept from other related forms of ambivalence. As a result, the literature appears fragmented and presents seemingly irreconcilable findings. Consequently, the basic features of consumer emotional ambivalence remain contested. Some studies suggest that emotional ambivalence is unpleasant for consumers (Olsen et al., 2005; Rothman et al., 2017), while others find that consumers actively seek out and enjoy ambivalent emotional experiences (Fong, 2006). Similarly, it is unclear whether the elicitation of ambivalent emotions hinders or enhances persuasion (Septianto,

2021). To the best of our knowledge, no theoretical account currently exists to reconcile these divergent findings, highlighting the limited understanding of emotional ambivalence.

In an effort to extend our understanding of consumer ambivalence, this study aims to provide a state-of-the-art review of research on consumer emotional ambivalence through a systematic analysis of marketing studies examining this phenomenon and its impact on consumer behaviour. By synthesising prior research, we aim to uncover: (a) the antecedents of emotional ambivalence; (b) the conceptual frameworks employed to operationalise ambivalence; and (c) the mechanisms and outcomes associated with emotional ambivalence. Our overarching objective is to clarify the conditions under which emotional ambivalence arises during consumption episodes, the psychological processes it triggers, and its influence on consumer behaviour.

Clarifying the notion of emotional ambivalence

Emotional ambivalence as a component of attitudinal ambivalence

Various concepts attempt to capture the complexities of conflicting attitudes and emotions. Ambivalence refers to a psychological state in which an individual holds conflicting thoughts, feelings, or evaluations about a particular object, issue, or situation (Jonas et al., 2000; Thompson & Zanna, 1995). This broad concept includes both internal evaluation and outward expressions. Expressed ambivalence refers to the external communication or behavioural manifestation of these conflicting attitudes and emotions (Rothman, 2011; Rothman & Northcraft, 2015). In this paper, we focus on ambivalence as an internal conflict, which can operate both at an overarching, attitudinal level and through more granular components, such as the contrasting emotions that are the focus of our analysis. Although Sipilä et al. (2018) acknowledge ambivalence as a multidimensional phenomenon, they define it primarily as a general evaluation, without considering its components.

Table 1 illustrates the differences between attitudinal, cognitive and emotional ambivalence. By differentiating between the general level of attitudinal ambivalence and its cognitive and emotional components, we can better identify specific research questions and domains of enquiry, as each level differs in its underlying mechanisms, psychological effects and behavioural outcomes. Attitudinal ambivalence refers to the coexistence of both positive and negative evaluations toward an object, person or situation (Cacioppo et al., 1997, Thompson & Zanna, 1995; van Harreveld et al., 2015), leading to conflicting attitudes. For example, an individual may simultaneously appreciate (cognitively) the convenience of fast food while feeling (emotional) discomfort about its unhealthy consequences. This inner state of conflict between cognition and emotions can induce psychological tension (Priester & Petty, 1996), uncertainty (Cacioppo et al., 1997) and frustration (Priester & Petty, 2001). Attitudinal ambivalence is thus an umbrella construct encompassing both cognitive and emotional ambivalence.

Cognitive ambivalence arises from conflicting beliefs or knowledge about an object, person or situation (Buttlar et al., 2025; Priester & Petty, 1996). This form of ambivalence occurs when a person holds contradictory thoughts or information about an issue, leading to uncertainty (Jonas et al., 2000). For instance, someone considering the effectiveness of a new diet might believe it has benefits in terms of weight loss, but may also harbour concerns about its potential negative effects on mood or fatigue levels. Unlike attitudinal ambivalence, which involves conflicting cognitive and emotional components, cognitive ambivalence is primarily concerned with inconsistency within one's beliefs. Research on cognitive ambivalence focuses on the differences among these cognitive states (Priester & Petty, 2001) and their distinct impacts on individual problem-solving and decision-making processes.

In contrast, emotional ambivalence involves experiencing contrasting emotions, either simultaneously or sequentially, toward an object, person or situation (Gardner, 1987; Larsen et

al., 2001; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017). For instance, an individual may feel both happiness and sadness, love and resentment, or excitement and anxiety at the same time. Unlike attitudinal and cognitive ambivalence, which involve cognitive components, emotional ambivalence is affective in nature. For example, a parent watching their child leave for college may feel proud and happy for their child's growth while also experiencing sadness and a sense of loss at their departure; this experience of conflicting emotions is distinct from the attitudinal or cognitive ambivalence discussed earlier. Thus, emotional ambivalence can create psychological discomfort, but can also lead to richer emotional experiences characterised by complexity, depth and the coexistence of opposing emotions (Larsen et al., 2011). In addition, it may enhance judgment accuracy (Rees et al., 2013). Key areas for research in this domain include understanding how emotional ambivalence is managed by individuals, how contextual factors such as cultural norms shape its experience and expression, and its impact on individual decision-making. However, as shown in Table 1, analysing emotional ambivalence in isolation allows for a focused examination of specific internal emotional conflicts, which warrants targeted research attention.

Table 1. Differentiating cognitive from emotional ambivalence

	Definition	Examples of pertinent, specific research questions	Illustrative citations
<i>Attitudinal ambivalence</i>	Attitudinal ambivalence refers to the coexistence of both positive and negative cognitive evaluations and emotions toward an object, person or situation (Cacioppo et al., 1997; Thompson & Zanna, 1995; van Harreveld et al., 2015).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does attitudinal ambivalence influence the likelihood of attitude change over time? 2. How do individuals manage the inconsistency between their cognitive evaluations and emotions about the same target? 3. Does exposure to persuasive arguments influence both the cognitive and affective dimensions of attitudinal ambivalence? 	Conner and Sparks (2002); Conner et al. (2021); Petty et al. (2006); Priester and Petty (2001); Zembrain and Johar (2007)
<i>Cognitive ambivalence</i>	Cognitive ambivalence is a component of attitudinal ambivalence. It refers to the coexistence of contradictory beliefs or knowledge about an object, person or situation (Buttlar et al., 2025; Priester & Petty, 1996).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does cognitive ambivalence relate to cognitive dissonance and/or uncertainty? 2. How does cognitive ambivalence influence problem-solving processes? 3. How do personality traits (e.g. need for closure, openness to experience) influence an individual's response to cognitive ambivalence? 	Buttlar et al. (2025); Guarana and Hernandez (2016); Kruglanski et al. (2018); Newby-Clark et al. (2002); Rydell et al. (2008)
<i>Emotional ambivalence</i>	Emotional ambivalence is another component of attitudinal ambivalence. It is defined as the simultaneous experience of conflicting emotions of different valence toward the same object, person or situation (Gardner 1987; Larsen et al., 2001; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What coping strategies do individuals use to manage emotional ambivalence, and how effective are they? 2. How do cultural norms influence how emotional ambivalence is experienced and expressed? 3. How does emotional ambivalence facilitate or hinder information processing and decision-making processes? 4. How does emotional ambivalence influence post-purchase satisfaction and regret? 5. How can brands leverage emotional ambivalence (e.g. nostalgia mixed with innovation) to enhance brand engagement and storytelling? 	Armağan and Seytap (2022); Davies et al. (2010); Hosany and Prayag (2013); Ong et al. (2023); Porter et al. (2023); Schneider and Schwarz (2017); Septianto et al. (2021); Tonner (2016)

The notion of emotional ambivalence in marketing

Emotional experiences are often more nuanced than the discrete emotions emphasised in early theories in the field (Roseman et al., 1990). While traditional models, such as Ekman's (1992) theory of basic emotions, focus on distinct emotions like fear, anger, or happiness, more recent research acknowledges that individuals can experience multiple and opposing emotions simultaneously (Rothman & Melwani, 2017; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017). This phenomenon appears to be a common aspect of everyday life. For instance, Larsen et al. (2001) demonstrate that individuals frequently experience both happiness and sadness during significant life events, such as graduation, where feelings of pride and anxiety regarding the future coexist. Similarly, [in organizational research](#), Campos et al. (2011) identify the co-occurrence of fear and excitement in situations involving risk or novelty, such as starting a new job. More mundane examples include horror films, which elicit both fear and enjoyment (Andrade & Cohen, 2017). Tangney et al. (2007) explore this complexity, revealing that moral emotions like pride and guilt often co-occur, particularly when success is accompanied by perceived wrongdoing.

It is also important to distinguish between emotional ambivalence and co-occurring or mixed emotions. In contrast to emotional ambivalence-the simultaneous experience of emotions with opposing valence, such as love and hate for a brand or pride and guilt after purchasing luxury goods (Williams & Aaker, 2002)-, mixed emotions involve experiencing multiple discrete emotions that may not necessarily conflict, such as a consumer feeling bored while waiting in line but also anxious about missing a limited-time offer (Sipilä et al., 2018).

As discussed earlier, research in marketing often lacks clarity on the specific type of ambivalence being investigated (Sipilä et al., 2018). To address this issue, we reviewed the literature to identify studies that focus specifically on emotional ambivalence. Our analysis reveals that the literature implicitly proposes two diverging approaches to understanding this

concept (see Table 2). The first defines emotional ambivalence as the simultaneous or sequential experience of positive and negative emotions toward the same object, person or situation (Larsen et al., 2001; Schneider & Schwarz, 2017). Typically, studies adopting this approach directly measure the positive and negative emotions elicited by consumption episodes. The second conceptualisation treats emotional ambivalence as a unique emotional state, characterised by a sense of feeling “torn” or “conflicted” (Bee & Madrigal, 2013, p. 371; Hong & Lee, 2010, p. 453), rather than focusing on specific contrasting emotions. This perspective assumes that emotional ambivalence is inherently unpleasant or harmful (Rothman et al., 2017), leading individuals to suppress it to restore emotional equilibrium (Bee & Madrigal, 2013). However, evidence from related domains (e.g. leadership and team dynamics) suggests that emotional ambivalence is not necessarily negative (Rothman et al., 2017) and can lead to positive outcomes for individuals and organisations. As indicated by our earlier discussion, the first definition is preferable as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of emotional ambivalence and avoids imposing limiting descriptors that fail to capture the richness of the construct. Nevertheless, in our review, we include studies from both perspectives to offer a comprehensive overview of the literature.

This is the first study to systematically review the literature on emotional ambivalence in the context of marketing and consumer behaviour. It aims to illustrate how the experience of simultaneously conflicting emotions shapes consumer behaviour. Moreover, by mapping the existing research, we identify underexplored research questions and conceptual gaps that warrant further investigation.

Table 2. Definitions of emotional ambivalence in marketing

Definition of emotional ambivalence in the marketing literature	Source
<i>Ambivalence as the experience of conflicting emotions</i>	
“Ambivalence refers to a psychological state in which a person holds mixed feelings (positive and negative) towards some psychological object.”	Gardner (1987, p. 241)
“Mixed emotions are defined as the affective experience of two oppositely valanced emotions simultaneously.”	Larsen et al. (2001, p. 685)
“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.”	Otnes et al. (1997, pp 83–84)
“The simultaneous experience of two conflicting emotions rather than on discrepancies between cognitions, between expressed and felt emotions, or between positive and negative evaluations of attitude objects.”	Williams and Aaker (2002, p. 642)
<i>Ambivalence as an affective experience in itself</i>	
“Ambivalence is considered as an overall feeling of the uncertainty or discomfort consumers feel as a result of a conflicted and torn state.”	Bee and Madrigal (2013, p. 371)
“...when people experience emotions of opposite valence at the same time, they enter into a conflicting psychological state and feel torn and uncomfortable. “	Hong and Lee (2010, pp. 453–457)
“Ambivalent feelings represent a state of psychological conflict concerning an attitude object.”	Roster and Richins (2009, pp. 49–49)

Methods

The systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, which are widely recognised for promoting transparency and precision (Page et al., 2021; Tranfield et al., 2003), reducing bias and allowing for replication (Xiao & Watson, 2019). This ensured a rigorous and reliable process for analysing existing studies on emotional ambivalence (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). As recommended by Tranfield et al. (2003), the review followed a three-stage procedure: planning, execution and reporting.

Planning

Seminal and review papers on emotional ambivalence in marketing, management and psychology (e.g. Oh & Tong, 2022; Otnes et al., 1997; Rothman et al., 2017; Wagner & Aaker, 2002) were reviewed to identify keywords for the search (see Table 3 for the search string). Three inclusion criteria were applied. First, only empirical studies with a measure of state emotional ambivalence were included. Studies assessing trait ambivalence or attitudinal

ambivalence, those lacking a measure to assess emotions, and those analysing ambivalence in consumer reviews were excluded. Second, only studies involving consumers or consumer contexts were included, omitting those focused on employee emotions or organisational settings. Third, only peer-reviewed journal articles (including in-press articles) were included to ensure quality. Conference papers, books, literature reviews, and conceptual or methodological papers (e.g. scale development for capturing emotional ambivalence) were excluded, though some were reviewed for background. No time or language exclusions were applied and the search was closed in May 2024.

Table 3. Search string

Concept-related search terms	Domain-related search terms
('mixed emotion*' OR 'emotion* ambivalence' OR 'emotion* blends' OR 'mixed feeling*' OR 'ambivalent sentiment*' OR 'sentiment* ambivalence' OR 'ambivalent mood*' OR 'mood* ambivalence' OR 'ambivalent atmosphere*' OR 'atmosphere* ambivalence' OR 'ambivalent affect*' OR 'affect* ambivalence')	AND (consumer* OR customer*) NOT employee* NOT leader*

Execution

The search was conducted in May 2024 using three major academic databases: Web of Science, EBSCO, and Elsevier. Web of Science was selected due to its extensive coverage and the high quality of its indexed journals (Paul & Criado, 2020; Schneider-Kamp et al., 2023). Next, the same search was also performed on a selection of key journals that are already indexed in Web of Science but are considered particularly prominent in the field of marketing and consumer research and are thus critical to our review. These included: *European Journal of Marketing*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Consumer Behavior* *Journal of*

Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Retailing, Journal of Service Research, Marketing Letters, Marketing Science, and Psychology and Marketing.

The initial search, after removing duplicates, yielded 536 articles. Abstracts of all the papers were screened by one author and coded for eligibility. The full texts of potentially relevant papers were then reviewed, with any disagreements on inclusion resolved by consensus among all authors. Most exclusions were due to either a lack of focus on consumption settings or the absence of a measure of emotional ambivalence. Backward reference searches were also performed on the included articles to identify any additional eligible studies. Following this procedure, 87 articles were retained, collectively reporting 167 empirical studies. While no language restrictions were applied, all included papers were published in English. Figure 1 summarises the selection process.

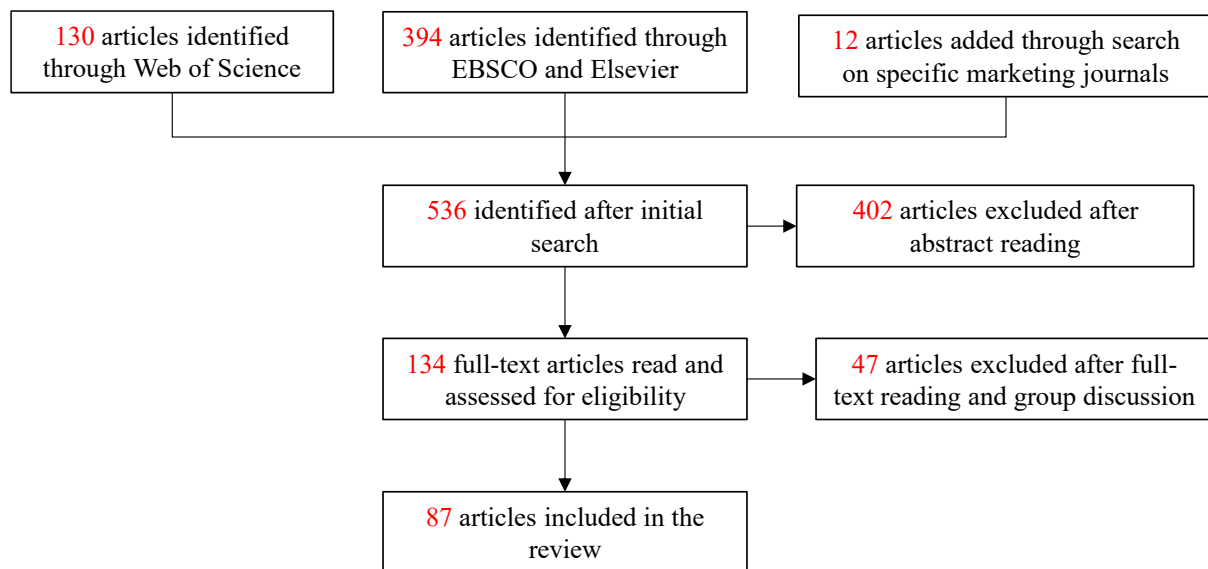


Figure 1: PRISMA diagram to identify customer emotional ambivalence articles

Reporting

We identified a set of codes to capture the theoretical and methodological characteristics of each paper. In addition to recording the year of publication and journal, each article was coded for methodology, theoretical framework, emotions examined, ambivalence measures, outcomes, moderators, and domain of study. This extensive coding was essential to obtain a granular view of the literature and capture the causal mechanisms at play (Tranfield et al., 2003). The articles (and related studies) were then categorised according to the antecedents of emotional ambivalence they examined (e.g. conflicting attitudes towards products, services or brands, conflicting emotions elicited through advertising, broader cultural and market tensions) and their reported outcomes, including adverse consequences (e.g. procrastination), positive effects (e.g. purchase intentions), or other psychological processes triggered by ambivalence. Notably, no significant differences emerged based on how ambivalence was defined (e.g. as opposing emotions versus “feeling torn”). Through several iterations, this classification led to the identification of three research streams in the study of consumer emotional ambivalence, as explained in Section 4. Appendix A presents descriptive information about the reviewed studies, including a table with a summary of each article.

Findings

We categorised the selected papers into three general approaches to the study of consumer emotional ambivalence, summarised in Table 4. While these categorisations are analytically distinct, individual studies may draw on insights from more than one perspective.

The first stream focuses on the emotional processes arising from the interaction of contrasting emotions. This research examines how emotional ambivalence ultimately resolves into a predominantly negative or positive consumer experience and explores how specific combinations of contrasting emotions influence consumer behaviour. As the largest body of research, we reviewed this stream by differentiating between studies focused on consumption choices and those examining emotional ambivalence in persuasion appeals.

The second stream investigates the impact of emotional ambivalence on information processing. Evidence suggests that ambivalence is associated with indecision (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Chen & Peng, 2023), increased analytic processing (Ayadi & Djelassi 2023; Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012), and specific patterns of cognitive inference (Septianto & Paramita, 2021). This stream's primary contribution lies in demonstrating how ambivalence shapes the way consumers process social and marketing information, especially when communications are designed to evoke contrasting emotions.

The third stream, informed predominantly by sociocultural perspectives (Otnes et al., 1997), views emotional ambivalence as a common feature of life events, particularly during personal transitions involving contradictory social norms or cultural expectations (Davies et al., 2010). This perspective highlights how sociocultural factors shape the psychological construction of ambivalence and contextualises its role in marketing within broader cultural dynamics. We now examine each of these research streams in detail.

Table 4 Three streams on the study of emotional ambivalence in consumer research

	<i>How contrasting emotions interact in experiences of ambivalence</i>	<i>How emotional ambivalence influences information processing</i>	<i>How sociocultural tensions shape ambivalence</i>
Key processes examined	How different emotions are integrated into a single emotional experience.	How the experience of ambivalence influences the information and decision-making processes.	How ambivalence structures specific consumption contexts and consumers' coping mechanisms.
Antecedents of ambivalence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intrapersonal experiences involving conflicting product or service features. ▪ Ambivalent emotions elicited through communications that present sequences of positive and negative cues. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Life experiences associated with mixed valence due to cultural and normative social expectations (e.g. motherhood, graduation ceremonies). ▪ Life events that cause emotional ambivalence and require specific coping strategies (e.g. inheritance, funeral services).
Outcomes of ambivalence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Different positive or negative emotions emerge through the integration of ambivalent emotions in a coherent blend. ▪ Ambivalence may be unpleasant for consumers and reduce satisfaction with a product or service. ▪ The positive side of ambivalence may dominate, leading to favourable outcomes such as increased purchase intention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ambivalence increases uncertainty or hesitation in decision-making. ▪ Ambivalence activates coping strategies that determine consumers' ability to manage contrasting emotions. ▪ Ambivalence enhances attention and encourages analytic processing compared to purely positive messages. ▪ Ambivalence strengthens efficacy beliefs. ▪ Ambivalence increases scepticism towards the communicated product or service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ambivalence activates coping strategies that determine consumers' ability to manage contrasting emotions.
Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ambivalence can have both positive and negative effects on consumers. ▪ Ambivalence is intrinsically linked to specific consumption experiences (e.g. horror movies, nostalgia-driven consumption). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ambivalence may either facilitate or hinder information processing and decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ambivalence is often linked with liminal experiences. ▪ Sociocultural norms and expectations influence how ambivalence is experienced and determine the coping strategies consumers employ to manage it.

How contrasting emotions interact in experiences of ambivalence

Emotional ambivalence in consumption choices

Studies in this stream demonstrate that emotional ambivalence often follows cognitive ambivalence, as it emerges when consumers hold contradictory judgements or appraisals of a brand or its offerings, including products, deals or service experiences (Maguire & Geiger, 2015; McCabe & Illodo, 2019; Ruth et al., 2002; Sedgley et al., 2017). This is particularly common in the case of brands or products with controversial attributes (Bee & Madrigal, 2013; Chen & Peng, 2023; Lee & Rha, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2022; Williams & Aaker, 2002) or radical innovations perceived as both risky and potentially satisfying (Hurmerinta & Sandberg, 2015). Emotional ambivalence may also stem from conflicting preferences (Cong et al., 2013) or competing norms or goals – typically ethical versus hedonic motives (Chang, 2012), as well as from discrepancies between expectations and reality, such as when perceived service quality is lacking (Kim et al., 2017). This same pattern of conflicting beliefs or evaluations explains emotional ambivalence in service experiences (e.g. Chan et al., 2023; Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Huang et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; van Nguyen et al., 2022).

Many studies within this stream indicate that emotional ambivalence is associated with negative consumer outcomes. Contrasting feelings may induce emotional discomfort (Bee et al., 2022; Chen, 2013; Wang et al., 2016), leading consumers to ruminate on negative aspects (Roster & Richins, 2009), which in turn lowers satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Barsyte & Fennis, 2023, Ki et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2005; Roster & Richins, 2009). In addition to decision avoidance or delay, emotional ambivalence can lead to negative attitudes towards the brand (Barsyte & Fennis, 2023; Bee & Madrigal, 2013; Cong et al., 2013; Gineikiene & Dimantopoulos, 2017; Roster & Richins, 2009), diminish satisfaction with the brand or service (Lunardo & Saintives, 2018) and reduce brand loyalty (Olsen et al., 2005). Similarly, brand

messages that evoke contrasting emotions negatively influence attitudes towards both advertisements and the brand itself (Valenzuela et al., 2022; Williams & Aaker, 2002).

In contrast, several studies suggest that ambivalence does not always lead to negative outcomes; rather, the effects of ambivalence may be either positive or negative depending on the intensity of the emotional experience and the hierarchy of emotions lived (e.g. which emotions dominate; Ahn et al., 2023; Ruth et al., 2004). For instance, Valor et al. (2023) observe that, depending on the specific emotions experienced during the innovation adoption process, consumers may reject, postpone or adopt a green innovation. Specifically, the authors found that consumers who were able to manage their ambivalent feelings efficiently were more likely to make adoption decisions. Similarly, Liang et al. (2016) demonstrate that the co-occurrence of strength (a positive emotion) and sadness (a negative emotion) following exposure to a donation appeal led participants to be more persuaded to donate compared to those who experienced a single dominant emotion. In another example, Gineikiene and Diamantopoulos (2017) show that nostalgia can counteract animosity, resulting in positive evaluations of products from historically connected markets (e.g. Russia and Ukraine). Gelbrich (2011) similarly reports that contrasting emotions in pricing contexts (i.e. price inequality) can lead to satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth when emotions like happiness, pride and gratitude dominate, but have the opposite effect when pity prevails. Studies conducted in hedonic consumption contexts often highlight that pleasure combined with guilt can have a positive influence on purchase intentions, likely because guilt activates cognitive associations related to pleasure (Goldsmith et al., 2012; Prestini & Sebastiani, 2023). Collectively, this body of evidence reflects the need to examine the specific mix of contrasting emotions experienced by consumers, as these combinations play a significant role in shaping subsequent behaviour (Valor et al., 2023).

In certain contexts, ambivalence is even actively sought out by consumers, such as when watching horror or drama films (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Aurier & Guintcheva, 2014, 2015; Carnevale et al., 2018) or visiting heritage sites that evoke sadness, pride and awe simultaneously (Steriopoulos et al., 2023).

Emotional ambivalence in persuasive appeals

Scholars have examined the influence of appeals that elicit contrasting emotions. Evidence suggests that sadness and happiness can combine to evoke feelings of inspiration, which can lead to stronger brand preferences or higher charitable donations (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2015; Quach et al., 2021). Alwitt (2002) identifies advertisements based on suspense as a specific type of ambivalent messaging, eliciting fear and hope. According to the author, these advertisements are characterised by narrative structures that rely on contrasting emotions to generate attention and positive attitudes, although they may be limited in their effectiveness at conveying brand-related content. It is important to note that the elicitation of mixed feelings often depends on specific types of messaging. For instance, many studies associate ambivalent emotions with graduation ceremonies or family memories, which may elicit nostalgia (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022; Hong & Lee, 2010; Nellaparuma et al., 2022; Xin et al., 2022). Beyond nostalgia, Chang (2022) demonstrates that short ads that elicit contrasting emotions are preferred by those seeking meaningful (as opposed to hedonic) experiences; in such cases, emotional ambivalence can improve brand attitudes.

When it comes to integrating contrasting feelings into a single affective experience, a key debate centres on how the sequencing of multiple emotions within advertisements influences outcomes. Two dominant views have emerged: a coping view and a recency view (Homer, 2021; Lau-Gesk & Mukherjee, 2017). The coping view suggests that positioning the positive emotions first is more productive, as early exposure to these emotions helps consumers cope with negative experiences that may follow in the communication process (Lau-Gesk, 2005). In

contrast, the recency view holds that consumers are more influenced by the emotions experienced most recently (Labroo & Ramanathan, 2007), and therefore, ending with material eliciting positive emotions is typically more effective (Homer, 2021; Olsen & Pracejus, 2004). Several moderating factors explain the relative influence of coping or recency effects. Evidence suggests that when emotions are linked to both a problem and its possible resolution – as in the common ‘fear and hope’ paradigm – ending on a positive note increases perceptions of efficacy (Homer, 2021; Labroo & Ramanathan, 2007; Nabi et al., 2019). However, this particular emotional pairing offers only a partial perspective and does not account for the wide variety of emotional combinations available to marketers.

Prior research has also examined differences in consumers’ ability to deal with conflicting emotions. These studies unveil a set of consumer-related traits that may attenuate the emotional discomfort associated with emotional ambivalence and help explain its varying impacts on behaviour. Dialectical thinking, or the ability to accept duality, is one such consumer trait that enables consumers to better manage emotional ambivalence (Wang et al., 2016). This trait is more pronounced among collectivist cultures and older adults, who are less likely to experience ambivalence as distressing and thus respond more favourably to contradictory product or brand features (Williams & Aaker, 2002). Similarly, cognitive flexibility or tolerance for ambiguity moderates the experience of emotional ambivalence as a negative experience, such that individuals with higher flexibility or tolerance for ambiguity exhibit greater preferences for brands, products or communications that elicit ambivalent emotions ((De Vos et al., 2021; Nellaparuma et al., 2022; Septianto et al., 2021; Xin et al., 2022). Conversely, Barsyte and Fennis (2023) reveal that, in the context of functional food, consumers who prefer predictability in their food choices are less comfortable with novelty and more sceptical of health claims, making them more prone to generalised emotional ambivalence.

Another consumer trait that reduces the discomfort associated with emotional ambivalence is the level of construal: individuals with chronically abstract construal (as opposed to low construal) experience less discomfort with mixed emotional appeals and exhibit more favourable attitudes towards them (Hong & Lee, 2010). Similarly, consumers with a growth mindset, who believe in the world's changeability, are more at ease with emotional ambivalence and experience fewer adverse outcomes (Carnevale et al., 2018).

How ambivalence influences information processing

The second stream of research on emotional ambivalence has considered the impact of this emotional experience on decision-making and the processing of information leading to purchase decisions. Studies in this stream conceptualise emotional ambivalence as an internal conflict experienced during the customer journey. Two specific contexts of internal conflict have received significant attention in this literature: indulgence or impulsive consumption and goal conflict. Indulgent or impulsive buying triggers ambivalence because consumers experience a conflict between their hedonic and normative goals; as a result, they experience pleasure or enjoyment but also guilt or regret (e.g. Ki et al., 2017; Li, 2015; Miao, 2011; Ramanathan & Williams, 2007; Sipilä et al., 2017). Similarly, intrapersonal conflicts between consumers' ethical norms or values and hedonic or functional goals may also elicit emotional ambivalence (Chang, 2011; Chen & Peng, 2023; Park et al., 2013; Schmalz & Orth, 2012; Toti & Sanchez-Romero, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

Studies in this group show that the experience of contrasting emotions when evaluating new information causes uncertainty, anxiety, and distress (Bee & Madrigal, 2013; Mick & Fournier, 1998; Nowlis et al., 2002). Such emotional discomfort can paralyse consumers: feeling unable to commit to a choice, they remain in a state of hesitation and indecision. This state then leads them to avoid or delay decision-making (e.g., Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Chen

& Norman, 2023; Malshe & Friend, 2018), including postponing decisions to adopt an innovation, reducing their intentions to purchase a brand or product, or abandoning shopping cart in online contexts (e.g. Chen, 2013; Cheng et al., 2014; Peng & Chen, 2021; Penz & Hogg, 2011; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Avoidance of such purchase decisions provides a temporary escape from the discomfort associated with decision-making (Dhar, 1997).

However, emotional ambivalence may also encourage more effortful, analytical, and systematic information processing. The experience of conflicting emotions compels consumers to consider different perspectives and potential outcomes more thoroughly, leading to more balanced and thoughtful judgements that better reflect their preferences (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007; Williams & Aaker, 2002). This heightened scrutiny can reduce the likelihood of impulsive decisions and may improve overall consumer well-being (Roster & Richins, 2009). Consistent with this view, appeals eliciting contrasting emotions can sometimes increase persuasion through greater narrative transportation in the advert (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022). Thus, this body of work supports the notion that a systematic approach to decision-making can help mitigate biases that might otherwise dominate in responses driven by unambiguous emotions. Nevertheless, the findings remain inconclusive as emotional ambivalence may also prompt consumers to focus on the immediate consequences of consumption, encouraging indulgent, impulsive or risky behaviours (e.g., Hamby & Russell, 2022).

Several studies also examine how exposure to appeals based on contrasting emotions can increase cognitive flexibility (Nellaparuma et al., 2022; Septianto et al., 2021; Xin et al., 2022). They propose that experiencing multiple, contradictory emotions prompts individuals to connect disparate ideas and consider diverse, even conflicting, perspectives. This suggests that the activation of cognitive flexibility is necessary for coping with ambivalent emotions (Xin et al., 2022).

Emotional ambivalence can also be associated with efficacy beliefs. For example, combining a sad appeal with happy images of donation recipients elicits both these emotions among recipients, increasing charitable behaviour by strengthening beliefs in the effectiveness of the donation (Septianto & Paramita, 2021). Similarly, in the context of health communication, messages that integrate fear and hope have been shown to increase self-efficacy and improve the persuasiveness of the appeal (Nabi et al., 2019).

How sociocultural tensions shape ambivalence

We now examine studies that focus on sociocultural factors shaping ambivalence in life events. While these experiences often involve consumption and engagement within the marketplace, the emotional ambivalence explored in this stream extends beyond the domain of marketing. Examples include studies on funerals (Szmigin & Canning, 2015), hen parties and weddings (Otnes et al., 1997; Wells et al., 2023), urban environments and landscapes (Wang et al., 2023), liminal life phases such as motherhood (Davies et al., 2010; Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022; Tonner, 2016) and intergenerational support during financial crises (Karanika & Hogg, 2016). This stream shows that emotional ambivalence pervades common consumption experiences, supporting Bauman's (1991) assertion that 'ambivalence is a fundamental part of the human condition' (p. 1).

While this stream also explains emotional ambivalence as a conflict (Maguire & Geiger, 2015; Otnes et al., 1997; Prestini & Sebastiani, 2021), it differs from the other two streams by conceptualising consumer experiences as expressions of broader sociocultural tensions. Specifically, this research attributes ambivalence to: (a) contradictory cultural logics, values or norms, referred to as cultural ambivalence (Steriopoulos et al., 2023); (b) contradictory norms governing the performance of the multiple roles played by individuals, known as sociological ambivalence (Kessous et al., 2017), or (c) tensions between personal aspirations and the

structural conditions of markets, described as psychological ambivalence (Humerinta et al., 2015). Consequently, emotional ambivalence is often regarded as a signal that reflects or manifests underlying sociocultural tensions and conflicts (Karanika & Hogg, 2016). Interestingly, some studies in this stream show that consumption not only generates emotional conflict but also serves as a coping strategy for individuals to navigate conflicting cultural norms (Tonner, 2016).

Studies examining liminal lifestyles often attribute emotional ambivalence to conflicting cultural logic or values. Davies et al. (2010) and Tonner (2016) explore liminal transitions to motherhood and attribute the ambivalent emotional experience of mothers-to-be to disparate cultural values or the difficulty of reconciling idealised maternity norms with personal resources or circumstances. These conflicts may lead to resented or postponed consumption choices, or to extensive search efforts aimed at reconciling them. Similarly, Mimoun and Bardhi (2022) show that consumers who purposefully embrace instability, change, and adaptability experience a conflict with mainstream societal values that associate this flexibility with social inferiority because of its high uncertainty and precarity. Consumers manifest this contradiction through ambivalent emotions; while their flexible lifestyle may create stress and uneasiness, it is also lived with enthusiasm, perceived as a form of creativity and reflexivity, and valued for the sense of freedom it provides despite the challenges it poses. A similar pattern emerges in studies exploring consumer rituals, such as hen parties or funerals (Porter et al., 2023; Szmigin & Canning, 2017) or family support during financial crises (Karanika & Hogg, 2016). These studies demonstrate that emotional ambivalence is also influenced by the extent to which the social context allows an individual to negotiate the rules governing the experience; the more rigidly these norms are enforced, the greater the ambivalence. Additionally, the presence of multiple, conflicting social identities may also lead individuals to experience emotional ambivalence. For instance, Yu et al. (2023) explore how individuals with conflicting

personal and social identities (e.g. professional versus personal life) experience emotional ambivalence when choosing a destination, simultaneously anticipating social admiration for choosing a prestigious destination and feeling animosity due to its political associations or cultural tensions.

Conflicting logic or conflicting cultural values can often be rendered salient by advertising campaigns. For instance, *Red* magazine encourages women to prioritise self-care, framing itself as an oasis of calm and pleasure amid the pressure of their demanding lives. However, the idea that women deserve ‘me-time’ contradicts dominant cultural values that assign women a 24/7 caregiving role. In their phenomenological study, Stevens et al. (2003) observe that women often feel torn between believing that they “deserved” calm and time for personal care and experiencing guilt for stepping away from their caregiving duties. Similarly, Johnson and Grier (2012) show that advertisements portraying racial stereotypes often elicit contradictory emotions from nonstereotyped audiences. These ads provoke both amusement and anger, as viewers are torn between conflicting norms: the expectation that advertisements may reproduce stereotypes perceived as entertaining, and broader societal norms of respect and inclusivity. Similar findings are reported in studies on taboo advertising (Sabri, 2012).

Some studies document emotional ambivalence arising from conflicts between consumers’ goals and those of their significant others (Karanika & Hogg, 2016; Wells et al., 2023). For example, Kessuos et al. (2017) examine the intergenerational transmission of luxury watches from fathers to sons; recipients of these watches experience ambivalent emotions: gratitude for receiving a cherished object, alongside anxiety about the imposed obligation to care for and appreciate it.

This stream of research unveils a broad palette of coping strategies employed by consumers to deal with episodes that entail ambivalence. These include reframing, resignation and adaptability (Lunardo & Saintives, 2018; Mick & Fournier, 1998; Mimoum & Bardhi,

2022; Otnes et al., 1997; Prestini & Sebastiani, 2021; Ruth et al., 2004; Stevens et al., 2003; Wells et al., 2023), as well as resistance (Davies et al., 2010). These strategies influence how consumers buy or dispose of possessions (Karanika & Hogg, 2016). In some cases, coping may involve negotiating conflicting expectations with others to reach compromises (Porter et al., 2023; Szmigin & Canning, 2017). The capacity to cope depends on the resources available to individuals, which are provided by social networks, market ideologies and market systems (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022; Tonner, 2016). Marketing communications can also provide coping aids that help consumers resolve the discomfort associated with ambivalence (Kramer et al., 2009).

Discussion

An integrated model to explain emotional ambivalence

Figure 2 summarises the current state of knowledge on consumer emotional ambivalence, presenting antecedents, moderators, and the potential outcomes of emotional ambivalence that are identified in the literature. A key insight that emerges from this review is that the effects of emotional ambivalence on relevant marketing outcomes are mediated through three distinct pathways, the roles of which are not explicitly acknowledged in prior research. Identifying these mechanisms carries important theoretical implications while also offering a foundation for future research in this domain.

The *discomfort pathway* reflects research that perceives emotional ambivalence as inherently unpleasant or uncomfortable, either due to its association with a sense of unease (Chen, 2013; Wang et al., 2016; Williams & Aaker, 2002) or the implication of unwanted negative emotions creeping into what is intended to be hedonistic consumption (Hosany & Prayag, 2013). This mechanism often leads to negative outcomes, such as dissatisfaction (e.g. Hosany & Prayag, 2013) or procrastination (e.g. Armağan & Seytap, 2022; Ong et al., 2023).

The *resolution pathway* identifies situations where emotional ambivalence is resolved into an overarching positive or negative emotion. As shown in this review, this phenomenon is well documented (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Aurier & Guintcheva, 2014, 2015; Carnevale et al., 2018), although the processes through which emotional ambivalence is resolved remain underexplored. Finally, the *cognitive processing pathway* aligns with evidence that emotional ambivalence increases analytical processing (Chang, 2011; Johnson et al., 2012). As indicated in Figure 2, the activation of this pathway might have implications for the resolution of emotional ambivalence, a possibility that is yet to be examined in the literature.

The identification of a *resolution pathway* implies that individuals can regulate their ambivalent emotions (Main, 2011). In other words, emotional ambivalence is not merely a passive experience, but a psychologically constructed process shaped by active interpretation of conflicting *stimuli*. Although prior research provides evidence of this integrative process of psychological resolution (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Aurier & Guintcheva, 2014, 2015; Carnevale et al., 2018), it does not offer a specific theory explaining it. Future work could examine the strategies and mechanisms that individuals use for such regulation processes. Resolution likely converges on a specific range of experiences that emerge from the integration of contrasting, ambivalent emotions. Some emotional experiences with specific labels, such as nostalgia (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022) or suspense (Alwitt, 2002), represent the amalgamation of contrasting emotions into an overarching, culturally coded and coherent ‘whole’. We posit that theories of emotion construction (Barrett & Russell, 2014) can provide useful tools to further theorise how emotional ambivalence is resolved and identify the strategies individuals might employ in this process.

The identification of three distinct pathways also shows that emotional ambivalence can systematically affect cognitive processes. This raises important implications for research on attitudinal ambivalence (Cacioppo et al., 1997; Conner et al., 2021; Millar & Tesser, 1989; van

Harreveld et al., 2015), cognitive ambivalence (MacDonald & Ross, 1999; Priester & Petty, 1996), and more specifically, on the mechanisms of persuasion that might affect different forms of ambivalence. Emotional ambivalence enhances cognitive flexibility, increasing openness to different perspectives (Rees et al., 2013; Xin et al., 2022). This could reduce cognitive ambivalence by facilitating the acceptance and integration of new, conflicting beliefs. However, increased analytical processing may also lead to increased cognitive ambivalence. When individuals encounter arguments that support ambivalence, the enhanced analytical processing triggered by emotional ambivalence can reinforce contrasting beliefs about the event (Chang, 2011; Johnson et al., 2012). This suggests that emotional ambivalence, depending on circumstances, can be a force for either the reduction or the increase of cognitive ambivalence.

The identification of these three pathways has broader implications for how emotional ambivalence is conceptualised. Our analysis demonstrates that, depending on the context, emotional ambivalence can take different forms and activate different psychological processes. Evidence on the multiple forms of emotional ambivalence will need to be reflected in future theories. This raises the question of the potential interactions between the pathways and the study of the specific mechanisms underpinning them. Furthermore, the boundary conditions under which each pathway operates will need to be considered explicitly for each of the specific pathways identified.

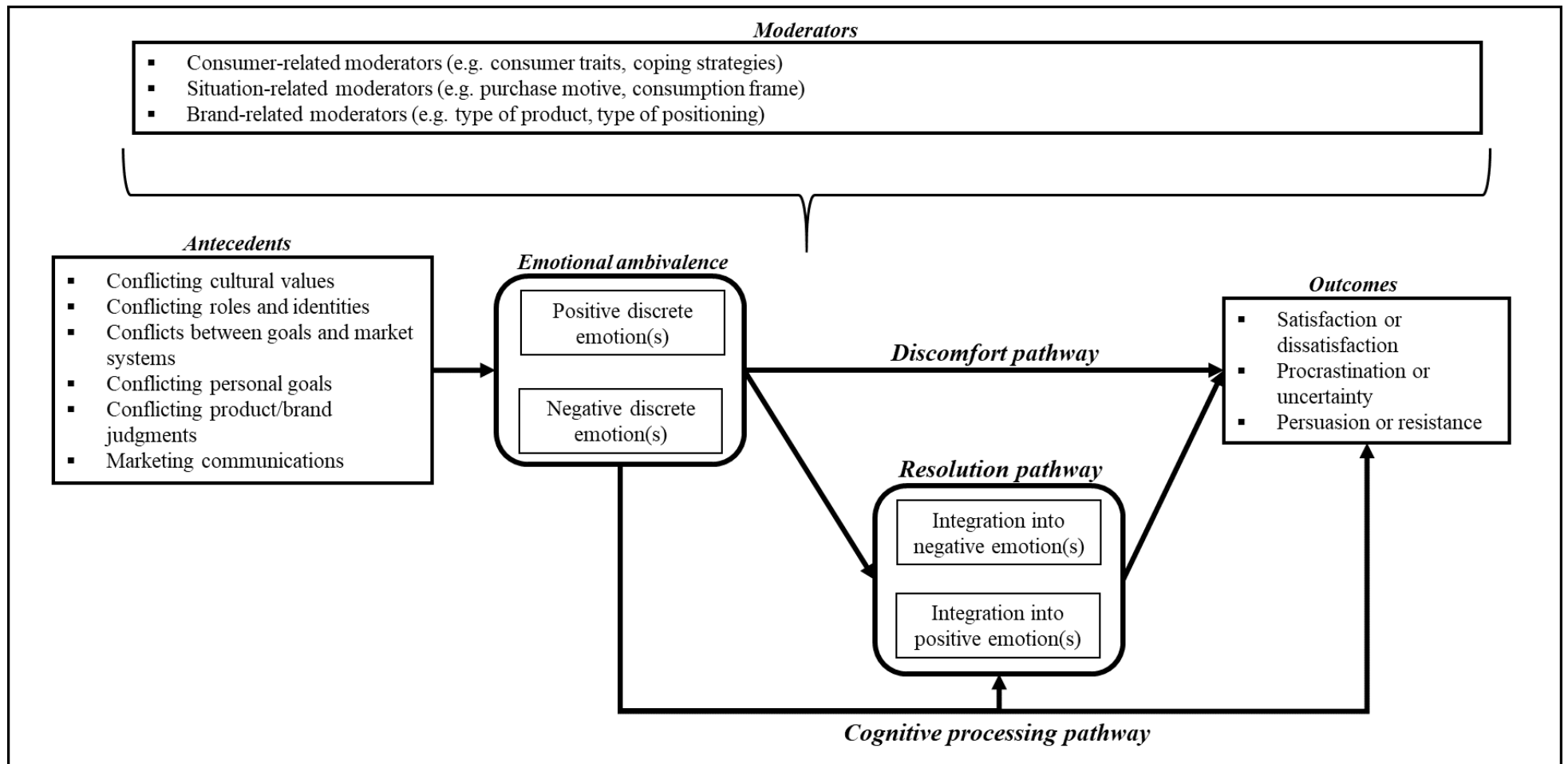


Figure 3. The current knowledge on consumer emotional ambivalence

An agenda for future research

Next, we outline an agenda for future research to shed light on aspects of emotional ambivalence that remain obscure in each component of the model depicted in Figure 3.

Antecedents and processes underpinning emotional ambivalence. To disambiguate which path is more likely to follow from the experience of emotional ambivalence, future work should pay closer attention to the relationships between emotions to reveal which combinations of emotions mediate certain behaviours under different conditions. Studies in the first stream assume that the experience of opposing discrete emotions leads to integration into either a positive or negative experience. However, the specific process of emotion integration has yet to be theorised in detail. Emotional integration may occur because one of the emotions takes precedence over the other. Yet, some studies (e.g. Gineikiene & Diamantopoulos, 2017; Ki et al., 2017) posit emotions of different valence as parallel mediators, assuming the coexistence of opposing emotions and overlooking the interactions between them. Future work can consider other possible relationships among emotions, beyond overriding. Additive or synergistic processes could occur, where one emotion reinforces another or triggers carryover or spillover effects on other cognitions or behaviours (Oh & Tong, 2022; Valor et al., 2023). By better understanding how emotions interrelate, marketers could develop more persuasive appeals, eliciting the right blend of emotions that can motivate the target behaviour.

To better understand these relationships, it is important to consider the cognitive content of emotions (Ruth *et al.*, 2002). The appraisals embedded in each emotion may underlie these distinct relationships. For instance, the experience of two emotions with similar situational control appraisals (e.g. anger and pride; Ruth et al., 2002) may have an additive effect by increasing self-perceived efficacy, thus influencing subsequent behaviour. The unique appraisals associated with each emotion may serve as the basis for theorising how multiple emotions may influence one another. This discussion implies that scholars should go beyond

the conceptualisation of ambivalence as a general feeling and instead pursue a more detailed examination of the specific emotions that comprise this experience. As observed in this review earlier, part of the literature has focused on ambivalence as an overall experience (Bee & Madrigal, 2013; Hong & Lee, 2010). We advocate a transition to the study of ambivalence as a combinatorial process, where contrasting emotions are experienced either concurrently or sequentially, continuing the approach employed in some of the reviewed studies (Otnes et al., 1997).

Moderators of emotional ambivalence. Our review has shown that we know little about moderators of emotional ambivalence; specifically, we lack a systematic understanding of the conditions that may determine which of the identified pathways is likely to occur. Current evidence largely focuses on how consumer traits regulate the emergence of emotional ambivalence as a discomforting experience, consistent with the broader insight that individuals differ in their ability to cope with contrasting experiences (Williams & Aaker, 2002). However, there is limited research examining factors at the company and societal levels (e.g. cultural characteristics) that influence the relationship between emotional ambivalence and consumer outcomes. To address this gap, we propose several additional moderators that future research could consider.

Since prior research shows that the interpretation of emotional ambivalence is a critical moderator of its varying outcomes, future studies should explore the underlying dimensions that shape how this experience is categorised. For instance, Rothman et al. (2017) show that the interpretation of emotional ambivalence as unusual can moderate its influence on creativity. In consumer contexts, such an interpretation may facilitate either the resolution pathway if it leads to a positive integration of the opposing emotions or the cognitive processing pathway if it leads to heightened information processing. The findings reported by Chan (2022) suggest that value orientations may influence how emotional ambivalence is experienced; consumers

with eudaimonic values appear more capable of coping with and accepting ambivalent emotional experiences and are, therefore, more likely to follow the resolution pathway. Cross-cultural research can also help discern how cultural factors influence the emergence and consequences of emotional ambivalence. For example, individuals in tight cultures, which prioritise conformity and order, may be less comfortable with ambivalence and be more likely to follow the discomfort pathway (Uz, 2015). In contrast, individuals in loose cultures, where social norms are more flexible, may be more comfortable with emotional ambivalence and more inclined towards resolution.

Despite their relevance, situational moderators remain underexplored, although they likely influence both the experience and potential outcomes of ambivalence. For instance, a consumer's prior relationship with a brand may shape how contradictory emotions are interpreted, thus explaining which pathway is more likely to occur. Additional situational moderators could include brand-related or contextual factors. For example, emotional ambivalence may not necessarily lead to cart abandonment if consumers are provided with suitable return policies; such organisational policies may facilitate the resolution and integration of emotions into a more positive evaluation.

On a related note, current knowledge of how consumers choose different coping strategies and the differential effects of these strategies is limited, as studies theorising causal relationships have not accounted for these factors. Yet, the type and effectiveness of the chosen coping strategies may be key factors that explain which pathway emerges. Future research should examine the conditions influencing the selection of coping strategies, such as the impact of moral or social norms or the availability of individual or collective resources. While existing research indicates that coping strategies are typically self-selected by individuals, less is known about the possible consequences of coping strategies that are suggested or enabled by brands. Similarly, further research is needed to understand the downstream effects of the coping

strategies employed by consumers across different domains. For example, in the context of brand transgressions, where consumers may experience both anger towards the brand and pride in their identity as users, venting may serve as a coping strategy that might potentially reduce customer revenge.

Emotional ambivalence varies depending on the domain or context considered. Ambiguous, complex, and uncertain contexts are more likely to give rise to contrasting emotions as they entail more conflicting beliefs and tensions between goals and social norms (Rothman & Melwani, 2017). Some of these contexts are of fundamental importance in modern marketing. Emotional ambivalence is likely to play a significant role in evolving domains, such as interactions with AI technology, evaluations of data privacy, and sustainable consumption practices. Future research should prioritise understanding how ambivalence influences decision-making, behaviour, and innovation adoption and acceptance in such contexts. For instance, future studies could investigate how ambivalence impacts user trust and the adoption of AI technologies. Researchers might explore the role of transparency in reducing ambivalence, examining how clear communication of data use can alleviate concerns about privacy while maintaining enthusiasm for the benefits of AI (Lopez & Garza, 2023). Additionally, researchers could examine how emotional ambivalence evolves as innovations become diffused. Investigating the existence of different pathways in such specific contexts will also improve our understanding of the antecedents and mechanisms underpinning them.

Finally, the time frame considered can moderate the effects of ambivalence. Most studies adopt a cross-sectional perspective that examines the short-term consequences of ambivalence. Longitudinal analyses would contribute to better explaining its mid- and long-term consequences. For instance, some studies have shown that feeling torn leads to immediate procrastination or suspension of decision-making (e.g. Armağan & Seytap, 2022; Ong et al., 2023). However, we lack knowledge about the long-term effects of this experience on decision-

making, and why and under which conditions procrastination is reversed. The pathways identified may unfold sequentially in such a way that initial discomfort, when followed by the employment of coping strategies that involve cognitive processing, may facilitate resolution and action. Longitudinal studies would facilitate a better understanding of how these processes unfold and the mechanisms and boundary conditions explaining their occurrence.

Furthermore, past work has explored individual ambivalence, but research shows that ambivalence can also be experienced by groups (Rothman et al., 2017). Therefore, scholars should theorise the antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes of group ambivalence. Likewise, the reviewed studies focus on emotional ambivalence as a felt experience while overlooking the effects of expressed ambivalence in firm or consumer-to-consumer interactions, with the exception of research on ambivalence in consumer reviews (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2018). Research on behaviour within organisations has made some inroads into this question, focusing on how expressions of ambivalence are perceived and how perceived ambivalence in corporate or leadership communication influences recipients (Rothman & Melwani, 2017). However, the consequences of expressed emotional ambivalence in the consumer domain remain underexplored and require further attention.

Outcomes of emotional ambivalence. Prior research has largely focused on the influence of emotional ambivalence on purchase decisions, overlooking other potential outcomes, such as consumer well-being. Evidence suggests that ambivalence may facilitate psychological adjustment and thus be beneficial for individual well-being (Rothman et al., 2017). In addition, since emotional ambivalence may enable a state of greater cognitive flexibility, it may have positive consequences for the stereotyping of consumers or brands, or more broadly, could be beneficial for managing conflicts (Rothman & Melwani, 2017).

A final line of inquiry concerns the carryover and spillover effects of emotional ambivalence. Ramanathan and Williams (2007) provide evidence of carryover effects

following indulgent consumption, where consumers engaged in actions to ‘launder’ their negative emotions. Carryover effects may be found in other instances. For example, it is unclear whether the experience of emotional ambivalence when shopping carries over to subsequent online shopping experiences on the same platform. Likewise, it is unclear whether experiences of ambivalence in a service encounter or towards a specific innovation may spill over to other service experiences or innovations. Addressing these questions requires longitudinal studies that help understand whether ambivalence fades or persists, and whether it influences subsequent decisions (carryover effects) or extends to brands or products that were not the original target of ambivalence (spillover effects).

Managerial implications

This review also sets out interesting managerial implications. First, the model presented in Figure 3 provides a useful framework to evaluate the potential effects of emotional ambivalence. Managers designing communications that aim to elicit contrasting emotions or market offerings likely to trigger ambivalent feelings would benefit from evaluating their marketing strategies based on the pathways outlined. Three critical implications emerge from this analysis. First, managers should measure the specific emotions elicited to be able to assess their downstream effects on consumer behaviour and the impact of specific combinations. Second, the specific pathway activated should be investigated to understand exactly how consumers will respond to the campaign. Third, the effects of hedonic experiences delivered and their impact on information processing deserve careful consideration.

The review stresses the importance of considering the role of combinations of emotions. Much managerial practice in the past has focused on debates around emotional valence (e.g. positive versus negative emotions) or discussions on the relative effectiveness of appeals centred on one emotion (e.g. fear appeals, hope appeals). In contrast, this review demonstrates

the importance of considering combinations of discrete emotions and their distinctive effects on consumer cognition and behaviour (Oh & Tong, 2022). Managers should reflect explicitly on the ability of products, services and communications to elicit multiple emotions from consumers and carefully consider the consequences of such complex elicitation.

Finally, our work highlights the importance of understanding key customer traits, such as dialectical thinking or tolerance for ambiguity. These traits are more prevalent in certain demographic groups (e.g. older consumers and those from Eastern cultures), and recognising these differences may help companies better segment and design more tailored campaigns for products evoking emotional ambivalence. Organisations managing offerings likely to elicit ambivalent emotions should regularly measure such traits through consumer surveys, which would allow them to track and respond to specific groups that may be disproportionately affected by emotional ambivalence.

Conclusion

This review extends the literature on consumer ambivalence in four ways. First, it synthesises existing evidence into three distinct streams and describes its main assumptions and findings. Building on this foundation, we outline three pathways that can explain the outcomes observed in the pool of studies. Second, we clarify the conceptual boundaries of emotional ambivalence and distinguish it from attitudinal and cognitive ambivalence. As part of this conceptual mapping, we show that while attitudinal or cognitive ambivalence can sometimes trigger contrasting emotions, emotional ambivalence has specific antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes that warrant focused attention. Specifically, we demonstrate the importance of unpacking the discrete emotions of opposing valence that constitute emotional ambivalence and call for a deeper study of the relationships among emotions and their integration into the pathways proposed. Third, our review challenges an often-held assumption

of prior research, namely that ambivalence is an inherently discomforting experience for consumers. We also underscore the positive aspects of emotional ambivalence, which can heighten attention, leading to improved decisions (Ayadi & Djelassi 2023; Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012), foster tolerance for ambiguity (Wang et al., 2016) and be inherently enjoyable, as seen in nostalgia or suspense (Alwitt, 2002; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022). Emotional ambivalence can stimulate consumer creativity or tolerance to navigate conflicts (Rees et al., 2013; Xin et al., 2022). Finally, we promote scholarly imagination by proposing a research agenda that not only raises pressing research questions but also connects them to relevant theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

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