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THE AMBIVALENT CONSUMER: A SEQUENTIAL INVESTIGATION OF RESPONSE AMPLIFICATION IN BUYER-SELLER ENCOUNTERS

Victoria D. Bush, Lifeng Yang, and Katerina E. Hill

Consumers have become increasingly skeptical about salespeople's persuasion attempts. Nonetheless, during the decision-making process, consumers depend on the aid of salespeople because of their knowledge. This dependence can result in consumer ambivalence toward the sales encounter—consumers may feel torn between their distrust and suspicion toward salespeople, and yet they need their help and expertise to make an informed decision. Using both qualitative and sequential experimental methods, we investigate how ambivalence manifests itself in the buyer-seller encounter, how and when it can be reduced, and its effect on attitudes and intent to purchase. Our results demonstrate that positive message amplification can be a potential help but also a hindrance in the initial buyer-seller encounter. Specifically, we found that ambivalent consumers responded more favorably to positive information provided by the salesperson *after* the interaction. This result may have emerged because consumers are more skeptical of salespeople and their *guard* is up when interacting with such individuals.

For years, salespeople have been stereotyped as manipulative, untrustworthy, and out for their own personal gain (Wood, Boles, and Babin 2008). Consequently, consumers have become increasingly savvy and skeptical about persuasive attempts by salespeople (DeCarlo, Lacznia, and Leigh 2013). Yet, in many settings, consumers depend on the expertise and product knowledge of salespeople for understanding product offerings and usage during the buying process. Salespeople provide a wealth of product and service knowledge that is central to the development of buyer-seller relationships (Evans et al. 2012). Thus, on one hand, consumers may find salespeople helpful in the purchase decision process (positive), but on the other, manipulative and untrustworthy (negative). These conflicting feelings can result in ambivalence toward the buyer-seller encounter—consumers may feel torn between their distrust of, yet need for, salespeople to make an informed decision and, ultimately,

purchase a product. If such ambivalence is not recognized in a sales encounter, a salesperson may actually inhibit, rather than facilitate, mutually satisfying exchanges (Babin, Boles, and Darden 1995).

Consumer ambivalence may also be prevalent in an encounter with a salesperson because of the changing retail landscape. Consumers have access to a wealth of product information from their own searches online before they enter a retail store and literally at their fingertips, via their mobile devices, while in the store. Sometimes this knowledge can lead to consumers perceiving that they know more than the salesperson, which, in turn, can contribute to negative stereotypes of salespeople. Additionally, consumers also have a multitude of retail shopping formats (i.e., online, mobile, click-and-mortar, personal, etc.) from which to choose. In fact, consumers now blend their shopping strategies—to the dismay of such stores as Best Buy—by using stores and salespeople for input and then purchasing the product at a competitor or online. This challenges retailers in terms of how consumers shop and what consumers perceive as important when interacting with salespeople (Kim, Lee, and Park 2014).

Additional research has shown that, when visiting a retail store, situational and individual factors prompt retail shoppers to consult with salespeople. For example, utilitarian shoppers tend to be more interested in reducing purchase uncertainty and getting efficient information from a salesperson. In contrast, hedonic shoppers may be more concerned with how a

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salesperson influences their shopping enjoyment (Haas and Kenning 2014). These factors as well as others, such as type of product, product involvement, and frequency of purchase, may also lead to ambivalent feelings toward a salesperson. In addition, researchers have found that mere observation of customers by salespeople is likely to increase a customer's public self-awareness, which can cause emotional discomfort and behavioral inhibition (Buss 1980). These responses can also create the potential for consumer ambivalence. Thus, retailers face the issue of how to provide positive and relevant information to ambivalent customers while enhancing store performance (Haas and Kenning 2014).

Ambivalence has been examined in such areas as customer satisfaction and loyalty (Olsen, Wilcox, and Olsson 2005), deadline pressure (Jewell 2003), purchase of certain brands, and attitudes toward stigmatized groups (Maio, Bell, and Esses 1996). For example, Olsen, Wilcox, and Olsson (2005) examined consumption of seafood by Norwegian consumers and found that ambivalent consumers are less loyal and less satisfied with their seafood consumption. Jewell (2003) found that ambivalence can fluctuate as a project deadline becomes imminent. Maio, Bell, and Esses (1996) found that ambivalent consumers are likely to process information more elaborately than individuals who are not ambivalent. In addition, research in persuasion has examined how consumers cope with and adjust to persuasive attempts (cf., Ha et al. 2013; Kirmani and Campbell 2004; Tuncay and Otnes 2008; Wood, Boles, and Babin 2008). Ha and associates (2013) found that consumers were able to change their judgments with information learned from external sources. However, little research exists regarding how *ambivalent* consumers cope with persuasive message tactics in sales encounters.

The purpose of this research is two-fold: First, we investigate attitudes toward salespeople and how ambivalence manifests itself in initial buyer-seller encounters. Second, we examine if and how purchase intentions of ambivalent consumers can be influenced via the amplification of persuasive messages. Using both qualitative and sequential experimental methods, our results demonstrate that positive message amplification can be a potential help but also a hindrance in initial buyer-seller encounters that involve ambivalent consumers. Our findings add to theory in buyer-seller interactions by understanding and investigating the

construct of ambivalence, both qualitatively and empirically, in the sales context. Additionally, while it has been investigated in social psychology (cf., Bell and Esses 2002) we apply and replicate the ambivalence reduction approach in the sales context. Finally, our findings help practitioners understand how consumer ambivalence can be recognized and managed in sales encounters.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Ambivalence in Buyer-Seller Encounters

In the marketing context, Otnes, Lowery, and Shrum (1997, p. 8) define consumer ambivalence as "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 that can have direct and/or indirect ramifications on pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase attitudes and behavior." Thus, consumer ambivalence can result from the interplay between internal emotional states and expectations that consumers bring to buyer-seller encounters as well as recognize the positive and negative aspects of the encounter itself.

Research in psychology suggests that ambivalence feels more uncomfortable when the issue relates to important others (Priester and Petty 2001), when individuals have a higher preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trust, and Newsom 1995), and when they have low tolerance for ambiguity (Nowlis, Kahm, and Dhar 2002). Ambivalence, then, applies to the buyer-seller encounter in terms of important others, consistent messages, and unambiguous information. Additionally, research in persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994; Campbell and Kirmani 2000) suggests that consumers' experience in sales encounters can contribute to their knowledge of salespeople's persuasive intentions. When consumers perceive an ulterior motive, they may discount a salesperson's credibility (DeCarlo 2005). However, if consumers do not perceive an ulterior motive, they are more willing to purchase from the salesperson (DeCarlo 2005). These findings suggest that consumer ambivalence toward salespeople can be formed through the experiences and knowledge of the consumer. The existence of ambivalence may affect

consumer's expectation of future interaction with salespeople (Ha et al. 2013). Thus, in our study, we examine the preexisting impressions and expectations (internal) that the potential customer brings to the initial retail sales encounter (external).

Sales research has found that consumers tend to form their perceptions of and confirm their expectations of salespeople relatively quickly (Ambady, Krabbenhoft, and Hogan 2006). Further, Wood, Boles, and Babin (2008) state that buyers search for indications of salesperson competence (i.e., positive aspect) in the "immediacy of a first encounter" (p. 30). Additionally, many consumers bring perceptions with them to the sales encounter—consumers believe that salespeople are often dishonest or deceptive because they are under pressure to achieve their sales quotas (DeCarlo, Lacznia, and Leigh 2013). This suspicion (i.e., negative aspect) can influence the overall attitudes and intentions of consumers toward salespeople in general. Consequently, DeCarlo (2005) found that a salesperson's presentation plays an essential role in confirming or disconfirming consumer suspicion, attitudes, and purchase intentions. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: The more positive and negative attitudes toward salespeople, the more ambivalent the consumer.

Ambivalence Reduction and Message Amplification

The social psychology literature provides evidence that ambivalence is an uncomfortable state (Bell and Esses 2002; Newby-Clark, McGregor, and Zanna 2002). Ambivalence results in aversive feelings that cause discomfort and guilt (Nordgren, Van Harreveld, and Van Der Plight 2006). Thus, we purport that during the initial buyer-seller encounter, the existence of ambivalence would feel uncomfortable because it may inhibit consumers from making a decision.

When such conflicting feelings occur, research has suggested that individuals will be motivated to reduce the ambivalence that causes these feelings (Bell and Esses 2002). For example, Bell and Esses (2002) found that ambivalence can be reduced when an individual is given additional information that adds to the positive or negative component of their ambivalent attitudes. Initially, these researchers found that a portion of participants in their study had ambivalent attitudes (i.e.,

both positive and negative) toward Native American people. However, after reading a positive or negative message about Native Americans, ambivalence was reduced. Those participants who did *not* have ambivalent attitudes toward this population initially had no change in their attitudes, regardless of whether the message was positive or negative. Consequently, Bell and Esses (2002) found evidence to support the proposition that ambivalent individuals show an amplified post-message attitude, whereas those who are not ambivalent about an issue do not show post-message attitude amplification. Hence, we examine whether this finding can be replicated in the buyer-seller encounter context.

As discussed earlier, suspicion combined with the need for knowledge contributes to consumer ambivalence toward salespeople. Thus, such ambivalence can be reduced by providing consumers with information to disconfirm their suspicion of a salesperson's motive or to confirm their belief that a salesperson is knowledgeable. With the forgoing logic, such a tactic may *not* be effective if one does *not* hold an ambivalent attitude toward salespeople initially. Thus, for consistency with previous research, we investigate the impact of both positive and negative messages on ambivalent consumers in the buyer-seller context. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Ambivalent consumers are more likely to process positive/negative messages to form a more univalent attitude toward salespeople than less ambivalent consumers.

Ambivalence Reduction and Persuasion Salience

Past literature in marketing has explored consumer reactions to persuasion attempts using a number of marketing-related stimuli, including interpersonal persuasion attempts such as sales scenarios and presentations (Kirmani and Campbell 2004; DeCarlo 2005; Wood, Boles, and Babin 2008). Because consumers may be skeptical and suspicious of salespeople, it is tempting to argue that their ambivalence toward salespeople can be reduced if positive information is provided to them for consideration. However, providing consumers with such information might, as well, activate the *negative* base, which believes that all persuasive attempts related to salespeople are suspicious (DeCarlo 2005; Friestad and Wright 1994; Wood, Boles, and Babin 2008).

Research in persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994) suggests that individuals are resistant to persuasion if they are aware of the persuasion tactics being used. The salience of persuasion tactics can lead to the activation of suspicion, which, in turn, activates negative reactance toward the persuasion attempt (Friestad and Wright 1994; Kirmani and Campbell 2004). At this stage, consumers could attribute this suspicion to the untrustworthy quality of the salesperson (DeCarlo 2005; Friestad and Wright 1994; Wood, Boles, and Babin 2008). Thus, in situations where consumers are given positive reinforcement related to salespeople, we contend that ambivalent individuals may or may not respond positively to the given message. When the persuasion attempt is made salient, providing positive information to ambivalent consumers may very likely be perceived as a tactful, persuasive strategy with an ulterior motive embedded, which may activate the negative base of consumer's ambivalence toward salespeople. As a result, ambivalence may be reduced, yet not necessarily in a positive direction.

Continuing, we argue that the provision of information to reduce consumer ambivalence toward salespeople may interact with the salience of persuasion attempts and thus affect the persuasion power of the information provided. Although literature has demonstrated that providing positive persuasive information can reduce the ambivalence of respondents toward an object/issue (cf., Bell and Esses 2002), little is known about how this information is processed and how it impacts the outcome of a sales encounter.

We argue that the timing of providing positive information in the sales encounter may be crucial because of consumer suspicion (DeCarlo 2005). Researchers have noted that attitudinal ambivalence may fluctuate over time (Jewell 2003). Additionally, research on recency effect in the memory literature has found that when evaluations are gathered immediately after an experience, the expected effect is more likely to be obtained (cf., Ariely 1998). When evaluations are gathered at a later time, the recency effect may dissipate (Crowder 1976). In our study, we argue that the timing of *when* positive information about the salesperson is given can significantly affect the salience of persuasion attempts, which could adversely affect the intended effect of persuasion. Thus, we expect to find that positive information

that highlights the trustworthiness/experience of a salesperson provided a few days *after* the interaction will have a greater impact on reducing ambivalence than if this positive information is provided at the same time (or *during* the interaction) when consumer resistance to persuasion is higher. Formally, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Positive persuasive information about salespeople is more effective in reducing ambivalence if it is provided on a separate occasion after the interaction rather than during the interaction.

Consumer Ambivalence and Purchase Intention

Research in persuasion knowledge (cf., Friestad and Wright 1994), suggests that consumers are goal oriented. Here, consumers actively seek information to achieve their goals. In the case of buyer-seller encounters, consumers seek the help of salespeople to make their purchase decision (Mallalieu and Nakamoto 2008). Alternatively, the goal of a salesperson is to persuade consumers to buy—a notion that is quite salient to consumers during such interactions (Friestad and Wright 1994; Kirmani and Campbell 2004). Because ambivalent consumers are motivated to respond to any information in the interaction that would help make their feelings more univalent (Has et al. 1992), we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4: Consumers' reduced ambivalence in the positive direction toward salespeople is positively related to purchase intention.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to investigate ambivalence in the context of the buyer-seller encounter, three sequential studies were designed. All studies were conducted with students at a large public university in the United States. Each study involved a different student sample. Our first study investigates initial attitudes and perceptions toward salespeople and how ambivalence manifests itself in the retail sales context. Our second study builds on the first by designing sales scenarios that intend to reduce ambivalence by providing individuals positive or negative messages related to salespeople. In Study 3, we examine our hypothesis that the salience and timing of persuasive information may adversely affect how ambivalent individuals are processing the information,

thus impacting the reduction of ambivalence and purchase intention. This third study manipulates the sales scenario in an interactive video context and examines the temporal sequence of positive information manipulations.

Study 1: Ambivalent Attitudes toward Salespeople

The primary objective of our first study was to use established qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate general attitudes consumers have toward salespeople and how ambivalence manifests itself in sales interactions. Here, we wanted to understand the positive and negative *content* of buyer-seller interactions.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 86 undergraduates at a large public university participated in the study. Participants were told that the researchers were interested in understanding their impressions toward salespeople when they were in a shopping environment. We did not restrict participants to recall their experience with salespeople in a specific context; thus, the experiences recollected should be the most salient experiences they had with salespeople. Specifically, participants read the following instructions:

When we go shopping for products at retail stores, we often get to meet with different salespeople. In this study, researchers are interested to know how consumers, like you, think about salespeople.

Respondents were then asked to recollect the most recent positive, negative, and neutral experiences they had with salespeople. Each participant listed all three types of recent experiences. They were asked to try to relive that actual experience, and describe the experience as vividly as possible. Immediately after describing each separate experience, respondents were asked to provide up to five adjectives about the salesperson in that experience that made each experience positive, negative, or neutral. Next, participants indicated on a 0–100-point scale how favorable or unfavorable (0 = extremely unfavorable; 50 = not favorable or unfavorable; 100 = extremely favorable) their attitudes were toward salespeople in *general*. This measure was adapted from Bell and Esses (2002).

Finally, participants were asked to indicate, on a 4-point scale (Kaplan 1972), “If you only consider the negative aspects of salespeople, how negative are those negative aspects?” (1 = not at all negative; 2 = slightly negative; 3 = very negative; 4 = extremely negative); and “If you only consider the positive aspects of salespeople, how positive are those positive aspects?” (1 = not at all positive; 2 = slightly positive; 3 = very positive; 4 = extremely positive). Using participant responses to the two questions, we computed the ambivalence score for each participant by following the ambivalence formula by Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin (1995), which is explained in our results.

Results

To test our first hypothesis, participants’ open-ended recollections of sales interactions were analyzed by two researchers individually, after which any discrepancies were discussed jointly and a consensus was reached. The analysis of the transcripts involved an iterative reading strategy. Following the procedure used by Strauss and Corbin (1990), three stages of coding were used. In the first stage of the coding, the data were categorized by looking for differences and similarities within and across transcripts. This open coding sought to break down data into discrete parts. Data that appeared to be related to similar phenomena were then clustered into a category. Next, axial coding, the process of identifying relationships among the open codes, was performed to make connections between categories. Here, we sought to organize the content of the open-ended responses within each main category of positive, negative, and neutral descriptions of sales interactions. Finally, selective coding was used to choose core themes, relate them to other themes, and validate those relationships.

A total of 620 experiences ranging from positive to negative were collected and analyzed. Of all the experiences, 264 were positive, 198 were negative, and 158 were neutral. Inter-rater reliability was calculated by dividing the total experiences listed by the total experiences that were coded equally among the two researchers. The result was 76.08 percent. As depicted in Table 1, the coding resulted in four positive attitudinal categories (knowledgeable, helpful, nice, and suggestive); four negative attitudinal categories (rude,

Table 1
Content Analysis Results for Study 1

Attitudinal Category	Theme	Sample Quote	Frequency
Positive	Knowledgeable	"The salesperson was actually knowledgeable when we discussed specifications and performance, and other elements."	58
	Helpful	"Every time I go in to the store, the salespeople are really helpful and help me find whatever I'm looking for ... they never run out of patience."	106
	Nice	"She customized my shopping experience just for me and made it pleasant."	86
	Suggestive	"The salesperson pulled other items from the store that she thought I would like."	14
Negative	Rude	"I had to endure two salespeople gossiping behind the counter instead of helping me."	92
	Disrespectful	"When I asked her questions, she seemed very bored and annoyed that I was inquiring about a product."	37
	Incompetent	"The salesperson was not experienced enough to help me with my problem."	31
	Aggressive	"The salesperson kept following me around and would not leave me alone ... wouldn't let me look around without answering questions about products I wasn't interested in."	38
Neutral	Capable	"The salesperson was quick and efficient."	77
	Distant	"Instead of pushing me to buy the product and standing by me while I made my choice, he left me alone to think about all the information he had just given me."	81

disrespectful, incompetent, aggressive); and two neutral categories (capable, distant).

Participants that recalled their positive experiences described salespeople as being knowledgeable, helpful, nice, and suggestive. The following quotes are representative of how the positive interactions were described:

I felt the salesperson knew his stuff and was knowledgeable enough to assist me in my decision instead of being just an uneducated salesman

He [the salesperson] met my needs without making me feel uncomfortable.

Participants that recalled their negative experiences described salespeople as being rude, disrespectful, incompetent, and aggressive. The following quotes were typical:

They [the salesperson] did not respect my space and desire to calmly relax and shop for a product. They [the salesperson] were overly forceful.

The salesperson was not very helpful in finding the product I wanted and she did not greet me or ask if I needed help. When I asked her questions, she seemed very bored and annoyed that I was inquiring about a product.

Participants that recalled their neutral experiences, described the salespeople as being capable, yet distant:

The salesperson was not overly nice nor was she rude. She was able to find a happy medium in assisting me with my shopping experience.

Instead of pushing me to buy the product and standing by me while I made my choice, he left me alone to think about all the information he had just given me.

Attitude toward Salespeople

The overall attitude measure (Bell and Esses 2002) showed that consumer attitudes toward salespeople are slightly above the midpoint of the 100-point scale ($M = 56.81$, $SD = 19.39$). Two explanations are plausible for this finding: (1) Consumer attitudes toward salespeople are indifferent—that is, they do not have much valenced reaction toward salespeople; (2) consumer attitudes toward salespeople are highly ambivalent, with strong positive and negative reactions embedded, but slightly tilted toward the positive end, given that the overall attitude measure is above the midpoint of the scale. To identify which of the two explanations hold, we analyzed the specific measurements on attitude ambivalence.

Attitude Ambivalence

Thompson and associates' (1995) procedure was followed for calculating ambivalence:

$(P+N) * \frac{1}{2} - \text{absolute } (P - N)$, where P and N represent how extremely positive/negative (on a 4-point scale,

e.g., Kaplan 1972) one thinks the positive/negative aspects are that are associated with salespeople. This procedure has been widely used in research on ambivalence (e.g., Armitage & Conner 2000). With this formula, the ambivalence score per respondent could range from -0.50 to 4 on a 9-point scale with 1.50 being the midpoint of the output scores.

As expected, the majority of the participants reported feeling ambivalent toward salespeople in general. Only 13.3 percent of the participants scored below the midpoint (1.50) of the ambivalence measure output; 86.7 percent of the participants scored above the midpoint (1.50) of the ambivalence measure output. We found that participants generally hold ambivalent attitudes toward salespeople ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.0$, $t = 8.38$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, our first hypothesis (*Hypothesis 1*) is confirmed.

Study 2: Reducing Ambivalence toward Salespeople

In Study 1, we found support for our conceptualization that consumers tend to feel ambivalent about salespeople. The question remains as to whether the feeling of ambivalence motivates consumers to process information that helps them reduce ambivalence and, thus, be more univalent in behavioral intention. Although results from social-psychological studies on topics of racial issues (Bell and Esses 2002) shed light on this question, no empirical evidence shows that ambivalent consumers are motivated to reduce their ambivalence by processing information in the buyer-seller context. Thus, the primary objective of Study 2 was to extend the findings by Bell and Esses (2002) to study how ambivalent consumers may be motivated to reduce their ambivalence toward salespeople. Additionally, we examined how ambivalence reduction impacts purchase intention.

Participants and Design

Participants were 137 undergraduates at a large public university in the United States (71 women and 66 men) who participated for course credit. We used a median split to break the sample into high- versus low-ambivalent groups to determine how the level of ambivalence and the provision of persuasive messages affect purchase intentions. Study 2, thus, was a 2 (ambivalence: low vs. high) \times 2 (persuasion

information: positive vs. negative) factorial design. All participants were randomly assigned to either the positive or negative persuasion information condition.

Procedure

Study 2 took place in a computer lab where participants responded to the study questions embedded in Qualtrics. They were recruited for a study on attitudes toward the purchasing process in a shopping environment. At the beginning of the study, participants responded to some brief demographic questions such as their age, gender, and name (for crediting purposes). They were then provided an introduction to the study:

When we go shopping for products at retail stores, we often get to meet with different salespeople. In this study, researchers are interested to know how consumers, like you, think about salespeople.

Participants then were asked to report their attitude and ambivalence toward salespeople. We again used the attitude measure from Bell and Esses (2002) where subjects indicated on a 0–100-point scale how favorable or unfavorable (0 = extremely unfavorable; 50 = not favorable or unfavorable; 100 = extremely favorable) they were toward salespeople in general. Attitude ambivalence was again measured by asking participants to indicate on a 4-point scale how positive (P)/negative (N) they think salespeople are if they only consider the positive/negative aspects of them (Kaplan 1972). Specifically, they were asked: “If you only consider the positive/negative aspects of salespeople, how positive (negative) are those aspects?” “One” (“1”) = “not at all positive/negative”; “2” = “slightly positive/negative”; “3” = “very positive/negative”; and “4” = “extremely positive/negative.” We computed an ambivalence score for each participant by following the formula by Thompson and associates (1995) as explained in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions where they were presented either a positive or negative scenario about a particular sales rep (i.e., “Pat”) at a TV store. We chose this product because it is a relatively high involvement and somewhat complex consumer product for which consumers may need help from a salesperson in making their purchase decision. Based on the emergent themes from our qualitative analysis in Study 1, we described Pat

(see Appendix A) with such terms as “very knowledgeable” and “nice” (positive scenario) or as “very pushy” and “aggressive” (negative scenario). Immediately after reading the positive or negative scenario, participants were asked to indicate how likely they would be to purchase a product from Pat by responding to four questions on a 7-point scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.98$, where 1 = very likely to 7 = very unlikely) that included: (1) How likely are you to purchase a product from Pat? (2) If you need a salesperson, how likely are you to use Pat? (3) How likely are you to recommend Pat to a friend? (4) How likely are you to make a purchase based on Pat’s recommendation? They were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Our conceptualization called for a comparison analysis between high and low ambivalent individuals. Thus, we split participants into high- versus low-ambivalence groups based on their ambivalence score, using 1.50 as the split point. As expected, participants in the high-ambivalence group held a more ambivalent attitude toward salespeople ($M = 2.62$) than those in the low-ambivalence group ($M = 1.34$; $F(1, 136) = 230.87$; $p < 0.001$). Although those in the low-ambivalence group indicated a more positive attitude toward salespeople ($M = 58.78$) compared to those in the high-ambivalence group ($M = 52.92$), this difference was not significant ($F(1, 136) = 3.25$; $p = 0.074$, NS).

Post-message Purchase Intentions

Consistent with our hypotheses, our results show that highly ambivalent participants reported a higher purchase intention when given a positive message ($M = 6.31$) compared to a negative message ($M = 1.63$) than low ambivalent participants ($M = 6.28$ after positive message; $M = 2.06$ after negative message). Therefore, our finding that low ambivalent participants displayed less disparity in purchase intention from the salesperson than highly ambivalent participants successfully replicated the finding by Bell and Esses (2002). Furthermore, it extends it to the context of buyer-seller interactions, using purchase intention as the more relevant dependent variable. Here, post-message purchase intention

disparities between the high ambivalent and low ambivalent individuals show that highly ambivalent consumers are more susceptible to post-message behavior amplification. Consumers who are low in ambivalence, in contrast, appear to be much less susceptible to persuasion attempts; thus, their purchase intention did not show the same level of amplification as those consumers who were high in ambivalence initially.

Study 3: Reducing Ambivalence and Persuasion Salience

To advance our understanding of the provision of positive information regarding the salesperson, we conducted our third study to evaluate our hypothesis that consumers’ suspicion of persuasion attempts may interactively affect the extent to which they change their evaluations of salespeople. Consistent with our logic, discussed earlier in the conceptual development, we predict that the utilization of timing can potentially dampen or strengthen the salience of persuasion attempts, which can increase or decrease the message’s effect on purchase intention.

To test our next hypotheses, we created a 2 (treatment: yes or no) \times 2 (salience of persuasion attempt: during vs. after) mixed design. The salience of persuasion attempt was operationalized using times of treatment, with the third treatment as a baseline condition where no treatment was given. At this point in the research process, we focused only on positive information because it is the most relevant to successful buyer-seller encounter outcomes. In order to test for temporal sequence, the only difference between the two treatment conditions was *when* the positive information toward the salesperson was given.

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate students from a large university participated in the study in a laboratory setting. All participants recruited for this study had not participated in any of our previous studies and were screened for ambivalence toward salespeople using the identical ambivalence measure as shown in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to either the baseline condition where no positive information was given at all (T0), the condition where they would be provided positive information

regarding the salesperson during the first-time encounter (T1), or given positive information at a separate occasion after their first-time encounter (T2) with the salesperson. The materials used for the treatment conditions were identical except for *when* the positive information was given (T1 or T2). We compared participants' attitudes, ambivalence, and purchase intentions in each condition.

Materials

We designed two sales videos for participants to view in Study 3. We attempted to minimize possible artifacts that may confound the study by finding an actor who would be perceived as a less valenced person to role-play the salesperson in our videos. We recruited and compared three individual actors for the role. Seventy-seven participants from a separate sample of the same subject population participated in this pretest; they were told that three individuals were candidates interviewing for a sales job. A headshot picture and a brief introductory video clip from each individual actor were shown to the participants. Perceived source credibility (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$), ulterior motive (DeCarlo 2005; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), and preference to interact were measured using 7-point scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much. Additionally, a rank order measure concerning which of the three individuals appeared the most capable, likable, trustworthy, and believable was captured toward the end of the pretest. One actor consistently rated in the *midpoint* of scales for all three constructs. Additionally, this candidate was consistently ranked second in the rank order measure. This actor, "Robert," was chosen to role play in the videos used in the main study. Thus, we minimized possible extraneous factors that may alternatively explain why consumers prefer or do not prefer to interact with the salesperson in our main study.

Subsequently, we designed two videos that focused on shopping in an electronics store (see Appendix B). One video was a simple introductory video of the salesperson, and the other included positive information provided by the salesperson. The introductory video consisted of the salesperson, Robert, introducing himself, mentioning that the store has a wide selection of electronics to choose

from, and that he looks forward to answering any questions customers have when visiting the store (see Appendix B, the baseline video condition). The second video featured Robert mentioning that he has been with the electronics store for eight years (experienced), is an avid fan of the latest electronic products on the market (knowledgeable), and loves to help customers navigate through the complicated world of innovative new electronics (helpful and suggestive). This scenario was based on the emergent themes from the positive recollections of our participants in our qualitative analysis in Study 1. This positive message was viewed in both the *during* and the *after* conditions.

Dependent Variables

Participants responded to questions that measured their overall attitudes and ambivalence toward the salesperson—Robert. They also were asked to indicate how likely they would be to purchase a product from Robert by responding to four questions on a 7-point scale (where 1 = very likely, and 7 = very unlikely; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). The questions were (1) How likely are you to purchase a product from Robert? (2) If you need a salesperson, how likely are you to use Robert? (3) How likely are you to recommend Robert to a friend? (4) How likely are you to make a purchase based on Robert's recommendation? They were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Identical to Studies 1 and 2, ambivalence scores were calculated following the procedure by Thompson and colleagues (1995). The majority of the participants had ambivalent attitudes toward salespeople. Further, preexisting attitudes toward salespeople in general were also measured using a 0–100-point scale with 0 = extremely negative and 100 = extremely positive (Bell and Esses 2002). A total of 127 participants completed the study. Since 13 of them did not show any ambivalence toward salespeople, their responses were deleted for the data analysis. Among the remaining 114 responses, 30 were from the baseline condition, 37 from the *during* condition, and 47 were from the *after* condition.

Post-message Attitudes, Ambivalence, and Purchase Intentions

As depicted in Table 2, we found that participants' overall general attitudes toward salespeople remained stable between the no treatment condition, the persuasion salience condition (our *during* condition), and the persuasion not-salient condition (our *after* condition): (MT0 = 57.68, SD = 18.06; vs. MT1 = 60.84, SD = 24.46; MT2 = 60.70, SD = 19.93, $ps > 0.10$, NS). Regardless of whether the participants did not view the positive message (T0), viewed the positive message *during* the sales interaction (T1), or at a separate occasion a few days *after* the interaction (T2), attitudes toward salespeople in general did not significantly change.

Ambivalence toward salespeople *did* change after the positive message manipulations (see Table 2). Compared to the no-treatment (control) condition (MT0 = 1.47, SD = 0.89), ambivalence toward salespeople was significantly lower when the positive message was viewed on a separate occasion a few days *after* participants first interacted with the salesperson (MT2 = 1.18, SD = 1.05, $F(1, 58) = 4.81$, $p = 0.032$). This supports our third hypothesis (*Hypothesis 3*). However, ambivalence was actually higher, however insignificantly, when the positive message was given in the *during* condition where persuasion attempt was most salient (MT0 = 1.47, SD = 0.89 vs. MT1 = 1.66, SD = 0.90; $p > 0.10$, NS).

In terms of purchase intentions, our results do *not* show a significant difference between the baseline message and positive message a few days after the sales interaction (MT0 = 3.64, SD = 1.41 vs. MT2 = 3.72, SD = 1.36, $t = 0.389$, $p = 0.69$, NS). However, we found that

a significant difference exists when participants were given the positive message during the interaction *and* a few days after the interaction (MT1 = 3.15, SD = 1.65 vs. MT2 = 3.72, SD = 1.36, $p = 0.05$). Apparently, when consumers are given positive messages during the interaction, their purchase intentions *decrease*. However, purchase intentions increase when the positive message is received again a few days after the interaction. Thus, when given positive messages during the sales encounter, ambivalent consumers may be more suspicious of the salesperson's motives and become more resistant and less inclined to purchase. However, ambivalent consumers who are given the positive message again after the interaction appear to be more receptive and more likely to purchase. Thus, *Hypothesis 4* is supported.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our findings from all three studies not only advance our understanding of the nature and malleability of ambivalent attitudes of consumers, but also provide substantial academic and managerial implications for marketing researchers and sales practitioners. First, our results offer significant external validity to existing academic research findings on ambivalence. Second, our results imply that ambivalent consumers should not be overlooked by sales practitioners. Third, and most importantly, academic marketing researchers and practitioners should not assume that ambivalence can be reduced by providing positive reinforcement, as previous studies suggest. Here, the timing of such a strategy is critical in the context of buyer-seller encounters.

In Studies 1, 2, and 3, we tested and found support for our hypotheses on consumer ambivalence toward salespeople and the possibility of changing ambivalent attitudes to be more univalent. Thus, we successfully replicate the ambivalence reduction approach used in social psychology (Bell and Esses 2002) and apply it in the sales context. Existing research in buyer-seller interactions and the popular press indicate that consumers are highly alert of and are resistant to overt sales persuasion attempts (DeCarlo 2005; Friestad & Wright 1994). However, as our findings reveal, a certain group of consumers have conflicting feelings (i.e., ambivalence) toward salespeople. This consumer segment should be recognized and embraced by salespeople because of their need and motivation to reduce such conflicting feelings.

Table 2
Study 3 Means and Standard Deviations for Treatment Groups

Variable	T0 ¹		T1 ²		T2 ³	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Attitude toward salespeople in general	57.68	18.06	60.84	24.46	60.70	19.93
Ambivalence	1.47	0.89	1.66	0.90	1.18	1.05
Purchase Intentions	3.64	1.41	3.15	1.65	3.72	1.36

Notes: ¹ No positive message given; ² Positive message given during sales interaction; ³ Positive message given after sales interaction.

As our studies reveal, ambivalent consumers responded more favorably to positive information provided by the salesperson *after* the interaction. This result may have emerged because consumers are more skeptical of salespeople and their *guard* is up when interacting with such individuals. Thus, when positive messages were provided during the interaction, ambivalence was *not* reduced and purchase intentions actually *decreased*. This finding appears contrary to common knowledge in the academic and practitioner marketing literature.

Most training programs and research into the selling process stress the importance of overcoming objections from the buyer. In fact, this recognition is a typical step in the sales process outlined in many textbooks and training manuals. In order to overcome such objections, positive reinforcement via positive information to help the buyer is typically one of the recommended methods. However, when confronted with ambivalent consumers, this step may actually sabotage the outcome of the interaction. This reversal of expectation may result from consumer suspicion of salespeople in the first place. Training salespeople to listen and identify ambivalent consumers and the critical nature of follow-up could help circumvent this potential occurrence in the market place. Providing these types of consumers with some positive informational cues after their interaction may be helpful.

Future research could also address some of the limitations of our study. Because of the laboratory setting, ambivalent buyer-seller interactions should be examined in the actual shopping environment. A number of verbal and nonverbal cues could be examined in such a setting, including timing of positive/negative messages, the appearance of the salesperson, and positive/negative atmospheric cues in the retail setting. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the type of retail setting would also be a fruitful avenue of research. For example, how can ambivalence be reduced in an online or mobile setting?

Additionally, our study focused only on one type of consumer product (TV). The degree of product involvement could be manipulated or controlled in future studies. For example, ambivalence may be more salient when a consumer is making a decision about a highly involved product. The type of

product could also be investigated. Our studies focused on end-user consumers in a retail context. Little is known about how ambivalence manifests itself in the buyer-to-buyer (B2B) environment. For example, are purchasing agents likely to be ambivalent when evaluating sales presentations? Further, service encounters could also be investigated. For example, ambivalence among consumers may be more prevalent when a service is hard to evaluate (i.e., credence quality).

More research could also investigate different types of positive informational cues in the buyer-seller encounter and determine when these cues are most relevant. In our qualitative investigation, we found that perceived positive interactions with salespeople consisted of the salesperson being knowledgeable, helpful, nice, and suggestive. Other positive cues from external sources, rather than the salesperson, could be more salient. More research is needed on how each of these positive cues impacts consumer attitudes and purchase intentions and when they are most effective. For example, providing evidence of knowledge before the sales encounter may have more impact than after. Being helpful and nice *during* the interaction may be more helpful than *before* or *after* the interaction. Further, ambivalence could become more univalent in a negative direction if suggestive selling is used during the initial encounter. Although quite common and emphasized in most sales training programs, an ambivalent consumer may be more sensitive to such attempts. Could suggestive selling be a reason why positive message amplification may backfire in buyer-seller encounters?

In conclusion, the results of our studies demonstrate that ambivalence in the sales context may be a fruitful area of research for marketing and sales academics. Further, our results suggest that salespeople and managers should at least consider alternative ways to elicit positive responses from consumers (especially those that are ambivalent). Training salespeople to recognize that consumers may possess ambivalent attitudes toward them may be beneficial. By providing the right type of information either before, during, or after the sales encounter, the salesperson may be better able to establish a positive rapport with consumers and hopefully amplify their message cues more efficiently and effectively, thus, producing the desired outcome.

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APPENDIX 1

Buyer-Seller Scenarios for Study 2

Positive Scenario

Imagine yourself at a large electronics store and that you are in the market for a new high definition 42-inch TV. You are not sure which brand to buy because there are so many options. You need some assistance from a salesperson. You ask someone in the TV department for help. You notice that this person's name is Pat, and on this person's nametag is an award for best customer service of the year. Pat is a very knowledgeable salesperson and has several years of experience in selling TVs and other electronic products. Pat answers your questions accurately, provides useful information to help you purchase a TV, and even suggests some other brands that will fit your budget. Pat is very helpful during the buying process by providing information, listening to your needs, and being attentive.

Negative Scenario

Imagine yourself at a large electronics store and that you are in the market for a new high definition 42-inch TV. You are not sure which brand to buy because there are so many options. You remember that the particular local electronics store you are in

has just been written up in the local news for aggressive sales tactics. Nonetheless, you need some help from a salesperson at this store. You ask someone in the TV department for help. You notice that this salesperson's name is Pat who appears to be very aggressive and pushy. Pat recommends a more expensive TV and steers you toward a brand you have never heard of. You suspect that Pat may be getting a commission on this brand. It seems that Pat has ulterior motives and is not really interested in listening to your opinion.

APPENDIX 2

Video Scripts for Study 3

Baseline Video Condition:

Welcome to Bell Electronics. My name is Robert. We offer many types of TVs, from Web Ready to HD to 3D. We also offer TVs in various sizes within different price ranges. We have a great selection of TVs for dorm rooms with limited space to apartments and houses with more living space. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Positive Reinforcement Video Condition:

Welcome to Bell Electronics. My name is Robert. I have been a salesperson here at Bell for about eight years now. I love helping customers choose the best products that fit their own needs. In addition to our company's product training programs, I myself am an avid fan of electronic goods. At home my wife usually jokes about how I should vest my interest in electronic goods by getting another college degree in electronic engineering! I love my job at Bell because I really enjoy sharing my knowledge with my customers. I also enjoy sharing how the products we have can help you solve your needs. Please let me know how I can help you.

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