

ROLE OF NEED FOR CLOSURE ON PERCEIVED PRICE FAIRNESS

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary years, need for closure as a driver of consumer behaviour has received significant attention. The present research would extend the extant pricing literature by including a cognitive factor, i.e., need for closure, which is predicted to have a substantial impact on perceived price fairness. When exposed to negative and/or undesirable incident such as price increase, need for closure (low vs high) influences cognitive attribution. Moreover, this cognitive attribution would thereby influence price fairness perceptions. It is significant for managers and marketers to comprehend the effect of cognitive need for closure on perceived price fairness so as to maintain positive customer's perception of price, which can result in positive outcomes and enhance firms' competitiveness.

KEYWORDS: *cognitive attribution, need for closure, perceived price fairness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Price of a product/service has a substantial influence on customers' behaviours and perceptions, thusly pricing decision is not only significant but also challenging (Chung & Petrick, 2015). Pricing decisions not only carry the opportunity to distinguish from competitors but also involve the hazard of disgruntling consumers (Diller, 2008). Apart from economic motives, subjective perceptions including preferences also play important role in customers' price perceptions and buying decisions. Customers have to go through a series of cognitive steps in order to determine fairness perceptions (Campbell, 1999). It has been widely proven in literature that rendering a price/ price increase seem to be fair or lowering unfairness perceptions can result in higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Han & Hyun, 2015; Hassan et al., 2013; Izogo & Ogba, 2015; Kasiri et al., 2017). Thereby, it is essential for marketers and managers to understand the underlying cognitive processes that create price fairness perceptions.

Fairness has been referred to as "a judgment of whether an outcome and/or the process to reach an outcome are reasonable, acceptable, or just" (Bolton et al., 2003). Fairness as a concept is highly convoluted and thus making judgements about fairness are not easy tasks. To represent price fairness from different aspects, various concepts of price fairness have been developed in literature (Bhowmick, 2010; Chung & Petrick, 2015; Graafland, 2006; Kalapurakal et al., 1991; Maxwell, 2002; Pallas et al., 2017; Xia et al., 2004). Previous research has shown that price fairness perception encompassing the various aspects has its influence on the behaviour of consumers. It is vital for companies to know when a customer perceives a price or price change to be fair or unfair. Customers evaluate the mode by which prices of products/services are set (Ferguson et. al., 2014; Garbarino & Maxwell, 2010) and thereby make price fairness perceptions (Kukar-Kinney et al., 2007; Rondan-Cataluña & Martin-Ruiz, 2011). Price fairness literature claims that aspects such as price increases or higher price influence consumers' price fairness perceptions.

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In today's ever-changing, complex, highly competitive, digitally enhanced and the increasingly transparent world, business organizations are increasingly embracing customer centricity (Shaw, 2017). Thereby, customer-oriented business strategies are increasingly gaining importance (Shaw et al., 2017). Therefore, a deep understanding of consumers' needs, expectations and perceptions are becoming crucial for the development of effective business strategies (Shaw & Chovancová, 2018). Perceived price fairness is a prime facet of customers' responses to prices. Perceived price fairness has a positive effect on customer satisfaction (Gorodutse & Hilman, 2014; H. Li, Ye, & Law, 2013), customer loyalty (Hassan et al., 2013; Kasiri et al., 2017), customer's intent to purchase (Bettray et al., 2017; Eid, 2015), and customer's attitude towards the seller (Chung & Petrick, 2015; Narteh et al., 2013). Conversely, perceived price unfairness can lead to negative outcomes in form of switching to competing firm, return of goods/services, negative word of mouth, complaints, or reprisal in court (Jin et al., 2013; Lymperopoulos et al., 2013; Xia et al., 2004). Consumers pursue information about products/services and thereby evaluate the products/services (Dabestani et al., 2016; Lymperopoulos et al., 2013). The widespread use of the internet, mobile apps and social media have enabled consumers to get information on aspects of pricing, the available alternatives as well as to make comparisons among various products/services in a much easier and quicker way. Consequently, they are more sensitive to perceived price fairness, which eventually influences their behavioural intentions (Lymperopoulos et al., 2013). For instance, in the context of online shopping, perceived price fairness is a significant factor that effects online shoppers' drop-out rate (Jiang & Sun, 2014).

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Fairness or unfairness perceptions rely on customers' subjective perceptions depending on cognitive reasoning (Chung & Petrick, 2013). A considerable body of pricing literature supports the view that cognitive attribution is an important factor influencing perceived price fairness. However, a surprising gap in the literature is the detection and analysis of the underlying factors that affect customers' cognitive attribution process in relation to perceived price fairness. In literature, the need for closure as a cognitive factor is well-known to have a significant influence on customers' attributional tendencies and to be responsible for driving various kinds of consumer behaviour. The present research attempts to extend the extant pricing literature by including the cognitive factor, i.e., need for closure, which is predicted to have a substantial impact on perceived price fairness but has not been researched before. It is assumed that the relationship between perceived price fairness and the need for closure can be explained through the specific path of cognitive attribution. Hence, this study steers to a novel and significant avenue for research that considers the interrelationships between the need for closure and perceived price fairness.

3. THEORETICAL FINDINGS

3.1 Price fairness perception

Consumer's evaluation of a product/service price depends not only on the nominal aspect but also on the perception of price. From the perspective of consumer behaviour, the issue of price perception is mainly based on subjective and psychological dimensions. Price fairness perception is defined as "a consumer judgment of how just, reasonable, acceptable, or satisfactory a focal price is" (Xia & Monroe, 2005). Theories, such as Dual Entitlement Principle; Attribution Theory; Equity Theory; Distributive Fairness; Procedural Fairness and Prospect Theory aid to depict conceptually intricate price fairness from different dimensions (Sheikhzadeh et al., 2012). Until consumers perceive a price as unfair, the perceptions of price fairness perceptions may not be crucial (Xia et al., 2004). Both offered price and the rationale behind it may lead to price unfairness perceptions. For evaluating price fairness, customers make comparisons. Customers compare the given price to

reference price (including past prices, competitors' price, and sellers' costs), other consumers' or sellers' price (Chung & Petrick, 2013). These comparisons can lead to unfavourable or favourable evaluations, which thereby induce customers to deem the price as unfair or fair respectively (Jin et al., 2013). The price fairness concept encompasses dimensions of distributive price fairness (emphasising price outcome) and procedural price fairness (focusing on price setting procedure). Price fairness perception is a crucial part of customers' responses to prices (Reavey & Suri, 2015). Fairness is dependent on the outcome, thereby price fairness perception is influenced by what/who is liable for that outcome. A price increase driven by internal costs or internal factors is perceived as more unfair (less fair) than those incited by external costs or external factors (e.g. inflation). In the context of price increase occur due to uncontrollable external factors, the customers are more likely to concede the price increase and perceive it as fair, or at least less unfair (Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003; Xia et al., 2004). In contrary, when price increase occurs due to controllable internal factors, the customers are more likely to perceive the price increase as more unfair, or less fair (Chung & Petrick, 2013; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). In case of price unfairness, the seller is normally perceived as the party responsible and causing the unfair circumstance. As consumers are generally not aware with certainty about the costs related to the concerned product/service. This situation heads to the incompetence to produce the various costs categories spontaneously. Hence, the seller's role is significant in buyer's evaluation process of prices or/and their increase (Bhowmick, 2010; Bolton et al., 2003; Chung & Petrick, 2013). Customers' perceived motive regarding seller's price increase choice plays a vital role in price fairness evaluation (Somervuori, 2014). Sellers who are required to increase prices may enhance customers' price fairness perceptions by divulging the price increase and providing a suitable explanation concerning the extent of price increase (Rothenberger et al., 2015).

Today's world of dynamic market is characterised by incessant price changes, thereby customers can end up disbursing different prices for the same product/service, inspite the seller being same (Li et al., 2018; Petro, 2015). This circumstance is more common in the online setting where the internet aids the sellers to adjust prices in a non-complicated and quick manner. The observed differences in prices lead the consumers to make a comparison, which thereby invokes price fairness perceptions (Andrés-Martínez et al., 2013). The discriminatory price setting strategies (such as differential vs. uniform pricing, auction vs. posted pricing) have their effects on price fairness perceptions (Ahmetoglu et al., 2014; Haws & Bearden, 2006). The perceived price fairness has its influence on consumer behavioural and attitudinal outcomes. Fairness process may result in perceptions of price fairness or unfairness, which thereby lead to various positive or negative consequences. Price fairness perceptions encourage customers to purchase products/services. Conversely, price unfairness perceptions may lead to negative outcomes, for instance, customers may end patronage, switch firms, spread negative word-of-mouth, or involve in other behaviours that can be detrimental to the seller.

3.2 Attributional approach to price fairness

Attribution theory avers that people are inclined to pursue the causal reasoning of an event, especially in case of negative and/or undesirable event (Maxwell et al., 2013). In comprehending a person's fairness perceptions, the understanding of his/her attributions of cause and responsibility are required. Thus, it can be said that fairness perceptions are essentially based on the attribution of cause and responsibility. The evaluation of price fairness is subjective and usually done from the point of view of the buyer. Hence, judgements are based on the buyer's interest. As fairness is subject to the outcome, thereby price fairness perception is affected by what/who is accountable for that outcome. In this essence, the attribution theory aids consumers in categorising the information on why and how the company has set up the given or/and other prices. Observed actions/events can be attributed corresponding to three dimensions: locus of causality, controllability, and temporal stability (Bhowmick, 2010; Pallas et al., 2017; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003; **Weiner, 1985;**

Young Chung & James, 2016). Customers can deduce the cause(s) of an action/event with respect to any or all the attributional dimensions (Chung & Petrick, 2009). In the event of external (internal) locus of causality, price increases are perceived as more (less) fair. Likewise, uncontrollable (controllable) price increases are perceived as more (less) fair (Chung, 2010; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). Raising the price to incur profit from demand is perceived to be unfair. Whereas, providing a proper justification regarding a price increase, specifically in uncontrollable situations (with respect to seller) helps in reducing unfairness perceptions.

Consumers tend to find reasons behind events/actions, unable to infer justifiable reasons can result to negative emotional reactions and unfavourable behaviour (Chung & Petrick, 2013; Young Chung & James, 2016). The attributional dimensions are connected to behavioural outcomes. When people meet certain types of events especially negative or undesirable, they deduce the events' cause(s) and depending on cognitive attribution (how the causes are attributed), different types of emotional responses are generated, which thereby lead to their reactions to the events. Cognitive attribution is defined as a cognitive process that infers the cause(s) of an event or others' behaviour, which in turn leads to behavioural intentions or consequences (Somervuori, 2014; Young Chung & James, 2016). Cognitive attribution influences distributive and procedural price fairness. Depending on the comprehension of cognitive attribution aspects (i.e., locus of causality, controllability, and temporal stability) outcome assessment causes positive or negative emotions, which thereby lead to different behavioural intentions (Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). In accordance to literature, locus of causality and controllability are the prime causal dimensions that influence cognitive attributions and ensuing behaviours (Chung & Petrick, 2013; Pallas et al., 2017; Voester et al., 2017).

3.3 Need for closure

Need for closure manifests an aversion to uncertainty and ambiguity as well as an inclination towards firm, quick, definitive answers to problems or questions (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Stalder, 2009; Umam et al., 2018). Intriguingly, people who prefer firm, quick, definitive answers and look for clarity are more likely to abide by rules and concede authoritarian leaders, but are less likely to accept diversity. The need for cognitive closure has been defined as the need to have an answer to any problem or question, as against any further ambiguity (Szumowska et al., 2017). It is believed that there subsists a continuum extending from a strong need to avoid closure to a strong need to obtain closure, i.e. low need for closure to high need for closure (Kossowska et al., 2002; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). Individuals with a high need for closure may jump to their judgments based on inconclusive evidence and show rigidity of thought and disinclination to consider views dissimilar from their own. On the contrary, individuals with a low need for closure may prefer uncertainty and may be unwilling to commit a specific opinion. The need for closure may influence an individual's information processing approach on the way to the formation, dissolution or alteration of knowledge (Pierro et al., 2018; Roets et al., 2015). The need for closure may also persuade the formation and use of abstract mental representations (e.g., prototypes, schemata, stereotypes attitudes); thereby it affects a person's way of thinking, feeling, and acting towards a person/event. In general, two tendencies underlie the need for closure effects - permanence and urgency. The propensity towards urgency ("seizing" phase) denotes to a desire to seize quickly on a view or position. The inclination towards permanence ("freezing" phase) is about holding on that obtained view or position and avoid alternatives (Kashima et al., 2015; Stalder, 2009).

Empirical evidence shows that need for closure might reduce receptiveness to diversity. When individuals experience needs for closure, they pursue clarity and certainty instantaneously. The need for closure manifests the tendency towards unambiguous norms and stable groups. Previous research has assessed whether the need for closure intensifies or impedes fundamental attribution error. People with a low need for closure are not motivated to develop inferences from emotional expressions of other individuals (Van Kleef et al., 2010). In contrary, individuals with a high need for closure are more likely to be sensitive to emotional expressions of other people. The phrase

"need" refers to a proclivity or motivated tendency, which indicates that closure may not be coveted in all circumstances. In some situations, individuals may endeavour to attain it, while in other circumstances they may exhibit less desire for it. Contextual and/or situational factors/forces such as time pressure, dullness of a cognitive task or environmental noise are able to activate need for closure. Among these factors, time pressure has been widely proven in literature to be able to manipulate need for closure (Leroy, 2009; Wiersema et al., 2012). Need for closure embodies an aspect of stable individual variances. People with a high need for closure prefer order and predictability, are more decisive, more closed-minded, and occasionally feel the discomfort of ambiguity. Such variances may originate from several sources, such as cultural norms (Bechtoldt et al., 2010) or personal socialisation histories that put emphasis on know-how and confidence. Accordingly, need for closure is averred to be a motivation persuaded by contexts and/or situations, as well as an aspect of stable individual variances.

3.4 Need for closure and attribution tendency

Individuals with a high need for closure compared to those with low need for closure are more prone to underestimate situational-contextual factors (external factors) and overestimate object-disposition based factors (internal factors) for explaining the cause of an event/a behaviour. This tendency to underestimate situational-contextual factors (external factors) and overattribute object-disposition based factors (internal factors) for explaining the cause of an event/a behaviour is known as the fundamental attribution error. For instance, how some individuals explain unemployment or poverty (i.e., by blaming the unemployed or poor). At the workplace, when an individual commends an error, his/her colleagues might assume the individual is inept, overseeing other factors for example errors in the instructions or flaws in their equipment. Need for closure denotes a desire to seize quickly on a view or position and then to freeze on that obtained view or position and avoid alternatives (Moss, 2016; Stalder, 2009). Individuals with a high need for closure desire prefer firm, quick, definitive answers and look for clarity and certainty instantaneously.

Individuals with a high need for closure promptly put emphasis on the focal object/actor as the cause of the event/behaviour and then only with adequate motivation and ability (or under specific conditions) might attune that view for contextual and situational factors (Swami, 2018). Individuals who incline to seize and freeze (i.e., with a high need for closure) are more likely to commit fundamental attribution error, i.e., need for closure is positively connected fundamental attribution error (Dunbar et al., 2014; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). For instance, in a study participants read an essay whose writer was enforced to take the essay viewpoint. Regardless of this constraint, participants tend to estimate the writer's attitude as corresponding with that viewpoint, indicative of fundamental attribution error. Participants are likely to rate the writer as undesirable, overseeing the constraints that were inflicted on the writer, specifically if they reported a high need for closure. In other words, if people like to form judgments promptly and retain these attitudes, they incline to ascribe behaviour to dispositions of the individual rather than attributes of the context (Scopelliti et al., 2017). Individuals with a high need for closure are more likely to consider object-disposition based factors (internal factors) while seeking cause of an event/a behaviour. In contrary, individuals with a low need for closure are more likely to consider situational-contextual factors (external factors), while seeking cause of an event/a behaviour. Individuals with a high need for closure favour to attribute causes to internal object/disposition based factors by ignoring the role of contexts and situations, i.e., tendencies of internal attribution. On the other hand, individuals with a low need for closure are more inclined in attributing causes to context/situation based factors, i.e., tendencies of external attribution. Individuals with a low need for closure are more prone to consider external factors in addition to internal factors, whereas individuals with a high need for closure are inclined to focus exclusively on internal factors. These cognitive attributions in turn influence consumers' perceptions, evaluations and behavioural outcomes.

4. PROPOSITIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

During cognitive attribution process, consideration of external (internal) factors divert (attribute) blame from (on) company (Monga & John, 2011; Monga & Hsu, 2018; Pallas et al., 2017) and thus it can be said that consumers with low (high) need for closure are less (more) likely to revise their brand perceptions and evaluations in a negative manner. Based on the literature review and in accordance with the identified gap in the literature, I would like to introduce the need for closure influences price fairness perceptions. When exposed to negative and/or undesirable incident such as price increase, need for closure (low vs high) influences cognitive attribution, i.e., consideration of external or/and internal factors. Moreover, this cognitive attribution would thereby influence price fairness perceptions. The following propositions were proposed:

P₁: Need for closure (low vs high) influences perceived price fairness.

P₂: Need for closure (low vs high) influences cognitive attribution.

P₃: Cognitive attribution influences perceived price fairness.

Figure 1 illustrates the current study's proposed conceptual framework.

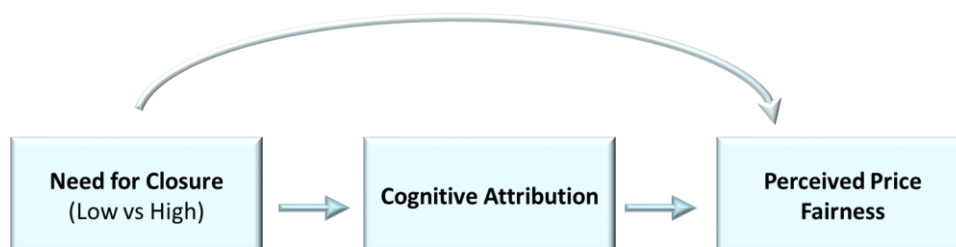


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of perceived price fairness

Source: author's research

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present research studies the role of cognitive need for closure on perceived price fairness, aid to enhance the understanding of cognitive processes that customers undergo while determining perceptions of price fairness. It is vital from the perspective of both business entities and consumers to understand the cognitive processes related to perceived price fairness. This research endeavours to extend the emergent literature in marketing and psychology studying cognitive aspects of perceived price fairness by considering issues not researched before. The study attempts to extend and probe the pricing literature by including the cognitive factor, i.e., need for closure, which is predicted to have a substantial impact on perceived price fairness. It is assumed that the relationship between perceived price fairness and the need for closure can be explained through the specific path of cognitive attribution. Hence, this study steers to a novel and important avenue for research that considers the interrelationships between the need for closure and perceived price fairness. The introduced findings are believed to be able to add important aspects to the existing theories and thoughts. Perceived price fairness is an important pricing issue and is crucial to marketers and managers for its link to various positive and negative outcomes, such as purchase intentions, willingness to pay, word-of-mouth behaviour, complaint behaviour, switching behaviour, brand attitudes and relationships, and firm profitability. This study is anticipated to be beneficial for theoreticians and practitioners particularly marketers and managers. An improved comprehension of the interconnections between the need for closure and perceived price fairness would develop the understanding of marketers and managers on ways to augment perceived price fairness. It is significant for managers and marketers to comprehend the effect of cognitive need for closure on perceived price fairness so as to maintain positive customer's perception of price, which can result

in positive outcomes and enhance firms' competitiveness. The current study has adopted the theoretical approach, thereby the main shortcoming of this study is lacking analytical approach. The research will contribute to the body of knowledge in the area of consumer behaviour and enterprise from the perspective of price fairness perception.

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