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When Hearts Stay, Minds Follow: The Asymmetric Roles of Emotional and Cognitive Evaluations in Returning Online Purchases

Prof. Dr. Lingfang Song , Yangchun Li , Anand Pulavazhi , Wei Hao

ESSCA School of Management, France

Abstract

The cost of online product returns imposes significant financial and operational burdens on e-commerce companies, yet product failure is not always the cause. Existing literature emphasizes cognitive evaluation in return decisions while underestimating emotional evaluation. This study investigates the interplay between cognitive and emotional evaluations—conceptualized as expectation confirmation (EC) and emotional attachment (EA)—in shaping consumer return behavior. Although prior research highlights EC as a key driver of post-purchase outcomes, we hypothesize that EA plays a more fundamental role in consumers' decisions to retain products. Based on a survey of 300 U.S. online shoppers, our findings show that EA directly and negatively impacts return intentions, while indirectly fostering retention through EC. Emotionally attached consumers perceive product performance more favorably, thereby reducing return likelihood. The model further incorporates trust in the return service as a moderator: trust strengthens the effect of EA on retention but does not influence the EC–return relationship. These insights advance the understanding of online return behavior by underscoring the central role of emotional processes and their integration with cognitive evaluation. For practitioners, the results suggest that e-commerce firms can reduce avoidable returns by cultivating emotional connections with consumers, managing expectations clearly, and providing transparent and trustworthy return services

Keywords: E-Commerce; Emotional Attachment; Expectation Confirmation; Online Return Intention; Post-Purchase Behavior