THE EXPECTED-REAL GAP: AN EXPLORATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

By adopting a customer-centric approach, organizations aim to comprehend and fulfill consumer needs, aligning product delivery with expectations. Satisfaction, influenced by pre-purchase and post-purchase norms, hinges on the alignment of anticipated and actual attributes. However, a discernible gap can result in consumer frustration. A unique aspect of this research involves exploring previously unexplored internal variables, particularly psychological factors that shape the assessment of the disparity between reality and expectations in the consumer experience. Insights from qualitative research involving thirteen Tunisian participants reveal optimism, certainty, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence as pivotal contributors to the perceived gap, enriching the theoretical landscape of consumer behavior and psychology literature. Recognizing and addressing these factors, is imperative for fostering consumer satisfaction, ensuring sustained business success, and cultivating a positive brand image. This study underscores the essential role of human behavior and personality in comprehending and managing the intricate dynamics of consumer experience.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding consumer behavior is crucial as it determines their responses to both the purchasing and consumption experiences, ultimately influencing levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Through a comprehension of consumer behavior, businesses and policymakers can strategically formulate well-informed decisions, thereby contributing to the enhancement of consumer well-being and fostering economic growth (Sostar & Ristanovic, 2023). A customer-oriented approach has been adopted by the company with the goal of comprehending the needs of its consumers and delivering products that align with their expectations (Fourie, 2015; Russ, 2006). This understanding of the customer is essential in ensuring their satisfaction, which can generate benefits and ensure the company's survival.

Westbrook (1987) demonstrated that satisfaction has influenced by both pre-purchase and post-purchase norms. Consumers create a mental image and representation of the product before purchase, anticipating that this image to be mirrored in the actual performance. The objective is for the mental schema to materialize in reality through the alignment of imagined and actual attributes. Nevertheless, consumers may encounter a disparity between their expectations and real product experience, resulting in a perceptible gap. This gap signifies the difference between the product's theoretical and real schemas, potentially leading to consumer frustration.

Identifying the factors contributing to the perceived gap between expectations and reality can be instrumental in mitigating negative gaps, fostering consumer satisfaction, and securing the company's success, brand image, and longevity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing from the literature on consumer behavior, we have identified six concepts closely linked to the idea of the disparity between theoretical schema or expectations and the actual schema of the product or service.

Primarily, disconfirmation emerges when disparities arise between prior expectations and actual performance (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980). The concept of service quality often aligns with this definition, where perceived quality "results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance" (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p.15). This concept, specific to services, distinguishes itself from the broader concept of disconfirmation.

Additionally, the concept of incongruity shares similar definitional attributes. Incongruity has been described as "the degree of perceived discrepancy between that product and an activated schema in a consumer's mind" (Gao et al., 2022, p.2; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Individuals employ expectations to anticipate and predict future outcomes (Noordewier & Stape, 2010). When reality diverges from these expectations, individuals encounter a misalignment between their anticipated expectations and the actual realization before examining the latter.

Furthermore, the concept of satisfaction aligns closely with the aforementioned concepts. According to Kopalle & Lehmann (2001), the study of satisfaction involves comparing prior expectations with observed performance.

Likewise, our readings indicate that the concept of cognitive dissonance exhibits close alignment with other related concepts. In accordance with Festinger's theory (1957), cognitive dissonance has characterized as the psychological discomfort stemming from the simultaneous possession of two conflicting beliefs or values. This inherent discomfort serves as a motivational force, compelling individuals to undertake measures to alleviate the cognitive dissonance.

Lastly, another concept associated with those previously discussed is assimilation/contrast. Assimilation validates expectations, whereas contrast contradicts judgments (Palan & Teas, 2005).

Each of these concepts has accompanied by both conceptual and methodological limitations. Table 1 delineates these limitations.

These concepts collectively fall short in exploring the underlying reasons behind consumers' perception of a gap between the actual product reality and their expectations. They predominantly posit that consumers perceive the actual performance to be lower than expected.

This study is grounded in the expectation-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), which is "the most widely accepted model used in examining the issue of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction" (Patterson & Johnson, 1993, p.90). This paradigm posits that consumer satisfaction is influenced by the alignment between expected and perceived performance. While this foundational model has significantly contributed to our understanding of satisfaction, it often lacks a detailed exploration of the internal psychological processes that shape how consumers perceive this alignment.

Bloemer & de Ruyter (1995) advanced this understanding by demonstrating that service quality is a key determinant of consumer satisfaction. Their study highlights that service quality perceptions are closely tied to expectations and that these expectations are subject to continuous adjustment based on service experiences and contextual factors.

Building on these insights, Korkofingas (2019) further expands the theoretical framework by examining how the availability of alternatives and variability in consumer expectations influence satisfaction outcomes. Korkofingas argues that consumer satisfaction is not solely a function of the initial alignment between expectations and performance but is also dynamically affected by contextual factors and individual differences. This perspective reveals

that both the presence of alternative options and fluctuations in expectations play crucial roles in shaping consumer perceptions.

Table 1:

Conceptual and Methodological Limitations in Investigating
Discrepancies between Consumer Expectations and Reality

Concept	Definition	Nature	Standard of comparison	Limitations
Disconfirmation expectancy	A cognitive evaluation that assesses the extent to which the performance of a product or service either falls short of expectations (referred to as negative disconfirmation) or surpasses them (referred to as positive disconfirmation) (Westbrook, 1987)	Cognitive	Predictive expectations	Criticism at the operationalization, reliability, and validity levels Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001; Zehrer et al., 2010).
Service quality	A difference between consumers' assessments of a company's services and their initial expectations for service provision by firms in that sector (Parasuraman, 1988)	Cognitive and affective	Expectations	Scale adaptability (Carman, 1990)
Satisfaction	A synthetic psychological state arises when an emotion linked to unfulfilled expectations is associated with the consumer's primary feelings towards a consumption experience (Oliver, 1981)	Cognitive and affective	Expectations	Often confused with perceived quality (Oliver, 1981)
Incongruence	Inconsistency between attributes and associated expectations, contexts, or patterns (Kirmani & Shiv, 1998)	Cognitive and affective	Expectations	Often confused with cognitive dissonance and disconfirmation
Cognitive dissonance	A condition characterized by frustration or imbalance that has a positive impact on the individual, eliciting a state of activation, desire, or tension (Martz et al., 2008)	Cognitive	Expectations	Assimilated to incongruence, disconfirmation, assimilations/contrast and incongruence (Noordewier & Stapel, 2010)
Assimilation / contrast	Assimilation takes place when the individual successfully establishes a congruent relationship between the product and the representations associated with its category. Conversely, a contrast effect occurs when the individual accentuates the perceived differences (Sherif & Hovland, 1961	Cognitive and affective	Expectations	The limitation of this theory is rooted in its conceptualization (Palan & Teas, 2005)

Notably, research into internal variables that may influence how individuals evaluate product performance post-consumption has been lacking. This gap has inspired our investigation into psychological factors that could mediate the assessment of discrepancies between reality and consumer expectations. Key psychological factors such as optimism, certainty, and social influence are crucial for gaining a more sophisticated understanding of how cognitive and emotional processes shape consumer perceptions, beyond conventional satisfaction models.

By incorporating these psychological dimensions into the expectation-disconfirmation framework, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the internal dynamics that shape consumer experiences. This approach connects theoretical models with real-world consumer behavior, offering deeper insights into how internal psychological factors affect the evaluation of the gap between product performance and consumer expectations.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, as it is particularly well-suited for comprehending phenomena within their specific context, uncovering connections among concepts and behaviors, and facilitating the generation and refinement of theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). More specifically, the study is grounded in the principals of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which enables theory to emerge from the data through an inductive and iterative process. Our analytical strategy follows the structured approach proposed by Nordstrom and Egan (2021), which moves systematically from first-order codes to second-order themes and overarching dimensions.

Given the existing dearth of empirical investigations into the influence of psychological variables on the perception of the expected-real gap, this study conducted a qualitative inquiry involving a cohort of thirteen Tunisian participants. In accordance with grounded theory methodology, participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the richness and diversity of the data (Glaser, 1992). Participants were meticulously selected based on multiple predetermined criteria. First, they were required to have recent personal experience with product or service dissatisfaction, allowing for a detailed recollection of their expectations and emotional responses. Second, to ensure diversity and theoretical variation, we sought heterogeneity in terms of age and gender. Finally, data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new categories or significant insights emerged from additional interviews (Glaser, 1992). This approach ensured both depth and breadth in the understanding of how psychological traits shape the perception of the expected-real gap. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of participants.

This research used semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol that required participants to recount experiences characterized by unsatisfactory consumption. This criterion was substantiated by the need to enhance the recollection of pre-purchase expectations, acknowledging that satisfaction arises from the alignment of comparison standards and perceived performance (Oliver, 1980). This approach emphasized actual performance, often prompting a recalibration of expectations.

Subsequently, participants were prompted to describe the mental image they had before purchasing the product. The interviewer then solicited participants' emotional responses when the product failed to meet their expectations, and explored the determinants influencing these reactions. After concluding the interview process, participants were invited to share any additional insights relevant to the subject matter. To ensure the interviews' efficacy, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by academic experts in marketing and qualitative research who are well-versed in developing semi-structured interview protocols. Their

feedback helped refine the guide's content and structure, resulting in the final version used in the study. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 2:
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participants	Age	Gender
Participant 1	30 years	Female
Participant 2	19 years	Female
Participant 3	42 years	Male
Participant 4	20 years	Female
Participant 5	39 years	Male
Participant 6	20 years	Female
Participant 7	13 years	Female
Participant 8	11 years	Male
Participant 9	60 years	Female
Participant 10	26 years	Male
Participant 11	64 years	Male
Participant 12	29 years	Male
Participant 13	37 years	Female

The interviews were conducted in Tunisian Arabic, the participants' native language, to ensure authentic and comfortable communication. To facilitate data analysis and academic dissemination, the transcripts were translated into English. To ensure the accuracy and fidelity of the translations, we employed the back-translation method, which is widely recognized for its reliability in cross-linguistic research. In the first stage, professional translators translated the original Arabic transcripts into English. In the second stage, a different expert retranslated the English version back into Arabic. This iterative process enabled us to detect and resolve any inconsistencies between the two versions, thereby preserving the semantic integrity of the participants' discourse. The back translation procedure allowed us to validate the quality of the translations and ensure that the original meaning was accurately conveyed (Beins, 2013).

The conduct of semi-directive interviews required a tape recorder to meticulously capture all aspects of the participants' information. Typically, these interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour. Thematic content analysis was employed for examining these interviews. To analyze the data, a manual approach was used, relying on the researcher's own examination and interpretation. This aligns with Wright & Larsen (2023), who argue that insightful qualitative research emerges from the researcher's intuition and inspiration during data analysis.

We conducted all interviews ourselves to ensure consistency, depth, and methodological rigor throughout the data collection process. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of this qualitative inquiry, our direct involvement allowed us to flexibly guide the conversation, respond to participants' cues, and deepen our exploration of emerging themes in a context-sensitive manner.

Initiating the analysis required a comprehensive understanding of the entire dataset, which was crucial to identifying emergent themes. Coding introduced a formal data-organizing system after an initial review of the material and a general understanding of the text. Codes, functioning as labels or tags, were assigned to complete documents or segments such as paragraphs, sentences, or words to categorize key concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The coding process was carried out manually and exclusively by ourselves, in line with the grounded theory approach adopted in this study. This methodological choice allowed us to immerse ourselves deeply in the data, enabling categories and themes to emerge inductively and progressively. Such direct engagement ensured coherence and fidelity to the participants' narratives throughout the entire interpretive process.

After completing the first-order coding, we engaged in an iterative process of reading and rereading the data to identify patterns and connections among the initial codes. This reflexive engagement with the material allowed for the abstraction of second-order themes, which helped interpret and give meaning to participants' narratives beyond surface-level descriptions. These second-order codes served as analytical bridges between empirical observations and theoretical constructs. Through further synthesis, we grouped these themes into overarching dimensions that captured the core psychological mechanisms underlying the perception of the expected-real gap. This multi-level coding process, inspired by grounded theory and the structured framework of Nordstrom and Egan (2021), enabled the development of a coherent, data-driven conceptual model.

FINDINGS

According to Costa and McCrae (1998), personality traits are defined as enduring dispositions that lead individuals to exhibit consistent patterns of cognition, emotion, and behavior. In the present study, a thorough content analysis of the interview data revealed three psychological traits namely optimism, certainty, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence, that were particularly salient in shaping how participants perceived the disjunction between their expectations and the actual performance of the product. These traits were not selected a priori; rather, they emerged inductively from the grounded analysis of participants' narratives. Their recurrence across cases, as well as their explanatory depth in relation to the perception and rationalization of dissatisfaction, warranted their selection as core interpretive dimensions in constructing the expected-real gap.

The subsequent section elaborates on the findings of the study. Figure 1 presents a comprehensive data structure that highlights the relationships among first-order codes, second-order codes, and overarching themes. This diagram represents the synthesis of the findings, incorporating illustrative first-order data that supports and forms the basis for the second-order codes, ultimately contributing to the broader themes.

Expected-Real Gap

Qualitative data analysis revealed that interviewees clearly express the gap between actual and desired product attributes. This gap stems from the mismatch between the product's actual performance and the expected outcome.

Below are examples of verbatim responses illustrating the language used by respondents to express this discrepancy:

Informant 1: *The product did not deliver the anticipated and desired result. I was expecting effective and reliable, but it turned out to be completely underwhelming. It felt like a promise that was never fulfilled.*

Informant 3: *Before purchasing, I had a very clear idea of what the product would be like, how it would feel, how it would work, and the kind of results I would get. But I formed an image that did not match the reality after using this product. There is a significant difference, and that gap left me very disappointed.*

Figure 1: Data Analysis Framework
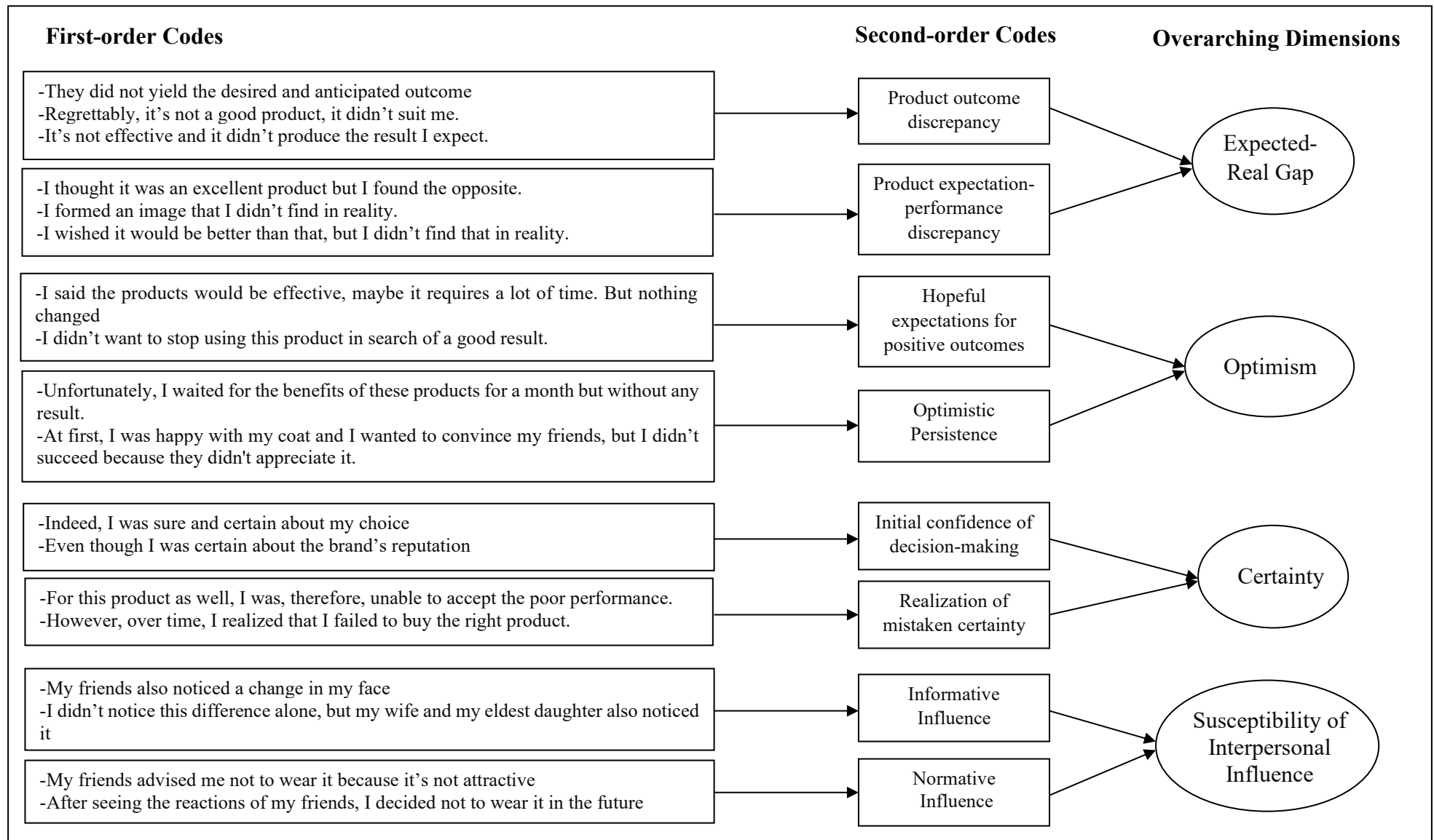
Informant 6: *Everything about the product such as its reputation and its presentation, let me believe it was high quality. I thought it was an excellent product, but I found the opposite. It didn't work, didn't deliver and fell short in every way I had imagined it would succeed.*

Informant 10: *I had high hopes based on the description and reviews. I was genuinely exited to try it, but the product did not deliver what I had hoped for. I didn't think it would be like this, disappointing, ineffective, and far from what was promised.*

Informant 13: *I had specific expectations and was really hoping this product would fulfil them. But I didn't find in this product what I truly wanted. It lacked everything I was looking for. That feeling of having made the wrong choice stayed with me.*

The interviewees explicitly acknowledge the gap between their expectations and what they actually found. In other words, if the individual does not find what they had envisioned or desired, they will sense this difference.

Similarly, the evaluation of the actual offering underscored the pivotal role of the imagined offering, which serves as a key reference point in shaping the overall consumption experience.

Optimism

Optimism, identified as an intrinsic personality trait varying in intensity among individuals, was conceptualized by Scheier and Carver in 1985. Defined as "the extent to which people hold generalized favorable expectancies for their future" (Carver et al., 2010, p. 879), optimism, considered a stable personality trait, significantly influences how individuals navigate challenges or stressful situations (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

Individuals with an optimistic disposition tend to approach tasks with a positive outlook on their potential performance, whereas those with lower optimism may doubt their abilities, fearing unfavorable outcomes (Marshall & Brown, 2004). Distinct from pessimism, optimism has been identified as a separate, uncorrelated psychological construct (Plomin et al., 1992). Scheier and Carver's theory posits that optimists differ in their approach to life compared to pessimists. Optimists anticipate positive future outcomes, expecting more favorable events than unfavorable ones (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Such individuals exhibit persistence and confidence, anticipating positive product outcomes (Carver et al., 2010).

Our qualitative research highlights the significance of optimism in shaping perceptions of the expected-real gap. Optimistic individuals, anticipating positive product outcomes, tend to experience a positive gap between expectations and reality. Verbatim statements from interviewees further illuminate how consumer optimism influences their perception of this gap.

Informant 2: *In the initial phase, I held the expectation that I would gradually acquire an understanding of the product's functioning over time. However, after a two-month period, I came to the realization that the process is intricate, and regrettably, I found myself unable to grasp it adequately.*

Informant 4: *I had previously asserted that the product would demonstrate effectiveness; but, despite affording it ample time, no discernible improvement has been evident.*

Informant 9: *At first, I was convinced that the product just needed some time to work. I kept using it patiently, thinking that the results would eventually come, but in the end, nothing really changed.*

Informant 11: *I was confident from the beginning that the product would deliver what it promised. I used it exactly as instructed, convinced it would work, but even after several uses, I didn't notice any improvement.*

Informant 12: *Honestly, I was hopeful. I thought that maybe the effects would show gradually, like after repeated use. I didn't want to give up too quickly because I wanted it to work.*

Analysis of interviewee discourse underscores that heightened optimism correlates with a reduced likelihood of acknowledging a gap between the expected and actual product offer. This tendency has been attributed to consumers seeking justifications for attributes that underperform, thereby affecting the perceived gap. The desire for positive outcomes, rooted in personality traits, plays a pivotal role in shaping this perception.

Our research delves into the interplay between optimism, persistence, and confidence in product performance (Carver et al., 2010). Initially, optimistic individuals perceive a smaller gap between expected and actual product performance. However, external factors, such as poor product performance or negative feedback, can amplify this gap, leading us to formulate our first research proposition:

P1: *The perceived expected-real gap has influenced by optimism.*

Certainty

Certainty, within the context of personality traits, has delineated as a subjective sense of conviction concerning an opinion or attitude (Gross et al., 1995; Christie, 1991; Festinger, 1950, 1954; Petrocelli et al., 2007). This trait encapsulates a judgment pertaining to a mental representation or thought process (DeMarree et al., 2007). Rubin et al. (2006) defines certainty, in the scientific sense, as the state of being devoid of doubt, particularly when substantiated by evidence. Duncan (1972) posits that uncertainty in the decision-making process during a purchase stems from a psychological state rooted in the absence of information about the anticipated outcome.

Textual analyses of interview data underscore a discernible association between the level of certainty regarding the anticipated performance of a product and the perceived gap between the envisaged and actual offerings.

Informant 1: *I exhibit a high level of certainty in my purchasing decisions. However, my confidence in the selection of this particular product was met with disappointment, as its performance fell significantly short of my expectations. The dissatisfaction stems from the realization that my initial confidence was misplaced, and the product did not align with my anticipated standards.*

Informant 3: *Despite my confidence in the brand's established reputation, the anticipated favorable outcome was not realized.*

Informant 5: *I didn't hesitate for a second when I purchased this product. I had complete confidence in my choice. I even recommended it to a colleague before trying it myself. But after using it for several weeks, it became clear that*

it didn't live up to any of my expectations. That certainty I had at the start made the disappointment even more frustrating.

Informant 8: *Because of all the positive reviews and the brand's reputation, I was sure this product would be effective. I didn't doubt it for a moment. So, when I noticed no visible change after consistent use, I was genuinely surprised, almost in denial at first. I didn't expect to be this let down.*

Informant 9: *I had used other products from the same brand before and was always satisfied, so I didn't even consider the possibility that this one might fail. I was convinced it would work just as well. That strong initial belief made me persist longer than I should have, despite the clear lack of results.*

Informant 13: *Everything, the packaging, the price, made it look like a premium product. I was certain I was making the right choice; I didn't question it for a second. But from the very first use, I began to have doubts. Still, because I felt so certain at the time of purchase, I kept thinking the problem was with me, not the product. It took some time before I could accept that it simply didn't deliver what it promised.*

Individuals exhibiting confidence in their envisioned product and possessing comprehensive information about the purchase tend to harbor greater confidence in the product, consequently exhibiting reluctance to acknowledge a misjudgement. According to Dickhäuser et al. (2011), heightened certainty in expectations amplifies their persistence, thereby influencing performance outcomes.

It has been inferred that when individuals harbor certitude regarding a product's anticipated performance, they may delay expressing awareness of any dissonance between their expectations and the actual product. This inclination has likely been motivated by a reluctance to admit errors in their product selection, prompting consumers to seek resolutions for any identified deficiencies. Subsequent tests revealed a negative deviation from the desired standards, indicating a failure to meet expected performance levels.

In conclusion, a relationship has been discerned between the level of certainty and the perception of a disjunction between expected and actual offerings. In essence, certainty plays a pivotal role in influencing the manifestation of this gap. This discovery forms the basis for our second research proposition:

P2: *The perceived expected-real gap is influenced by the level of certainty*

Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence is a personality trait that exhibits individual variability and substantially influences behavioral patterns (Bearden et al., 1989). As Bearden et al. (1989) assert, this susceptibility involves the desire to align oneself with, or to enhance one's image relative to, relevant others. This alignment can manifest through the acquisition and consumption of products, adherence to others' expectations in purchase decisions, and the pursuit of information through conversation and observation. Bearden et al. emphasize the importance of social influence in consumer behavior and distinguish between two types of susceptibility to interpersonal influence: normative and informational influence, as conceptualized by Deutsch and Gerard (1955).

Normative influence, as described by Deutsch and Gerard (1955), refers to the inclination to conform to positive expectations of others. Burnkrant & Cousineau (1975) posit

that normative influence has realized through either conformity or identification, where individuals may conform to the expectations of those around them to attain rewards or avoid punishment. Conformity is evident when an individual believes that their achievements are visible and known to others. In a product evaluation context, individuals may refer to significant others' previous evaluations to align with their expectations.

Informational influence, as outlined by Bearden et al. (1989), operates through internalization, wherein information from others enhances an individual's knowledge about a particular subject. This influence extends to product evaluation (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Cohen & Golden, 1972; Pincus & Waters, 1977) and product or brand selection (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Park & Lessig, 1977), impacting consumer decision-making regarding product attributes (Khare et al., 2011). LaTour & Manrai (1989) contends that informational and normative influences are interconnected dimensions that synergistically influence consumer behavior.

Interpersonal influence assumes a significant role in consumer purchasing behavior (Chu & Kim, 2011). Our investigation reveals that social influence contributes significantly to an individual's perception of the expected-real gap, with family and friends playing a pivotal role in confirming this discrepancy. Susceptibility to interpersonal influence emerges as a crucial factor in the genesis of this gap. Socially susceptible individuals' exhibit heightened discernment in evaluating product performance, and the entourage's opinion influences the perceived gap. Positive opinions result in a more favorable gap, while negative opinions yield a more negative gap.

Our findings substantiate a correlation between the entourage's involvement in gap evaluation and the magnitude of the gap. Additionally, susceptibility to interpersonal influence affects the evaluation of actual product performance, whether positive or negative, and the degree of deviation observed. The verbatim transcripts elucidate this assertion.

> **Informant 3:** *While I, personally, did not discern this distinction, my spouse did. At first, I believed the product was working as intended, or at least not causing any harm. But my spouse pointed out some negative effects I hadn't noticed, which made me reconsider my evaluation. I started to question whether I had been too quick to judge it positively. That external perspective changed how I interpreted the whole experience.*

> **Informant 4:** *At first, I didn't see any issue with the product. But after several of my colleagues pointed out how ineffective it seemed, I started questioning my choice.*

> **Informant 6:** *One of my close friends had already told me she didn't have a good experience with this product. At first, I didn't pay much attention, but after using it myself and seeing no results, her feedback really stuck with me. It influenced my perception, and eventually, I decided to stop using it too.*

> **Informant 7:** *My friends recommended that I cease using the product. Initially, I was convinced it was just a matter of time before I would see results. But after several of them commented on the lack of improvement, I began to doubt the effectiveness myself. Their opinions made me re-evaluate my expectations, and I eventually stopped using it, not because I was fully dissatisfied, but because their feedback made me feel I was perhaps wrong.*

Informant 12: *Upon observing my parents' responses, I have made the decision to refrain from using this product in the future.*

Informant 13: *A colleague mentioned during a conversation that she was also disappointed with this product. Hearing someone else express the same dissatisfaction made me feel more certain that it wasn't just my own impression. Her opinion validated my doubts, and that played a big role in my decision to stop using it*

Consequently, we posit that susceptibility to interpersonal influence exerts a positive effect on the perceived gap between the expected offer and the actual offer.

P3: *The perceived expected-real gap has influenced by susceptibility to interpersonal influence.*

Collectively, the findings reveal a structured pattern of psychological mechanisms that shape the perception of the expected-real gap in consumption. First, several participants demonstrated a form of optimistic persistence, continuing to believe in the product's potential despite early signs of ineffectiveness. This hopeful attitude delayed the recognition of dissatisfaction, as consumers were initially inclined to give the product more time or benefit of the doubt. Second, a number of consumers expressed a high degree of certainty at the time of purchase, which intensified their emotional response when the outcome failed to meet their expectations. This self-assuredness, rooted in prior experiences or brand trust, contributed to a deeper sense of frustration when the reality contradicted their initial conviction. Finally, the data reveal a susceptibility to interpersonal influence, as participants often referenced the opinions, advice, or feedback of peers and family members. These social inputs shaped both the interpretation of the product's effectiveness and the final judgment of dissatisfaction.

To synthesize the qualitative insights presented above, Table 3 offers a consolidated view of the three psychological traits identified. It provides their conceptual definitions, how they were operationalized within the participants' discourse, and illustrative quotes that reflect each trait's role in shaping the perception of the expected-real gap.

Together, these three psychological forces interact to influence how consumers construct, negotiate, and ultimately express their discontent when confronted with a discrepancy between what was expected and what was experienced. Figure 2 presents the expected-real gap framework.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to explore how specific psychological traits influence consumer dissatisfaction when a gap emerges between expected and actual product performance. Using a grounded theory approach, the analysis identified three key psychological traits: optimism, certainty, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. These findings offer theoretical and managerial insights into the psychological complexity underlying the expected-real gap.

The findings first underscore the influence of optimism, understood as a dispositional tendency to expect positive outcomes. Several participants maintained a hopeful outlook regarding the product's potential, even in the face of repeated underperformance. This optimistic predisposition delayed the recognition of dissatisfaction, as participants gave the product extended opportunities to deliver the expected results. Such behavior reflects the broader psychological mechanism whereby optimism leads individuals to interpret ambiguous or adverse outcomes in a more favorable light, often sustaining hope for improvement (Scheier

& Carver, 1985). In the context of consumption, this suggests that some consumers may maintain positive expectations even when early signs of failure emerge, thereby postponing negative evaluations. These insights help to refine traditional satisfaction models by highlighting the role of dispositional optimism in sustaining expectations beyond what performance alone would justify.

Figure 2:
Expected-Real Gap Framework
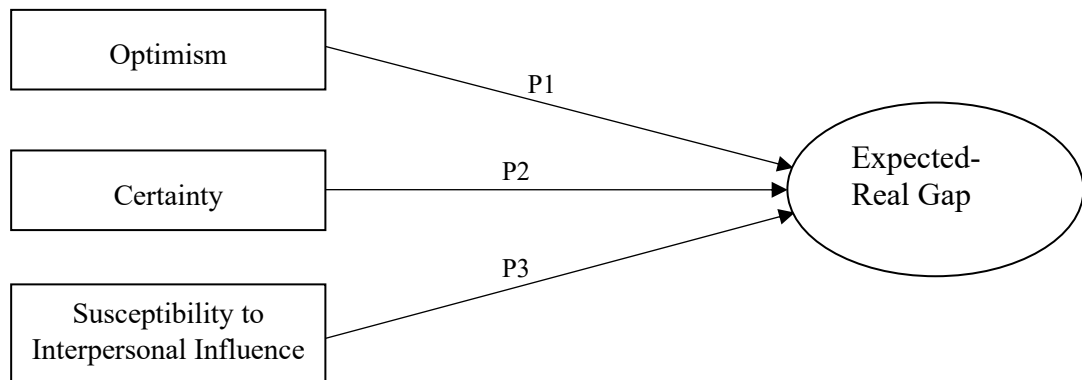
The second psychological trait highlighted in this study is certainty, which refers to consumers' confidence in the soundness of their purchase decisions. Several participants expressed a strong conviction at the time of purchase, often based on prior experiences, brand reputation, or persuasive information. This high level of self-assurance appeared to exacerbate the emotional impact of dissatisfaction when the product failed to meet their expectations. The disappointment was not only linked to the product's underperformance, but also to the sense of personal misjudgment, as their initial certainty had made the possibility of failure seem unlikely.

This finding adds nuance to traditional disconfirmation models (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982), which focus primarily on expectation-performance comparisons, by showing how the strength of expectations, not just their content, modulates the affective outcome. In this sense, certainty can be seen as an intensifier: the more confident a consumer is at the moment of purchase, the more psychologically destabilizing it becomes to face a conflicting reality. This finding echoes Zeithaml et al.'s (1993) assertion that the zone of tolerance contracts as expectations become more rigidly held.

The third and final trait, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, emerged as a key mechanism in shaping consumers' post-purchase evaluations. While participants initially formed individual judgments about the product, many subsequently revised their evaluation based on the opinions of peers, partners, or family members. In several cases, dissatisfaction was not fully recognized until it was confirmed, or even suggested, by significant others. This indicates that the expected-real gap is not always constructed in isolation but is often socially mediated.

Table 3: Summary of Identified Psychological Traits

Trait	Definition	Operationalization	Illustrative Quote
Optimism	A dispositional tendency to anticipate favorable outcomes, even in the face of adversity.	Participants demonstrated sustained hope and perseverance, continuing to use the product despite early signs of ineffectiveness.	"In the initial phase, I held the expectation that I would gradually acquire an understanding of the product's functioning over time. However, after a two-month period, I came to the realization that the process is intricate, and regrettably, I found myself unable to grasp it adequately." (Informant 2, F, 19)
Certainty	A high level of confidence in one's choices and judgments.	Participants expressed strong conviction during the purchase decision, often leading to heightened disappointment when the product failed to meet expectations.	"I exhibit a high level of certainty in my purchasing decisions. However, my confidence in the selection of this particular product was met with disappointment, as its performance fell significantly short of my expectations. The dissatisfaction stems from the realization that my initial confidence was misplaced, and the product did not align with my anticipated standards." (Informant 1, F, 30)
Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence	The degree to which individuals are influenced by the opinions, suggestions, or reactions of others.	Participants reevaluated their satisfaction or usage of the product based on external feedback from family or friends.	"While I, personally, did not discern this distinction, my spouse did. At first, I believed the product was working as intended, or at least not causing any harm. But my spouse pointed out some negative effects I hadn't noticed, which made me reconsider my evaluation. I started to question whether I had been too quick to judge it positively. That external perspective changed how I interpreted the whole experience." (Informant 3, M, 42)

This result resonates strongly with Bearden et al.'s (1989) work on interpersonal influence in consumer behavior, which distinguishes between normative and informational influence. In our data, both forms were visible. Some participants were implicitly persuaded by others' disapproval (normative), while others explicitly re-evaluated the product based on shared experiences or feedback (informational). In both cases, interpersonal influence acted as a validation mechanism, reinforcing or shaping the final perception of dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that dissatisfaction is not a purely private experience, but one that is often negotiated in dialogue with trusted others. Consequently, interpersonal influence contributes not only to pre-purchase decision-making, as commonly recognized, but also to the post-consumption meaning-making process.

These three psychological traits exemplify the interplay between individual dispositions and social dynamics in the development of consumer dissatisfaction arising from unmet expectations. Rather than being a simple or immediate reaction to product failure,

dissatisfaction emerges as a psychologically constructed experience that is contingent upon consumer characteristics.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

From a managerial perspective, this research holds significant implications for guiding strategic decisions within organizations. The internal awareness cultivated regarding the psychological factors influencing consumer perceptions serves as a valuable asset in shaping effective managerial strategies. Firms are advised to place a strong emphasis on aligning product or service designs closely with consumer expectations to minimize the perceived expected-real gap.

To optimize consumer communication, marketers are encouraged to tailor strategies that capitalize on optimism and certainty while ensuring transparency in product or service representation. An essential aspect of this process involves efforts to bolster consumer confidence by aligning marketing messages with the realistic attributes of the product or service. A concerted focus on conveying genuine features and benefits is crucial for effectively managing consumer expectations.

Moreover, recognizing the influential role of interpersonal influence in consumer behavior provides valuable insights for creating marketing messages that resonate within social contexts. This understanding helps firms develop communication strategies that align with prevailing social dynamics, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of marketing efforts.
In line with these considerations, implementing training programs for marketing and sales teams becomes imperative. These programs should underscore the significance of accurate representation and the effective management of consumer expectations. By instilling this awareness, organizations empower their teams to navigate the complex interplay between psychological factors and consumer perceptions, contributing to more informed and strategic decision-making processes.

LIMITATIONS

As with any research, this study has limitations. The primary constraint concerns the lack of specificity regarding the degree of involvement with the product. Whether the product falls within the spectrum of high or low involvement remains unspecified, and such categorization can potentially be inferred from other psychological factors. Future research may consider conducting a comparative analysis of high- and low-involvement products to assess the potential involvement of additional personality traits.

The second limitation pertains to the generalizability of the results. As the proposed model has not been empirically tested in real-world settings, we recommend validating it through a quantitative field study. This approach would provide a more robust assessment of the model's applicability and effectiveness in diverse contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research was undertaken to address the limited attention previously given to the psychological mechanisms that shape the discrepancy between expected and actual product performance. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study identified three psychological traits, optimism, certainty, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence, as key factors influencing how consumers perceive and experience this gap.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the subjective processes underlying consumer dissatisfaction. Rather than focusing solely on functional

disconfirmation, this study highlights how internal dispositions mediate post-purchase evaluations. In doing so, it extends traditional models of consumer satisfaction by incorporating broader psychological dimensions.

Ultimately, this research offers a more comprehensive framework for analyzing satisfaction and dissatisfaction, positioning consumer responses as the result of both individual tendencies and interpersonal dynamics. It opens new avenues for exploring how psychological traits shape marketplace experiences and invites further research on the interplay between personality and evaluative judgment.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. The aim of this interview is to understand how individuals compare their consumption experiences with their expectations and imagined product attributes. If you have ever experienced a disappointing purchase or felt dissatisfied with a product or service, please feel free to share this experience while answering a series of questions. You are encouraged to speak freely and openly.

Phase 1: Introduction of the Consumption Experience

Q1. Could you please describe your most recent unsatisfactory consumption experience?

Phase 2: Pre-Purchase Expectations

Q2. Thinking back to the period before the purchase, what motivated you to choose this product or service?

Q3. Why did you decide to buy it?

Q4. Before purchasing, did you have a specific image or expectation in your mind about the product or service? Can you describe this mental image in detail?

Phase 3: Post-Purchase Evaluation

Q5. How did you find the product or service after using it? Could you explain your evaluation?

Q6. How did you feel when the product did not meet your expectations?

Q7. What triggered this feeling of discrepancy between your expectations and the actual product performance?

Phase 4: Conclusion

Q8. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience or expectations as a consumer?