

INVESTIGATIONS OF THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION

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Research in the consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (CS/D) area - at least in North America -, appears as a relatively unified body of knowledge. For one thing, it revolves around a widely accepted definition of the CS/D concept, namely the consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations - or some other norm of performance - and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption (Day, 1984).

Such a consensus has had several beneficial consequences, one of them being the tendency to integrate quite carefully new theoretical developments relevant to the understanding of the CS/D phenomenon, such as the role of involvement (Barber and Venkatraman, 1986) or the role of emotions (Westbrook, 1987) in the process of CS/D formation.

However, another consequence of the definition mentioned above has been to lead most researchers to put a major emphasis on the psychological approach to the study of CS/D, within what is now known as the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (Tse and Wilton, 1988). More recently there has been a growing interest to move away from such an exclusive approach and to look, for instance, at the role of the social context as a determinant of norm importance in the process of expectancy (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987).

The primary objective of this paper is to highlight some of the theoretical and conceptual consequences that a social psychological approach - rather than a strictly psychological one - would have for the understanding of the CS/D phenomenon. This means that the focus moves away from the sole internal factors and will rather be on the interactions between the individual consumer and his/her environment, within of course the process of CS/D formation.

More precisely, we will present, in the first section of this paper, a definition of the most important concepts raised by such an approach, which should also, in the same time, shed some light on our perspective. Some of these concepts are, as far as we know, presented for the first time within the context of CS/D formation and, therefore, will command a special attention. Such is the case, for example, for the role of time as a determinant of CS/D.

Then, in the following section, we will emphasize the dynamic aspect of this approach by sketching a general model which focuses on the various interactions that can take place, at various levels of conceptualization, in the process of CS/D formation. Some general hypotheses and research directions or questions will also be formulated in order to outline the conceptual contribution of this social and psychological perspective.

Finally, we will highlight some of the most striking implications of such an approach, both from a theoretical and from a managerial standpoint.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS, AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

An important activity, in any conceptual work, is a preliminary definition of the terms and concepts that will be used throughout the analysis. These definitions may sometimes seem trivial, but they are nevertheless important in order to understand the representation of the world that we put forward in the coming model.

In our view, consumer behavior, and therefore the formation of CS/D as a part and parcel of consumer behavior, is the result of the many interactions that take place between an individual consumer and his/her environment. The focal point of interest is still consumption and CS/D at the individual level, and not at the societal level as in Lambert (1980) for instance. However, much more attention, and in fact pre-eminence is given, at least for the purpose of presentation, to the influence of external factors in our understanding of the process of CS/D formation.

Consumption within Individuals' Life

Different levels of conceptualization are possible in order to grasp the nature of the phenomenon under study. We would like to start, at a more general level, with the observation that consumption is an important activity in everybody's life. It is even taking an increasing importance with respect to almost any possible criterion, in what has been called modern, affluent, postindustrial societies (Nicosia and Glock, 1968). For instance, in several occidental countries, the trend toward an extension of the shopping hours, including Sunday, is now stronger than most religious dictates that would forbid such activities on Sundays.

This is important with regard to the fact that overall life satisfaction is related to all life's domains, one of which being consumption. Arndt (1978) have argued, with others, that marketing, through its role on consumption, is a significant contributor to life satisfaction outcomes. Instead of trying to assess the causality in this relation (Meadow, 1987), suffice to state that in our view CS/D is related to - i.e. not independent of - satisfaction in every other life's domain and with overall life satisfaction.

Consumption Activities

We have so far avoided to define the general notion of consumption, and we intend to limit this definition to the enumeration of the various classes of concrete activities involved, namely the buying, using and disposing of goods (products, services, ideas, etc.) to which we could add other overt activities such as the storing, maintaining, and repairing of these goods - although not necessarily in this order (Nicosia and Mayer, 1976; Tse, Nicosia and Wilton, 1989).

The importance of this list lies in the emphasis it puts on the so-called post-purchase activities. As already

stated in the comprehensive models of consumer behavior in the late 60s, consumption does not end with the buying of a good but rather involve the important sequence of activities just mentioned above. Each of these activities are interrelated with each other, as well as they are influenced by the social context - the situation - in which they take place. They are also partially determined by the pre-purchase activities that have taken place (exposure to and search for information, trial, etc. etc.). Finally, each of them is also the result of independent processes which involves feedback and therefore learning.

This last notion is an important one; consumers are in the constant process of learning how to become "good consumers", that is how to improve their level of satisfaction on each of the activities mentioned. A dynamic approach to the study of CS/D is, in our view, indispensable in order to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. Oliver (1980) has developed such a model, which has later inspired LaBarbera and Mazursky's (1983) longitudinal assessment of CS/D. They all use, however, an "abbreviated" cognitive model, inspired by both Helson's adaptation level theory and Thibaut and Kelly's comparison level theory, and they limit their analysis to the psychological process of expectation confirmation or disconfirmation over two or more periods. CS/D is treated as the feedback of purchase behavior rather than a state in itself which, as we have already suggested, encompasses larger dimensions than the disconfirmation of expectations, such as the Overall Consumer Satisfaction mentioned above. This concept can now be understood as an individual's self-appraisal of being or not a "good consumer", and is part of a more general level of "Life Satisfaction" in which intervene several external forces of different kinds that might act on these processes.

Consumption Institutions and Norms

We believe that one of the most important determinants of this level of "Life Satisfaction" is the extent to which an individual is well adapted or not to his/her social environment. This social environment is usually thought of as being made of several types of groups, including the family, reference groups, social classes and the community. Whether an individual experiences rather harmonious or rather conflictual relations with these groups is a crucial determinant of overall "Life Satisfaction".

One of the most important level of groups is the institution, defined as "practices, established ways of doing things" (Broom and Selznik, 1958) or, more precisely, as an unique pattern of interactions among specific activities performed by specific people in specific places through time (Nicosia and Mayer, 1976). Marriage, private enterprise, Valentine's Day and the Catholic Church are examples of some North American social institutions.

Consumption being an important set of social activities, we can ascribe it the social status of an institution. More importantly, we can define consumption as comprising several institutions of its own. For example, advertising, retailing or credit can be identified as specific consumption institutions in most occidental societies.

In our scheme, institutions are more interesting for

what they do rather than for what they are. More precisely, an institution creates norms directing specific activities. These norms are enforced through some mechanisms of rewards and sanctions. As a consequence, learning and ultimately adaptation take place within specific institutions; this is the essence of their concrete and active impact on consumers' experience and therefore satisfaction.

Consumer's Experience

There has been, in the last decade, a significant increase in the consideration given to the experiential aspect of consumption, linked, undoubtedly, to the recognition of the role played by affect within the domain of consumption behavior.

This experiential approach to the study of consumer behavior can follow different paths. It has been developed in a more cognitive perspective by Deighton (1986), Hoch and Ha (1986) and Hoch and Deighton (1989), for whom learning is conceptualized as an intuitive hypothesis-testing process whereby consumers adapt their beliefs to make sense of new data (Bower and Hilgard, 1981). They distinguish learning by education from the more interactive process of learning from experience, and claim that the latter is more pervasive and have a greater influence on behavior (Hoch and Deighton, 1989).

Another approach to the study of consumers' experience is the one advocated by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) which emphasizes the affective, sensorial dimensions of experience, and puts forward a phenomenological approach to the study of consumption, regarded as "a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and esthetic criteria" (p. 132).

Their experiential model of consumer behavior is interesting in many respects, one of which is certainly the contrast it offers with the dominant information-processing paradigm in the consumer behavior literature of the preceding decade. For instance, they point out that in terms of the resources that consumers bring to the exchange transaction, the focus is slowly shifting from considerations of money to the fundamental role played by the consumer's allocation of time. They refer to some important developments in this area in economics (Becker, 1976) and claim that "investigation of subjective time resources may help to unravel the mysteries of the psychotemporal expenditures involved in experiential consumption" (p. 135).

This notion of "subjective time resources" is of great interest within a social psychological approach like ours. The main justification for paying special attention to this variable comes from other research efforts in the areas of industrial psychology and sociology of work. More precisely, Jahoda (1982) has built on findings from unemployment research in the 1930s and in the 1980s and argued that employment as an institution involves five broad categories of experience enforced on the overwhelming majority of people who have jobs. These categories of experience are "the imposition of a time structure, the enlargement of the scope of social experience into areas less emotionally charged than family life, participation in a collective purpose or effort, the

assignment by virtue of employment of status and identity, and regular activity" (p. 59).

The various categories of experience enforced by the various consumption activities taking place within the social institution of consumption have not been defined nor identified yet. Such a task would require a major work of analysis and reflexion, and certainly exceeds the scope of this paper. However, as a general hypothesis, we can assert that the first of these "latent consequences" assigned to employment in Jahoda's functional analysis, the imposition of a time structure, does certainly also apply to consumption.

In fact, it echoes the role assigned to time by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) although they do not explicitly discuss the social component underlying the perception or the "experiencing" of time. Graham (1981) has even developed the cultural dimension underlying the perception of time. We limit ourselves to the European-American perception that allows time to "be sliced into discrete units and then allocated for specific tasks" (p. 335). Within this conceptualization, we focus on individual differences in terms of "time structure", a variable proposed by Bond and Feather (1988) and defined by "the degree to which individuals perceive their use of time to be structured and purposive" (p. 321). Their interest in this variable follows from Jahoda's and other researchers' work on unemployment, and they found that unemployed people reported less structure and purpose in their use of time than the employed group (Feather and Bond, 1983). To assess this "time structure" variable, they developed a scale made of 26 items reproduced in Table 1. They subsequently found significant positive relations between perceived use of time and a sense of purpose in life, self-esteem and several other dimensions of general psychological well-being (Bond and Feather, 1988).

We believe that we can reasonably hypothesize the same type of relations within the consumption area. We have already mentioned the role played by consumption within each and everyone's life. Therefore, the general sense of time structure and purpose in everyday life should be positively correlated with the perceived use of time allocated to consumption in general, and to more specific consumption activities. Moreover, this perceptual variable should also be positively correlated with consumer's satisfaction with respect to each consumption activity, as well as with the so-called Overall Consumer Satisfaction.

A GENERAL DYNAMIC MODEL OF CS/D FORMATION

The definitions stated so far are probably quite revealing by themselves of the main orientations we want to suggest to the understanding of the CS/D phenomenon. In summary, we see CS/D as a subjective rather than an objective, process rather than a state of experiencing the purchased goods and services, through time, and within a given social environment.

The concepts presented so far may need, however, an ordering so that the main interactions occurring in the process of CS/D formation can be better understood. Such an ordering is the purpose of Figure 1 in which a general dynamic model of CS/D is reproduced. It starts with a

Table 1
Items in the Time Structure Questionnaire

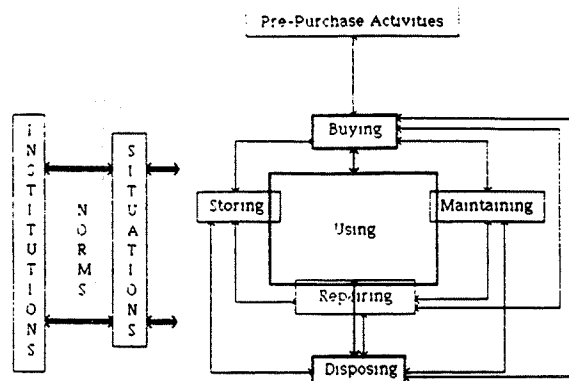
1. Do you ever have trouble organizing the things you have to do? (No)
2. Do you ever find that time just seems to slip away? (No)
3. Do you have a daily routine which you follow? (Yes)
4. Do you often feel that your life is aimless, with no definite purpose? (No)
5. Many of us tend to daydream about the future. Do you find this happening to you? (No)
6. And what about the past? Do you find yourself dwelling on the past? (No)
7. Once you've started an activity, do you persist at it until you've completed it? (Yes)
8. Do you ever feel that the things you have to do during the day just don't seem to matter? (No)
9. Do you plan your activities from day to day? (Yes)
10. Do you tend to leave things until the last minute? (No)
11. Do you find that during the day you are often not sure what to do next? (No)
12. Do you take a long time to "get going"? (No)
13. Do you tend to change rather aimlessly from one activity to another during the day? (No)
14. Do you give up easily once you've started something? (No)
15. Do you plan your activities so that they fall into a particular pattern during the day? (Yes)
16. Could you tell how many useful hours you put in last week? (Yes)
17. Do you think you do enough with your time? (Yes)
18. Do you get bored with your day-to-day activities? (No)
19. Looking at a typical day in your life, do you think that most things you do have some purpose? (Yes)
20. Do your main activities during the day fit together in a structured way? (Yes)
21. Do the important interests/activities in your life tend to change frequently? (No)
22. Do your main interests/activities fulfill some purpose in your life? (Yes)
23. Do you have any difficulty in finishing activities once you've started them? (No)
24. Do you spend time thinking about opportunities that you have missed? (No)
25. Do you ever feel that the way you fill your time has little use or value? (No)
26. Do you spend time thinking about what your future might be like? (No)

Note: The key for scoring each item is given in parentheses. For example, ratings in the direction of the no pole were scored as indicating more time structure for items #1, 2, 4 and so forth, and ratings in the direction of the yes pole were coded as indicating more time structure for items #3, 7, 9 and so forth.

Source: Bond, M.J. and N.T. Feather (1988), "Some Correlates of Structure and Purpose in the Use of Time", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, (2), p. 324.

sequence of consumption activities, from the pre-purchase activities, during which expectations are formed, to the buying and then the using of this good, which encompasses related activities such as, when relevant, the storing, the repairing and the maintaining of the good. These activities are said to be adjacent because they can occur before and/or after using the good. Finally, the last activity within this sequence is the disposal of the good.

Figure 1
A General Dynamic Model of CS/D Formation



Now with regard to the satisfaction experienced by the individual consumer, it is first assumed to result from each of these activities, both independently and conjointly. Since we have also emphasized the role played by the perceived time allocation to consumption activities, a precision is also in order: each of these activities requires time, and for each of them, the more this time allocation will be perceived as being well structured and purposive, the higher the level of satisfaction experienced will be.

More, since each activity interacts with each other as parts of the same consumption experience, then dissatisfaction on one activity can be compensated by satisfaction on another activity. However, such a state of tension opens the door to a more conscious evaluation of the whole consumption process by the consumer and, should the occasion arise, to a possible interruption or disruption of brand loyalty or even purchase habit. Of course, as in any other CS/D formation model, the greater the dissatisfaction associated with these activities, the higher the probability of such an occurrence.

But we would like to think that the main contribution of this model is not necessarily in explaining the mechanisms operating at this micro level as much as in eliciting the social determinants which operate, at a more general level, within this experiencing of CS/D. As stated earlier, consumption takes place within a set of social institutions of two types: some are directly related to consumption, others, such as the family, work, religion, are not. The increasing pervasiveness of consumption in everybody's life gives more importance to its related institutions, and simultaneously challenges the existence of

the other institutions. This transitory phenomenon may generate a diminution in the quality of structure and purpose of time as perceived by most consumers. In other words, the norms enforced by most social institutions with regard to consumption activities may become much more vague and ambiguous in the mind of the consumers, leaving them with a higher level of dissatisfaction either with their life and their consumption activities.

Moving away from this more macro level of analysis, one research direction that our model suggests is the impact of consumer socialization processes, understood as the degree of adaptation to the surrounding consumption institutions (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; O'Guinn and Faber, 1987), on CS/D. In fact, we can reasonably assume that individual consumers will differ in terms of their level of adaptation to their social environment and to the changes in this environment. Even during a period in which numerous and rapid changes occur in the social structure, some individuals will show a higher level of adaptation than others. Translated into the consumption domain, these consumers will adopt and conform more easily and rapidly to the norms enforced by the consumption institutions, and hence experience a greater level of satisfaction out of their consumption activities.

Finally, with respect to the expectancy disconfirmation process, our model would suggest that the expectations formed prior to any consumption activity should be qualified. Since these expectations are to a large extent the result of the interactions taking place between the consumer and his/her environment, we can hypothesize that the process of confirmation or disconfirmation of these expectations will be different depending on the nature of the environment as perceived and experienced by the consumer. (In our analysis, perception is a crucial mediator of experience.) Those who perceive their environment as either too loosely, too tightly, or well structured, are likely to go through different processes of expectation formation and of confirmation or disconfirmation. Such a proposition has been made within the consumer's learning model developed by Hoch and Ha (1986) and Hoch and Deighton (1989) where the so-called ambiguity of the information environment is seen as an important determinant of the consumer's learning process and of his/her more general experience; this variable is generally used, however, within a cognitive perspective rather than within a social one as we advocate here.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical and conceptual implications are closely intertwined to more practical ones, since, of course, any action is rooted in one's own understanding of the reality. Therefore, we will address these two kinds of implications in an interactive way, without trying to arbitrarily distinguish the two.

We would like to think of the model presented in Figure 1 as a genuine dynamic one, mainly because of the importance given to the sequence of activities taking place as well as because of the numerous interactions that we have described. The challenge remains, however, to formalize the model in such a way that it could serve empirical purposes without losing its dynamic orientation.

The conceptualization of CS/D as a process rather

than a state raises several important issues. The most obvious one is that it forces us to pay attention to the changes occurring in the social environment in which consumers operate. These changes can either be at the level of the social institutions relevant to consumption - and, as we have suggested, most of them are - or at the more concrete level of, say, the intensity of the competition in a market. For instance, pre-purchase expectations are formed within a given concurrential context, which of course can change with the appearance of new offerings on the market after a consumer has purchased a product. These new offerings will be included in the process of confirmation or disconfirmation of the expectations. Therefore, any measurement and comparison of expectations and performance at two points in time should take into account these changes within the social environment.

The dynamic component of this model also forces us to reexamine the nature of CS/D with regard to the type of good involved. There is a consensus in the CS/D literature that CS/D formation and appraisal differs for durable and non-durable products as well as for services. Our conceptualization of CS/D as a process suggests that not only the life duration of the product or its tangible or intangible nature should be considered, but also the nature of the activities involved in its consumption (i.e. maintaining, repairing, etc.), the frequency of occurrence of these activities, and the duration of the consequences of the purchase. Therefore, the consumption of some non-durable goods might have longer and more important consequences than the consumption of some durable goods. The same can be said for services which, in general, might benefit from a distinction in terms of their consequences. The practical implications of this are quite straightforward; the monitoring of CS/D by marketing managers, as well as by public policy makers, when relevant - may be much more consequential for services and some non-durable than for durable goods. Again, the nature of the underlying process of CS/D is the ultimate criterion. This recommendation is especially important, in our view, in the light of the recent developments on the managing of consumers' experience (Hoch and Deighton, 1989; Deighton and Schindler, 1988).

CONCLUSION

We believe that alternative conceptualizations of the CS/D phenomenon can enhance our comprehension of this important phenomenon. Of course, the model presented here is still largely exploratory and needs to be refined. The task of identifying consumption institutions and norms, as well as the categories of experience involved in consumption, still has to be done in a more consistent and complete way. Only then will the measurement issues become relevant. The difficulty of such a task is, in our opinion, largely counterbalanced by the advantage of it.

This task is even more imperative in the light of the frequently reported phenomenon that consumption is becoming one of the most determinant activity in everybody's life paralleled, by the growth of materialistic values. The way individuals experience or not satisfaction from the performance of the related activities is therefore crucial, as it has been the case for many decades, now, in

the area of work. Consumption being now probably as important as work for most individuals in occidental societies, we believe that we can borrow and learn from what is already known in industrial psychology.

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