THE ILLUSION OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer satisfaction is considered to be a central issue in marketing and consumer protection. For marketeers, brand satisfaction is one of the conditions for market continuation and expansion to take place. Also, a satisfied consumer is a non-complaining consumer - no time and money have to be spent on corrective actions by the firm, and no adverse communication among consumers will take place. Similarly, a high level of consumer satisfaction and/or a low level of dissatisfaction will prevent government intervention so that business independence may be maintained. For consumers, (experienced and expected) product or brand satisfaction is an important factor in buying decisions. Finally, satisfaction with products/brands is an effect that can be viewed as worth striving for in its own right.

These observations call for a serious consideration of the nature and the scope of the concept of satisfaction. The question to be answered is: To what extent can and may satisfaction serve as feedback information to marketing policy decisions, and as a starting point for consumer protection activities?

In this paper we will discuss consumer behavior related issues that can help find an answer to this question. (For sake of brevity, we will refer to brands only. This is meant to imply unbranded products as well).

In principle, consumer satisfaction is a concept that can be assessed both in a direct and in an indirect way. Marketeers often tend to use the indirect way by deriving satisfaction from sales. Fluctuations in the market share of a brand are taken to reflect consumer's relative brand satisfaction changes.

It is obvious that this approach has certain drawbacks. First, it is a post-hoc approach that may not give adequate opportunity to flexibly adapt marketing policy to changing market conditions. Second, it does not clarify how sales differences come about. For example, in the case of an increased sales volume, are more consumers buying the brand or have the same consumers increased consumption-does it mean increased satisfaction with brand A or decreased satisfaction with brand B? Third, in the case of a stable consumption level, it is not clear whether real satisfaction or mere habitual or routine buying is the primary cause for consumption. In the latter case, a brand whose market share is stable may be still be quite vulnerable to the impact of marketing activities of competing brands. The fourth drawback of the indirect, post-hoc approach is that all consumer behavior outcomes are collapsed into one sales or other market performance measure that does not allow for distinctions among segments of consumers.

These disadvantages of the indirect approach can be prevented by using the direct approach to the assessment of consumer satisfaction. Consumers may be questioned individually as to their evaluations of, and satisfaction with a brand. Consumer reactions to the introduction or adaptation of a brand may be predicted prior to the expensive launch or production change. Another advantage of individual responses is that they may be compared over time and with each other, and with the corresponding actual market shares. Also, the different satisfaction scores of the various consumer segments may be compared.

Yet, the direct approach has its drawbacks as well. It is relatively time and money consuming. A second drawback is that the question of the nature and the scope of the concept of satisfaction remains to be resolved. That is, individual satisfaction scores are subject to validity questions.

There are theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects associated with the satisfaction concept as employed in the direct approach. In the following we will make an attempt to give an overview of these aspects, to be followed by a critical analysis.

THEORY

Satisfaction or dissatisfaction may be thought of as the evaluation by the consumer of his/her interaction with the brand in the buying and consumption situation.

In the literature many different conceptual and operational definitions of brand satisfaction can be found. Many operationalizations depart from the relationship between consumer expectations and product performance. The two stage expectancy confirmation model of Oliver (1980) may be used as an illustration. In brief, the basic tenets of this model are the following:

1. Brand choice is a function of intentions to act, which, in turn, are influenced by beliefs and attitudes.
2. The post-usage experience begins with disconfirmation or fulfillment of pre-purchase expectations and beliefs.
3. If expectations are fulfilled, satisfaction is the outcome or vice versa.
4. Postusage attitude is a function of satisfaction. If the experience is positive, prior attitude is reinforced and vice versa.
5. Future purchase intentions are directly affected by post-purchase attitude (and of course, the experience of satisfaction and dissatisfaction). If the experience has been positive, repurchase is likely (Engel et al, 1986, p. 155-156).

A number of studies have shown evidence for this model (i.e. Swan and Trawick, 1981; Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Bearden and Teel, 1983; LaBarbera and Mazursky, 1983; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983;).

In Oliver's model three concepts play a central role: expectation, performance and confirmation/disconfirmation. These concepts play a part in several other theoretical approaches as well. Therefore, we will elaborate upon them in the following section.

Expectations

In several approaches, product performance is compared with product expectations. However, different standards are used to provide expectations about a brand:

1. Equitable or deserved performance ('should be'). This standard represents the level of performance the consumer ought to receive, given a perceived set of costs. (Miller, 1977; Liechty and Churchill, 1979; Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983).

2. Ideal or desirable performance ('can be'). This standard represents the optimal product performance a consumer would hope for. (Swan and Trawick, 1981).

3. Expected product performance ('will be'). A products' most likely performance is presented by this standard. It is the most used pre-consumption comparison standard in consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction research. (Oliver, 1980; Oliver and Linda, 1981; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983).

4. Minimal tolerable performance ('must be'). A product has at least to meet a certain minimal tolerable performance. (LaTour and Peat, 1979)

Swan and Trawick (1981) find that not only one but two different standards (desired and expected performance) have an influence upon the level of satisfaction.

Tse and Wilton (1988) also show the presence of multiple comparison standards in consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction formation. The expected performance has a direct and positive effect. The ideal performance has an indirect and negative effect.

Expectations about a product have an indirect effect on satisfaction through disconfirmation, but there is also a direct effect of expectations on satisfaction as has been shown by Oliver (1979), Bearden and Teel (1983), Tse and Wilton (1988).

Product Performance

Swan and Combs (1976) suggest that product performance has two different dimensions; an instrumental dimension and an expressive dimension. However, Maddox (1981) concludes that the disparity between instrumental and expressive performance does not lead to a better explanation of satisfaction. Traditionally, only the instrumental performance is measured in consumer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction research.

On the basis of the literature, it is difficult to decide whether product performance should be measured at an overall level or at an attribute level. It seems that measuring product performance on an overall level produces the same satisfaction results, as measuring it on an attribute level (depending, of course, on the number and nature of the attributes included in the analysis).

Product performance is related to satisfaction through the intervening construct of disconfirmation, but it is also directly linked to satisfaction (Swan and Trawick, 1981; Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Tse and Wilton, 1988).

Confirmation/Disconfirmation

Alternative approaches of modelling the comparison of product performance against a pre-experience standard can be found. The subtractive disconfirmation approach (e.g. LaTour and Peat, 1979; Sirgy, 1984) assumes that the effects of a post-experience comparison on satisfaction can be expressed as a function of the algebraic difference between product performance and a comparison standard. As an alternative approach, subjective disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980; Churchill and Suprenant, 1982) represents a distinct psychological construct encompassing a subjective evaluation of the difference between product performance and the comparison standard. An important distinction between the two approaches is drawn by Oliver (1980), who suggests that subtractive disconfirmation may lead to an immediate satisfaction judgement, whereas subjective disconfirmation represents an intervening 'distinct cognitive state resulting from the comparison process and preceding satisfaction judgement (pp. 460). Hence, subjective disconfirmation is likely to offer a richer explanation of the processes underlying consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction formation.

The state of the art may be summarized in the following points:

- The concept of satisfaction is defined in a variety of ways (Day, 1982).
- Swan and Martin (1980) present as a major conclusion that models of consumer satisfaction need to incorporate the disconfirmation of past performance expectations.
- According to Guzzo (1980): 'Each variation of the general paradigm relating expectation to perceived performance has received empirical support. However, no one variation stands out as an overall explanation of consumer satisfaction'. Day (1982): there is a lack of a well-developed and widely accepted theoretical framework.
- The various components or determinants of satisfaction are not completely clear themselves. It is not well understood how expectations influence the evaluative process (Day, 1982). Although satisfaction has been shown to be directly related to disconfirmation (Swan, 1977; Oliver, 1979, 1977; Swan & Combs, 1976), it was suggested by Swan and Trawick (1980) that satisfaction is related to 'desired' expectations but not to 'predictive' expectations.
- It is not clear whether satisfaction is a continuous variable or a discontinuous variable with satisfaction and dissatisfaction as two different states (Leavitt, 1977).
- Finally, Jacoby (1976) suggests a parallel between the two-factor content approach presented in the context of job satisfaction (Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959) and the effects that may be observed in the context of consumer satisfaction. According to Jacoby: '(...) it appears that many factors in buying a product will, by their presence or absence, either positively or negatively affect behavior and/or subsequent behavior, but not both.' For example, a product warranty may not increase

purchase likelihood or product satisfaction. However, the absence of a warranty may definitely decrease purchase likelihood or product satisfaction. A dual system is suggested including facilitators and inhibitors. In the consumer behavior literature this distinction has not been elaborated upon.

The overall result is a considerable amount of theoretical and operational confusion. The one single notion that seems to stand out in each domain is the notion of comparison. This means, at the very least, that satisfaction is taken as a concept expressing some degree of relativity. Satisfaction is not an absolute thing, it varies with the circumstances even when the object of satisfaction is not different.

Satisfaction can be seen as the affective outcome associated with a cognitive comparison of the present situation relative to any one or a combination of several reference points, which may be inherent in the past, in the future, in other persons, or in some personal or external norm.

We may suggest, then, that theoretical satisfaction research should be directed at the conditions under which comparisons can occur, and at the elements in the comparison.

What can be said about the psychological conditions under which comparisons may come about? Below, we will make an attempt to specify these conditions. For reasons of brevity and clarity, we will only refer to negative product experiences that possibly lead to dissatisfaction. The conditions may be easily translated to positive experiences and satisfaction.

As a first condition, the negative evaluative effect, resulting from the comparison(s) referred to earlier, must exceed a particular threshold in order to be psychologically significant. A moderate deviation from the expected product performance is likely to be assimilated into the expected range of product performances.

If the person does not assimilate the present experience into the expected range, s/he will make a judgment as to whether the deviation lies in the range of perceived acceptable product performances. An unexpected negative experience is expected not to lead to dissatisfaction if it falls within the range of perceived acceptability. We may call this the second condition for satisfaction/dissatisfaction to occur.

A negative evaluation, if it does develop, is an unpleasant psychological effect that a person will try to avoid, even if there are really disappointing product characteristics. By consequence, a person will attempt to attenuate the experience by generating compensatory thoughts that restore the psychological balance. Compensatory thoughts may be those that stress positive product characteristics, that de-emphasize negative product characteristics, or that involve some (future) retaliation against the producer or seller (- e.g. not to buy products of the same brand again; not to return; to counter-advertise among friends), or that deal with some meta-reflection, e.g. 'this bad buy was a good lesson for me'. The third condition for dissatisfaction to develop is that the psychological balance is not restored by self-generated compensatory thoughts.

For these conditions to be met, the consumer must have the opportunity, the knowledge, the capacity and the motivation to evaluate the brand relative to the reference point employed. As indicated earlier, this reference point may be located in expectations, in earlier experiences, in future expectations, in other persons' evaluations, etcetera.

Here we want to introduce a new element in the discussion. The various approaches all seem to imply some more or less explicit comparison between expectations and experiences. However, it may be very hard for an individual to generate expectations, to evaluate performance, and to compare the two as if they were independent elements. The conditions that have been described above may be hard to meet by a consumer who is not very knowledgeable about the product at issue, who has no experience with alternatives that may serve as a reference point, and who may not be capable of 'computing' the correspondence or difference between expectations and experiences. That is, if s/he is capable of generating these comparison elements independent from one another.

Even if the consumer is capable of doing so, the absence of perceived differences between brands may prevent the consumer from being motivated to form expectations and performance evaluations. (In this respect, it seems worthwhile to note that Assael (1986) explicitly includes the perception of significant brand differences as a basic dimension influencing the nature of consumer decision making).

To the extent that a comparison can be made between expectations (etc.) and performance, the consumer is likely to be aware of the outcome of his/her evaluation, of the level of his/her (dis)satisfaction. If the above conditions are hard or impossible to meet, (dis)satisfaction may not come about, unless the consumer is prompted to express it by an external request (such as, for example, a question in satisfaction research).

For this reason, we want to make a distinction between latent and manifest (dis)satisfaction.

Manifest satisfaction may be thought of as the explicit comparison between (perceived) brand expectations prior to the purchase and actual brand performance. In the case of latent satisfaction, the consumer does not realize and cannot express his/her level of satisfaction unless prompted to do so. If satisfaction is manifest, the consumer is apt to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction in some type of behavior such as, for example, (re)buying, brand loyalty, brand switching, communicating with other consumers or store personnel, or complaining to the manufacturer.

If (dis)satisfaction is passively present, it may be hard to identify behavior that is directly and unequivocally related to it. Latent satisfaction may be expressed in, for example, habitual buying behavior. Latent dissatisfaction may be expressed in a broader orientation to purchase alternatives.

The reasoning above implies that there may be many cases in which the literature refers to consumer (dis)satisfaction while no consumer (dis)satisfaction is actually taking place. There are a variety of conditions which make it hard, impossible, or psychologically unnecessary to make comparisons between product performance and prior expectations or some other norm.

Therefore, if (dis)satisfaction comes about in consumer behavior research, we should question ourselves whether we are dealing with a manifest expression of something that is only latently present or with an explicit expression of actually experienced (dis)satisfaction. This critical remark explains the title of this paper: is it true satisfaction that we are measuring or is it an artificial evaluation prompted by the research task that we have given our respondents? Given the number of conditions that should be met for actual (dis)satisfaction to take place, we have reasons to believe that in many (dis)satisfaction studies the obtained scores are research artifacts. In real life, without a research question on (dis)satisfaction, consumers might not have experienced the expressed (dis)satisfaction at all.

In conclusion, we may suppose to deal with true (dis)satisfaction only if the consumer is motivated to make the comparison, if the consumer has the knowledge and the capacity to make the comparison, and if there are perceived significant product or brand differences.

Let us return to the relationship between (dis)satisfaction and other types of buying behavior. The distinction between latent and manifest satisfaction seems to point at a relevant theoretical dimension that has practical implications as well. The distinction seems capable of helping us to clarify the relationship between (dis)satisfaction and behavior. In the remainder of this paper we will focus upon brand loyalty (repeat purchase behavior). Other types of behavior related to (dis)satisfaction, such as for example complaining behavior are interesting in their own right, but will not be dealt with here.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRAND LOYALTY AND BRAND SATISFACTION

For reasons of conceptual clarity we first want to make a distinction between two types of brand loyalty. This distinction is psychologically and theoretically relevant. In their behavior consumers may appear to be brand loyal because they purchase and repurchase a particular brand. However, their underlying motives or antecedents of behavior may be quite different. In some cases, repeat purchase behavior is the result of actual brand loyalty: the deliberate selection of a particular brand because the consumer has specific positive reasons to like that brand. In other cases, there is 'spurious loyalty' as opposed to 'true loyalty'. In the case of spurious loyalty repeat purchase behavior takes place as the mere result of the convenience of not having to make purchase decisions over and over again (Bloemer, 1988).

The relationship with product involvement is clear: in the case of true brand loyalty product involvement is high relative to the case in which we may speak of spurious loyalty. It is important, therefore, to make a theoretical distinction between the two types of loyalty.

It is surprising to note that in the literature little attention is given to the relationship between brand loyalty and brand satisfaction. This is surprising as satisfaction can be thought of as an important determinant of brand loyalty. A possible reason is that satisfaction is taken as a criterion in its own right, so that the relationship with loyalty is either ignored or implicitly assumed. As far as

known, only Newman and Webel, 1973; Oliver, 1980; LaBarbera and Mazurshy, 1983; Bloemer, 1988 and Kasper, 1988 did pay attention to the relationship.

Earlier we discussed the model of Oliver (1980). In the post-purchase phase the model shows the influence of satisfaction on attitude and intention. However, no real attention is given to behavior. Based upon the cognitive model of Oliver, LaBarbera and Mazursky (1983) measure the influence of satisfaction on post-purchase attitude, intention and behavior. They measure repeat purchasing behavior which they assume to be equal to brand loyalty. However, they do not explicitly measure brand loyalty. "Our finding strongly supports the role of satisfaction in mediating revised intentions and overt behavior. Satisfaction and intention are found to increase as the loyalty to the brand increases (when brand loyalty is measures in a number of successive purchases of the same brand). However, the relative importance of satisfaction in predicting purchase appears to decrease as loyalty increases. Thus, it is likely that a certain threshold of satisfaction must be met to lead to a repeat purchase of the brand. Moreover, the longer the sequence of repeat purchases, the more experience with the brand accounts for repeat purchase behavior" (pp. 402 -403).

A study by Newman and Werbel (1973) is the only study we know in which the effects of satisfaction on true brand loyalty for several major household appliances are investigated. It appears that brand loyalty varies directly with perceived satisfaction with the old brand. Although a direct relationship has been found, the correlation is not perfect, in the sense that not all satisfied consumers will be brand loyal. Similarly, not every consumer who is not fully satisfied appears to be nonloyal. However, Newman and Werbel do not mention these findings, nor provide an explanation for it.

Bloemer (1988) theoretically investigates the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty.

Kasper (1988) observes that satisfaction with a color tv-set in general does discriminate between brand loyal and brand switching consumers. He used the absence or the presence of a problem with a product as a proxy for satisfaction/ dissatisfaction.

Given the previous discussion it seems possible to combine the notions of manifest and latent satisfaction on the one hand with the notions of true and spurious brand loyalty on the other hand.

With regard to this combination we take the view that only in the case of manifest satisfaction there is true brand loyalty. That is loyalty out of explicit conviction as a result of psychological evaluation and decision making processes. If forced to provide a satisfaction score, the respondent will indicate that s/he is really satisfied with the brand. This decreases the likelihood that other brands may be tried or purchased.

If a consumer shows repeat purchasing behavior and satisfaction is only latently present one may speak of spurious brand loyalty. Here a distinction has to be make between:

a) spurious loyalty as a habit out of convenience and;
b) spurious loyalty as a habit out of conviction

Habit out of convenience means acceptance only. The evaluation of the brand or in other terms, the satisfaction with the brand does not reach the level of

conscious awareness.

If forced to provide a satisfaction score, the respondent will indicate that s/he is satisfied with the brand, but the obtained satisfaction score reflects inflated and not actual satisfaction. The consumer may relatively easy decide to change brands.

Habit out of conviction on the other hand also means acceptance. Satisfaction is also just latently present, but before habit out of conviction arises, satisfaction has been manifest. If a consumer is very satisfied about a particular brand, s/he is likely to continue buying the brand, however, without explicitly realizing this satisfaction level over and over again. Continued buying of a satisfactory brand decreases the likelihood of continued explicit brand evaluation and thereby of continued manifest satisfaction.

As a result habitual behavior out of conviction occurs even though the basis of the conviction is not continually reinforced. The likelihood that other brands may be tried or purchased increases. This also points at the dynamics of satisfaction and loyalty. Spurious loyalty may develop into true loyalty by an explicit positive evaluation: manifest satisfaction. However, true brand loyalty may regress into habitual buying behavior based upon latent rather than manifest satisfaction.

Parenthetically, a similar reasoning may be applied to the relationship between dissatisfaction and brand switching. Consumers may be latently dissatisfied with products for reasons we have described above. If it is hard for a consumer to generate expectations and make performance evaluations, manifest dissatisfaction is unlikely. However, dissatisfaction may be latently present. That is, if a consumer is requested to give his/her evaluation, a negative satisfaction score can be expected. Manifest dissatisfaction leading to the selection of a different purchase alternative, is likely to attenuate over time.

The nature of the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty is depicted in Figure 1. For reasons of simplicity, in this figure only reference is made to satisfaction.

Figure 1
The Relationship Between the Nature of
Satisfaction and the Type of Brand Loyalty
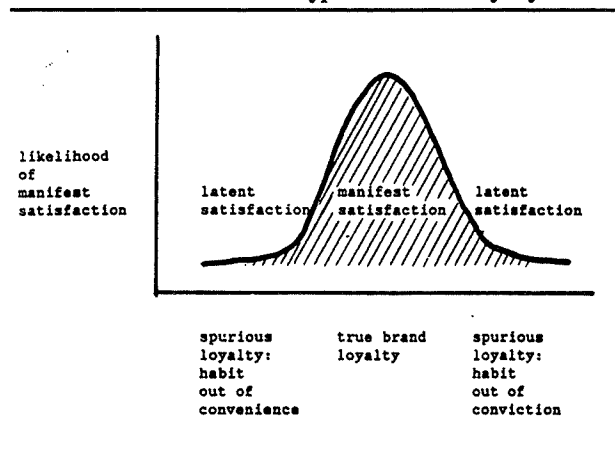
In the shaded area of Figure 1 we may speak of true satisfaction and true loyalty. In the nonshaded area, satisfaction is only latently present and brand loyalty is only spurious.

We indicated earlier that the conditions for manifest satisfaction and therefore true loyalty may be hard to reach. For that reason, the nonshaded area covers the instances in which we might refer to the illusion of brand loyalty.

DISCUSSION

In this article we have critically analyzed the state of the art in the theory on consumer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction. One of the conclusions was that there is a lot of conceptual and operational confusion.

So, we started out by comparing a direct analysis with an indirect analysis of consumer satisfaction. Both approaches were shown to have positive and negative characteristics. It was not our goal to end up choosing for either one of these approaches. Instead, it is clear that the indirect approach can be viewed as a supplement to the direct approach an vice versa. Both approaches should be used to adequately monitor changes in consumer preference, evaluations and satisfaction.

Another conclusion was that the comparison between product performance and product expectations is one of the core concepts. However, the conditions necessary for a comparison, to be actually made by consumers, may be very hard to reach. For that reason we distinguished between latent and manifest (dis)satisfaction and concluded that in (dis)satisfaction research latent (dis)satisfaction is often brought about by the nature of the research setting and procedure. That is why we referred to 'the illusion of consumer satisfaction' in the title of this paper.

The distinction between latent and manifest (dis)satisfaction is an important one when a connection is made with purchase behavior. We related manifest satisfaction to true brand loyalty and latent satisfaction to spurious loyalty. The relationship shows that a seemingly similar type of brand purchase behavior may be based upon quite different types of (dis)satisfaction.

The reasoning presented in this article is not based upon direct empirical evidence. The article is primarily meant as a critical analysis of the available literature.

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