A "DESIRES AS STANDARD" MODEL OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

The most influential model of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (CS/D) is based upon the assumption that CS/D is an emotional reaction to the outcome of a comparison process involving expectations (pre-purchase) and perceived actual performance (post-purchase). For various reasons, expectations do not appear to be the correct standard. In this paper, a new model of CS/D is presented that departs from the existing model in two ways. First, desires replaces expectations as the standard of comparison. Second, a more comprehensive view of the behaviors that are relevant to the determination of CS/D is adopted. Specifically, consumer behavior is characterized as a sequence of "episodes" wherein each episode encompasses the complete set of behaviors directed toward a good, from the initial formation of a desire for a good to the final act of disposing of the good. Given this view, CS/D is defined in terms of the behaviors that occur across two or more episodes. Expectations are assumed to influence satisfaction but in two distinct ways: 1) the formation of a "desire" to purchase/use a good (during Episode 1); and 2) the perception of the performance of the good (during Episode 2 and subsequent Episodes). Some implications of the new model for research and practice are described.

INTRODUCTION

According to Peter and Olson (1987, p. 512) and Bettman (1986, p. 280), the most heavily researched model of consumer satisfaction is the disconfirmation of expectations model. Satisfaction has been thought to be the result of a comparison between the pre-use expectations that a consumer has about the product and the post-use perception of product performance. The discrepancy between what is anticipated and what is received has been termed disconfirmation and has been shown to be a predictor of satisfaction (Oliver 1980; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Bearden and Teal 1983).

Expectations have usually been conceptualized as beliefs or predictions of the probable attributes or performance of the product (Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983). Oliver (1980) argued that expectations contribute independently to satisfaction by providing a frame of reference or an adaption level (Helson 1959) for the product. For this reason, disconfirmation is usually measured separately as the consumer's subjective assessment of the discrepancy between what was expected and what was achieved (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Oliver 1980).

Although there have been some important exceptions, the disconfirmation model has received considerable empirical support (Bearden and Teal 1983; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983; Oliver and Linda 1981). However, in reviewing the research results of Churchill and Surprenant (1982), Bettman concluded that there may be a problem in using expectations as the standard of comparison. "Thus, the major issue facing research on this approach to consumer satisfaction is how to determine an appropriate norm for performance or a reference point." (p. 281, Bettman 1986).

Other researchers have also been critical of the use of expectations as the comparison standard. For example, Swan and Trawick (1980) stated, "it does not seem reasonable to suppose that if a consumer expected a product to perform poorly and it did so, that the consumer would be satisfied." LaTour and Peat (1979) point to additional logical problems with the use of expectations as the comparison standard, such as the situation in which a new product comes on the market with better values on certain attributes than existing brands. They argue that even if the manufacturer created unrealistic expectations that resulted in negative disconfirmation, the consumer would still be satisfied because the product is better than anything else currently available. LaTour and Peat suggest that the appropriate standard should be a comparison level that is a function of the consumer's past experiences with attribute levels, what other consumers have received, and expectations.

A variety of other alternative standards have also been suggested, such as ideal, expected, minimum tolerable, desirable (Miller 1977); desired expectations and predictive expectations (Swan and Trawick 1980); experience based norms (Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983); and equitable and ideal performance (Tse and Wilton 1988). Westbrook and Reilly (1983) proposed using the consumer's values (needs, wants, desires) as the standard against which the product's performance is compared.

We agree that a problem exists with the use of expectations as the standard of comparison. And we agree with Westbrook and Reilly that preexisting desires may be a better standard.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a model of consumer satisfaction that incorporates the assumption that desires are the relevant standard, but in a somewhat different and more comprehensive way than the Westbrook and Reilly treatment. In addition, our new model presents three quite different roles for expectations. Some implications of our new model for future research and practice are described.

SOME PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Before our new model of satisfaction can be described, it is necessary to describe the types of behaviors that are assumed to characterize "consumer behavior" directed toward goods (Olshavsky 1985). (In the interest of brevity, consumer behavior directed toward information is not explicitly addressed.)

Episode

An "episode" refers to all behaviors of a consumer directed toward a specific good, from the initial formulation of a desire for the good to the final disposition of the good. (A "good" is defined in terms of the basic product/service, any services associated with the basic product/service and the methods / strategies that characterize the associated services.) Four types of behavior comprise an episode: goal formation (GF), acquisition (A), consumption (C), and disposition (D). These four types of behavior are assumed to occur in the following order: GF --> A --> C--> D. (Important departures from this sequence can and do occur, but these departures will not be addressed in this paper.)

Consumer behavior directed towards one particular good over time may be viewed as a sequence of episodes.

Episode 1 --> Episode 2 -->... Episode i ...--> Episode N

In general, consumer behavior is viewed here as a complex and highly intertwined bundle of several simultaneously occurring episodes, with each episode involving a different good. That is, at any particular point in time a consumer is simultaneously involved in many different types of behaviors involving many different goods. For example, while formulating goals to buy a car the consumer is simultaneously consuming clothing and shelter.

Goal Formation

Each of the four types of consumer behavior encompasses several subtypes of behaviors. "Goal formation" refers to those behaviors involved in the formulation of specific goals. Goal formation encompasses four subtypes: Desire Formation, Preference Formation, Priority Formation, and Intention Formation.

Desire Formation (DF). "Desire formation" is concerned with those behaviors that establish/change a desire for a good.

Preference Formation (PF). "Preference formation" refers to those behaviors that establish/change the most desired brand or store.

Priority Formation (PrF). "Priority formation" refers to those behaviors that establish/change the relative importance of all goods desired at a point in time.

Intention Formation (IF). "Intention formation" refers to those behaviors that establish/change specific plans to purchase specific goods during a specific time period.

Acquisition

"Acquisition" refers to those behaviors involved in transporting the consumer to the marketplace (Tc), purchasing the good (Pg), and transporting the good to the consumer's place of residence (Tg).

Consumption

"Consumption" refers to those behaviors involved in the storage (S), preparation (Pr), and use (U) of goods.

Disposition

"Disposition" refers to those behaviors involved in the disassociation of a good from the consumer (e.g., trash, trade, sell).

A more detailed representation of an episode therefore is:

DF->PF->PrF->IF --> Tc->Pg->Tg -->
S->Pr->U --> D

THE NEW MODEL OF SATISFACTION

Behaviors that underlie the formation of satisfaction toward a specific good are assumed to involve two or more episodes. Further, it is assumed that episodes directed toward the same good can overlap in time; i.e., before Episode i is completed, Episode i+1 can begin. Of specific interest here is the overlap that occurs when "desire formation" of Episode i+1 begins immediately after "use" of a good begins in Episode i.

Ei: DF->PF->PrF->IF --> Tc->Pc->Tg --> S->Pp->U --> D

Ei+1: DF->PF

However, an important feature of this new model is that Episode i+1 can begin during any of the stages of Episode i. (For instance, DF, and hence satisfaction/dissatisfaction can arise during the "preparation" stage; e.g., a consumer may become dissatisfied with a product due to difficulties encountered during assembly of a product, even before he/she uses it.)

Behaviors During Episode 1

Initial feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction toward a particular good are assumed to arise as a result of behaviors that occur during Episodes 1 and 2. Since consumer behavior at Episode 1 is defined as a consumer's first behaviors directed toward a particular good, this generally means the good is an innovation, but not always. What is old to one consumer may be new to another consumer. For example, cigarettes are an old product for adult consumers, but to a very young consumer there will come a time when cigarettes will be considered for the first time; such behaviors also fit within our definition of Episode 1. For our purposes here, a consumer's initial behaviors toward an innovation (e.g., a new brand) are considered.

Desire Formation. Desire formation behaviors directed toward an innovation are assumed to encompass two stages as shown in the model of desire formation presented in Figure 1. This model is based upon research on the adoption of innovations by Olshavsky and Spreng (1989).

Stage 1. Stage 1 concerns the formulation of expectations about the innovation, the formulation of desires regarding underlying goals that relate to the innovation, and a comparison of desires with expectations.

A consumer's expectations about an innovation are assumed to be based upon some combination of encoding processes of the information presented about the innovation, information retrieved, and any inference processes that may occur. For example, a consumer confronted with an advertisement describing a new breakfast cereal ("Oatties") will formulate expectations about the attributes of this new brand of cereal; expectations about attributes such as type of bran (oat or wheat or both), amount of oat bran, and taste will be based upon the information presented in the ad as well as information generated by retrieval and generated by inference from product knowledge about breakfast cereals in general and knowledge about the particular cereal manufacturer involved (e.g., Kelloggs).

The desired state is assumed to be formed in response to the presentation of an innovation. Desires are assumed to be generated by a variety of reasoning processes that involve a consumer's beliefs and a consumer's other goals. For example, a consumer confronted with an ad describing a new breakfast cereal ("Oatties") will formulate a list of the attributes desired in a breakfast cereal and will specify the levels desired of each desired attribute. For example, if the consumer's other goals include a desire for "something to lower blood cholesterol level" and, if the consumer believes that oat bran in specific amounts (say 5 grams) will lower blood cholesterol level, then he/she will formulate a desire for a new cereal that includes five or more grams of oat bran per serving. (Note that advertising may influence desires either by influencing the beliefs a consumer holds or by influencing a consumer's "other goals.")

If expectations about the innovation exceed or equal the desires regarding the innovation, then the innovation will be desired. (I.e., if the consumer expects "Oatties" to have oat bran in the desired amounts, then a desire for Oatties will be formed.) If expectations are less than desires, the innovation is rejected. (I.e., if "Oatties" is perceived to have too little oat bran, then it is rejected.)

Note that the first role just proposed for expectations is very different from that found in previous CS/D research. Here, expectations are being compared to the desired state of the consumer before the product is tried. If the consumer does not expect the innovation to have what is desired, no further consideration of the innovation will take place. Note also that desires are assumed to play an important role prior to purchase as well as after purchase, as a standard, as will be described in Stage 2.

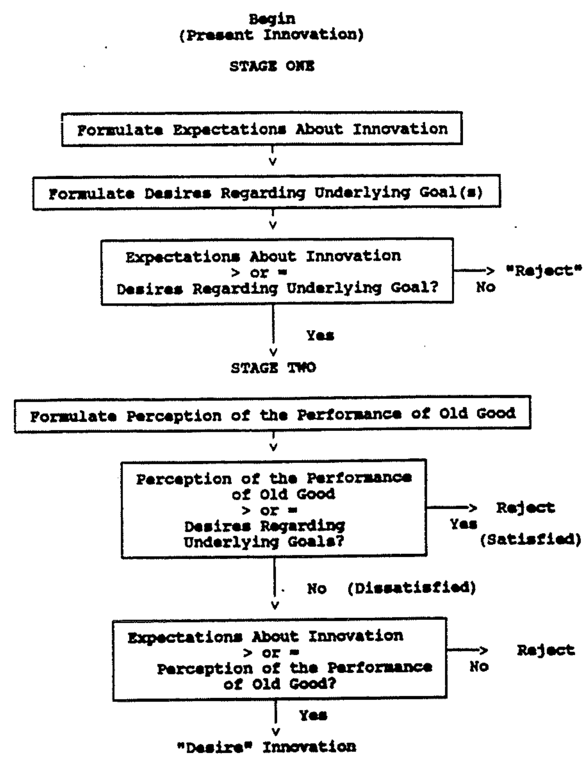
Stage 2. Stage 2 involves the formulation of perceptions of the performance of the old good, a comparison of the perceptions of the performance of the old good with desires, and a comparison of the perceptions of the performance of the old good and expectations concerning the new good.

Formulation of a perception of performance of the old good involves several cognitive processes that sense, perceive, and integrate information from one or more sources (e.g., direct observation of the good during use, information from others who have used the good, and information from the packaging). In the breakfast cereal example, during Episode 1, at this stage the old good refers to the consumer's present brand (e.g., Wheaties).

If the perception of the performance of the old good exceeds or equals desires, the innovation is rejected from further consideration. Note that the innovation is rejected because the consumer is satisfied with the old good! That is, Oatties is rejected because the consumer is satisfied with Wheaties. (Which, of course, would not occur in this example because Wheaties does not have the oat bran that is now desired.)

If the consumer is not satisfied with the old good, a

Figure 1
Desire Formation Behaviors During Episode 1



comparison occurs between expectations about the innovation and the perception of the performance of the old good.

If expectations equal or exceed the perception of the performance of the old, then desire for the innovation continues. I.e., if Oatties is judged better than Wheaties then Oatties becomes the desired breakfast cereal. If expectations do not equal or exceed the perception of the performance of the old, then the innovation is rejected from further consideration.

Note that expectations are playing a second role in this last comparison process. Further note that this comparison process is not similar to past uses of expectations, even though expectations are compared to perceived product performance. Here the expectations pertain to the new product (Oatties) but the perceived product performance pertains to the consumer's old good (Wheaties).

If the innovation is desired, then the remaining behaviors of Episode 1 (i.e., PF, PrF, etc.) are assumed to occur as described above.

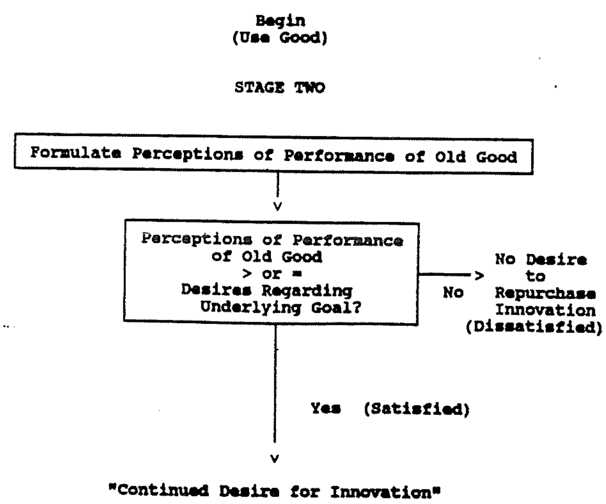
Behaviors During Episode 2

We consider here the case where Episode 2 is initiated during the "use" stage of Episode 1. For example, as soon as the consumer begins to eat his Oatties, Episode 2 is initiated.

Desire Formation

Stage 1. It is important to stress that during Episode 2, the new good becomes the old good (i.e., if Oatties is actually purchased and used it is now defined as the consumer's present or old good). As a consequence, the behaviors that occur at the

Figure 2
Desire Formation Behaviors During Episode 2



desire formation stage in Episode 2 change in important ways (See Figure 2). Specifically, Stage 1 does not occur partly because the consumer has already formulated a desire about the innovation in Episode 1 and the desired state is assumed to remain unchanged across Episodes 1 and 2. (It is of course possible that the desired state can change as a result of many factors, including usage of the innovation. The implications of changes in the desired state are discussed later.) Stage 1 also does not occur because the good is no longer an innovation; hence, it is not necessary to formulate expectations about the innovation.

Stage 2. At Stage 2, the consumer formulates perceptions of the performance of the old good (i.e., the consumer formulates a perception of the performance of Oatties). This perception process is assumed to be influenced both by the new information obtained during use of the innovation, during Episode 1, and by the expectations the consumer formed about the innovation formed during Episode 1. It is assumed that expectations will influence perception of product performance in the direction of expectations, particularly if performance is difficult to judge (Olshavsky and Miller 1972; Churchill and Surprenant 1982). Note that expectations are now playing a third role at this stage.

The perception of the performance of the old good is compared with desires. That is, the perception of Oatties is compared with the desires regarding a new breakfast cereal. The specific outcome of this comparison process is of particular interest because consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, as traditionally defined, is assumed to emerge at this point. Satisfaction/dissatisfaction is defined as the consumer's emotional reaction to the outcome of this comparison process.

A consumer is satisfied (positive affect) with a good if the perception of the old good is greater than or equal to desires. A consumer is dissatisfied (negative affect) with a good if the desired state is greater than the perceived actual state. Unlike models using other comparison standards, it is argued here that when performance is equal to the comparison standard of desires, the consumer will not be indifferent, but rather will be satisfied.

Note that at this stage satisfaction/dissatisfaction pertains to the innovation, but it is referred to as the "old good" in Episode 2 (i.e., satisfaction/dissatisfaction pertains to Oatties).

Note further that the outcome of this last comparison may be different from the outcome that occurred during Episode 1, when the innovation (Oatties) was evaluated solely in terms of expectations. An innovation that was originally desired (and purchased and consumed) based upon expectations, may, after use, no longer be desired.

Behavior During Episodes 3, 4, ...

The behaviors that occur in Episodes that follow Episode 2 are assumed to be similar to those that occurred in Episode 2 (Figure 2). For instance, if a consumer is satisfied following Episode 2, this consumer may continue to be satisfied with the good on subsequent Episodes (i.e., perceptions exceed or equal desires). On the other hand, satisfaction can change to dissatisfaction during subsequent Episodes for either or both of the following reasons: 1) changes in the perception of the performance of the old good and 2) changes in desires.

Changes in the perception of the performance of the old good can result from further information gathered from continued use of the good. For example, a blood test reveals that the consumer's blood cholesterol level has not been reduced after eating Oatties for several months.

Changes in the desired state can occur over time. For example, a consumer who is satisfied with Oatties may learn (e.g., from a newspaper article) that oat bran does not reduce cholesterol as formerly reported or that a larger amount of oat bran is required to reduce cholesterol than was originally believed.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In our model expectations are assumed to play three important roles in the determination of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Specifically: (1) expectations of the new good are compared with desires to see if it will at least provide what is desired; (2) expectations of the new good are compared with the old good to see if the new good exceeds the old; and (3) expectations influence the consumer's perception of performance in subsequent episodes. Empirical support for the third role has been reported by Olshavsky and Miller (1972) and Churchill and Surprenant (1982).

We suspect that the many empirical studies that have reported results in support of the traditional model of satisfaction (i.e., the disconfirmation of expectations as a causal determinant of satisfaction) may be explained by the multiple and important roles expectations play in the adoption, use and evaluation of new goods. We conclude therefore that expectations are an important indirect determinant of satisfaction / dissatisfaction but that desires is the relevant standard in the comparison process that actually determines consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

We believe our model provides some fresh insights into consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. For example, our model suggests that some consumers will show high levels of satisfaction toward many brands simply because they are not knowledgeable enough to know what an excellent brand is -- i.e., the desired state is specified vaguely or perhaps even specified incorrectly. Hence, practically any brand will be found to equal or to exceed the desired state.

Also, as goods get better and better (according to some objective standard of quality), consumers may raise the level of performance desired in these goods. Therefore, even though manufacturers may in fact be making very high quality goods consumers may be dissatisfied.

Also some very important behaviors relating to dangerous and addictive products may be explained in terms of desires that decrease over time. Consumers who are unable to discontinue use of a dangerous product may reduce their desires over time in order to remain satisfied. For example, Olshavsky (1977) reported at an earlier conference on consumer satisfaction, that many cigarette smokers who had tried several times to quit smoking but failed claimed that "the immediate pleasures of smoking outweighed the joys of a long life." Olshavsky argued that these smokers' original desire (before addiction to cigarettes) probably was something like "a long, healthy life" but this desire was reduced (after many unsuccessful attempts at quitting) to a desire for a "shortened but pleasure filled life."

This new model also suggests that a consumer who is dissatisfied with a good may also be dissatisfied with the source or sources of information upon which expectations were formed. For, according to our model, expectations contribute in a significant way to a consumer's decision to adopt and to use an innovation and these expectations, in turn, may have been formed largely upon information obtained from these sources.

Finally it is noted that satisfaction or dissatisfaction can arise at any stage of an Episode. For instance, a consumer may become dissatisfied during the attempt to purchase a good (e.g., check out lines that are too long), during preparation (e.g., poor instructions or faulty product design that lead to difficulty in assembling or servicing a product), or during disposition (e.g., inability to sell a good or to prevent its being stolen). Hence, it may be meaningful and useful to define satisfaction in terms of all aspects of performance not just "performance" that arises in use. Even though a product is satisfactory in use, the dissatisfaction that arises in one or more other contexts may be sufficient to override this satisfaction.

Implications for Research

Several past studies have looked at issues relating to the standard of comparison. For example, Westbrook and Reilly (1983) utilized both expectations and desires (called "value-percept disparity") as comparison standards. While their results did not show the superiority of desires over expectations, they suggested that problems in measurement contributed to their results. Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins (1987) tested expectations, best brand norm, and product norm as comparison standards. Although they did not test a comparison standard similar to what we have defined as desires, they found that in three different types of usage situations expectations did not contribute as much in explaining satisfaction as the alternative comparison standards. They concluded that their study showed that consumers used standards other than expectations. Tse and Wilton (1988) also concluded that their study indicated the presence of multiple standards in explaining satisfaction.

Obviously our model is in need of empirical testing. In so doing we propose that behaviors that span two episodes must be considered in order to capture the many types of variables that are assumed to precede and determine consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

Implications for Practice

Should empirical testing provide support for our model, we believe that some important implications will arise for the manner in which managers measure consumer satisfaction. Specifically, managers should not only measure "satisfaction" with a brand or store (as is commonly done now) but measures should also be obtained of consumer desires, expectations and perceptions of product performance (both old and new). If these multiple measures are taken, the manager will not only know whether or not his/her consumers are satisfied, but he/she will have some basis for identifying the determinants of this satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

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