

THE ROLE OF SITUATIONAL AND ENDURING INVOLVEMENT  
IN POST-PURCHASE PRODUCT EVALUATION

Marsha L. Richins, University of Massachusetts  
Peter H. Bloch, University of Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

This study examines changes in product satisfaction that occur after purchase. The data are from a two-wave longitudinal study in which buyers reported their satisfaction with their cars two weeks after purchase and then again two months later. In addition to new car buyers, other consumers were surveyed to examine satisfaction changes across consumers owning their cars for varying lengths of time. Analyses investigated whether levels of consumer involvement are related to observed changes in satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

How does satisfaction with a purchase decision change over time? What factors influence this change? Answers to questions such as these are important for a number of reasons, both theoretical and managerial. On a theoretical level, complete understanding of the processes underlying product evaluation requires an understanding of how such evaluations change over time and the factors precipitating these changes. At a more practical level, marketing managers seeking repeat business and a long term relationship with their customers must be aware of varying satisfaction levels. In addition, managers can incorporate information about changes in satisfaction levels into their marketing programs to determine when consumers are most susceptible to advertisements for replacement products or to find ways to reduce brand switching.

Examining changes in post-purchase satisfaction is best done using longitudinal studies that assess satisfaction and other variables from the same individuals at multiple points in time after purchase. Such studies, however, are rare and most are proprietary industry projects. Some published studies have measured consumer attitudes toward a product at multiple points in time (e.g., Oliver 1977; Oliver and Bearden 1983), but these studies generally measure attitudes once prior to purchase and once after purchase, providing little opportunity to examine changes in satisfaction and related attitudes occurring after purchase.

The research described here is a limited longitudinal study of satisfaction after purchase. The nature and extent of satisfaction changes are examined and consumer involvement theory is used to help explain such changes.

The Relevance of Involvement to Consumer Satisfaction

Although consumer's involvement with products is only one of many possible influences on satisfaction, there are several reasons to single involvement out for study. First, involvement reflects a state of arousal and has been defined as "the extent to which something occupies one's thoughts" (Tyebee 1978, p. 176). Thus, highly involved consumers spend more time thinking about a product class than those with low involvement. Satisfaction judgments are generally considered to entail evaluative processes in which expectations are compared with performance, with the resulting match or mismatch (disconfirmation) determining satisfaction

level. Given the nature of satisfaction judgments, it is likely that consumers who spend more time thinking about a product class will have more frequent opportunities and be more motivated to make satisfaction judgments. More frequent evaluations increase the possibility of satisfaction volatility and raise the possibility that evaluations or the evaluative process itself may differ for high and low involvement consumers.

Second, involvement results in other states that may of themselves influence satisfaction. Consumers with high involvement with a product class have been shown to possess greater knowledge about the product class than those with low involvement (Corey 1971; Bloch, Sherrell and Ridgway 1986). They also more frequently discuss the product class with others, resulting in more knowledge about others' experiences with and reactions to the product. This greater knowledge may lead high involvement individuals to have different and perhaps more accurate expectations about product performance than low involvement consumers. It may also lead them to make product choices that better meet their needs and are therefore more satisfying.

Third, because high product involvement implies a greater than average concern with product benefits, involved consumers may have more at stake in a given purchase situation and a greater need to make a wise choice. In other words, product involvement magnifies purchase risk and involvement. There are risks of foregoing important product benefits and greater social risks, as well. For example, highly involved buyers are frequently called upon to advise other consumers on their purchases (Price and Feick 1984). For such visibly knowledgeable people, consumption errors would be particularly embarrassing. It is likely, then, that high involvement consumers would be very motivated to avoid or reduce post-purchase dissonance and generally would report satisfaction with product choices in their area of expertise.

Finally, highly-involved consumers are an important market segment from a manager's perspective. Because they are often heavy users of the product class as well as opinion leaders, their continued satisfaction may be important to a product's success.

Defining Involvement

Before proceeding, it might be useful to elaborate on the nature of consumer involvement, as this construct has caused some confusion in the consumer behavior literature. Involvement here refers to an internal state reflecting the amount of interest or attention a consumer directs toward a product (Bloch 1982; Cohen 1983; Mitchell 1979). While involvement itself is a nonobservable state, it does lead to a number of tangible outputs such as information search and word-of-mouth activity.

In examining consumers' involvement with products, it is useful to partition the construct into two distinct types (Bloch and Richins 1983; Houston and Rothschild 1978; Laurent and Kapferer 1985; Rothschild 1979). The first form, called **Situational Involvement**

(SI), reflects involvement that occurs only in specific situations such as purchase, whereas **Enduring Involvement** (EI) represents an ongoing concern with the product that transcends situational influences.

SI and EI both represent states of arousal and product interest, but they differ in their motivations and in the temporal pattern of their occurrence. Consumers typically experience situational involvement with a product class during the purchase process, given that there are significant risks associated with mispurchase. Such risks may stem from product attributes such as cost or complexity or from situational factors such as the anticipated use of the product in the presence of important referents (Houston and Rothschild 1978; Parkinson and Schenk 1980). The involvement and accompanying behaviors such as search, extensive brand evaluations, and word-of-mouth activity are thus motivated by desires to maximize the outcome of the high stakes purchase. While the perception or experience of SI is an individual matter, the planned purchase of expensive, complex products such as automobiles or real estate is likely to result in an involved state in nearly all consumers. Once the purchase is made, consumer arousal and time spent thinking about the product decline as the situation (purchase) engendering involvement passes, hence the term "situational involvement."

Enduring involvement (see Bloch 1982; Tyebjee 1979; Zaichkowsky 1985) forms the baseline level of involvement since it represents the degree of product interest or arousal that a consumer has with a given product on a day-to-day basis. EI is a continuous variable ranging from very low to very high across consumers. It is independent of purchase situations and is motivated by the relatedness of the product to the self and/or the hedonic pleasure received from the product (Bloch and Richins 1983; Kapferer and Laurent 1985).

Consumers' EI with most products is likely to be low. For example, most consumers don't spend much time thinking about dish detergent, refrigerators, or light fixtures on a day-to-day basis, even though they may use them constantly. However, for a limited set of products some consumers may experience high levels of involvement on an ongoing basis. Camera buffs possess high EI with photographic gear; while "hackers" have high enduring involvement with personal computers. When EI occurs at high levels, the product is interesting, arousing and occupies the consumer's thoughts without the necessity of purchase-related risks or objectives.

There are some products where a broad range of EI may be observed, as in the case of automobiles (Bloch 1981). Some consumers may use a car daily but spend little time thinking, reading, and talking about the product, indicative of low levels of EI. Other individuals may experience much higher enduring involvement with the same product class, as do auto enthusiasts who subscribe to car magazines, attend auto races, belong to car clubs, and discuss cars at length with friends and acquaintances. Additionally, it should be noted that even those consumers who experience low levels of EI on a day-to-day basis will probably experience high levels of SI during the purchase of a new car (Laurent and Kapferer 1985).

A primary distinction between SI and EI is their temporal duration, hence the terminology (Bloch and Richins 1983; Houston and Rothschild 1978). SI is a temporary phenomenon. SI wanes soon after the purchase is completed and the outcome resolved because consumer attentiveness to the product category is no longer required. Note that consumers are likely to exhibit SI after purchase for at least a brief period due to the

excitement generated by the newness of the item and possible cognitive dissonance avoidance or reduction. In general, however, the appliance or set of tires often described as "high involvement goods" in the consumer behavior literature justifiably hold this title for only a limited time period.

#### Satisfaction Processes

In this paper, involvement is studied within the context of product satisfaction. While the precise details of the product evaluation process are not always agreed upon, it is generally accepted that the satisfaction evaluation is the result of a comparison between expectations about a product's performance before purchase and its perceived performance after purchase or trial (Cardozo 1965; Oliver 1980; Swan and Trawick 1981; Barber and Venkatramen 1986). A perfect match between expectations and perceived performance is called confirmation. More commonly, there is a discrepancy between expectations and performance, resulting in disconfirmation. When performance exceeds expectation, positive disconfirmation occurs and generally results in satisfaction. When performance falls short, negative disconfirmation exists leading to dissatisfaction. A number of memory and other processes have been shown to bias disconfirmation assessment (Olson and Dover 1977) so that perceived disconfirmation is generally believed to be a better predictor of satisfaction than objective disconfirmation measures.

Changes in satisfaction with a product over time are not unusual. A record album once considered a waste may "grow on" the buyer with repeated listenings. On the other hand, a new appliance which becomes unreliable after an initially trouble-free period may become the target of increasingly unfavorable product attitudes. These changes seem commonplace. Involvement theory, however, can be used to make less obvious predictions about how consumers' satisfaction levels will change over time. Effects of situational involvement and enduring involvement are discussed separately below.

When situational involvement is high, consumers spend considerable effort and search time to make a wise choice. Because they have searched carefully, their expectations that the product will perform well are relatively high and they are confident their choice is a good one. Cognitive consistency theory (see Venkatesan 1973) leads one to expect good performance for considerable effort. At the same time, motivation to avoid dissonance is relatively high, again because of the effort expended and the high cost of products that induce situational involvement. For this reason, consumers are motivated after purchase to evaluate the product positively. Any negative disconfirmation, unless it is quite major, will be assimilated toward expectations. The combined effect of high expectations and motivation to assimilate performance perceptions will be high satisfaction ratings immediately after purchase. When situational involvement is low, these two factors do not operate, and one would expect product evaluations to be less positive.

Over time, the situational involvement effects on satisfaction ratings would be expected to dissipate as the situational involvement itself declines (Richins and Bloch 1986). As time passes, the arousal attendant with the purchase of a new and important product wanes, the recollection of the effort and inconvenience of the search process becomes more vague, and thus the potential for cognitive imbalance dissonance arousal are reduced. Concomitantly, with the passage of time more opportunities for performance problems arise, especially for complex products, so the potential for dissatisfaction increases. These factors argue for a decline in satisfaction ratings at some point after purchase.

Effects of enduring involvement on satisfaction are somewhat different. A consumer with high enduring involvement who makes an important purchase experiences the situational involvement effects described above, but experiences additional effects due to enduring involvement. Expectations for the product are likely to be high, not only because of the expense and effort of purchase, but because the product is of central importance in the consumer's life. The highly involved consumer cares more. In addition, the involved consumer's expectations about the product are probably more accurate because his knowledge of the product class is substantial. Rather than spending a month before the purchase researching cars, the car enthusiast has spent years. Because these expectations are more accurate, the involved consumer is better able to choose the product that best meets his needs, and accurate expectations are less likely to be disconfirmed. At the same time, the involved consumer has a heavy dissonance avoidance burden. Because the product is so important and the consumer is known for a high level of product attachment, admitting even to oneself that a purchase mistake was made would wound the psyche. Thus, the highly involved consumer is strongly motivated to assimilate performance perceptions to an already high expectation level, resulting in high satisfaction ratings.

There are additional factors that may lead to higher satisfaction by involved consumers. Because product benefits are important to them, they may buy inherently more interesting, exciting, and perhaps expensive products which offer a greater potential for satisfaction (e.g., a Porsche 944 instead of a Chevrolet Cavalier). In addition, the friends of a high involvement consumer likely to provide a great deal of social reinforcement for a purchase as part of the friendship role fulfillment.

All these factors suggest that consumers with high enduring involvement will report greater satisfaction following a purchase than those low in enduring involvement. Oliver and Bearden's (1983) study of an appetite suppressant product did in fact find that highly involved users were more pleased with product performance than low involvement users.

The effects of time on satisfaction ratings of highly involved consumers is unclear. As time passes, more opportunities for performance problems occur. With their superior knowledge, highly involved consumers should be better able to spot dissatisfaction-triggering performance deficiencies when they occur. How they deal with these deficiencies psychologically and whether they affect satisfaction ratings is difficult to predict.

This study examines satisfaction and satisfaction change as they relate to consumer involvement. Three aspects of satisfaction change, as follows:

1. Does satisfaction decrease over time as situational involvement wanes?
2. Are consumers with high enduring involvement more satisfied with their product choice than consumers low in involvement?
3. Are satisfaction changes over time similar for consumers with high and with low enduring involvement?

#### METHODOLOGY

Automobiles were chosen as the study product class for several reasons. First, most adults own a car and thus would be eligible for inclusion in the study.

Second, the product is sufficiently risky to elicit moderate to high levels of situational involvement among most consumers and cars are relatively common targets of EI (Bloch 1981; Hupfer and Gardner 1971). In addition, the importance of the product to most buyers assures that following the purchase, there will be an evaluation of the product's performance relative to expectations. Finally, the registration records available for car owners allowed access to the population of recent purchasers.

#### Data Collection

Data were collected using a two wave mail survey with followup reminders. The interval between waves was two months. Data were collected from two groups. The first consisted of a random sample of adult consumers living in a medium-sized city in the South. These respondents constituted the non-buyers expected to be low in SI. To make sure these respondents would be appropriately classified as low or no situational involvement, they were asked when their automobile had been purchased; those respondents purchasing a car within 12 months were dropped from the sample.

The cover letter for the survey second wave requested that the same household member complete the second wave as had responded to the first, and automobile and demographic characteristics for the two waves were compared on a case-by-case basis with imperfect matches deleted. Of the 1000 surveys mailed, 111 respondents met the requirements for inclusion in the study.

The second sample group consisted of new car buyers who had made a purchase within the two-week period prior to receiving the first wave questionnaire. First wave questionnaires were sent out over 12-days. State registration records processed the preceding day were obtained daily from the Office of Motor Vehicles. A random sample of approximately 65 new owners was drawn daily and questionnaires mailed the same day. A total of 800 questionnaires were mailed. To verify that the individual completing the survey was in fact the new car owner, the questionnaire asked respondents to report the make, model, and year of their personal vehicle. This information and respondent's sex were verified against registration records and imperfect matches were deleted. A total of 107 respondents met requirements for inclusion in the study and returned usable questionnaires for both waves.

#### Measures

Satisfaction was measured with three items: the Delighted-Terrible scale described by Westbrook (1980), an 11-point percentage satisfaction scale ranging from 0% (not at all satisfied) to 100% (completely satisfied) in 10-point intervals, and an 11-point item reflecting the chances of the consumer buying the same car again if they could make the decision again (regret scale).

Enduring involvement was assessed with a shortened (12-item) version of Bloch's (1981) scale to measure involvement with automobiles ( $\alpha=.88$ ). Because situational involvement has been shown to decay after purchase (Richins and Bloch 1986), time since purchase was used as an indicator of situational involvement.

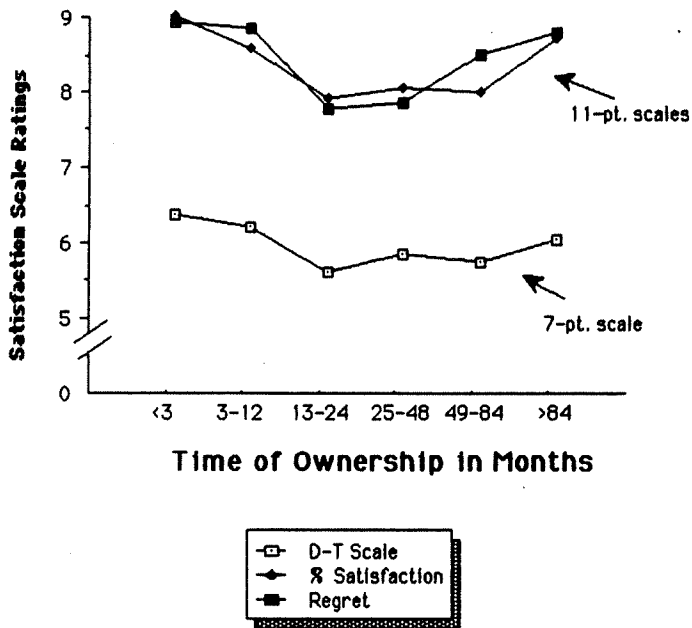
#### RESULTS

##### Temporal Changes in Satisfaction

Respondents were asked to report the month and year they had purchased their personal cars. Using this information, they were grouped into 6 categories

reflecting length of ownership expressed in months: less than 3 months, 3-12 months, 13-24 months, 25-48 months, 49-84 months, and more than 84 months. Means of the three satisfaction measures for the 6 ownership categories are plotted in Figure 1. Oneway analysis of variance tests showed significant differences across time categories for all three satisfaction measures. Post hoc tests showed that consumers who had owned their cars for more than one year but less than 7 years (84 months) were significantly less satisfied than those who had owned their cars for less than a year or for a very long time. Situational involvement decreases after the purchase of a durable good (Richins and Bloch 1986); as hypothesized satisfaction with the good appears to decrease with time as well, but this relationship is curvilinear, with an upswing in satisfaction after the product has been owned for a long time. Ortinau (1982) found a similar curvilinear pattern of satisfaction after purchase, but in his better controlled study the upswing occurred much earlier, during the period of 13 to 19 months after ownership.

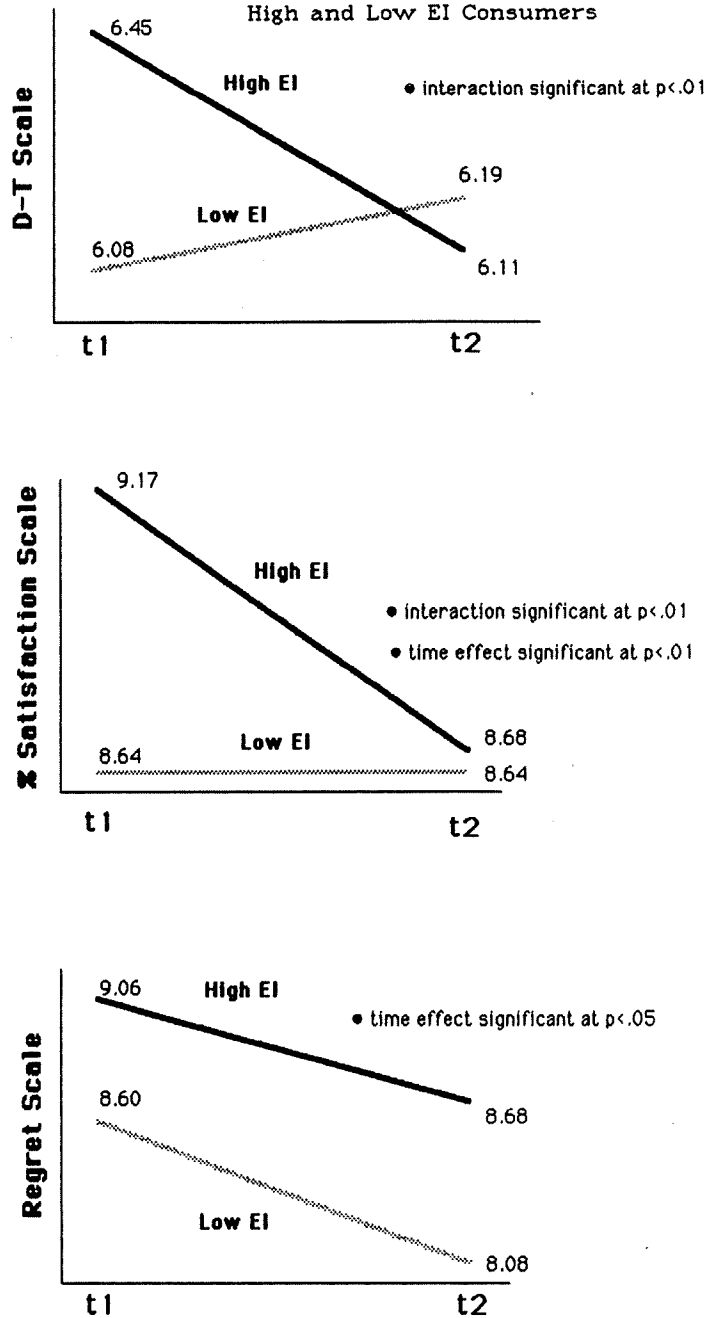
Figure 1  
CS/D Trends Over Time



The analysis reported above used a between-subjects design without random assignment and as such is subject to many competing explanations. Consumers who keep their cars longer may differ in important ways from those who replace them frequently, cars more than 7 years old may be better-built than more recent makes, etc. To avoid these problems, additional analysis was performed using a repeated measures design. Respondents had reported their satisfaction level twice with a two-month intervening interval, and these two reports were examined for change. Only those respondents who had purchased a new car within the preceding 3 months were included in this analysis (n=107), as two months was considered to be too short a time to see an aggregate change in satisfaction levels for consumers who had owned their cars for a long period of time.

A repeated measures MANOVA was performed with the three satisfaction measures the dependent variables and time the within-subjects factor. As expected, the analysis showed a significant decline in satisfaction over the 2-month period (Pillai's trace=.08, F=2.85, df=3/104, p<.05). Univariate analysis revealed that the decline was significant for the percent satisfied and

Figure 2  
Change in Satisfaction for High and Low EI Consumers



regret measures (p<.05) but not for the delighted-terrible measure. Thus, the indicators of the more cognitive aspects of satisfaction showed a decline as situational involvement waned and as consumers had more opportunities to experience problems with their cars over the two-month measurement period. The more affective component of satisfaction measured by the delighted-terrible scale showed no significant decline in this time period.

#### Enduring Involvement and Satisfaction Change

In the preceding analysis of situational involvement and satisfaction, new car buyers both high and low in enduring involvement were lumped together. To determine the relationship between enduring involvement and satisfaction change, new car buyers were split at the median on the enduring involvement measure to form high and low EI groups and a second repeated measures MANOVA model was tested. This model had three dependent

variables (the satisfaction measures), one between-subjects factor with two levels (enduring involvement classification), and one within-subjects factor with two levels (time, or the repeated measure at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ ).

Consistent with the analysis reported above, the main effect for time was significant. However, the hypothesized main effect for enduring involvement did not materialize (Pillais trace=.04,  $F=1.43$ ,  $df=3/103$ ,  $p>.05$ ), indicating that on average across the two time periods there was no difference in the satisfaction levels of high and low EI consumers.

More importantly for satisfaction theory, there was a significant interaction between involvement and time (Pillais trace=.10,  $F=3.86$ ,  $df=3/103$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Univariate analysis shows that immediately after purchase, consumers high in EI scored higher than low EI consumers on the delighted-terrible and percent satisfaction measures. After two months, however, these consumers' satisfaction levels had declined to equal that of low EI consumers. The interaction with the regret measure was not significant. Group means demonstrating these changes are shown in Figure 2.

As suggested above, the decline in satisfaction ratings for high EI respondents may be due to a more canny ability to identify weaknesses or problems with the product. These respondents have the ability to evaluate cars on a far larger number of attributes than low involved consumers, leading to greater opportunity for an imperfection or disconfirmation of expectation on at least one attribute. Immediately after purchase, insufficient time has elapsed for these problems to occur, but eventually they do come to the discerning owner's attention. At the same time, the high arousal accompanying the purchase of a new car has diminished and the social reinforcements from admiring friends are now only a memory. Apparently, these changes to some extent over-ride pressures to reduce some of the dissonance that might be present. At the same time, it should be noted that these consumers are hardly dissatisfied. Their satisfaction levels have simply declined to equal that of their less involved counterparts. They averaged 6.11 on the delighted-terrible scale, where a value of 6 represents 'pleased' and 7 is 'delighted' and averaged 86.8% out of a possible 100% on the percent satisfaction scale.

The main effect for decline in satisfaction rating over time is due almost exclusively to the drop in scores for the high EI group. The low EI respondents remained stable for two of the three measures. It is likely, given results of Ortinau's (1982) study, that a longer interval between ratings would have yielded greater change in satisfaction level.

#### DISCUSSION

The present research has tried to further illuminate the overlap of two important constructs, consumer satisfaction and involvement. It is clear, however, that much additional work is needed. The results noted above only pertain to a single product class and replications using other products and settings are warranted. It would be interesting, for example, to examine the relationships for products that are repurchased more frequently than are automobiles. In addition, products where prepurchase search and expertise may be less helpful in predicting actual performance (e.g., vacations) bear further examination.

Furthermore, investigating the relationship between involvement and satisfaction requires greater

attention to prepurchase expectations and how these expectations change with time. Additional research comparing the expectations of high and low involvement consumers over time would be a useful avenue of inquiry. One may speculate that high and low involvement consumers will differ noticeably in the nature of their expectations. For instance, high EI may lead to greater emphasis on expectations pertaining to the expressive performance of a product in addition to the functional (see Swan and Combs 1976; Barber and Venkatramen 1985). There may be more clearly defined expectations regarding how the product will appear to others, its image, and how it will enhance the self in the case of highly involved consumers. For example, the enthusiast may want the sports car that he feels is "sexy" or distinctive rather than a comparable model that has superior objective performance in Consumer Reports tests.

In general, the study of satisfaction and affective or emotional processes deserves greater attention and involvement may be a useful explanatory element (see Westbrook 1983). Products that are the most satisfying in a traditional perspective are frequently the least involving. A toaster oven that works reliably for years and meets all expectations, nevertheless will rarely command any interest or thought from its owner. On the other hand, the garment that is poorly made and due to go out of style quickly may nevertheless engender tremendous positive affect because of the way it makes the highly involved user feel. It is evident that further investigation of these and other issues will prove valuable in increasing consumer behaviorists' understanding of both involvement and satisfaction.

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