

THE ROLE OF SITUATIONAL VARIABLES IN CONSUMER CHOICE SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine if there was a difference in expectation levels, performance evaluations, and satisfaction levels between students who selected a course for the instructor and students who selected the course for situational reasons, such as the time and/or day the course was offered. The study also investigated the extent to which satisfaction predicted future behaviors: intention to recommend the course to other students and willingness to take the course if they had it to do all over again. Results of the study indicate that students who selected the course for the instructor had greater expectations than students who selected the course for situational reasons. However, overall satisfaction with the course, evaluation of performance, and intended future behavior did not differ between these two groups. The findings indicate that the relative importance of the components of satisfaction differ by the role that situational variables play in the consumer decision process and nature of the consumer decision.

INTRODUCTION

Research investigating consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction has focused attention on the importance of the consumer's expectations in determining the consumer's overall satisfaction. There is general agreement that consumer post choice satisfaction/dissatisfaction is the result of the consumer's comparison of his pre-choice expectation standards and his perception of his experience (Day, 1984). This comparison process is the basis of the widely accepted confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980). The confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm proposes that, prior to choice, the consumer forms expectations regarding the brand's performance.

After the consumer has experienced the brand, the consumer compares the brand's performance with the pre-choice expectations. Confirmation is said to occur when the brand's performance meets pre-choice expectations. Positive disconfirmation results when the brand performs better than expected. Negative disconfirmation occurs when the brand performs worse than expected. Confirmation/disconfirmation results in consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

The confirmation/disconfirmation model has received empirical support in a number of studies (Oliver, 1980; Swan and Trawick, 1981). While the majority of the research with this model has considered the focal brand as the basis for the formation of expectations, alternative comparison standards have been suggested. Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins (1987) have suggested that consumers may evaluate the performance of a brand against normative expectations formed as the result of the consumers' experience with the various brands and products within the product class. Swan and Mercer (1981) propose that the consumer's evaluation of the performance of the product may result from a comparison of the cost (e.g., time, money, effort) of obtaining the product in contrast to the benefits. Other proposals for alternative evaluation standards include the ideal product performance (Miller, 1976; Holbrook, 1984). It may also be that consumers use one set of standards to serve as expectations to determine choice and a different set of standards to evaluate choice performance (Westbrook and Reilly 1983; Swan, Trawick and Carroll 1980). Or, multiple comparison standards that change during the course of the consumption process (Tse and Wilton, 1988).

There is lack of agreement on the relative importance of the expectation component on consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction compared to other components such as inferred disconfirmation

(the subtractive difference between expectations and performance), perceived disconfirmation (the consumer's evaluation that the performance is better or worse than expected), or perceived performance (the consumer's evaluation of the brand's performance). Some research (Oliver 1977, 1979, 1980) supports the proposition that expectation and disconfirmation be considered as separate and additive components to satisfaction and have demonstrated the role of disconfirmation as an intervening variable in consumer satisfaction (Swan and Trawick, 1981). However, Churchill and Surprenant (1982) have found that the importance of the various components differ by product category. In the case of a nondurable product (plant), their results supported the previous findings of the importance of disconfirmation, expectation, and perceived performance on consumer satisfaction. In the case of a durable product (video disk player), perceived performance was the primary component in determining consumer satisfaction. Their results suggest that the role of expectation differs by product category. However, it may not be the product category that is the importance variable to focus attention, but rather the nature of the relationship of the product to the consumer.

Consumer decision processes have been variously conceptualized as extended decision, limited decision, and habitual by Engle, Blackwell and Miniard (1990) and as high involvement and low involvement by Assael (1987). Common to these varying conceptualizations of the consumer decision process is the recognition of the different roles of the antecedent variables on subsequent post-choice processes. For example, when the decision is one that is not important to the consumer, such as low involvement or limited decision making, the role of the antecedent variables is much less important or explicit than when the decision is one that is important to the consumer (Assael, 1987).

Recognizing that all consumer behavior occurs within the context of the situation, Belk (1975) has underscored the importance of recognizing situational variables in consumer decisions. Situational variables affect the decision process to a larger or lesser degree depending upon the type of consumer decision. In general, the more important the brand is to the consumer or the more

important the decision is to the consumer, the less important situational variables are as determinants to the decision process (Assael, 1987). Belk has suggested that situational influence can be thought of as an influence arising from factors that are particular to a specific time and place which are independent of consumer and object characteristics. He has suggested that consumer situations may be defined by the following five characteristics:

1. Physical Surroundings--the tangible properties, e.g., geographic location, decor, sounds, etc.
2. Social Surroundings--the presence or absence of other people in the situation.
3. Time--the temporal properties of the situation.
4. Task--the particular goals that the consumers have in the situation.
5. Antecedent States--temporary moods or conditions that consumers bring to the situation.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of situational variables on consumer expectations, choice, and satisfaction. Students' selection of classes was chosen as the setting for the study because it provides a relatively strong distinction between the situational variables and the choice object--the instructor. Students may decide to enroll in a course specifically for the instructor or they may enroll in a course because of situational variables such as the time of day and/or day of the week the courses are offered. Course selection is a high involvement selection process, but one with which students are familiar. Moreover, students have the opportunity to return the purchase if they are dissatisfied with it; that is, they have the opportunity to drop the course should they decide that the course/instructor is inappropriate for them and shop for another course/brand (instructor). However, beyond a set time limit (the drop date), students who enroll in a course are expected to complete the course. Thus, the students' decision to enroll in a course mirrors the major characteristics of the consumers' decision to purchase a product in the marketplace.

This study sought to determine if there was a

difference in expectation levels, performance evaluations, and satisfaction levels between students who selected the course for the instructor and students who selected the course for situational reasons. The study also sought to determine the extent to which satisfaction predicted future behaviors: intention to recommend the course to other students and willingness to take the course if they had it to do all over again.

METHODOLOGY

One hundred seventy-three students from four sections, with two instructors each teaching two sections of an introductory marketing course required of all business majors, was selected as the product. Two weeks after the start of the semester students were asked to answer a questionnaire. A constant sum question was used to assess the extent to which the student enrolled in the course specifically for the instructor and the extent to which situational variables affected their selection. "Please divide 100 points among the following statements so that they reflect your reasons for enrolling in MGMT 120. I selected to enroll in MGMT 120 because:

- _____ of the day and time it was offered.
- _____ my friends were going to take it.
- _____ of the room and building in which it was taught.
- _____ I specifically want to take it from this instructor.
- _____ it is a requirement for my major.
- _____ it is an elective.
- _____ of interest."

The situational variables selected for inclusion in this question mirrors Belk's (1975) classification of situational variables. Student expectations regarding their enjoyment in the course and the amount of relevant information they would learn were assessed with two Likert scales.

Two weeks before the end of the semester students were asked to answer a seven-item Likert scale questionnaire designed to assess their satisfaction with the course, their intention to recommend the course to other students, and whether they would take the course if they had it to do all over again. The questionnaires were

administered by a graduate student assistant who instructed the students to be candid and honest in their responses. Students were asked to write an anonymous identification code on both of their questionnaires, and it was through their identification code that their responses on both questionnaires were identified in subsequent analysis.

RESULTS

As seen in Table 1, although it may be a blow to the instructor's ego, students' selection of the course is determined by situational variables more so than by the instructor. A frequency analysis was performed to determine the extent to which students selected the course for the instructor. Two groups were created based upon the scores of this variable. Those students who allocated less than ten points to the selection of the course for the instructor constituted the Situation Group. Those students who allocated ten or more points to the instructor as the reason for the selection of the course constituted the Instructor Group.

Table 1
Frequency Analysis of the Reasons for Selecting MGMT 120

Reasons	Mean Response
Day and time offered	13.3
Friends were taking it	1.3
Room and building	.7
Instructor	12.9
Requirement	59.7
Elective	1.1
Interest	10.8

T-test analysis between the Situation and Instructor Groups revealed that the Instructor Group had higher expectations in terms of both amount to be learned ($t = 2.39, p < .01$) and enjoyment ($t = 1.78, p < .07$). The two groups did not differ in their judgment of the perceived amount learned in the course or their perceived enjoyment. Nor did the two groups differ in disconfirmation of amount learned or disconfirmation of perceived enjoyment. The two groups did not differ in their stated intentions to

recommend the course and were equal in their judgment of taking the course again if they had it to do all over again.

Table 2 presents the regression analysis conducted separately for expectation, disconfirmation, and perceived performance. As can be seen from Table 2, perceived performance was the primary explanatory variable for both the Situation and Instructor Groups. Expectations and disconfirmation were better predictors of satisfaction for the Instructor Group than for the Situation Group. Regression analysis performed using both the expectation and disconfirmation variables revealed that perceived performance alone predicted satisfaction as well as expectation and disconfirmation together.

Table 2
Regression Analysis of Satisfaction

PREDICTORS OF SATISFACTION

Components	Situation Group		Instructor Group	
	<u>p value</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>p value</u>	<u>R²</u>
Expectation:				
Expect to learn and expected enjoyment	.006	12.8%	.000	34.1%
Perceived Performance:				
Perceived learned and enjoyment	.000	64.7%	.000	66.3%
Disconfirmation:				
Expect learn-perceived learned				
Expect enjoy-perceived enjoy	.004	14.2%	.000	27.2%

SATISFACTION AS PREDICTOR OF POST-CHOICE BEHAVIORS

Behavior	Situation Group		Instructor Group	
	<u>p value</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>p value</u>	<u>R²</u>
Recommendation	.00	60.8%	.00	60.3%
Repeat purchase	.00	19.9%	.00	34.1%

From Table 2, it is evident that satisfaction predicted recommendation and repetition of the course for both the Instructor Group and Satisfaction Group.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that situational variables do affect the relative importance of expectation, disconfirmation, and perceived performance on consumer satisfaction. The importance of expectation and disconfirmation in explaining satisfaction appear to be less important as the role of situational variables increases in the decision process. However, it is not just the situational variables per se that are important. Rather they suggest that the nature of the consumer's decision needs to be recognized in the determination of consumer satisfaction. Expectation and disconfirmation seem to be relatively more important in decisions where the brand/instructor is the focal point of attention rather than the product class/MGMT 120. However, for both the Instructor and Situation Groups, perceived performance was the most important explanatory variable for consumer satisfaction. This finding common to both the Instructor and Situation Groups may suggest that the decision is equally important for both groups, supported by the fact that this is a required course for these students. Thus, although the decision was an important one for both the Instructor Group and for the Situation Group, the difference is that the Instructor Group focused attention upon the instructor/brand while the Situation Group focused attention upon MGMT 120/product class requirement.

The distinction of consumer choices by its level of importance and focus upon the brand or product class may explain the variation in findings between the studies which support the disconfirmation model and those that do not. For example, Swan and Trawick (1981) studied consumers who patronized a restaurant. It is highly likely that the consumers' choice of restaurant was brand specific; that is, consumers wanted to try out the particular restaurant because it is new. Churchill and Surprenant's (1982) finding of the relative differences of the components of the disconfirmation paradigm for the consumer decision of the plant and video disk player may be due to the difference in the nature of the two decisions. The commonality of the experimental manipulation created comparable levels of importance for the two consumer

decisions. However, the difference in the manipulation of the plant and video disk player may have created differences in focus attention. That consumers were allowed to take the plant home and their prior familiarity with plants, created focused attention upon the plant. Consumers were not allowed to take the video disk player home, nor did they have any prior familiarity with the product category.

The contribution of this study to the consumer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction research is focusing attention on the importance of recognizing the nature of the consumer decision. The results of the study suggest that the relative importance of the components of the disconfirmation paradigm differ by the nature of the consumer decision. The strength of this proposition must be tested with subsequent research. The results of the study suggest that the role of expectations in consumer satisfaction differ by the nature of the consumer decision, but did not investigate the type of expectations that students used. It may be that the type of expectations that consumers use is dependent upon the nature of the consumer decision. This is an area for future investigation.

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