

INTEGRATION, MODEL DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIORAL ADVICE: THREE DIRECTIONS FOR SATISFACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Advances in academic research in consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior have produced several important new directions offering great promise. Three of these new developments are identified and briefly assessed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer satisfaction as a field of study has advanced at an accelerated pace during the past decade. Several important theoretical developments have challenged the generality of the basic disconfirmation model that guided early research. Academics have reported results of increasingly sophisticated studies in mainstream marketing and consumer journals as well as in the *Journal of Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*. A greatly increased number of satisfaction programs by businesses and nonprofit organizations have been announced and discussed in the business press. Many of these programs have been influenced by published research into consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior, much of which has been conducted by academic researchers.

It would be difficult to overstate the role of the biennial conferences dealing with the topic and of the JCS/D&CB in stimulating and facilitating this continuing development. These conferences and the outlet provided by the journal have helped encourage and direct the enthusiasm, inventiveness and energy of the growing body of talented researchers, practitioners and teachers concerned with this important topic. Practitioners have shared their experience with academics, facilitating a flow of ideas regarding new problems that merit attention and the effectiveness of proposed solutions that has influenced later research. Academics have shared models, results and methods with each other and with practitioners. Satisfaction research has also become a truly international concern, as revealed by the many countries represented by conference attendees and contributors to the literature. All in all, it has been

an impressive and exciting decade for consumer satisfaction!

The following brief reaction to the past decade of satisfaction research by academics summarizes one observer's general impressions and recommendations in response to the question, "Where do we go from here?" The response outlined here discusses three trends and developments that seem to offer greatest promise for the further advancement of satisfaction research. Some elaboration of these ideas shows why further work along the lines identified here should be encouraged.

INCREASED INTEGRATION WITH MAINSTREAM RESEARCH

One sign of the increased maturation of satisfaction research is the growing integration of satisfaction models and research with mainstream work in consumer behavior. Early writers limited the scope of consumer satisfaction models to phenomena that resulted from consumers' evaluations of product and service performance after actual purchase and use. On the other hand, mainstream consumer behavior tended to concentrate on pre-purchase behavior, even though early comprehensive consumer models included consumption/use and satisfaction as variables (Howard and Sheth 1969). In its early years, the field of Consumer Behavior in effect was really Buyer Behavior. Neither field explicitly studied the act of consumption itself.

Use of Shared Concepts

Recently, however, at least two signs of convergence have become evident. First, both fields increasingly draw on the same concepts, models, paradigms and methods of more general behavioral science, particularly social psychology. Examples of concepts and paradigms now frequently appearing in both literatures include emotions (Westbrook 1987, Westbrook and Oliver 1991), framing (Wright and Lutz 1992), categorization theory and schema theory (Sujan and Bettman 1989, Stayman, Alden and Smith

Product as an Independent Variable

A related development in both mainstream consumer behavior and satisfaction research is growing evidence that product differences provide an important basis for the development of specialized models. Research on product ambiguity (Hoch and Deighton 1989) has influenced satisfaction researchers. Work by Yi (1993) suggests that when product experience is ambiguous, expectations are more likely to influence product evaluation (and thus satisfaction) than when experience is unambiguously evaluated.

Other product-related variables are apparently also at work. Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins (1987) found that the type of evaluative standards used in forming disconfirmation judgments varies with restaurant type, and Bolting and Woodruff (1988) found that involvement level seems to determine the norms used in disconfirmation. Tse (1990) used an attributions framework to identify product and consumption categories.

One of the most important needs in both mainstream consumer behavior research and satisfaction research is further conceptualization of product as an independent variable and the development of ways to operationalize meaningful product categories for use in hypothesis testing. Satisfaction researchers might well investigate the attempt to provide a comprehensive categorization advanced recently by Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) to determine possible applications for developing special satisfaction models.

Group vs. Individual Models

Another class of situation-specific models that is emerging in the satisfaction literature specifies group, rather than individual, behavior for investigation. Family or dyadic models, perhaps first suggested in the satisfaction literature by Heffring (1978), received recent provocative conceptual development by Rogers, Peyton and Berl (1992). Concepts of individual vs. group satisfaction raise issues of the roles of empathy, equity, role orientation, etc. long recognized in the literature on family decision making. Comparative and/or joint processes of expectation formation, product evaluation and satisfaction evaluation when two or more participants are involved raise many

difficult questions that have only begun to be recognized.

Group members often have different levels of prior experience, may play differing roles in dealing with sellers and in actual product use, may have differing criteria for judging performance and may have differing actual experience with product or seller performance. Similar issues have been recognized when the group is a formal organization, and we are beginning to see research into satisfaction processes within formal buying organizations (Trawick and Swan 1981, paper by Swan and Trawick in this issue of JCS/D&CB). Considerable conceptual development will be required to bring group satisfaction literature to the level of development now enjoyed by the study of individual satisfaction. Tremendous need and opportunity exist.

DEVELOPING A BROADER NORMATIVE FOCUS

Satisfaction researchers, like some mainstream consumer behavior researchers, have exhibited an interest in deriving prescriptions for managers based on their research findings. Such prescriptions are usually defended in terms of the self-interest of the organization involved. For example, some researchers have calculated the revenues to be gained over time by retaining customers through satisfactory responses to complaints (see the paper by Jeff Blodgett to be published in Volume 7 of JCS/D&CB).

These managerial recommendations have also had a strong normative flavor regarding overall consumer welfare. The suggestion is that if managers applied research findings as they "ought to," consumers would be better served. For example, managers are encouraged to reduce consumers' dissatisfaction and to increase their satisfaction through performance improvements. These improvements can be based, in part, on the careful study of complaints growing out of customer experience with the product and its distribution channel, advertising, etc. Managers are also urged to encourage complaints, to respond quickly and courteously to these complaints, and to provide satisfactory redress.

However, a larger normative view on the part of satisfaction researchers is urged here. This

recommendation (not as strongly based on apparent trends as were the first two observations), grows out of the notion that a broader kind of consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction is, in part, based on behaviors of consumers themselves, not just on the performance of the sellers with whom they transact business. Making an especially appropriate choice or using a decision process that is thorough and logical may be behaviors that are inherently satisfying, at least for some consumers. At this point, however, experts in consumer satisfaction can only speculate as to what these inherently satisfying behaviors might be. An important potential contribution of satisfaction research is to identify those consumer behaviors causally linked to this broader concept of consumer satisfaction.

One example of a consumer behavior that apparently leads to this sort of satisfying behavior has already been suggested in satisfaction research. It is becoming clear that consumers should complain and seek redress for their own good. It seems to be increasingly likely that the result will be proper compensatory action by sellers as sellers learn such behavior is in their own self interest. In a larger sense, the proper performance of market systems depends on adequate feedback from consumption to the product design, production and distribution systems. Sellers who properly analyze and respond to consumer complaints prosper, and those who do not lose market share. This process can work, however, only if consumers actively provide feedback to sellers, an aspect of consumer responsibility as described by Hans B. Thorelli (1972).

However, it may also be true that consumers' satisfaction with the results of their consumption choices and the decision and household management systems that produce these choices can be enhanced by behaviors long studied in mainstream consumer behavior. Possible behaviors include pre-purchase information search (Is more "better"? Do some sources provide more useful information?), family decision role structure (Does joint decision behavior increase happiness with the outcome?), use of maximizing rather than satisficing rules in selecting alternatives (Should something like the compensatory multiattribute model be prescribed?) and the like.

Although Alan Andreasen (1993) and other consumer researchers have urged a stronger

consumer welfare focus among consumer researchers, little has appeared in the consumer literature that typifies the sort of behavior-satisfaction approach advocated here. In short, it is not yet known how to advise consumers on their purchase and consumption behaviors that will yield greater satisfaction, except to urge that complaining behavior "should" be directed to sellers whose performance is perceived to be inadequate.

What seems to be needed is broader conceptualization of consumer satisfaction, so that measures can be devised to capture the idea that satisfaction is in part a function of the consumer's own actions. These necessary steps must precede the formulation of research projects dealing with the fundamental question: What is the impact of specific consumer behaviors on these new measures of consumer satisfaction? If it can be established that performing certain pre-purchase acts does, in fact, contribute to higher levels of consumer satisfaction with product choices, selection of service-providers and the like, consumer information institutions and consumer policy will be influenced, and consumer educational efforts can be greatly enhanced.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the belief that satisfaction research is limited to a single paradigm, the past decade's output suggests many productive and exciting paths for future research and applications. The directions identified here promise an expanding role for satisfaction researchers as contributors to the general growth in understanding consumer behavior. As the linkages with "mainstream" researchers grow, and as the implications of satisfaction research for consumer education and policy become clearer, academic satisfaction researchers will find increasing appreciation and interest in their work. As a result, they will enjoy increasing satisfaction with their chosen field.

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