

EXPLORING SELF (DIS)SATISFACTION AS AN OUTCOME OF PRODUCT USE EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer (dis)satisfaction research investigates post purchase evaluations of product performance (e.g., Oliver 1980, 1989; Tse 1990; Tse and Wilton 1988; Westbrook 1987; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). "The satisfaction judgment is generally agreed to originate in a comparison of the level of product or service performance, quality, or other outcomes perceived by the consumer with an evaluative standard. Typically, the evaluative standard most often assumed is the consumer's prepurchase expectation set, which, when compared to the level of perceived product performance, yields disconfirmation beliefs" (Westbrook and Oliver 1991, p. 85). Looking across satisfaction theories (for a comprehensive review, see Erevelles and Leavitt, 1992), it is clear that the emphasis of previous research is on product and the functional aspects of product usage (the product did/did not perform).

This paper explores the notion that, in addition to an evaluation of product during use, consumers also form evaluations related to how they feel about themselves in the product use situation. Thus, use experiences can result in both "product (dis)satisfaction" and "self (dis)satisfaction" outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Interest in the concept of "self (dis)satisfaction" was triggered as a result of in-depth interviews with 22 new users of a health club facility. These interviews were a small part of a continuing program of study developed by a team of researchers at a large southeastern university to investigate issues related to value and satisfaction. Interviews were conducted at the health club and lasted approximately one to two hours. Respondents were asked very broad questions about their opinions on health and fitness, past and present experiences with health clubs, their typical workouts, and their current evaluation of their experiences with the health club they had recently joined.

Subjects explicitly and implicitly referred to

how satisfied they were with themselves during and after product use. For example, when asked what words he/she would use to describe the total health club experience, one subject replied, "Satisfied...Uh, feel good about yourself. Uh, pride. I've got enough pride in myself to do it."

In another interview, a respondent used the term "personal satisfaction" and defined it as "I'm doing what I set out to do." When asked about how he/she felt after a workout, another subject said, "I exercised today. You know, that kind of thing. You know, you feel a little smug."

Other comments included:

I feel -- I feel good about myself and I feel, uh, I don't know if I should say I feel better than other people that have not done that ... (Study 2, Subject 12).

I just feel like I did something really good for myself (Study 2, Subject 20).

All of these reactions were quite different from those associated with evaluations of health club membership. Membership evaluations tended to be related to the facility, aerobics classes, instructors, administrators, and equipment.

Based on these depth interviews, it was apparent that this set of consumers acknowledged that a self (dis)satisfaction evaluation was a possible outcome of a product use experience. A literature review provided additional insight into the concept of self (dis)satisfaction.

SELF (DIS)SATISFACTION

Several researchers have examined dimensions on which products are evaluated (Holbrook and Corfman 1985; Prentice 1987; Scott and Lundstrom 1990). These dimensions relate to two broad functions that products serve. One refers to an instrumental function that helps people cope with their surroundings, while the other serves a self expressive purpose (Prentice 1987). It is the former that has been the focus of much satisfaction research. An investigation of the latter reveals insight into the possibility of a different type of

product use evaluation: self (dis)satisfaction.

An examination of relevant literature indicated that self (dis)satisfaction has not been widely studied. Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach and Grube (1984) described self satisfaction as a result of individuals' assessments of how competent and/or morale they are portrayed to others in a given situation. Self satisfaction is then directly related to self esteem and results in individuals seeking situations where self satisfaction is an outcome and avoiding situations where self dissatisfaction is likely to occur.

In a consumer behavior context, several researchers have examined how products relate to self image (e.g., Belk 1988; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990; Levy 1959; Solomon 1983). Kehret-Ward and Yalch (1984) proposed that "one way of getting individuals to think positive thoughts about the product is to get them to think about aspects of themselves that can be reflected positively in product purchase" (p.415). In fact, Scott and Lundstrom (1990) found that public image and success are dimensions of possession satisfaction.

Therefore, if products help individuals define themselves, there is likely to be a satisfaction reaction associated with what the product says about the owner or user of a product. That reaction is related to, but distinct from, an assessment of product performance. The remainder of this paper presents preliminary work designed to help clarify differences between product and self (dis)satisfaction. As such, it is a first step in a research program whose purpose is to explore product and self (dis)satisfaction as different concepts.

COMPARISON OF SELF VERSUS PRODUCT (DIS)SATISFACTION SURVEY ITEMS

A study was designed to investigate consumers' evaluations of product experiences. After examining several possible alternatives, the decision was made to survey owners of formal dining room furniture about their thoughts and feelings when entertaining guests.

Following procedures outlined by Dillman (1978), 1024 mail surveys were sent to customers who recently made purchases in the dining room

department of furniture stores in three cities in the central United States. Sixty-eight were returned with bad addresses, 42 were returned indicating that, although the subjects had made a purchase in the dining room furniture department, they had no formal dining room furniture. As a result, 536 usable responses were received.

Using previous studies for guidance (Bagozzi 1986; Hausknecht 1990; Westbrook and Oliver 1991), several items were identified to help assess judgments of how well a product performed in a given use situation. The appropriateness of the final set of items selected for inclusion in the survey was determined through a pretest.

Subjects were asked to respond to two sets of semantic differentials with seven spaces between terms. The first set was preceded by the statement, "Compared to what you wanted, how do you feel about your dining room furniture when you are entertaining guests?" The second set was preceded by the statement, "Compared to what you wanted, how does your furniture make you feel about yourself when you are entertaining guests?" Subjects then responded to the following pairs of words: satisfied/ dissatisfied; positive/ negative; happy/ unhappy; good/ bad; pleasantly surprised/ unpleasantly surprised; upset/ not upset; contented/ discontented. For the product (dis)satisfaction measures, each pair included the phrase "with my furniture" (e.g., satisfied with my furniture/ dissatisfied with my furniture). Each of the self (dis)satisfaction measures included the phrase "with myself" (e.g., satisfied with myself/ dissatisfied with myself).

Mean differences were calculated between the product (dis)satisfaction responses and the self (dis)satisfactions responses. Results are included in the Table 1.

An examination of Table 1 results reveals that, across satisfaction indicators, there are differences in how subjects responded to self satisfaction and product satisfaction items. Significant differences were found in happy/ unhappy and contented/ discontented, while marginal differences were evident in satisfied/dissatisfied, positive/ negative, and good/bad.

Notably, no consistent pattern of differences emerged on the emotion items (happy, surprised, upset, content). The strongest differences were found on two of the emotion indicators (happy and

content), yet no differences were found on the other emotion items. One might have speculated that all emotion responses would have more strongly been linked with sense of self resulting in a similar pattern of differences. However, given that the emotion items reflect distinctly different factors, it is also reasonable to expect that the significance of results on emotion items would be independent of one another.

Table 1
Comparison of Mean Differences Results

Variables	N ¹	Mean Difference ²	T	Probability > T
Satisfied/ Dissatisfied	480	0.096	1.76	.079
Positive/ Negative	477	0.082	1.80	.073
Happy/ Unhappy	477	0.124	2.52	.012
Good/ Bad	475	0.099	1.89	.059
Pleasantly/ Unpleasantly Surprised	475	-0.029	-0.55	.582
Not Upset/ Upset	477	0.077	1.45	.148
Contented/ Discontented	480	0.183	3.34	.001

1. N reflects completed pairs of responses.
2. Mean differences were calculated by subtracting self (dis)satisfaction scores from product (dis)satisfaction scores. Therefore, positive values indicate product satisfaction received higher ratings.

Subjects' reactions to the satisfied/dissatisfied items also yielded intriguing findings. In this study, responses to the satisfied/dissatisfied items were more consistent with those items that captured the simple valence of judgment (positive/negative, good/bad) than with the more emotion

laden terms.

The fact that product satisfaction judgments were higher than self satisfaction evaluations is also curious. Product (dis)satisfaction judgments may have been higher because, for this product in this situation, product performance is driving evaluation. Therefore, this product may not have elicited self (dis)satisfaction reactions that were as strong as product satisfaction reactions. Further research is necessary to explore the implications of this finding.

Survey results suggested that consumers' overall reactions to their products during use was quite high. This may have affected differences found between product and self satisfaction. Exploring use situations that result in a wider range of satisfaction responses may provide greater insight into differences between these concepts.

In addition, an expanded set of items to assess the nature of self vs product (dis)satisfaction is certainly warranted. Other forms of measures may also increase confidence in the assertion that product (dis)satisfaction and self (dis)satisfaction are distinctly different.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides preliminary support for the notion that two types of satisfaction result from the product use experience. Initial attempts to measure differences between satisfaction types produced mixed results. Findings provide a basis for identifying a number of intriguing research questions.

Three broad future research areas are suggested. The first relates to an extension of conceptual understanding of self (dis)satisfaction. Self (dis)satisfaction needs to be more clearly defined. This study suggests that self (dis)satisfaction is an individual's combined evaluative and emotional reaction to him or herself as a result of engaging in the use experience. However, what is the exact nature of that reaction? For example, there may be several factors underlying a self satisfaction outcome. A "competence in use" dimension alluded to in attribution theory (Folkes 1984, 1988) may exist as well as a "self expressive" dimension suggested by those who have investigated the symbolic nature of products (e.g., Belk 1988; Prentice 1987; Solomon

1983).

The second potential research area indicated by this study concerns measurement issues. How relevant are measures of product satisfaction for assessing self satisfaction? It may be that an entirely different approach to determining self satisfaction is necessary.

Table 2
Future Research Questions

Conceptual

1. Are processes that result in product (dis)satisfaction similar to those that result in self (dis)satisfaction?
2. Is self (dis)satisfaction a multidimensional construct?
3. Do the two types of (dis)satisfactions share any underlying factors or dimensions?
4. Do the two combine in additive nature to form an overall (dis)satisfaction reaction?
5. Is the intensity of product (dis)satisfaction reactions the same as the intensity of self (dis)satisfaction reactions?
6. What role does involvement play in differences in product and self (dis)satisfaction in a given use situation? Does high vs low involvement accentuate differences in product and self (dis)satisfaction ratings?

Measurement

1. Are there other items that would better differentiate concepts?
2. Are there other forms of satisfaction measures that would better assess differences?
3. Can these findings be replicated across situations?

Managerial Implications

1. What are the relationships between self (dis)satisfaction and relevant consumers behaviors (e.g., purchase, repurchase, WOM, complaining behavior?)
2. Are there differential causal weightings between product/self (dis)satisfaction and relevant consumer behaviors?
3. Are different marketing strategies appropriate to enhance self (dis)satisfaction vs product (dis)satisfaction?

The ramifications of these findings to managers also generates a number of research questions. Consumers' perceptions of a product as providing self (dis)satisfaction has significant impact on strategic decisions. For example, how would a firm's promotion efforts best communicate products' abilities to provide self (dis)satisfaction?

What are the potential interactions between other marketing mix variables and self (dis)satisfaction judgments? Table 2 provides a sample of future questions that have the potential to extend knowledge in this area. As the Table suggests, a number of exciting research directions are indicated that will contribute to the continued enhancement of both academicians' and practitioners' understanding of consumers' postpurchase evaluations.

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