Abstract

Both the strengths and weaknesses of three standards of comparison are discussed. The standards evaluated are ideal points, focal brand expectations, and product class experience. A number of new hypotheses are generated by this evaluation. Taken together, these hypotheses suggest a relationship between satisfaction/dissatisfaction and standards of comparison which is more complex than suggested previously.

Introduction

It is generally agreed that the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a consumption experience of a brand is a function of the discrepancy, if any, between a standard of comparison and post-purchase beliefs. (Satisfaction can exist at both a global and an attribute-specific level. The emphasis herein is with attribute-specific satisfaction.) Different standards have been suggested. Probably, the prevailing view is that focal brand expectations serve as a standard of comparison. This standard probably is associated most strongly with Oliver (1977, 1979, 1980). Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983), based partly on LaTour and Peat's (1979) formulation of a comparison level, recently suggested that a typical level of experience with different brands within a product class may be used as a standard. Miller (1977), Day (1977), and Westbrook and Reilly (1983) have discussed the use of ideal points as a standard.

The advancement of competing standards provides an incentive to thoroughly evaluate both the comparative strengths and weaknesses of each proposed standard. In spite of this incentive, such an evaluation has not been undertaken in this writer's opinion. One possible reason for the lack of such an evaluation is that a particular standard frequently has been advocated. In an advocacy situation, the tendency is to ignore both the strengths of nonadvocated standards and the weaknesses of the advocated standard. For example, advocates of the focal brand expectations standard (Oliver 1980, Churchill and Surprenant 1982, Bearden and Teel 1983, LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983) have not responded to LaTour and Peat's criticisms of the model; and Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins did not discuss the limitations of using product class experience as a standard. A second possible reason for the lack of such an evaluation is a tendency to use social science theories or studies, which are not directly applicable to satisfaction with goods and services, to support a particular standard without discussing how and why the theories or studies are applicable. For example, Oliver (1979, 1980) used the results of Weaver and Brinkman's (1974) study to support his contention that the effects of disconfirmation and expectation may be additive. However, the expectation in the Weaver and Brinkman study pertained to subjects' confidence in their ability to win a card game involving skill. This type of expectation, which seems to tap a personality variable, is quite different than an expectation about product performance. In spite of this difference, Oliver did not discuss how and why the Weaver and Brinkman study is relevant to product performance expectations. Another example is LaTour and Peat's use of Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) comparison level theory to support their contention that promotional claims have little impact upon the comparison level. Yet, since Thibaut and Kelley were concerned with interpersonal relationships, they did not even discuss promotional claims. They discussed special expectations created by the present interaction. Thus, to use comparison level theory to support their contention about promotional claims, LaTour and Peat needed to demonstrate that promotional claims are analogous to special expectations created by the present interaction. They made no attempt to do so.

The primary objective of this paper is to conduct a thorough evaluation of the three standards of comparison mentioned in the first paragraph. Sixteen hypotheses, identified in the last part of this paper, are generated by this evaluation. It should be stressed that although this paper evaluates the use of focal brand expectations and product class experience as standards of comparison, it does not evaluate the impact of either of these factors upon cognitive beliefs. For example, an assimilation effect, which predicts that cognitive beliefs are influenced by focal brand expectations, is not evaluated in this paper.

An Evaluation of an Ideal Points Standard

Strengths

One strength of ideal points is that since satisfaction is an affective or emotional construct, it is intuitively appealing to assume that satisfaction should be at least partly a function of the "desires," "wants," or "wishes" of consumers. Ideal points provide a partial understanding of the nature of the wants and desires of consumers, while neither focal brand expectations nor product class experience provide such an understanding.

A second strength, which is derived from the first one, is that ideal points are needed to translate a cognitive discrepancy on a salient attribute between postpurchase beliefs and either focal brand expectations or product class experience into an affective discrepancy (i.e., positive or negative). For example, assume that Coors is perceived as tasting "stronger" than expected. This would be a negative discrepancy if the ideal point is at the "light" end of the attribute, a positive discrepancy if the ideal point is at the "strong" end of the attribute, and either positive or negative if the ideal point is around the middle of the attribute. A caveat to this strength should be mentioned. If expectancy disconfirmation is measured directly at an affective level (e.g., better/worse than expected), ideal points are not needed to translate cognitive into affective disconfirmation. However, direct measurement of affective disconfirmation...
bypasses a step that multiatribute attitude theorists believe that consumers usually need to either consciously or subconsciously perform, namely the translation of a cognitive into an affective perception.

A third strength is that, unlike both focal brand expectations and product class experience, ideal points can be formulated by consumers even when they have limited brand or product class information. This is because ideal points are derived largely from the values of consumers rather than product information. As a result of this strength, it is feasible to use ideal points as a standard when it is not feasible to use focal brand expectations or product class experience (e.g., a new product).

Weaknesses

Ideal points provide an extremely stringent standard of comparison since all discrepancies between ideal points and postpurchase cognitive beliefs must be negative discrepancies. As a result of this limitation, it is extremely unlikely that an ideal point will be used as a boundary between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Based upon both this weakness and the concept that an ideal point defines the level of optimal satisfaction, ideal points probably should be viewed as satisfiers rather than dissatisfiers. In other words, they will tend to be used to determine the degree of satisfaction rather than whether satisfaction or dissatisfaction exists.

Ideal points with many attributes are not at a finite level. For example, a quality conscious consumer might desire that an automobile last a lifetime. Since the magnitude of the discrepancy between a nonfinite ideal point and a postpurchase cognitive belief cannot be determined, it is difficult to use nonfinite points to determine the degree of either noncomparative satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

When and How Might Ideal Points Be Used as a Standard

As discussed above, ideal points are needed to determine whether a cognitive discrepancy between postpurchase beliefs and either focal brand expectations or product class experience is positive or negative.

Ideal points may serve as the sole standard when consumers formulate comparative satisfaction judgements (i.e., how much more satisfaction exists with one brand than with another brand). The weaknesses of ideal points are irrelevant in this situation. A standard which serves as a boundary between satisfaction and dissatisfaction is not needed to determine if satisfaction is greater with one brand than another. Thus, the difficulty of using ideal points as this boundary is irrelevant with comparative satisfaction. In addition, the relevant discrepancy with comparative satisfaction is that between one brand and another brand rather than between an ideal point and a brand. Thus, nonfinite ideal points can be used to formulate comparative satisfaction judgements. Comparative satisfaction judgements may be made when the degree of satisfaction with some aspect of product performance is used to help make a purchase decision when two or more brands are being actively considered and information is processed by attribute. Comparative satisfaction judgements also may be elicited in some word-of-mouth situations. Although comparative satisfaction judgements may be made in the real world, they have not been measured in any of the cited empirical studies which have explored the antecedents of satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

Finally, the distance between a finite ideal point and a postpurchase cognitive belief may need to be less than a specified amount in order for a high degree of satisfaction to exist. Such a standard insures that a consumer will be highly satisfied only when his or her desires are fulfilled. In other words, fulfillment of ideal points may be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of a high degree of satisfaction.

An Evaluation of a Focal Brand Expectations Standard

Strengths

Even though focal brand expectations do not represent values, there are some intuitively appealing reasons why these expectations may serve as a standard of evaluation.

First, expectations based either upon first-hand experience with a brand, promotional claims, or price may serve as a normative standard. If the expectation is based upon experience, the most likely interpretation of a negative expectancy disconfirmation is that the firm has either unintentionally, through insufficient quality control, or intentionally changed performance for the worse. This interpretation, combined with a norm that a brand’s performance should not change for the worse, will tend to result in dissatisfaction. If the expectation is based upon a promotional claim, the most likely interpretation of a negative disconfirmed expectation is that the promotion is deceptive. This interpretation, combined with a norm that promotion should not be deceptive, probably will result in dissatisfaction with both the promoter and the performance of the promoter’s brand. The level of dissatisfaction in this situation might depend partly on the extent that the promotional claim influences the purchase decision. Dissatisfaction will tend to be substantial when a brand would not have been purchased without the promotional claim. If the expectation is based upon the price, a normative belief might exist that a brand’s performance level should be consistent with the price level. Thus, a negative expectancy disconfirmation will be viewed as a normative deficit and dissatisfaction probably will exist.

Second, unlike ideal points, focal brand expectations have two characteristics, namely that they exist at a finite level and frequently are removed in distance from ideal points, that make it feasible to use them as a boundary between satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Weaknesses

It is difficult to ascertain the degree of satisfaction based upon focal brand expectations when an expectation is confirmed. This is a likely occurrence since firms try to achieve consistent performance over time with their brands. Since the degree