

Defining Consumer Satisfaction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A review of the existing literature indicates a wide variance in the definitions of satisfaction. The lack of a consensus definition limits the contribution of consumer satisfaction research. Without a uniform definition of satisfaction, researchers are unable to select an appropriate definition for a given context; develop valid measures of satisfaction; and/or compare and interpret empirical results. Consumer satisfaction researchers have contended that these problems are pervasive and important (Gardial, Clemons, Woodruff, Schumann, and Burns 1994; Peterson and Wilson 1992; Yi 1990). This research will:

1. Suggest a definitional framework of consumer satisfaction based on commonalities in the literature and the views of consumers.
2. Discuss how this framework can be used to develop a definition of satisfaction to accommodate different contextual settings.
3. Ensure that our definitions of satisfaction are consistent with consumers' views. This is critical since, ultimately, we must understand consumers' meanings of satisfaction and consumers must understand what we mean when we use the term, satisfaction.

The Literature and Consumer Views of Satisfaction - While the literature contains significant differences in the definition of satisfaction, all the definitions share some common elements. When examined as a whole, three general components can be identified: 1) consumer satisfaction is a response (emotional or cognitive); 2) the response pertains to a particular focus (expectations, product, consumption experience, etc.); and 3) the response occurs at a particular time (after consumption, after choice, based on accumulated experience, etc). Consumer responses followed a general pattern similar to the literature. Satisfaction was comprised of three basic components, a response pertaining to a particular focus determined at a particular time.

Response: Type and Intensity - Consumer satisfaction has been typically conceptualized as either an emotional or cognitive response. More recent satisfaction definitions concede an emotional response. The emotional basis for satisfaction is confirmed by the consumer responses. 77.3% of group interview responses specifically used affective responses to describe satisfaction and 64% of the personal interviewees actually changed the question term "satisfaction" to more affective terms. Both the literature and consumers also recognize that this affective response varies in intensity depending on the situation. Response intensity refers to the strength of the satisfaction response, ranging from strong to weak. Terms such as, "like love," "excited," "euphoria," "thrilled," "very satisfied," "pleasantly surprised," "relieved," "helpless," "frustrated," "cheated," "indifferent," "relieved," "apathy," and "neutral" reveal the range of intensity. In sum, the literature and consumers both view satisfaction as a summary affective response of varying intensity.

Focus of the Response - The focus identifies the object of a consumer's satisfaction and usually entails comparing performance to some standard. This standard can vary from very specific to more general standards. There are often multiple foci to which these various standards are directed including the product, consumption, purchase decision, salesperson, or store/acquisition. The determination of an appropriate focus for satisfaction varies from context to context. However, without a clear focus, any definition of satisfaction would have little meaning since interpretation of the construct would vary from person to person (chameleon effects).

Timing of the Response - It is generally accepted that consumer satisfaction is a postpurchase phenomenon, yet a number of subtle differences exist in this perspective. The purchase decision may be evaluated after choice, but prior to the actual purchase of the product. Consumer satisfaction may occur prior to choice or even in the absence of purchase or choice (e.g., dissatisfied with out-of-town supermarkets, which were never patronized, because they caused a local store to close). It has even been argued that none of the above time frames is appropriate since satisfaction can vary dramatically over time and satisfaction is only determined at the time the evaluation occurs. The consumer responses reinforced this varied timing aspect of satisfaction. In addition, the consumers discussed the duration of satisfaction, which refers to how long a particular satisfaction response lasts.

Dissatisfaction - The literature has taken two approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing the dissatisfaction construct. Consumer dissatisfaction is portrayed as the bipolar opposite of satisfaction; or consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction are viewed as two different dimensions. Since the literature does not provide a clear conceptualization of dissatisfaction, we turned to consumer perceptions. Consumers suggest that dissatisfaction is still comprised of the three components of the definitional framework: affective response; focus; and timing. However, the consumer data did not help resolve the dimensionality issue. We speculate that the apparent dimensionality of satisfaction might be understood by examining the focus of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Consumers were sometimes satisfied with one aspect of the choice/consumption experience, but dissatisfied with another aspect. In this case, satisfaction and dissatisfaction can be viewed as different dimensions.

A DEFINITIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONSUMER SATISFACTION

Based on the insights provided by the literature review and interviews, we propose a framework for developing context-specific definitions of consumer satisfaction. This framework is not a generic definition of satisfaction. As noted above, innumerable contextual variables will affect how satisfaction is viewed. As such, any generic definition of satisfaction will be subject to chameleon effects. Rather than presenting a generic definition of satisfaction, we identify the conceptual domain of satisfaction, delineate specific components necessary for any meaningful definition of satisfaction, and outline a process for developing context-specific definitions that can be compared across studies.

As concluded by the literature review and validated by the group and personal interview data, consumer satisfaction is:

- *A summary affective response of varying intensity.* The exact type of affective response and the level of intensity likely to be experienced must be explicitly defined by a researcher depending on the context of interest.
- *With a time-specific point of determination and limited duration.* The researcher should select the point of determination most relevant for the research questions and identify the likely duration of the summary response. It is reasonable to expect that consumers may consciously determine their satisfaction response when asked by a researcher; therefore, timing is most critical to ascertain the most accurate, well-formed response.
- *Directed toward focal aspects of product acquisition and/or consumption.* The researcher should identify the focus of interest based on the managerial or research question they face. This may include a broad or narrow range of acquisition or consumption activities/issues.

By fleshing out these components, researchers should be able to develop specific definitions that are conceptually richer and empirically more useful than previous definitions. To develop context-relevant definitions and measures, researchers must be able to identify both the questions they are interested in answering and some basic information about the setting and consumers. Specifically, the researcher will need to provide details about all three components of satisfaction.

Implications

The satisfaction literature has not yet, explicitly or implicitly, established a generally accepted definition of satisfaction. This has limited our abilities to develop appropriate measures and compare results across studies. The definitional framework we present provides guidelines for developing conceptually consistent, clearly delineated, context-specific definitions of satisfaction. By providing appropriate detail concerning the affective response, time of determination and duration, and the focus of the response, a more meaningful definition of satisfaction can be constructed. Context-specific definitions created using the framework should be general enough to allow comparisons across studies, but specific enough to allow for the development of context-specific measures in order to prevent chameleon effects.

Implications for Theory Development and Testing - Currently, it is impossible to disentangle differences in operationalizing satisfaction from differences in results. This limits theoretical advancements. Our proposed definition framework allows researchers to identify the common and unique components of different satisfaction studies. This will allow results to be more easily interpreted and compared.

Developing Measures of Satisfaction - The proposed definitional framework provides the specificity to allow researchers to develop context-specific measures by helping researchers clearly identify the relevant satisfaction domain for their study. When appropriate, researchers can develop measures of satisfaction consistent with the conceptual definition and their research goals. Providing context-specific measures will prevent chameleon effects which can cause the meaning of items to vary depending on the other information presented in the questionnaire or research context. Furthermore, the typical measurement problems of negative skewness and lack of variability can be alleviated with scales reflecting appropriate intensity of the affective response.

Implications for Managers - Managers need to know how their consumer groups define satisfaction and then interpret satisfaction scales to accurately target, report, and respond to satisfaction levels. Guided by our framework, managers should conduct post-purchase segmentation, realizing that consumers vary with respect to the components and related properties of satisfaction. Results suggest that different industries may need to use different satisfaction scales, or a single industry may need to tailor scales to different types of consumers. More importantly, managers can recognize that the satisfaction focus and timing can be customized for their needs. Rather than looking at all aspects of choice/consumption experience, managers can concentrate on those that are of direct interest or are directly controllable. As a result, managers are able to obtain "true" consumer responses that are relevant to managerial decision making.

DEFINING CONSUMER SATISFACTION

Despite extensive research in the years since Cardozo's (1965) classic article, researchers have yet to develop a consensual definition of consumer satisfaction. Oliver (1997) addresses this definitional issue by paraphrasing the emotion literature, noting that "everyone knows what [satisfaction] is until asked to give a definition. Then it seems, nobody knows" (p. 13). Based on the perception that satisfaction has been defined, most research focuses on testing models of consumer satisfaction (e.g., Mano and Oliver 1993; Oliver 1993; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996; Tse and Wilton 1988) while definitional considerations have received little attention. As a result, the literature is replete with different conceptual and operational definitions of consumer satisfaction (see Table 1). As Peterson and Wilson (1992) suggest, "Studies of customer satisfaction are perhaps best characterized by their lack of definitional and methodological standardization" (p. 62).

A basic definitional inconsistency is evident by the debate of whether satisfaction is a process or an outcome (Yi 1990). More precisely, consumer satisfaction definitions have either emphasized an evaluation process (e.g., Fornell 1992; Hunt 1977; Oliver 1981) or a response to an evaluation process (e.g., Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994; Howard and Sheth 1969; Oliver 1997, 1981; Tse and Wilton 1988; Westbrook and Reilly 1983). From a general definition perspective, process definitions are problematic in that there is little consistency in the satisfaction process. From an operational perspective, process definitions are plagued by antecedent constructs included in the conceptual definition; thus, there is an overlap between the domains of the determinative process constructs and the consumer satisfaction construct.

Most definitions have favored the notion of consumer satisfaction as a response to an evaluation process. Specifically, there is an overriding theme of consumer satisfaction as a summary concept (i.e., a fulfillment response (Oliver 1997); affective response (Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994); overall evaluation (Fornell 1992); psychological state (Howard and Sheth 1969); global evaluative judgment (Westbrook 1987); summary attribute phenomenon (Oliver 1992); or evaluative response (Day 1984)). However, there is disagreement concerning the nature of this summary concept. Researchers portray consumer satisfaction as either a cognitive response (e.g., Bolton and Drew 1991; Howard and Sheth 1969; Tse and Wilton 1988) or an affective response (e.g., Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994; Westbrook and Reilly 1983). Furthermore, operational definitions may include a behavioral dimension of satisfaction (e.g., "I would recommend the school to students interested in a business career." (Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994)), although conceptual definitions are void of a behavioral orientation.

A final discrepancy occurs in the terms used as a designation for this concept. Researchers have used discrepant terms to mean satisfaction as determined by the final user: consumer satisfaction (e.g., Cronin and Taylor 1992; Oliver 1993; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996; Tse and Wilton 1988; Westbrook 1980), customer satisfaction (e.g., Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Fornell 1992; Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), or simply, satisfaction (e.g., Kourilsky and Murray 1981; Mittal, Kumar, and Tsiros 1999; Oliver 1992; Oliver and Swan 1989). These terms are used somewhat interchangeably, with limited, if any, justification for the use of any particular term.

The lack of a consensus definition for satisfaction creates three serious problems for consumer satisfaction research: selecting an appropriate definition for a given study; operationalizing the definition; and interpreting and comparing empirical results. These three problems affect the basic structure and outcomes of marketing research and theory testing.

When discussing and testing theory it is critical to explicate the conceptual domain. Part of this process is defining the constructs of interest and explaining why this conceptualization is appropriate. For constructs having a consensus definition, this issue does not need to be addressed in each and every study. However, if multiple definitions for a construct exist, then researchers must explicitly define and justify the definition selected. Unfortunately, most satisfaction researchers do not justify their choice of definition. In some cases, satisfaction is not defined at all. Even if a researcher attempts to define satisfaction, there are no clear guidelines for selecting an appropriate definition for a given context. As a result, the selection of a definition for satisfaction becomes idiosyncratic.

A second problem is the development of valid measures of satisfaction. Defining a construct's theoretical meaning and conceptual domain are necessary steps to developing appropriate measures and obtaining valid results (Bollen 1989; Churchill 1979; Gerbing and Anderson 1988). If the choice of a consumer satisfaction definition, or lack thereof, is not justified, it is unclear whether the measures used are appropriate or valid. As Marsh and Yeung (1999) point out, "the meaning attributed to the items and *the underlying nature of the measured . . . construct are changed by the context within which they appear*" (bold added). This problem becomes more serious as the measure becomes more global in nature. Thus, the "chameleon effect" described by Marsh and Yeung (1999) is rampant in satisfaction research. Generally worded, global measures provide no guidance to respondents or other researchers for interpreting the exact meaning of satisfaction. In this situation, respondents will interpret the meaning of "satisfaction" based on the other cues including instructions, other measured constructs, and products being assessed.

Given the lack of a clear definition or definitional framework, developing context-specific items becomes difficult and idiosyncratic. For example, Westbrook (1987) defines satisfaction as a "global evaluative judgment about product usage/consumption" (p. 260). This definition provides little guidance for developing context-specific measures. Based on this definition, satisfaction was assessed using an item like the following: How do you feel about the product or product usage? (I feel delighted/terrible). While this item is consistent with the definition, Marsh and Yeung (1999) would argue it is subject to chameleon effects. As they note:

We evaluate support for the chameleon effect that hypothesizes that an open-ended (content-free) item such as those appearing on most esteem scales (e.g., "I feel good about myself," "Overall, I have a lot to be proud of," "Overall, I am no good") takes on the meaning of items with which it appears. For example, if the item "I feel good about myself" appears on a survey in which all of the other items refer to academic situations, then respondents are more likely to respond in terms of how they feel about themselves academically. On the other hand, if all of the other items on the survey refer to their physical conditions, then respondents are more likely to respond to the same item in terms of how they feel about themselves physically (page 49).

Similarly, the meaning of the "delighted-terrible" question posed above would change depending on other items and contextual information in the study. Without a consensus definition of satisfaction that can be used to develop context-specific measures, the combination of explicit and implicit (chameleon effect) inconsistencies prevents meaningful conclusions about consumer satisfaction.

Perhaps the most serious problem caused by the lack of a consensus definition is the inability to interpret and compare empirical results. Peterson and Wilson (1992) note that differences in results depend on how satisfaction was operationalized. For example, how do expectations influence satisfaction? It is impossible to compare results across studies since differences in the definition and operationalization of satisfaction will influence the role of expectations in the model. Furthermore, expectations may be irrelevant for the particular context in which satisfaction is being determined. A specific concern to managers is that uninterpretable results are essentially results that can not provide information to make decisions. Thus, a lack of definitional and measurement standardization limits the degree to which generalizations can be developed; a lack of definitional standardization limits the degree to which results can be explained, justified, and compared.

Without definitional explication, true satisfaction can be elusive. A brief example may illustrate the relevance of a standardized definition of consumer satisfaction. Two automobile purchasers respond to the same seven-point satisfied/dissatisfied scale. Consumer A marks a '5' and Consumer B marks a '7.' Most likely, the interpretation is that Consumer B is more satisfied than Consumer A. Given only this much information, however, it is virtually impossible to interpret what these consumers mean from the number that they have marked. How they define satisfaction is integral to interpreting their response.

In sum, it becomes impossible to create a unified, comparable body of research on consumer satisfaction if researchers do not agree on what satisfaction is and cannot base measurement decisions on a consensual definition. Furthermore, it is

imperative to define and measure satisfaction according to consumers' views of the relevant satisfaction situation. For these and other reasons, Yi (1990) concludes, "For the field of consumer satisfaction to develop further, a clear definition of consumer satisfaction is needed" (p. 74).

The purpose of this research is to resolve existing inconsistencies by proposing a framework that researchers can use to develop clear and conceptually consistent, context-specific definitions of consumer satisfaction. Given the complexity and context-specific nature of satisfaction, it is impossible to develop a generic global definition. Rather, the definition of satisfaction must be contextually adapted. The proposed framework ensures that the context-specific definition captures the complete domain of satisfaction and is consistent with the conceptual domain of other researchers. Specifically, we will:

1. Suggest a definitional framework of consumer satisfaction based on commonalities in the literature and the views of consumers.
2. Discuss how this framework can be used to develop a definition of satisfaction to accommodate different contextual settings.
3. Ensure that our definitions of satisfaction are consistent with consumers' views. This is critical since, ultimately, we must understand consumers' meanings of satisfaction and consumers must understand what we mean when we use the term, satisfaction.

This study will focus on the concept of consumer satisfaction. As noted previously, the literature has been lax in distinguishing between consumer satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and satisfaction (see Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins (1987) versus Churchill and Surprenant (1982) or Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky (1996) versus Smith, Bolton, and Wagner (1999) for examples). In other cases, neither consumer nor customer is used to qualify the term, satisfaction (e.g., Gardial et al. 1994; Mittal, Kumar, and Tsiros 1999). All of these studies, however, tend to be focused on the final user.

Consistent with the literature, we will define the consumer as the ultimate user of the product. Although our focus is on the end user of the product, we recognize that, in some situations, the end user is also the purchaser. It is evident that the concept of consumer satisfaction applies in many marketing contexts: purchase (e.g., Swan and Oliver 1985), consumption (e.g., Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987), information considered (e.g., Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996); and, even business consumption (Mowen and Minor 1998; Schiffman and Kanuk 2000; Solomon 1999). Thus, consumer satisfaction must be explicitly defined to delineate the context. In this study, consumer satisfaction pertains to the response of the end user who may or may not be the purchaser.

ALTERNATIVE DEFINITIONS OF SATISFACTION: IDENTIFYING A CONSENSUS

A three-step approach, loosely based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990), was used to discover and formulate different definitions of consumer satisfaction. First, because of the plethora of satisfaction research, a literature review was conducted to glean general consistencies and specific inconsistencies in the definitions used by marketing researchers. Second, group interviews provided exploratory data to refute, confirm, and/or augment the evolving definition. Our goal was to use consumer perspectives to expand and question emerging definitions from the literature. Group interviews were conducted to elicit descriptions of satisfaction pertinent to consumer-specified situations. In addition, group interviews provided direction for the next interviewing phase. Third, personal interviewees provided their generic definitions of consumer satisfaction. Consistent with the procedures of grounded theory, personal interviews were designed to verify, refute, and further refine the emerging components of consumer satisfaction. Personal interviewees also provided data needed for assessing the generalizability of the emerging definitional framework of satisfaction across different contexts. The input of actual consumers is critical for developing a meaningful definitional framework since ultimately, it is the consumers whom we will ask to answer questions about satisfaction.

Research Design

The literature review consisted of an examination of 20 definitions used during a 30-year period of consumer satisfaction

research. This review was supplemented by group and personal interviews. Group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were followed by specific questioning concerning a different, but related, topic. One of the researchers and a colleague (both experienced facilitators) moderated the group interviews. Personal interviews were conducted at neutral locations where interruptions could be minimized. In-depth interviews, conducted by one of the researchers, lasted approximately one hour.

Interview Samples

Using the techniques of theoretical (purposive) sampling (Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967), groups were chosen to obtain differences in age, gender, residence, and purchase decisions. The group interview sample consisted of 135 adult consumers chosen to participate in thirteen group interviews conducted throughout the midwest for a major utility company. The paid participants (10-12 per group) varied by age, gender, and geographic location (five midwestern states; rural and urban). Demographic information was not available for all group interviews; however, data from four group interviews revealed 52% males and 48% females ranging in age from under 25 to over 65 (modal interval was 35 to 44) and ranging in income from less than \$15,000 to over \$75,000 (modal interval was \$30,000 to \$50,000).

The personal interview sample included 23 consumers from four locations in two western states. One person was deleted because of an inaudible tape. Interviewees ranged in age from 24 to 72, with a mean age of 42. Seventy percent were women, 65% had a college degree, and 56% were employed. These interviewees were entered into a drawing for a \$100 cash prize for their voluntary participation. Interviewees were obtained with the assistance of three facilitators and, in all but two instances, interviewees were unknown to the interviewer.

Group Interview Script

After a brief description of the research project and a warm-up activity, participants provided a battery of phrases used to describe consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Participants were first asked to recall a previous purchase situation where they felt good (did not feel good) and to use their own words to describe that situation. Although using the word, "felt," introduced bias toward affective responses, demand effects were initially reduced by not using the words, satisfied and dissatisfied (Gardial et al. 1994). Later in the group interviews, participants were specifically asked to define satisfaction with a durable, a service, and a nondurable. The purpose of this question selection was to generate many responses across dissimilar situations so that definitional similarities would begin to emerge. Specific question wording appears in the appendix.

Personal Interview Schedule

After a brief introduction to the research project, interviewees provided general definitions of satisfaction. Proceeding from more general to more specific questioning (Dillman 1978), the interviewer guided their comments by saying, ". . . no particular product. In fact, lump food, clothing, cars, lawnmowers, recreation equipment, etc. together. How do you, in general, define satisfaction?" This question was followed by, "How do you, in general, define dissatisfaction?" Interviewees were then asked about three or four self-determined purchase situations. Interview questions appear in the appendix.

Data Interpretation

All group and personal interviews were audiotaped and/or videotaped and transcribed. Data were coded, analyzed, and compared to extant literature to develop consumer satisfaction in terms of its components, properties, and dimensional ranges (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Results

Researchers define consumer satisfaction in various ways (see Table 1). Some of the definitions provided in the consumer satisfaction literature are fundamentally inconsistent with one another. In other cases, the definitions have overlapping components but are partially inconsistent. When examined as a whole, three general components can be identified in extant definitions: 1) consumer satisfaction is a response (emotional or cognitive); 2) the response pertains to a particular focus (expectations, product, consumption experience, etc.); and 3) the response occurs at a particular time (after

consumption, after choice, based on accumulated experience, etc). As can be seen by examining Table 1, these three general categories capture the essence of all the definitions presented. As expected, existing definitions are inconsistent in the specifics associated with the type, focus and timing of the satisfaction response.

TABLE 1
Conceptual and Operational Definitions in Consumer Satisfaction Literature

| Source | Conceptual Definition | Response | Focus | Time |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|-----------------------------|
| Oliver 1997 | the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or overfulfillment (p. 13) | Fulfillment response/judgment | Product or service | During consumption |
| Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994 | A transaction-specific affective response resulting from the customer's comparison of product performance to some prepurchase standard (e.g., Hunt 1977; Oliver 1989) (p. 122). | Affective response | Product performance compared to some prepurchase standard | During or after consumption |
| Mano and Oliver 1993 | (Product satisfaction) is an attitude - like postconsumption evaluative judgment (Hunt 1977) varying along the hedonic continuum (Oliver 1989; Westbrook and Oliver 1991) (p. 454). | Attitude - evaluative judgment Varying along the hedonic continuum | Product | Postconsumption |
| Fornell 1992 | An overall postpurchase evaluation (p.11). | Overall evaluation | Postpurchase perceived product performance compared with prepurchase expectations | Postpurchase |
| Oliver 1992 | Examined whether satisfaction was an emotion. Concluded that satisfaction is a summary attribute phenomenon coexisting with other consumption emotions (p. 242). | Summary attribute phenomenon coexisting with other consumption emotions | Product attributes | During consumption |
| Westbrook and Oliver 1991 | A postchoice evaluative judgment concerning a specific purchase selection (Day 1984) (p. 84). | Evaluative judgment | Specific purchase selection | Postchoice |
| Oliver and Swan 1989 | No conceptual definition. (with the salesperson) a function of fairness, preference, and disconfirmation (pp. 28-29). | | Salesperson | During purchase |

TABLE 1 (cont.)
Conceptual and Operational Definitions in Consumer Satisfaction Literature

| | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Tse and Wilton 1988 | The consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption (p. 204). | Response to the evaluation | Perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product | Postconsumption |
| Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins 1987 | Conceptualized as a feeling developed from an evaluation of the use experience (p. 305). | Feeling developed from an evaluation | Use experience | During consumption |
| Westbrook 1987 | Global evaluative judgment about product usage/consumption (p. 260) Also cited Hunt (1977). | Global evaluative judgment | Product usage/consumption | During consumption |
| Day 1984 | the evaluative response to the current consumption event...the consumer's response in a particular consumption experience to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some other norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product perceived after its acquisition (p.496). | Evaluative response | Perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some other norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product | Current consumption event ... particular consumption experience ... after its acquisition |
| Bearden and Teel 1983 | No conceptual definition. A function of consumer expectations operationalized as product attribute beliefs (Olson and Dover 1979) and disconfirmation (p. 22). | | | During consumption |
| LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983 | Postpurchase evaluation. Cited Oliver's (1981) definition: An evaluation of the surprise inherent in a product acquisition and/or consumption experience (p. 394). | Evaluation | Surprise | Postpurchase Product acquisition and/or consumption experience |

TABLE 1 (cont.)
Conceptual and Operational Definitions in Consumer Satisfaction Literature

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Westbrook and Reilly 1983 | An emotional response to the experiences provided by and associated with particular products or services purchased, retail outlets, or even molar patterns of behavior such as shopping and buyer behavior, as well as the overall marketplace (p. 256). An emotional response triggered by a cognitive evaluative process in which the perceptions of (or beliefs about) an object, action, or condition are compared to one's values (or needs, wants, desires) (p. 258). | Emotional response | Experiences provided by and associated with particular products or services purchased, retail outlets, or even molar patterns of behavior such as shopping and buyer behavior Perceptions of (or beliefs about) an object, action, or condition are compared to one's values | Postpurchase |
| Churchill and Surprenant 1982 | Conceptually, an outcome of purchase and use resulting from the buyer's comparison of the rewards and costs of the purchase relative to anticipated consequences. Operationally, similar to attitude in that it can be assessed as a summation of satisfactions with various attributes (p. 493). | Outcome | Comparison of the rewards and costs of the purchase relative to anticipated consequences | Implies after purchase and use |
| Oliver 1981 | An evaluation of the surprise inherent in a product acquisition and/or consumption experience. In essence, the summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer's prior feelings about the consumption experience (p. 27). | Evaluation Summary psychological state Emotion | Surprise Disconfirmed expectations coupled with the consumer's prior feelings | Product acquisition and/or consumption experience |
| Swan, Trawick and Carroll 1980 | A conscious evaluation or cognitive judgment that the product has performed relatively well or poorly or that the product was suitable or unsuitable for its use/purpose. Another dimension of satisfaction involves affect of feelings toward the product (p. 17). | Conscious evaluation or cognitive judgment Another dimension involves affect of feelings | Product has performed relatively well or poorly or that the product was suitable or unsuitable for its use/purpose Toward the product | During or after consumption |
| Westbrook 1980 | Refers to the favorability of the individual's subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with using or consuming it (product) (Hunt 1977) (p. 49). | Favorability of the individual's subjective evaluation | Outcomes and experiences | During consumption |

TABLE 1 (cont.)
Conceptual and Operational Definitions in Consumer Satisfaction Literature

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|-------------------------------|
| Hunt 1977 | A kind of stepping away from an experience and evaluating it. . . the evaluation rendered that the experience was at least as good as it was supposed to be (p. 459). | A kind of stepping away from an experience and evaluating it | Experience was at least as good as it was supposed to be | During consumption experience |
| Howard and Sheth 1969 | The buyer's cognitive state of being adequately or inadequately rewarded for the sacrifices he has undergone (p. 145). | Cognitive state of being | Being adequately or inadequately rewarded for sacrifices | |

Group interview responses followed a general pattern similar to the literature. Satisfaction was comprised of three basic components, a *response* pertaining to a particular *focus* determined at a particular *time*. Personal interviews verified this notion of a general definition of satisfaction. We will now examine each of these three components in more depth.

Response: Type and Intensity

Consumer satisfaction has been typically conceptualized as either an emotional (e.g., Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Westbrook and Reilly 1983) or cognitive response (e.g., Bolton and Drew 1991; Howard and Sheth 1969; Tse and Wilton 1988). For example, Westbrook and Reilly (1983, p. 256) refer to satisfaction as "an emotional response," while Howard and Sheth (1969, p. 145) refer to it as "a buyer's cognitive state." Furthermore, there are several conceptual and operational definitions indicating that the response may be comprised of both cognitive and affective dimensions (e.g., Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Swan, Trawick, and Carroll 1980; Westbrook 1980). More recent satisfaction definitions concede an emotional response (Halstead, Hartman, and Schmidt 1994; Mano and Oliver 1993; Oliver 1997; Oliver 1992; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996). In some cases, operational definitions may even include a conative dimension, such as repeat purchase intention (e.g., Westbrook and Oliver 1991). Other definitions provide no suggestion about the specific type of response and simply say "an evaluative response" (Day 1984, p. 496) or "summary psychological state" (Oliver 1981, p. 27) or "an overall postpurchase evaluation" (Fornell 1992, p. 11). As noted by these examples, there is little agreement about the type of satisfaction response, although more current definitions employ an emotional bent.

Group interview participants described satisfaction using summary phrases reflecting affective responses (See Table 2). Of 274 coded comments, 67.5% specifically indicated an overall holistic response regardless of context (i.e., consumer-selected context, durable or nondurable product, or service). Affective responses were evident in 77.3% of these summary phrases. These are relatively large percentages considering that participants either repeated or changed the question format in responding.

Personal interviewees reinforced the group interview results indicating satisfaction is primarily affective in nature. Responding to the question, "How do you, in general, define satisfaction?," and not asked to do so by the interviewer, 64% of the personal interviewees actually changed the question term "satisfaction" to more affective terms for their definitions including, "I'm happy," "I feel good," "I like it," or "I'm comfortable." These responses are typical of emotional descriptors presented by Richins (1997) and of other terms commonly used in the satisfaction literature (e.g., Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Oliver 1992; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). In sum, the tendencies of consumers and recent trends in the satisfaction literature suggest satisfaction is a global affective summary response.

Researchers have operationalized consumer satisfaction using measures reflecting variance in intensity (e.g., terrible/delighted (Spreng and Olshavsky 1993; Westbrook 1987); pleased/displeased and contented/disgusted (Oliver and Swan 1989); elated/tense and good/bad (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987); however conceptual definitions typically lack an intensity reference. Group interviews clearly suggested response intensity is an important consideration. Response intensity refers to the strength of the satisfaction response, ranging from strong to weak. Group participants mentioned descriptors such as good, excited, very satisfied, pleasantly surprised, relieved, helpless, frustrated, cheated, indifferent, and neutral. The intensity of satisfaction is evident in terms like "excited," "good," and "neutral." All reflect positive

satisfaction or at least a lack of dissatisfaction; however, "excited" is a more intense feeling than "good" and "good" is more intense than "neutral." Similarities exist with Westbrook and Oliver's (1991) empirical findings that there were five groups of automobile owners differentiated by their emotional response: happy/contented, pleasantly surprised, unemotional, unpleasantly surprised, and angry/upset (1991). Results from this study, however, indicate that consumers may have even more extreme positive responses than happy/angry or contented/upset.

TABLE 2
Sample Comments about Satisfaction from the Group Interviews

| Response | Focus | Timing |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Our family was growing so we needed a bigger car. We were <i>excited and happy</i> about it.</p> <p>I bought a silver bracelet. And, instead of regretting the purchase like I do many times, I just really felt <i>happy</i> to have it because of the uniqueness of the item.</p> <p>"<i>Satisfied</i> because I didn't get the most expensive things . . . I got the job done. That's it. I don't have to deal with it and it's a job done.'</p> <p>I was <i>pleased</i> I got what I wanted.</p> <p>"I got an extraordinary good deal on a van that I bought. I was <i>relieved</i>, very relieved."</p> <p>"I kind of debated for awhile, bought it, and then really got <i>glad</i> because it is much better than we thought it was."</p> <p>"I drive a hard bargain when I buy something ... You feel <i>elated</i>."</p> <p>"New car. <i>Proud and happy</i>."</p> <p>"I had bought Christmas lights, and I guess I was <i>really upset</i> when I brought them home, and I pulled them out of the box."</p> <p>"In this case, I was just <i>disgusted, dissatisfied</i>."</p> <p>"It is an <i>anger</i>. It is a <i>frustrating anxiety</i>".</p> <p>"I perfectly fulfilled my need. It was <i>completely satisfying</i>."</p> | <p>Purchase Experience</p> <p>"You are getting something new, you know . . . You'd be excited about that."</p> <p>"I drive a hard bargain when I buy something you see. I never take what they ask for. Never . . . You feel elated."</p> <p>"It [product] was a source of satisfaction, I think, as the result of the [prepurchase] research."</p> <p>Information Provided by Others</p> <p>"Performs the way it was told to you at the purchase time."</p> <p>Expectations</p> <p>"It does everything you expected it to do."</p> <p>Product Attributes/Benefits</p> <p>"It was a self-propelled one and it was just atrocious."</p> <p>"I was frustrated every time I wanted to bake a cake."</p> <p>Salesperson/Store</p> <p>"I took it back and they wouldn't stand behind it. So, I'll never go back there again. I blame it on the place."</p> <p>Consumption Experience</p> <p>"I bought a Harley-Davidson . . . My wife thinks I am going through my second childhood."</p> <p>Others' Responses</p> <p>"That made me feel very happy because it made him very happy."</p> <p>Multiple Foci</p> <p>"Once again, it was the salesperson especially. We were satisfied with the vehicle but [also] with the salesperson."</p> <p>"I think, in my case, there are two factors in general. One is related to the product. . . . The second of them is that I definitely feel personally, is the emotional response I get to the business which is nearly always represented by a person. "</p> | <p>Prepurchase</p> <p>"For the restaurant, it [point of satisfaction] could be when you're seated, when you walk in the door. It starts at the beginning . . . could color the rest of your experience even if everything else is okay."</p> <p>"I don't buy <i>until I know</i> I'm going to like it."</p> <p>Before Consumption</p> <p>"I went to pick it up. The original one I selected was not the one they had ready for me. It was the feeling of being gypped."</p> <p>"We got a good deal on it . . . I walked out of the place with the feeling of satisfaction."</p> <p>During Consumption</p> <p>"When you first use it"</p> <p>I've had rear main seal leak, transmission leak . . . It works when it feels like it."</p> <p>Evolving</p> <p>"[satisfaction occurs] when you first use it. . . . [but I would] start to become dissatisfied with poor performance."</p> <p>"If it doesn't cause a lot of problems, which I wouldn't know that right away. Right? I mean you don't know it right away. But if it proves to be satisfactory, operates well, and doesn't cause a lot of problems, I think you are satisfied with it."</p> |

TABLE 3
Sample Comments About Satisfaction from the Personal Depth Interviews

| Response | Focus | Timing |
|---|---|--|
| <p>"I was <i>jazzed</i> ... I was anticipating a <i>personal relationship</i> with this computer that I could grow with over many years ... <i>kind of like love</i> ... There's an <i>infatuation</i> state that wanes, then reality sets in, but that doesn't mean you don't love anymore."</p> <p>I am <i>disgruntled</i> ... It was a <i>bad</i> experience.</p> <p>I never felt all that much <i>excitement</i> about it in the first place.</p> <p>"<i>really happy</i> ... don't know how I would live without it."</p> <p>"I was <i>excited</i> about it ... anytime you are talking about that much money for something (car), there is some <i>apprehension</i> along with the excitement."</p> <p>"I just don't <i>like</i> it at all."</p> <p>"You know, it wouldn't really mean that I was just <i>overjoyed</i> with it, but that it was satisfactory."</p> | <p>Purchase Experience "It about drained our finances, but, at the same time, I love buying new cars" "Making that purchase and making that decision was invigorating just in itself."</p> <p>Information Provided by Others "The product works in the way it was advertised."</p> <p>Expectations "The quality that I expected it to be"</p> <p>Product Performance/Benefits "It had all the components that I wanted. You know, it had double everything and that's what I felt I needed" "The product ... does the job that you want it to do." "... I want to have them [products in general] work for me. I want to have them be useful." "Something I use that makes our lives simpler."</p> <p>Consumption Experience "I don't run out and get on the bike and go places all the time." "It is doing just what it is supposed to be doing and that allows me to do what I am supposed to."</p> <p>Others' Responses "If he likes it, then I like it."</p> | <p>Prepurchase "As soon as I decided in my mind which one to go with" "Frustrated with the [purchase] situation" "Irritated because we had to spend the money"</p> <p>Before Consumption "I had a peace about it after I bought it ... I guess I just felt content about it." "I was jazzed ... a pretty high level of anticipation"</p> <p>During Consumption It's been a good lawnmower. It (mixer) is fine for some things, but it is not a universal thing that I can use on anything.</p> <p>Evolving "It took longer [for the initial satisfaction response to dissipate] than the other products that I talked about." "If I love something, my feelings generally do not change." "It doesn't do anything for me any more."</p> |

Individual interview data also revealed a range of intensity. Responding to specific situations, interviewees described their satisfaction responses as "like love," "excited," "euphoria," and "thrilled," but also as "pleased," "indifferent," and "relieved" (See Table 3). In some instances, satisfaction responses were so weak in intensity that consumers felt "apathy" or in other words, "I just really didn't think a lot about it." In sum, consumer data, combined with extant satisfaction research data, suggest consumer satisfaction is a summary affective response of varying intensity.

Focus of the Response

Numerous social science constructs can be classified as "evaluative responses" (e.g., attitude-toward-the-ad and purchase decisions). In order to more clearly delineate the conceptual domain, many researchers limit the focus of the satisfaction response. The focus identifies the object of a consumer's satisfaction and usually entails comparing performance to some standard. This standard can vary from very specific "expectations" (Oliver 1980) or "purchase selection" (Westbrook and Oliver 1991) to the more general "prepurchase standard" (Halstead, Hartman and Schmidt 1994) or "use experience" (Cadotte Woodruff and Jenkins 1987).

There are often multiple foci to which these various standards are directed. A product (Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Tse and Wilton 1988) or consumption (Bearden and Teel 1983; Fisk and Young 1985; Hunt 1977; LaTour and Peat 1979; Oliver 1980; Westbrook and Reilly 1983; Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983) focus is implicit in most definitions. However, the satisfaction focus may also be the purchase decision (Kourilsky and Murray 1981), a salesperson (Oliver and Swan 1989; Swan and Oliver 1985), or a store/acquisition (Oliver 1981). Thus, as appropriate, there is no clear consensus of what the satisfaction focus should be, only that a satisfaction focus exists.

Group interview data confirmed the myriad of foci suggested by the consumer satisfaction literature (See Table 2). Group interviews (274 comments) revealed satisfaction with: the product in general, specific attributes, and/or product benefits (50.7% mentioned); salespeople or service providers (47.8%); price (19.3%); information provided by others (12%); and other foci, such as the purchase experience and consumption experience. Interestingly, only 6.2% of the comments explicitly revealed expectations as a focus of consumer satisfaction; however, expectations were implicit in many product performance comments.

Group interviews identified foci not mentioned in the literature, including satisfaction with research efforts and the reactions of others. Satisfaction based on prepurchase research suggests that the purchase decision itself is important to consumer satisfaction in that consumers forecast their postacquisition satisfaction. Satisfaction based on others' reactions is also important since the focus is not the product per se but the response of someone else to the product. Group interview data also revealed that satisfaction appears to be an ongoing process with changing foci. Often times, initial satisfaction was based on the purchase situation (including salesperson, store and product) and evolved to focus on the product only.

When asked to describe satisfaction in general, personal interviewees revealed a strong product performance focus; such as, "If the product does what I expected it to, then I like it and I'm satisfied" (See Table 3). This product focus may reflect the question wording as interviewees were asked to consider all products. However, some consumers mentioned a broader consumption focus on product benefits; such as, "Things I like to own and purchase, I want to have them work for me. I want to have them be useful." Somewhat unlike the group interview respondents but consistent with the literature, interviewees listed product performance standards and expectations as foci for satisfaction. When asked to discuss satisfaction in specific contexts, interviewees revealed a broader array of relevant foci; thus reflecting the appropriate focus component pertinent to a particular satisfaction context.

Timing of the Response

Satisfaction can be determined at various points in time. It is generally accepted that consumer satisfaction is a postpurchase phenomenon (Yi 1990; e.g., Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Fornell 1992; Oliver 1981; Tse and Wilton 1988; Westbrook and Oliver 1991), yet a number of subtle differences exist in this perspective. The purchase decision may be evaluated after choice, but prior to the actual purchase of the product (Kourilsky and Murray 1981). For example, Westbrook and Oliver (1991) define satisfaction as "a postchoice evaluative judgment concerning a specific purchase selection (p. 84, italics added, also see Day 1984). Others suggest that "the consumer's response to the evaluation . . . as perceived after its consumption" (Tse and Wilton 1988, p. 204, italics added) or "the summary psychological state resulting . . . about the consumption experience" (Oliver 1981, p. 27, italics added). This is quite different from postpurchase timing since it adds a restriction that the product must have been consumed before satisfaction is determined.

All the above perspectives consider satisfaction to be a postpurchase/choice phenomenon. However, consumer satisfaction may occur prior to choice or even in the absence of purchase or choice. For example, Westbrook and Reilly (1983) define satisfaction as "an emotional response to the experiences provided by, or associated with particular products or services purchased, retail outlets, or even molar patterns of behavior such as shopping and buyer behavior, as well as the overall marketplace" (p. 256, italics added). Olander (1977) claimed that there are even situations when a consumer determines satisfaction without purchase (e.g., dissatisfied with out-of-town supermarkets, which were never patronized, because they caused a local store to close). Thus, much of the literature suggests that satisfaction may occur prior to or after choice, purchase, or consumption.

Complicating the time determination of satisfaction, Cote, Foxman, and Cutler (1989) argue that none of the above definitions is appropriate since satisfaction can vary dramatically over time. They suggest that satisfaction is only determined at the time the evaluation occurs. In some cases, this satisfaction assessment may be a naturally occurring, internal response such as after consumption, or prior to repurchase. In other cases, the assessment of satisfaction may be externally driven, such as when a company conducts a satisfaction survey. In either case, this could be postchoice, purchase, or consumption in time 1, time 2, etc (although satisfaction at previous time periods may be recalled and even influence current satisfaction). As such, satisfaction is a changing phenomenon that reflects the current response. In sum, the presence of a satisfaction determination time is evident, yet current definitions differ in their conceptualization of when it might occur.

In the focus groups, consumers discussed the timing of their satisfaction in more specific terms. Considering those comments specifically related to timing, consumers indicated that they determine their satisfaction before consumption (39.9%), during consumption (48.2%) or after consumption (11.9%) (See Table 3). If considering all comments regardless of reference to timing, it is interesting to note that in 3.3% of the cases satisfaction was not determined at all. Furthermore, the timing mentioned by consumers ranged from the time of product search, through choice, purchase, and initial consumption to extended consumption. Verifying the Cote, Foxman, and Cutler (1989) contention, consumers indicated that satisfaction may not yet be determined when asked and that satisfaction may vary with time. For example, one consumer posed the question, "... I wouldn't know right away. Right? I mean you don't know (about satisfaction) right away." In general, consumers felt satisfaction was initially formed "when you first used it," but might change as performance was assessed over time. Similar to the focus component, consumers revealed a broad range of timing points for satisfaction determination; thus reflecting the appropriate timing component pertinent to a particular satisfaction context.

Group participants also suggested that consumer satisfaction had various durations. Duration refers to how long a particular satisfaction response lasts. Oliver (1981) suggested that "the surprise or excitement of this [satisfaction] evaluation is thought to be of finite duration" (p. 27). Although group participants primarily discussed satisfaction at a single point in time, duration was revealed in comments like, "After it happened years ago, it still burns me."

Notably fewer comments were made during the personal interviews about the timing of the satisfaction response (see Table 3), most likely because interviewees were attempting to describe a general definition of satisfaction rather than responding to a specific incident. Most general definition comments tended to refer to initial purchase and use. However, these data also supported a continuing assessment of satisfaction throughout the consumption experience. Context-specific data confirmed the determination of satisfaction at various points in time.

In addition to the time of determination, the individual interviews confirmed the notion of duration by discussing their satisfaction responses over time. One consumer, when comparing responses, said "it took longer [for the initial satisfaction response to dissipate] than the other products that I talked about." Others indicated that they were "still happy, really I am," or "now I don't even think about it." Thus, the satisfaction response does appear to have a finite, but varied, duration.

Dissatisfaction. Conceptualizing dissatisfaction has received relatively little attention in consumer research. The existing research in the area has examined the unidimensionality of the satisfaction/dissatisfaction construct (Maddox 1981; Swan and Combs 1976). Researchers have taken two approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing the dissatisfaction construct.

Consumer dissatisfaction is portrayed as the bipolar opposite of satisfaction (e.g., Mittal, Kumar, and Tsiros 1999 (completely satisfied/very dissatisfied) Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996 (very satisfied/very dissatisfied));

or

Consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction are viewed as two different dimensions (e.g., Mano and Oliver 1993 and Westbrook and Oliver 1991 use unipolar satisfaction and unipolar dissatisfaction measures).

Consumer research that focuses primarily on dissatisfaction considers the construct as antecedent to remedial behaviors, such as complaining and negative word-of-mouth communication (e.g., Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham 1987; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). A notable exception is Fornell and Robinson (1983); however, their research focused primarily on industry variables, such as seller concentration and distribution breadth, combined with consumer cost to explain price and quality dissatisfaction). Thus, extant literature does not shed much insight into defining dissatisfaction.

Since the literature does not provide a clear conceptualization of dissatisfaction, we turned to consumer perceptions. The focus group and personal interview results suggest that dissatisfaction is still comprised of the three components of the definitional framework: affective response; focus; and timing. This is an extremely important finding since it suggests that researchers interested in dissatisfaction can apply the same definitional framework as that used for satisfaction. While the conceptual domain for satisfaction and dissatisfaction are the same, consumer data indicated some important differences of degree. In general, dissatisfaction responses were viewed as more extreme than satisfaction (e.g., angry, disappointed, mad, upset, cheated, or aggravated). Responses referring to the provider and marketer communication were quite common, especially related to fairness and accurate information (e.g., felt cheated; gullible; gypped; resentful). When dissatisfaction was expressed about the product itself, the focus tended to be more on the core product (i.e., basic product attributes, doesn't work; doesn't taste good) than the augmented or extended product satisfaction. Dissatisfaction may occur sooner and last longer (without company intervention) than satisfaction because of the disproportional emphasis on the negative response. Despite these operational differences it is important to remember that dissatisfaction can be defined using the three components of the definitional framework: affective response, focus, and timing. For example, in a particular situation, consumer satisfaction may be a satisfied/dissatisfied affective response to the consumption experience determined during consumption, but, in another situation, consumer satisfaction may be a dissatisfied/not dissatisfied affective response to specific product attributes determined after purchase.

The ability to define satisfaction and dissatisfaction using the same framework does not resolve the issue of dimensionality. The consumer data highlight this point: Approximately 50% of the personal interview respondents indicated satisfaction and dissatisfaction were just ends of a continuum; however, the other 50% suggested that dissatisfaction was manifested in a different manner than satisfaction. This apparent inconsistency might best be understood by examining the focus of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Consumers were sometimes satisfied with one aspect of the choice/consumption experience, but dissatisfied with another aspect. In this case, satisfaction and dissatisfaction can be viewed as different dimensions. The consumer might be satisfied with the functionality of a product, but not the purchase experience. In this case, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are evaluated as if they were different dimensions. Conversely, satisfied or dissatisfied would be viewed as bipolar opposites when the consumer reaction is consistent across all focal aspects of the choice/consumption experience. Our data cannot empirically resolve the dimensionality debate. More research is necessary to ascertain the dimensionality of satisfaction versus dissatisfaction. However, dissatisfaction is undoubtedly comprised of the same components as satisfaction, and therefore, can be conceptualized using the same definitional framework (if unidimensional) or a satisfaction framework and a dissatisfaction framework (if multidimensional). In the next section we will propose a framework for developing context specific definitions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

SUMMARY

The literature views satisfaction as:

1. some type of affective, cognitive, and/or conative response.
2. based on an evaluation of product-related standards, product consumption experiences, and or purchase-related attributes (e.g., salesperson).
3. expressed before choice, after choice, after consumption, after extended experience, or just about any other time a researcher may query consumers about the product or related attributes.

As noted above, opinions conflict about each component of satisfaction. Furthermore, definitions vary quite dramatically in the number of components they include as well as the detail they provide. Some definitions only address a limited number of issues in a very general fashion. For example, Fornell (1992) describes satisfaction as simply "an overall postpurchase evaluation." Other definitions include explicit detail about all the components. To illustrate this, Tse and Wilton (1988) include all three components with some detail in their definition:

"the consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption" (p. 204).

Clearly, this attempt to develop an inclusive, summary definition of satisfaction is both unwieldy and internally inconsistent. Most problematic is that none of these definitions in the literature pass the adequacy test of a theoretically meaningful nominal definition; i.e., the nominal definition can replace the term, consumer satisfaction, and maintain the "truth value" in all situations (Teas and Palan 1997, p. 55). However, a generic structure is evident: Consumer satisfaction is a response to a particular purchase or consumption-related aspect occurring at a specific point in time.

Group interviews revealed a similar view of satisfaction as gleaned from the literature; however, there were a number of notable differences. Group interview participants almost uniformly used affective terms to define satisfaction. In addition, they rarely discussed expectations as a focus of satisfaction. Lastly, because their satisfaction was based on specific experiences, they also tended to view the timing of the satisfaction response within a much more specific, but varied time frame. Therefore, we might summarize the view of satisfaction based on group interview responses as:

1. an affective response of varying intensity.
2. based on an evaluation of product attributes-benefits-performance, relevant people, information provided by others or researched, purchase/consumption experiences, and/or consumer-derived foci (e.g., needs, wants, decision, expectations, etc.).
3. time-specific to before purchase, after purchase but before consumption, during consumption, or after consumption.

Personal interview data confirmed the affective tendency of satisfaction. In addition, multiple foci were discussed including expectations and performance standards. Satisfaction was generally viewed as occurring at purchase or initial consumption, but could be monitored throughout the consumption experience. Thus, the interview respondents viewed satisfaction as:

1. an affective response of varying intensity.
2. based on an evaluation of products and other standards of comparison.
3. at the time of purchase or temporal points during consumption and lasting for a finite but variable amount of time.

A GENERAL DEFINITIONAL FRAMEWORK OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

Based on the insights provided by the literature review, group and personal interviews, we propose a framework for developing context-specific definitions of consumer satisfaction. This framework is not a generic definition of satisfaction. As noted above, innumerable contextual variables will affect how satisfaction is viewed. As such, any generic definition of satisfaction will be subject to chameleon effects. Rather than presenting a generic definition of satisfaction, we identify the conceptual domain of satisfaction, delineate specific components necessary for any meaningful definition of satisfaction, and outline a process for developing context-specific definitions that can be compared across studies.

As concluded by the literature review and validated by the group and personal interview data, there appears to be three essential components of consumer satisfaction:

1. summary affective response which varies in intensity;
2. satisfaction focus around product choice, purchase and consumption; and
3. time of determination which varies by situation, but is generally limited in duration.

In this framework, satisfaction is limited to an affective response reflecting satisfaction as a holistic evaluative outcome. This distinction does not preclude the importance of cognitions in determining satisfaction; however, cognitions are bases for the formation of satisfaction, but the cognitions are not satisfaction. This is similar to choice in that the brand chosen may be based on cognitive evaluations; however, the choice is not a cognition but the brands selected or not selected.

The summary affective response is defined as the holistic nature of consumer's state of satisfaction, the focus is the object(s) of consumer's state, and timing refers to the temporal existence of satisfaction. According to field data results and supported by extant satisfaction literature, these components are applicable across situations and across consumers. All of these components are critical to appropriately operationalize the definition, to produce valid results, and make accurate interpretations and managerial decisions. Thus, the following components should be included in any context specific definition of consumer satisfaction.

Consumer satisfaction is:

*A **summary affective response of varying intensity.** The exact type of affective response and the level of intensity likely to be experienced must be explicitly defined by a researcher depending on the context of interest.*

*With a **time-specific point of determination and limited duration.** The researcher should select the point of determination most relevant for the research questions and identify the likely duration of the summary response. It is reasonable to expect that consumers may consciously determine their satisfaction response when asked by a researcher; therefore, timing is most critical to ascertain the most accurate, well-formed response.*

*Directed toward **focal aspects of product acquisition and/or consumption.** The researcher should identify the focus of interest based on the managerial or research question they face. This may include a broad or narrow range of acquisition or consumption activities/issues.*

By fleshing out these components, researchers should be able to develop specific definitions that are conceptually richer and empirically more useful than previous definitions. To develop context-relevant definitions and measures, researchers must be able to identify both the questions they are interested in answering and some basic information about the setting and consumers. Specifically, the researcher will need to provide details about all three components of satisfaction.

Satisfaction Focus - The difficult decision for a researcher is to determine the degree of detail needed to define the satisfaction focus. For example, is satisfaction with the product an appropriate focus (e.g., the automobile), or should it be limited to specific attributes (e.g., gas mileage) or specific benefits (e.g., the automobile is fun to drive)? One way researchers could identify the appropriate focus or foci is by surveying or interviewing existing or new customers during the purchase process or at various points following purchase (Gardial et al. 1994). This information would allow researchers to segment their customers on the basis of what foci are actually considered when they determine their

satisfaction. The purpose would be to develop a battery of satisfaction survey instruments tailored to different types of customers and research questions.

Timing - As noted above, there are two important properties related to timing; time of determination and duration. When examining time of determination, the researcher must identify which stage of the purchase and consumption process is most important to the research question. For example, if an automobile manufacturer is interested in repeat purchase, then the final stages of consumption may be most appropriate. On the other hand, if the firm were interested in improving the warranty program, then earlier stages would be most appropriate. Duration will also help identify the most appropriate time of determination to consider. For example, if satisfaction is fleeting, then it should be measured earlier in the process.

Summary Response - The final step is to identify appropriate affective responses. Intensity represents the key properties of response. Affective responses can vary dramatically across a range of responses. For example, Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins (1987) identify ten different types of affective descriptors that may be appropriate in a restaurant setting. However, it is unreasonable to assume that all of these will be appropriate in another specific context. Researchers must select descriptors that accurately reflect the emotional responses to the relevant satisfaction focus. If the range of intensity is too large, then there will be little variance in any measures of satisfaction. If the range is too small, then the researcher does not obtain the maximum information that the consumers can provide (Cox 1980).

DEFINITIONAL ADEQUACY

The proposed definitional framework lead the reader to question why satisfaction is limited to an affective response rather than including cognitive and conative components. Limiting satisfaction to affective responses is consistent with Oliver's (1992) proposal that, "satisfaction and dissatisfaction reflect the general affective tone" (p. 242). In addition, the phrases reflect a condensed, global response to one or many aspects of purchase or consumption consistent with Zajonc's (1980) conceptualization of affect being a holistic concept. We would also argue that cognitive and conative components tend to be more strongly related to antecedents and consequences of the satisfaction determination. For example, cognitive deliberations (such as comparing performance to expectations) reflect the process by which a summary evaluation (affect) is formed. Conversely, a summary affective response may be later justified by cognitive explanations (it just didn't do what I wanted) or exemplified in behavior (repeat purchase). Several definitions in Table 1 include process such as, "the consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption" (Tse and Wilton 1988, p. 204, italics added). Our definition emphasizes the construct itself rather than the evaluative process (model) by which the response is determined. Focusing on the response (construct) rather than the process (model) facilitates the operationalization of consumer satisfaction as a single construct unencumbered by various antecedents or consequences.

In order to ensure our definitional framework is rigorous, we evaluated it according to Teas and Palan's (1997) definitional criteria: ambiguity; intensional vagueness; and extensional vagueness. We will examine these criteria as suggested by Teas and Palan (1997) consistently using the coined terms they have proposed and defined. Ambiguity is the degree to which confusion "reduces the theoretical meaningfulness of language used to express theory and, therefore, reduces the degree to which theories can be precisely expressed, interpreted, and empirically tested" (Teas and Palan 1997, p. 56). In order to be applicable across all contexts, our definitional framework must be somewhat indefinite. Thus, by design, ambiguity exists in our general framework; however, modified definitions based on this general definition are unambiguous and well justified. Specific definitions used to operationalize the consumer satisfaction construct would be sufficiently distinct and explicit so as to resolve the ambiguity issue beyond most extant definitions.

As noted by Teas and Palan (1997), some degree of intensional vagueness will exist because an exhaustive list of properties is unlikely. Intensional vagueness is minimized by our definitional framework because components and properties have been carefully determined. Specifically, we have identified the affective response ranges in intensity from minimal to extreme; the foci range across purchase and consumption response sources (e.g., product benefits); and the

timing ranges in determination from immediately upon purchase to time of repurchase and ranges in duration from very limited to enduring. In addition, properties of consumer satisfaction are well explicated in the specificity of the operational definition. For example, for a specific context, consumer satisfaction may be defined as an intense affective response (elation) to the product benefits determined immediately upon purchase and lasting for a brief duration. This affective response dissipates to enjoyment of product benefits enduring for the life of (or consumer interaction with) the product. Thus, intensional vagueness is minimized by using the framework to explicate the general properties of satisfaction or dissatisfaction and guides the development of specific properties within a particular research setting.

Extensional vagueness, or lack thereof, is "the ability to classify objects in the physical realm unambiguously into one of two sets: the extension of the concept or its complement (nonextension)" (Teas and Palan 1997, p. 59). Extensional vagueness is reduced by our definitional framework since the response, the focus of the response, and the timing (determination and duration) are specified. Thus, it is possible to distinguish consumer satisfaction from what consumer satisfaction is not. In particular, delineating the time component greatly reduces extensional vagueness. For example, Teas and Palan (1997) examine the vagueness of prior expectations in terms of the point location along a time continuum (when consumers actually determine their prior expectations) as well as the point when expectations are actually measured by researchers. By applying our definitional framework, the timing of the satisfaction response is ascertained and measured at a temporally appropriate point, greatly alleviating extensional vagueness.

A context-specific definition generated using our framework (the definiens) could be substituted for the term, consumer satisfaction (the definiendum), without falsifying the statement. Thus, our definition adheres to the rules of replacement. However, as intended, our framework reduces the specificity of the conceptual domain so as to appropriately modify (by increasing the specificity) the definition for any particular context. As such, the context-specific definition used in one study cannot substitute for the definition in another study. However, both definitions would have the same general components and specific differences could be easily identified and compared. As such, our framework would generate definitions that meet the requirement of replacement without creating chameleon effects.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The satisfaction literature has not yet, explicitly or implicitly, established a generally accepted definition of satisfaction, which has limited our abilities to develop appropriate measures and compare results across studies. As suggested by Gardial et al. (1994), there is a "need for a clear delineation of what this phenomenon is (and is not)" (p. 556). The definitional framework presented above provides guidelines for developing conceptually consistent, clearly delineated, context-specific definitions of satisfaction. By providing appropriate detail concerning the affective response, time of determination and duration, and the focus of the response, a more meaningful definition of satisfaction can be constructed. As encouraged by Marsh and Yeung (1999) context-specific definitions created using the framework should be general enough to allow comparisons across studies, but specific enough to allow for the development of context-specific measures in order to prevent chameleon effects.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING

Consumer satisfaction researchers consider a consensual definition to be a priority in furthering consumer satisfaction theory (Peterson and Wilson 1992; Yi 1990). This directive is important for two reasons:

- A construct cannot be measured without an understanding of the domain of the construct (Bollen 1989; Churchill 1979); and,
- Empirical studies can be compared only if similar definitions and operationalizations are employed.

Currently, it is impossible to disentangle differences in operationalizing satisfaction from differences in results. This limits theoretical advancements. Our proposed definition framework allows researchers to identify the common and unique components of different satisfaction studies. This will allow results to be more easily interpreted and compared.

DEVELOPING MEASURES OF SATISFACTION

A consensual, yet adaptable, definition and underlying properties would increase the validity of consumer satisfaction measures. Valid measures are essential for theory development and testing (Peter 1981), yet, researchers do not always "recognize the serious impact measurement error can have on empirical results" (Cote and Buckley 1988, p. 579). Valid measures put the emphasis back on developing and testing theory. Having a grounded conceptual definition and a subsequent procedure for measuring the construct should improve the construct validity of consumer satisfaction measures.

The proposed definitional framework provides the specificity to allow researchers to develop context specific measures. When appropriate, researchers can develop measures of satisfaction consistent with the conceptual definition and their research goals (e.g., satisfaction with a retailer or satisfaction one-month after purchase). Providing context-specific measures will prevent chameleon effects which can cause the meaning of items to vary depending on the other information presented in the questionnaire or research context (Marsh and Yeung 1999). As Marsh and Yeung (1999) note, ". . . items referring to a particular domain to be much more invariant across contexts than esteem items that are specifically constructed to be content free, forcing participants to infer the relevant domain or domains in forming their esteem responses" (p. 62). The definitional framework we suggest helps researchers form clear statements of the relevant satisfaction domains. By researching and understanding different types of customers and context, researchers can tailor the satisfaction scale to more accurately reflect the consumer's true meaning of satisfaction. This allows researchers to move away from putting, ". . . too much emphasis on global measures . . . instead of more specific self-concept scales that are more closely related to the content of their research" (Marsh and Yeung 1999, p. 62). Furthermore, the typical measurement problems of negative skewness and lack of variability can be alleviated with scales reflecting appropriate endpoints. For example, in contexts where consumers can be elated, a satisfied/dissatisfied scale does not discriminate adequately resulting in a clumping of positive responses (Peterson and Wilson 1992). Changing the endpoints does not completely resolve these measurement issues. Most likely, the ambiguity of the construct is the cause of negative skewness and lack of variability; thus, making the satisfaction question more explicit (with proper endpoints being only a part of this) should help to remedy these measurement problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

Previous consumer research has examined and supported contextual relevance to marketing strategies (Flynn and Goldsmith 1993; Foxall 1992). Prompted by general inconsistencies, Peterson and Wilson (1992) asked: "To what extent do satisfaction self-reports reflect 'true' satisfaction?" (p. 62). Managers need to know how their consumer groups define satisfaction and then interpret satisfaction scales to accurately target, report, and respond to satisfaction levels. Guided by our framework, managers should conduct postpurchase segmentation, realizing that consumers vary with respect to the components and related properties of satisfaction. Results suggest that different industries may need to use different satisfaction scales, or a single industry may need to tailor scales to different types of consumers. More importantly, managers can recognize that the satisfaction focus and timing can be customized for their needs. Rather than looking at all aspects of choice/consumption experience, managers can concentrate on those that are of direct interest or are directly controllable. As a result, managers are able to obtain "true" consumer responses that are relevant to managerial decision making.

Returning to the example in the introduction, consumer A, who marked a '5' on the satisfaction scale, is answering the question based on how much enjoyment (even excitement) s/he derived from the purchase experience, consumption

experience, and the product. Consumer A equates satisfaction with perfection (i.e., a little rattle or an inconsiderate salesperson can rob Consumer A of some of the joy associated with this automobile). Also, Consumer A determines satisfaction almost immediately upon purchase, and the satisfaction response is intense and enduring. On the other hand, Consumer B, who marked a '7' on the satisfaction scale, considered the purchase a necessity. S/he answered the question based on how well the product works; i.e., does what it is supposed to do. The purchase experience is still important because Consumer B is somewhat negatively predisposed about making the purchase at all. Consumer B waits to determine satisfaction until consumption. The initial satisfaction response is weak relative to Consumer A and, unless pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised, diminishes during consumption. By applying our definitional framework, and appropriately modifying its application to the context, a manager would recognize the differences between Consumers A and B in the above example. They could also have phrased satisfaction questions so that both consumers interpreted it the same way. By clarifying what they meant by "satisfaction," management could have focused on comparable responses upon which they could act.

A postpurchase segmentation approach would be to group consumers according to their different satisfaction perspectives. Thus, regardless of whether Consumer A is less satisfied than Consumer B, Consumer A (and others like Consumer A) should respond to a satisfaction scale that is appropriately anchored with intense adjectives, such as excited or enthusiastic. Furthermore, the scales should reflect the relevant foci of their satisfaction (purchase experience, consumption enjoyment, and product attributes). These consumers should receive a survey instrument as soon after purchase as possible and receive other appropriately-designed surveys later during consumption. Satisfaction, in this case, may need to be considered as a within-subject monitoring procedure (Peterson and Wilson 1992). On the other hand, since Consumer B does not determine satisfaction until consumption, he/she should receive a survey instrument later than Consumer A. The satisfaction scales should have less intense endpoints that reflect a summary perception toward product benefits (i.e., satisfies needs).

Another industry may take a different approach. For example, consumers may not determine whether they are satisfied at all; they simply are not dissatisfied (i.e., no problems). When appropriate, satisfaction scales should reflect only the dissatisfaction factor because these consumers do not consider satisfaction per se. As well, managers may override the priority of the consumer's perspective and ask satisfaction questions relating to management's particular areas of concern or interest.

In summary, firms must appropriately modify the basic components of consumer satisfaction to develop a context-specific definition that will guide the assessment of satisfaction. This measurement process is necessary to move closer to truly understanding customers, and thus, to make better managerial decisions. Otherwise, it is virtually impossible to interpret what consumers mean by the number they mark on a scale.

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APPENDIX

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- In the situation where you felt good, what word or phrase would you use to describe how you felt?
- Tell us briefly about the situation and the phrase you used to describe how you felt.
- How would you define satisfaction with a major appliance?
- How would you define satisfaction with an appliance repair service?
- How would you define satisfaction with natural gas as an energy source?
- Tell us briefly about the situation when you did not feel good. In that situation, how did you describe how you felt?
- Looking at the two situations/products you wrote down (one where you felt good and one where you didn't), what do you think is the major difference between these two products or situations other than the product itself? How come were you "satisfied" in one instance and "dissatisfied" in the other?
- How would you define or describe dissatisfaction with a major appliance?
- How would you define or describe dissatisfaction with an appliance repair service?
- How would you define or describe dissatisfaction with natural gas as an energy source?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- General Definitions of Satisfaction – Please put yourself into the role of a consumer. Consider the purchase of products, in general. No particular product. In fact, lump food, clothing, cars, lawnmowers, recreation equipment, etc. all together.
- How do you, in general, define 'satisfaction?' In other words, how do you describe the consumer situation where you are satisfied? If you need to, take a minute to consider this question.
- How about 'dissatisfaction?' How do you, in general, define 'dissatisfaction?'
- Informant-Selected Situations - Now, consider this situation, the purchase of _____. Re-live the purchase and the use of this product in your mind for a minute.
- Tell me about this situation.
- Describe your response or your reaction at the time of purchase.
- When did you know that you felt <use their words ?
- How long ago did you purchase this product?
- For how long did you feel <use their words ?
- How long after purchase did you actually use the product?
- Are you still using the product?
- Describe your response now. <If they say "satisfied" What does that mean?
- Why do you feel the same as you did at purchase? <or Why do you feel differently than you did at purchase?
- What happened to change your response?
- When did you start to feel <use their words ?
- What might cause this feeling to change?