Systematically Varying Consumer Satisfaction and its Implications for Product Choice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The expectations-disconfirmation paradigm provides the most popular explanation of consumer satisfaction. However, and as is occasionally noted, if a customer experiences disconfirmation after consuming a product, future expectations regarding the product should be revised toward the performance perceived by the customer. If expectations do not change in the face of disconfirmation, the implication would be that the customer did not learn from their consumption experience.

Assuming that a customer will learn from experience, then decreasing levels of disconfirmation should affect customer satisfaction. For example, if a customer is surprised by an excellent service experience he or she will be satisfied. Yet the customer now has higher expectations for the service the next time it is purchased. If product performance is consistent, the degree of disconfirmation will diminish regardless of whether the revised expectations are exceeded or just met. If disconfirmation is the best predictor of satisfaction, then satisfaction should vary directly with disconfirmation to a steady state level, despite increasing expectations. A longitudinal approach to the antecedents of consumer satisfaction logically implies the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction.

Literature related to consumer satisfaction, repurchase behavior, switching barriers, and consumer information updating is reviewed in order to fashion a model that integrates these concepts. A longitudinal study of the antecedents of satisfaction and their consequence over time could not be found, although several articles study satisfaction in a dynamic setting. The review also reveals the following three important conceptual relationships: 1) satisfaction is a function of expectations, perceived performance, and disconfirmation; 2) intention to repurchase is a function of consumer satisfaction and switching barriers; and 3) choice is a function of expectations and intention to repurchase. These relationships are integrated in a conceptual model called the Satisfaction-Based Repeat Purchase Behavior model. The model is dynamic and emphasizes satisfaction as a primary determinant of repurchase behavior. It also incorporates the antecedents of satisfaction, and allows their effect to vary with time.

A combination of the model and the notion of systematically varying consumer satisfaction makes it possible to formulate some interesting predictions that have many implications for marketing. Specifically, the hypothesis of systematically

varying consumer satisfaction provides a rationale for continuous improvement, yet reinforces the notion that there is no substitute for high quality and good value. This follows because customers will adapt their expectations as improvements are made, until no disconfirmation exists. When this occurs, satisfaction is based solely on expectations (or performance). The higher the expectations that are met, the higher the customer satisfaction and probability of repurchase.

If satisfaction is assumed to be a significant predictor of repurchase and switching behavior, another implication is that if satisfaction varies with disconfirmation to a steady state or equilibrium level, the probability of repurchase and switching will be affected in a predictable way. Moreover, the positive disconfirmation created by a surprise factor and its effect on consumer satisfaction and repurchase probabilities will dissipate over time, which implies that switching behavior becomes more probable as satisfaction decreases. Another implication is that the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction may offer an alternative explanation to the variety-seeking phenomenon, or it may even offer a rationale for variety seeking. Both the variety seeking literature and the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction predict—in the typical case—a decreasing marginal utility of product consumption. Diminished satisfaction with one product is a good reason to try an alternative, and it might be difficult to discern whether variety seeking or a desire to increase satisfaction is the goal.

Systematically Varying Consumer Satisfaction and its Implications for Product Choice

Consumer satisfaction provides the basis for the marketing concept and has been shown to be a good predictor of future purchase behavior. As a reflection of its importance, consumer satisfaction is a popular topic in the marketing literature. Most models of consumer satisfaction—and service quality—maintain that discrepancies between *ex ante* expectations of a good or service and the product's *ex post* performance are the best predictors of the satisfaction or quality perceived by the customer (e.g., Oliver 1977, 1980; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 1988). However, there are many extensions or alternatives to this approach (e.g., Clemons and Woodruff 1992; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996; Westbrook and Reilly 1983), and there is controversy regarding the relationship between consumer satisfaction and service quality. If the differences between the various positions can be set aside, their most obvious similarity is the utilization of "gaps" models for measurement.

Yet, when gaps models are viewed from a longitudinal perspective, an interesting and compelling observation can be made that has received scarcely any attention in the marketing literature. Specifically, if a gap between expectations and perceived performance is the best predictor of satisfaction, then as this gap diminishes over repeated purchases a customer's satisfaction should vary accordingly. If the gap does not decrease, it would imply that the individual has not learned anything from his or her prior experience. On the basis of this observation it is proposed that when a gap between expectations and perceptions of performance exists, an individual's satisfaction may vary with the amount of product experiences, and that it will do so in a predictable manner. A longitudinal approach to the antecedents of consumer satisfaction (or service quality) logically implies the predicted outcome.

If past research in consumer behavior has neglected the idea that customer satisfaction can change over time it may be a serious oversight, for satisfaction has been shown to be a significant predictor of brand choice (Kasper 1988; Newman and Werbel 1973) and purchase intentions (LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983; Oliver 1980). This article describes why—under clearly defined circumstances—consumer satisfaction should vary systematically over time, and the implications for marketing practitioners and researchers. The most obvious implication is that systematic variations in customer satisfaction can help explain changes in product choice, based on an initial degree of satisfaction and its rate of change. Such explanatory power provides a powerful tool for those interested in employing customer satisfaction as a predictor of profit, choice, repurchase behavior, or market share.

This article reviews past research on consumer satisfaction, repurchase behavior, and information updating, in order to derive a dynamic model of repeat purchase behavior that reflects the notion that satisfaction may change over time. The model development is conceptual, yet offers several propositions that provide fresh insight regarding satisfaction's role in consumer behavior.

ILLUSTRATION BY EXAMPLE

An ordinary example of the phenomenon discussed here occurs at restaurants. Often, customers soon will return to a restaurant where they were pleasantly surprised during an initial encounter. However, upon returning it is not uncommon to hear the sentiment that "The restaurant was not as good as I remembered." Assuming that factors such as mood and the effect of other customers are constant, two possible reasons for the discrepancy exist: either some element of the restaurant's setting, service, food, etc. was not as good the second time; or the customer's expectations were raised by the first visit, causing the reduced satisfaction with the second visit. Because the individual has a better idea of what to expect during the second visit, large gaps or degrees of disconfirmation are less likely to exist. If disconfirmation is the best predictor of satisfaction, one should expect satisfaction to decrease, due to and despite raised expectations.

The notion that the degree of disconfirmation felt by a consumer should diminish over time recognizes that consumers will learn as they gain experience with a product, and should modify expectations accordingly. Otherwise, a consumer would be surprised every time he or she experienced a product again. However, people may not immediately adjust their

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expectations to match perceptions of the product' s performance. Oliver (1980) finds that expectations can be resistant to change, and Olson and Dover (1979) suggest that "After several disconfirmations, expectations may eventually coincide with posttrial beliefs so that further disconfirmations are not possible." (p. 187). The rate at which consumers adjust their expectations to meet perceived product performance can be affected by the variability of a product's performance, the ease with which it can be evaluated, the degree of involvement with the product, the completeness and accuracy of information that forms expectations, and the precision with which a product's level of performance is recalled. Adjustments to expectations are likely to be swift when the product is easily evaluated, but slow when a product is complicated and has many attributes.

Continuing with the restaurant theme, when customers encounter a very satisfying restaurant experience they are likely to believe they have received extremely good value and consequently are likely to return to the same restaurant. However, regardless of how satisfied customers might be, they are very unlikely to eat every meal at the same restaurant. The best that can be hoped for is that these customers return to the restaurant on a regular basis, such as once a week. Over time, the restaurant's customers will come to expect excellence, and although satisfaction may exist there can be no pleasant surprises because these diners already have very high expectations. If the restaurant occasionally produced a lunch experience that was less than excellent, its customers would be dissatisfied. The restaurant will have difficulty maintaining the high degree of satisfaction its customers felt after their original experience.

This example illustrates why satisfaction might change predictably over repeated product experiences, and the consequence of changes in consumer satisfaction. The scenario contains an important implicit assumption, that some degree of disconfirmation exists after the initial product experience. If there is no disconfirmation then expectations exactly meet perceived performance, or else the difference between the two is so small as to be ignored. Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983) discuss a "zone of indifference" where there is little or no difference between expected and perceived performance. They suggest that

> For most people, performance outside the zone of indifference is probably the exception rather than the common occurrence. Otherwise consumers would be in a frequent state of excitement or frustration. ...brand experiences outside of the zone of indifference are much more likely than more typical experiences to explain the dynamic shifting of reference performance norms over time. ...If companies do not strive constantly for exceptional performance, positive satisfaction with the brand will slowly decay through the brand's repeated use or through the introduction of similar, "me-too" brands. …Consequently, the consumer eventually will have either a neutral or no emotional response to the evaluation of focal brand performance (pp. 300-301).

Similarly, Gurney (1999) writes that firms' desires to exceed customer expectations

> …sounds wonderful at first, but a little logic will show you that it's actually a preposterous notion. If you always exceed expectations, then expectations simply will rise. With ever-escalating expectations, you have to offer more and more to make an impression (p. 40).

In the only other known reference to the notion that consumer satisfaction can vary systematically, Rust and Oliver (2000) prophesy that the success of strategies to create delight or positive disconfirmation in customers is dependent on the degree to which customers learn from the delighting experience, its effect on customer retention, and the ability of competitors to duplicate it. Thus Gurney (1999), Rust and Oliver (2000), and Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983) appear to recognize that because customer expectations can change over time, a focus on disconfirmation or gaps can affect consumer satisfaction. Here this idea is extended through the belief that diminishing gaps will systematically influence consumer satisfaction.

CONSUMER SATISFACTION RESEARCH IN MARKETING

Consumer satisfaction has been a popular topic in marketing since Cardozo (1965), and the associated literature can be divided into three broad topics: the first explores the relationship between consumer expectations and appraisals of performance (e.g., Anderson 1973; Cardozo 1965); the second determines the antecedents of satisfaction (e.g., Oliver 1977, 1980; Tse and Wilton 1988); and the third and most recent category evaluates the consequences of consumer satisfaction for purchase decisions, sales, and firm profitability (e.g., Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann 1994; Fornell 1992; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983). Research relating these and other constructs is now explored.

ANTECEDENTS OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

Despite many attempts to measure and explain consumer satisfaction, there still does not appear to be a consensus regarding its definition (Giese and Cote 2000) or determinants (Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996). Consumer satisfaction is typically defined as being the result of an evaluative process that contrasts prepurchase expectations with perceptions of performance during and after the consumption experience (e.g., Oliver 1980, 1981; Rust and Oliver 1994). That is also the view taken by this paper, although it is recognized that such a definition may not fully explicate the satisfaction construct (Anderson and Fornell 1994; Giese and Cote 2000).

Several alternative explanations of consumer satisfaction have been advanced, but the expectations-disconfirmation paradigm has been the most popular (Oliver 1980, 1981; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996; Tse and Wilton 1988). This account predicts that expectations and disconfirmation are the two variables that best explain consumer satisfaction. Disconfirmation can be defined as the difference between expected and perceived product performance, and expectations as predictions of future performance (e.g., Oliver 1980). The inclusion of expectations suggests that products fulfilling high expectations are predicted to generate greater consumer satisfaction than products that meet low expectations. Some researchers employ perceived performance as an additional explanator of satisfaction (e.g., Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Tse and Wilton 1988).

If there is a degree of disconfirmation after a product is consumed, it should decrease over time as experience is gained with the product and the consumer learns more of what he or she can expect from it. As expectations shift toward perceived performance, it is assumed that the effect of varying expectations *will not completely offset* the effect of reductions in disconfirmation. This assumption is critical for what is known hereafter as the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction. Tse and Wilton (1988) and Oliver (1980), for example, find that the coefficients associated with expectations are not as significant as those associated with disconfirmation. The predicted level of satisfaction should therefore be lower when no positive disconfirmation exists, despite increased expectations. Because satisfaction can be defined as the result of comparing expectations with perceptions of performance, the assumption that disconfirmation has a stronger effect than expectations for explaining satisfaction is reasonable. Indeed, some early models of consumer satisfaction use disconfirmation as the only predictor of satisfaction (Tse and Wilton 1988).

The literature on service quality has followed a similar disconfirmation approach with Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1985) original "gaps" model. However, there is a debate in marketing regarding the differences and similarities between the consumer satisfaction and service quality constructs (e.g., Dabholkar 1993; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1994; Spreng and Singh 1993; Teas 1993, 1994). The debate will not be joined here except to state that—despite any conceptual differences between the two—the way they are typically measured is quite comparable. This is because measures of service quality usually represent customer perceptions rather than objective indicators of quality (Zeithaml 1988; Bitner and Hubbert 1994), and service quality and customer satisfaction therefore tend to be highly correlated.

There have been many refinements and extensions to the gaps models, but the essential ingredients have hardly changed. For example, despite the discussion in the marketing literature regarding what forms of expectations are most appropriate for measuring consumer satisfaction and service quality (e.g., Cote, Foxman, and Cutler 1989; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996; Teas 1993, 1994; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993), a comparison between some form of expectations and perceived performance remains the popular standard.

LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH IN CONSUMER SATISFACTION

Satisfaction is defined as the consequence of comparing expectations with perceptions of performance (Oliver 1981), and therefore appears to result from a dynamic process. However, expectations, perceptions of performance, and the difference between the two are typically measured simultaneously despite evolving at different points in time (Clow, Kurtz, and Ozment 1998; Clow and Vorhies 1993; Oliver 1977; Patterson, Johnson, and Spreng 1997). Such an approach may be appropriate because some researchers believe that consumer satisfaction is limited to individual transactions (e.g., Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). On the other hand, satisfaction is affected by prior experiences that condition expectations.

Over twenty years ago Jacoby (1978) urged marketing academics to study consumer behavior as a dynamic process, yet few articles have employed longitudinal designs to investigate consumer satisfaction or perceptions of service quality. Those that do have two different approaches to exploring changes over time: the first measures satisfaction or impressions of service quality as they change in the period *between* purchases (Mazursky and Geva 1989); and the second examines satisfaction or perceptions of service quality as they change *across* purchase periods (e.g., Bolton 1998; Bolton and Drew 1991; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983). A brief discussion of research related to these approaches is presented here.

In what may be the only example of empirical research investigating satisfaction change within a purchase cycle, Mazursky and Geva (1989) find that the effect of satisfaction on intentions to repurchase decreases over time, which

> "...emphasizes the need for considering timing of measurement as a relevant factor in predicting purchase and choice behavior." (p. 224).

In contrast, several studies have evaluated satisfaction across purchase periods, including LaBarbera and Mazursky (1983), Fornell, and Lehmann (1994), Johnson, Anderson, and Fornell (1995), Fornell et al. (1996), Boulding et al. (1993), Bolton and Drew (1991), Rust and Williams (1994), and Bolton (1998).

Although none of these studies specifically model changes in individual customers' satisfaction over time, Bolton and Drew (1991) come closest when they perform a longitudinal investigation of the effect of telephone line upgrading on customers' perceptions of service quality. Information in their Table 1 (p. 5) supports the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction, because mean quality ratings for the control sample hardly change across three periods, while the test sample means rise for the second period then fall to where they were before the service improvements (which took place between the first and second questionnaires). This outcome could be predicted because the improved service would generate some "surprise" in the respondents, thereby creating positive disconfirmation. By the third time period, respondents may have adjusted their expectations to match the new level of service, and positive disconfirmation is no longer working to increase quality ratings.

It appears that the notion of individual-level changes in consumer satisfaction across purchase periods has not previously been studied. Nevertheless, until there is no disconfirmation —implying that a customer is completely familiar with a product—there is no reason to presume that satisfaction will remain constant over repeated purchase and consumption cycles, even when there is consistent objective product performance. Varying satisfaction can affect the probability of switching to a competitor's product, which is problematic for any producer of goods or services. This article extends Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins' (1983) and Gurney's (1999) observations by explaining why satisfaction may change over time, and perhaps in a predictable direction.

CONSUMER SATISFACTION, INTENTION TO REPURCHASE, AND SWITCHING BARRIERS

Satisfaction has been linked to firm profitability and repurchase probability (e.g., Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann 1994; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983). Demonstrating such a relationship is valuable, for explaining why consumers purchase or repurchase products underlies consumer behavior and consumer psychology. One account is offered by Fornell (1992), who suggests that the probability of repeat purchase is a function of both satisfaction and switching barriers. Search costs, transaction costs, learning costs, habit, emotional cost, cognitive effort, and various forms of risk or uncertainty may all act as barriers to switching from one brand to another (Fornell 1992; Hirschman 1970). Even when dissatisfaction with the current choice exists—or an alternative appears more attractive—there are many reasons why a consumer might continue to choose their customary brand. Perhaps as a result of deterrents to switching, Fornell (1992) finds that customer satisfaction is lower in industries where repeat purchasers face high switching costs.

Support for Fornell's (1992) view comes from studies of switching behavior in services. Keaveney (1995) identifies several reasons for customer switching (price, inconvenience, service failures, competition, and ethical problems), which Bansal and Taylor (1999) summarize as service performance and costs of switching (p. 201). As customer satisfaction is strongly linked to impressions of performance, satisfaction and switching barriers are assumed to be the most important antecedents of repurchase behavior, or the intention to repurchase a good or service (cf. Bateson and Hoffman 1999, p. 295). When some degree of satisfaction exists after purchase and evaluation, the intention to repurchase will be positive. Conversely, if there is dissatisfaction the intention to repurchase will be negative, and a consumer would be unlikely to repurchase the product again. However, in both cases the existence of switching barriers raises the likelihood of repurchase. Every available alternative within a consumer's consideration set creates its own level of intentions to repurchase; but, if neither satisfaction nor switching barriers exist then repurchase is unlikely.

SUPPLEMENTAL TOPICS

This section briefly addresses further ideas relevant to the development of an integrative conceptual model. The antecedents of repeat purchase behavior and information updating are the subject areas that provide the necessary information. It will be seen that consumer satisfaction provides a rationale for repeat purchase behavior, and its antecedents can be employed as a portion of the data used to update one's product information over a series of purchases.

Repeat Purchase Behavior (Brand Loyalty)

The first of the related topics discussed is repeat purchase behavior or brand loyalty. Because brand loyalty has so many definitions and this article focuses on the probability of repurchase, brand loyalty is instead referred to as repeat purchase or repurchase behavior (cf. Jacoby and Chestnut 1978). Consumer satisfaction is assumed here to be an important antecedent of both choice decisions and the likelihood of repeat purchase. The few articles that explore the relationship between satisfaction and repeat purchase behavior find that they are strongly related (Bloemer and Kasper 1995; Kasper 1988; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983; Newman and Werbel 1973).

Customers who are loyal to one brand either expect more from their current brand than alternatives, or they don't switch because of switching barriers (Fornell 1992; Meyer 1981). On the other hand, consumers who occasionally purchase different brands may switch when they are not completely satisfied with the brand they last purchased, or because they have higher expectations for a different brand. Another reason for switching brands is found in the variety seeking literature (Bawa 1990; Givon 1984; McAlister 1979, 1982). Understanding the reasons why consumers either switch brands or repeatedly purchase the same brand is critical if marketers are to effectively utilize the concepts of brand loyalty or repeat purchase behavior.

Information Updating

A final topic required for the dynamic model of repeat purchase behavior developed subsequently is information updating, which relates here to the process of combining new information with one's previous expectations. There are many approaches to this phenomenon, although Helson's (1964) Adaptation Level Theory and Anderson's (1981, 1982) Information Integration Theory are perhaps the most widely cited. Both of these accounts provide an explanation of the mechanism whereby new information is combined with old to produce revised impressions of competing products, which in turn can be used by consumers to make choice decisions.

It is posited here that consumer satisfaction will diminish to a steady state level due to a decrease in positive disconfirmation, assuming positive disconfirmation exists after the evaluation of a previous purchase. The steady state level obtained can vary across consumers and products. Perceived performance is assumed to provide new information for future expectations, and Hunter, Danes, and Cohen (1984) introduce an information processing model that accurately represents the proposed relationship between expectations and perceived performance (pp. 39-40). Their approach suggests that if expectations for the next time period (E_{t+1}) are updated with information gained from this period's perceived performance (PP_t), then

$$E_{t+1} = (1-\alpha)E_t + \alpha PP_t \quad (1)$$

Thus E_{t+1} is an average of the previous period's expectations and perceived performance that is weighted by a smoothing parameter a . This formulation is the same as Anderson's (1981) averaging model for the case of an initial state and one new stimulus. Johnson, Anderson, and Fornell (1995) find empirical support for adaptive expectations at an aggregate level, and their functional form is identical to Equation 1 except for an intercept and year variable. In the general case where there are n time periods Equation 1 becomes:

$$E_{t+n} = (1-\alpha)^n E_t + \sum_{k=1}^{n}(1-\alpha)^{n-k}\alpha PP_{t+k-1} \quad (2)$$

and future expectations (E_{t+n}) will tend to the constant level of perceived performance at a rate determined by a.
Equation 1 can also be written in the following way:

$$E_{t+1} = E_t + \alpha(PP_t - E_t) \quad (3)$$

Because (PP_t - E_t) represents conceptually the disconfirmation a consumer feels toward a product, Equation 3 can be written as:

$$E_{t+1} = E_t + \alpha(DIS_t) \quad (4)$$

where DIS_t is the disconfirmation experienced by the consumer. Hence, next period's expectations are a function of this period's expectations and the disconfirmation resulting from perceived differences between expectations and performance. Such differences need not objectively exist, but if they are believed to exist by the consumer then disconfirmation results. Every time a consumer experiences a product they are able to compare their expectations with the product's perceived performance, and when there are discrepancies new information can be integrated with former expectations, which may in turn affect future choice probabilities.

SATISFACTION-BASED REPEAT PURCHASE BEHAVIOR: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

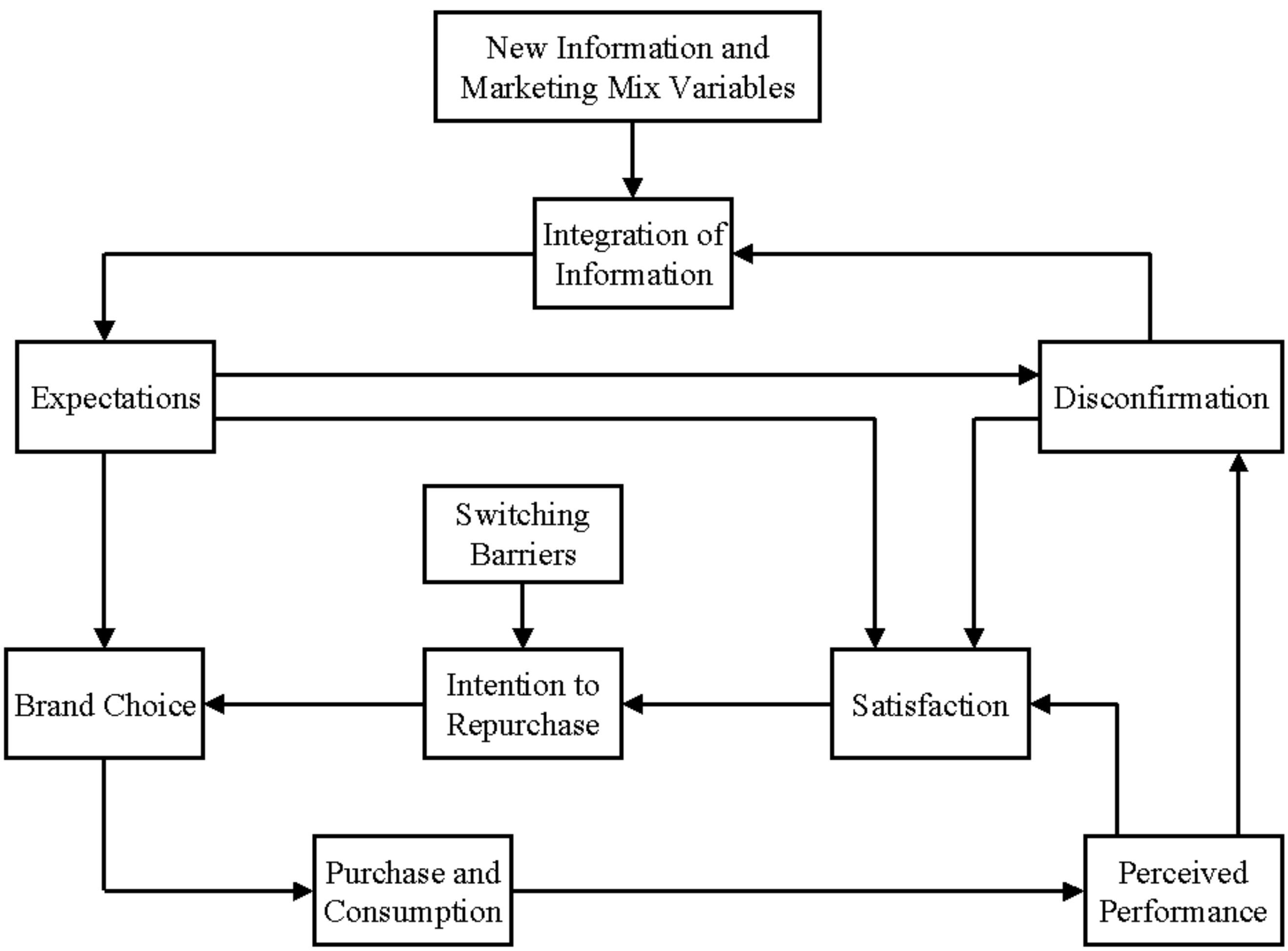
The objective of reviewing the consumer satisfaction, repeat purchase behavior, switching barriers, and information updating literature is to provide a foundation for a conceptual model that is capable of integrating these ideas. The conceptual model will now be laid out and explained, and it will be seen that a combination of the model and the notion of systematically varying consumer satisfaction makes it possible to formulate some interesting predictions. Thus, a subsequent section derives several research propositions based on the above relationships and a dynamic approach to consumer satisfaction. These propositions and their implications are expected to enhance the understanding of consumer behavior. The article concludes by identifying the propositions that require further investigation, given the support that currently exists in the marketing literature.

To illustrate how the relationships suggested by the literature review may be combined, assume a consumer has recognized a need or want, and obtains information that is integrated into existing knowledge related to the product class. The sum of this information and prior experience is reflected in the customer's expectations for competing products, which in turn are employed to generate a choice decision.

After purchase, the consumer can compare expectations with perceptions of product performance, a process that confirms or disconfirms the earlier expectations (e.g., Oliver 1980, 1981). Disconfirmation can be used in two ways, as it: 1) provides information for future purchases; and 2) serves as a major determinant of overall satisfaction with the purchased product. In the next purchase cycle the consumer has experience with the previously chosen product, and if disconfirmation existed it will be used to provide information that may alter expectations for the second purchase cycle. Any other new data can also be used to revise expectations, and eventually another purchase will be made. However, this second purchase—and all future purchases—will also be influenced by the intention to repurchase created by switching barriers and satisfaction arising from earlier purchases. These two factors provide a strong rationale for repeat purchase behavior, and could be employed to assess a consumer's likelihood of repurchasing a given product, i.e., his or her intention to repurchase.

Finally, brand choice is assumed to be a function of a consumer's intention to repurchase and expectations for a product; the brand with the highest combined value on these two measures has the highest probability of being purchased. Marketing mix tools such as price and product features are captured by customer expectations for each alternative. Disconfirmation influences brand choice by affecting consumer satisfaction and expectations, and both can vary over time.

FIGURE 1
Satisfaction-Based Repeat Purchase Behavior: A Descriptive Model of a Dynamic Process



The relationships described in this article and the model suggested by them are illustrated in Figure 1. The depicted model is dynamic because of the feedback supplied by disconfirmation, and by the intention to repurchase derived from satisfaction and switching barriers. It integrates three important conceptual relationships: 1) satisfaction is a function of expectations, perceived performance, and disconfirmation; 2) intention to repurchase is a function of consumer satisfaction and switching barriers; and 3) choice is a function of expectations and intention to repurchase. New information is continuously flowing into this system, in the form of marketing tools, word-of-mouth, etc., and disconfirmation provides another important source of information. The idea that it will change predictably over repeated product trials—and cause changes in consumer satisfaction—is the focus of this article.

DERIVATION OF PROPOSITIONS: A STATEMENT OF THE HYPOTHESIS OF SYSTEMATICALLY VARYING CONSUMER SATISFACTION

When united with the idea that customer satisfaction may vary systematically with disconfirmation, the framework offered by the Satisfaction-Based Repeat Purchase model produces several research propositions that have important implications for managers. Put simply, the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction predicts that if disconfirmation is the best explanator of satisfaction (Oliver and Bearden 1983; Tse and Wilton 1988) and diminishes with repeated product experiences, then satisfaction should vary with disconfirmation. The idea implicitly assumes that consumers are experiencing a relatively unfamiliar product, otherwise no disconfirmation would exist. Such unfamiliarity could be a result of experiencing a new product or product class, or due to an actual or perceived change in the delivered product. Customers who repeatedly purchase the same product are assumed to be either satisfied or subject to switching barriers, thus the Satisfaction-Based Repeat Purchase model also applies to products with which customers are completely familiar.

The summary statement made so far suggests a number of propositions that are presented formally:

> **P1$_a$** Where there is initially *positive* disconfirmation and other factors are held constant, expectations will *rise* to meet perceived performance and disconfirmation will therefore tend to zero over repeated purchase evaluations.

Similarly,

> **P1$_b$** Where there is initially *negative* disconfirmation and other factors are held constant, expectations will *fall* to meet perceived performance and disconfirmation will therefore tend to zero over repeated purchase evaluations.

In either case satisfaction can still vary with expectations and/or with perceived performance. Yet, a problem with P1$_b$ is that there is no reason for people to repurchase if they are dissatisfied (negative disconfirmation case), unless they are purchasing a necessary item when other alternatives are believed to be less attractive than the alternative already chosen, or when switching barriers outweigh the current dissatisfaction.

More propositions are implied by the summary statement:

> **P2$_a$** With repeated purchases and *positive* disconfirmation, satisfaction will *decrease* to a steady state though objective product performance remains constant.

Similarly,

> **P2$_b$** With repeated purchases and *negative* disconfirmation, satisfaction will *increase* to a steady state though objective product performance remains constant.

Propositions 2$_a$ and 2$_b$ represent the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction, which predicts that inaccurate expectations and the concomitant disconfirmation will be modified by product experience, and it is due to their changing that satisfaction will vary. Some level of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) will continue to exist after a customer becomes fully familiar with the product, but the final level will be less intense than was experienced initially. In the negative disconfirmation case ($P2_b$) satisfaction is predicted to increase because expectations are revised downward and negative disconfirmation decreases, thus satisfaction increases (i.e., dissatisfaction decreases). This scenario implies that the consumer is resigned to purchasing the product and is accepting the idea.

Further propositions can be derived from an explanation of the relationship between satisfaction and repeat purchase behavior. The only thing as important to marketers as obtaining customers is how to retain them, and satisfaction appears to be a key component of customer retention. If satisfaction really does in fact decrease over time (positive disconfirmation case), the consequence is an increase in the probability of switching to an alternative. When there is negative disconfirmation the consumer is driven to sample another alternative, therefore the probability of switching is high. If, however, the dissatisfied consumer does not switch, the probability of switching decreases over time due to diminishing negative disconfirmation and increasing satisfaction. The following propositions can be derived from this discussion:

> **P3** Satisfaction is positively related to brand choice and repeat purchase.
>
> **$P4_a$** Where there is initially *positive* disconfirmation, the probability of switching to another brand *increases* to a steady state as satisfaction decreases over time, given constant product performance.
>
> **$P4_b$** Where there is initially *negative* disconfirmation—but the consumer continues to purchase the brand—the probability of switching to another brand *decreases* to a steady state as dissatisfaction decreases, given constant product performance.

A problem with $P4_b$ is that consumers may compare their perceptions of the product's performance not only with their expectations for that product, but with expectations of competing products as well. When consumers have higher expectations for competing products—but must repurchase an alternative for which they have lower expectations—the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction predicts that their level of satisfaction will increase because expectations will be reduced ($P2_b$). However, expectations of the competing brands are not likely to change, and may affect a customer's satisfaction with the original product. This issue is resolved if an expectation can take the form of a comparison with alternative products. When such a contrast is more negative than predicted, expectations for the purchased brand must again decrease until there is no discrepancy between the expected and perceived contrast (i.e., disconfirmation). Although the degree of dissatisfaction may diminish, its continued existence implies that customers will switch brands when given the opportunity. If they do not, $P4_b$ predicts that their satisfaction will increase to a steady-state level.

Finally, some consideration has to be given to consumers who continue to purchase the same brand(s) repeatedly. Such customers should have little or no disconfirmation because they know precisely what to expect from the product. Presumably, they continue to purchase the same product because they have higher expectations for it than for any alternative, or there are no alternative choices due to a monopoly situation, or the cost of switching may be high enough so that it is not feasible to sample an alternative. Switching barriers may be an important variable in explaining brand choice and repeat purchase. The implications and propositions are as follows:

> **P5** Satisfaction and switching barriers can be combined to create a measure of intentions to repurchase.
>
> **P6** A measure of intentions to repurchase can help explain and predict repeat purchase and switching behaviors.

The last two propositions are extensions of the Satisfaction-Based Repeat Purchase framework that have implications for predicting consumer behavior. For example, a measure of intentions to repurchase that combines satisfaction and switching barriers could significantly improve on the predictive power of other variables (e.g., price) typically employed in models of consumer choice.

Support for several of these propositions already exists in the marketing literature. Table 1 identifies the previous research that substantiates certain propositions; this corroboration is taken as evidence of the nomological validity of the Satisfaction-Based Repeat Purchase Behavior model. The propositions for which there is no current empirical support are strongly related, for they are all derived from the presumption that an individual's disconfirmation with a product will systematically vary with experience, which in turn will influence satisfaction. That prediction is the primary contribution of this article, and gives rise to the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction.

From a static perspective the propositions and the model presented in Figure 1 contribute nothing more than the integration of the three conceptual relationships noted earlier. However, with a dynamic approach it is evident that systematically varying consumer satisfaction may affect repurchase probabilities and subsequent brand choice; and this view generates fresh research opportunities that are overlooked by static renderings. Consideration of this hypothesis may improve the ability to forecast or predict when satisfied customers might switch to an alternative good or service, even when the products within a market have not changed. Product modification may again generate disconfirmation, but over time and with repeated consumption experiences there should be predictable changes to satisfaction as a result of diminishing magnitudes of disconfirmation, until an equilibrium position is reached.

TABLE 1
Propositions and Corroborative Articles

Proposition	Description	Articles Empirically Supporting Proposition
$P1_a$	repeat purchase, expectations rise; +disconfirmation® 0	Boulding et al. (1993)[1]
$P1_b$	repeat purchase, expectations lower; -disconfirmation® 0	Boulding et al. (1993)[1]
$P2_a$	as +disconfirmation® 0, satisfaction decreases	none[2]
$P2_b$	as -disconfirmation® 0, satisfaction increases	none[2]
P3	satisfaction related to choice and repeat purchase	LaBarbera and Mazursky (1983); Kasper (1988); Newman and Werbel (1973)
$P4_a$	+disconfirmation and repeat purchase imply probability of switching increases	none[3]
$P4_b$	-disconfirmation and repeat purchase imply probability of switching decreases	none[3]
P5	intention to repurchase is a function of satisfaction and switching barriers	Fornell (1992); Keaveney (1995)
P6	intention to repurchase affects repeat purchase and switching behavior	none[4]

1. Boulding et al. (1993) demonstrate that expectations shift toward performance over time.
2. The correlation between disconfirmation and satisfaction has been confirmed (e.g., Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Oliver 1980); however, the notion of intra-individual changes in the determinants of satisfaction and their effects has not been studied.
3. The correlation between satisfaction and choice has been demonstrated (e.g., LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983; Kasper 1988), but the idea of changing disconfirmation affecting choice through satisfaction has not been examined.
4. The effect of an intention to repurchase variable for predicting purchase and switching behavior has not been established, although satisfaction and switching barriers are known to affect the probability of repurchase.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This article links consumer satisfaction with repeat purchase behavior because satisfaction is an intuitive antecedent and significant predictor of brand choice and repurchase. The expectations-disconfirmation paradigm suggests that—when it exists—disconfirmation is the best predictor of satisfaction, thus satisfaction should vary with disconfirmation. A dynamic or multi-period view of the expectations-disconfirmation paradigm logically suggests the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction. Based on these observations it should be expected that if satisfaction diminishes as a result of decreasing disconfirmation, then the probability of brand choice or repurchase will lessen too. Much work is required to validate the hypothesis, but the potential for the improved understanding of consumer behavior should be of value to marketing researchers and practitioners.

The hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction has several implications for managers, the most important of which is a justification or reason why firms must find ways of continuously improving their product, whether it be a good or service. Product improvements must occur regularly in order to surprise customers and to increase or maintain customer satisfaction or service quality ratings. Competition creates the potential for dissatisfaction with the status quo, because a firm's competitors will always be searching for innovations that might provide a competitive advantage. If a customer is not experiencing some degree of pleasant surprise with a firm's product, their level of satisfaction may be decreasing while their probability of switching to a competitor's product increases.

On the other hand, a strategy of continuous improvement creates its own problems. Many organizations seek to increase customer satisfaction, for there is a strong link between customer satisfaction and profitability. Yet, assuming that customer satisfaction remains constant might be unwarranted and may lead to inaccurate estimates of the optimal level of satisfaction, because satisfying customers at any cost is counterproductive (Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann 1994; Anderson and Sullivan 1993; Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1995). Although managers may attempt to continually improve products to create positive disconfirmation and satisfaction, customers will—sooner or later—become accustomed to the new or improved product. This implies that a strategy of continuous product improvement may not be able to replace a strategy of high product quality, for customers familiar with a product ultimately will be most satisfied when high expectations are met. Managers will have to balance the costs of high product quality and product development against sales and profitability, while considering short- and long-term strategic objectives.

Despite the positive relationship between repeat purchase behavior and satisfaction, some researchers argue that satisfaction may not be enough to create long term customer loyalty (Jones and Sasser 1995; Oliver 1999; Reichheld 1996). Oliver (1999) recommends that a firm’s emphasis on satisfaction should be shifted to a focus on customer loyalty. Bhote (1996) states that "It is now becoming apparent that it is no longer customer satisfaction but *customer loyalty that is the dominant key to business success*." (p. 31). The rationale for these claims is essentially the same as that identified here; i.e., the positive disconfirmation created by a surprise or wow factor (Levesque 1995) and its effect on consumer satisfaction will dissipate over time. Moreover, improved service in many industries has raised expectations (Rust and Oliver 2000), making it more difficult to surprise customers. The hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction both predicts and offers an explanation for these outcomes.

Another implication of the current article is that switching behavior becomes more probable over time if satisfaction decreases, i.e., the hypothesis implies a decreasing marginal probability of repurchase. Lower levels of satisfaction have been shown to cause brand switching by customers who are not influenced by switching barriers. Conversely, for those consumers who are affected by switching barriers and therefore may have to accept some dissatisfaction, it would be advantageous to know just how much the security of their chosen brand is worth. Marketers need to understand how to use switching barriers effectively to maximize their value to the firm. For example, delaying product innovation or development can save a great deal of money, if customers are unlikely to sample another brand.

Customers with low expectations of a product will experience greater positive disconfirmation than customers with higher expectations of the same product. For example, if a sudden favorable event takes place, people not expecting the event will be happier than others who expected the fortunate occurrence. On the other hand, people expecting an unfavorable event will not be as disappointed as those who did not expect the misfortune. These scenarios suggest a rule: If one has good news, surprise people with it in order to maximize its effect. If one has bad news, it should be given with plenty of warning to minimize the effect on satisfaction. This could be called the "politicians' rule", and has implications for and beyond marketing, e.g., politicians making a public announcement, price changes, human resource management, stock prices, etc. Such a rule may also be seen as a form of mental accounting (Thaler 1985).

The variety seeking literature proposes that some consumers obtain utility from switching brands (Givon 1984), or that consumers require a minimal consumption level of an attribute that a single brand may be unable to fulfill, thus necessitating switching behavior (McAlister 1979, 1982). Both the variety seeking literature and the hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction predict—in the typical case—a decreasing marginal utility of product consumption. Bawa (1990) adds a contrary case whereby marginal utility for a product increases over time, and this situation is somewhat analogous to the case where switching barriers are strong and satisfaction increases due to decreasing degrees of negative disconfirmation.

The hypothesis of systematically varying consumer satisfaction may offer an alternative explanation to the variety-seeking phenomenon, or it may even offer a rationale for variety seeking. Diminished satisfaction with one product is a good reason to try an alternative, and it might be difficult to discern whether variety seeking or a desire to increase satisfaction is the goal. Another potential explanation is that variety seeking may take place only when there is no positive disconfirmation with a product; this account is plausible because the cited variety seeking literature describes research that uses fairly simple products in mature categories, e.g., magazines (McAlister 1979), soft drinks (McAlister 1982), and facial tissue, paper towels, and cereal (Bawa 1990).

In summary, it should be repeated that there are no substitutes for high quality and good value, in terms of what is provided to consumers by goods and services. Altering products in an insignificant way or creating high expectations in order to create sales are not long term alternatives to real value. Even though consumer satisfaction may decrease over time as a consumer becomes familiar with a product, superior products will receive higher steady state or long term ratings of satisfaction than inferior competitors. This is because fulfilling high expectations will produce greater consumer satisfaction than meeting low expectations.

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