

Consumer satisfaction - an unattainable ideal?

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OPSOMMING

Verbruikerstevredenheid, 'n na-aankoopevaluering dat 'n gekose produk aan 'n verbruiker se verwagtinge voldoen of dit oortref (Engel *et al*, 1995), word algemeen as die ideale uitkoms van verbruikersbesluitneming voorgehou. Verbruikerstevredenheid verlig die interne spanningstoestand (kognitiewe dissonansie) wat veral met die aankoop van hoërisikoprodukte gepaard gaan. Verbruikerstevredenheid het die verdere voordeel vir handelaars en produsente dat verbruikers hulle tevredenheid aan ander verbruikers kommunikeer en dat daar 'n groot moontlikheid bestaan dat die tevrede verbruikers daardie produkte weer sal koop en selfs handelsnaamlojaal kan raak.

Volgens die konfirmasie/diskonfirmasieparadigma word verbruikerstevredenheid beskou as 'n situasie van konfirmasie waar die produk aan die verbruiker se verwagtinge voldoen; verbruikersontevredenheid is dus 'n situasie van diskonfirmasie. Navorsers is dit verder eens dat verbruikers(on)tevredenheid ook met 'n bepaalde intensiteit ervaar word. Daar is bewyse dat verbruikerstevredenheid en verbruikersontevredenheid selfs as twee afsonderlike konstruksie beskou moet word en dat die emosie op spesifieke eienskappe van die produk gerig is en selfs in stadiums manifesteer. Verbruikers vorm dus 'n aanvanklike indruk van tevredenheid of ontevredenheid, maar met gebruik kan die emosie verander omdat evaluering 'n voortgesette en volgehoue proses is.

Om leiding met betrekking tot verbruikersbesluitneming te kan gee in 'n poging om verbruikerstevredenheid te bevorder, moet die kompleksiteit van die konstruksie sowel as die invloed van persoonlikheidsverskille tydens evaluering in aanmerking geneem word. Verbruikersraadgewing is dus ewe kompleks - veral omdat verbruikers dit soms moeilik vind om hulle behoeftes met betrekking tot produkte te verbaliseer. Huishoudkundiges het 'n beter kans om die ondersteuning te bied wat nodig is om verbruikerstevredenheid te bevorder as gevolg van hulle basiese kennis van die mens se funksionering in sy mikro- en makro-omgewing saam met die produkkennis wat op meer konkrete beginsels en eienskappe berus.

Verbruikerstevredenheid as die gevolg van 'n aankoopbesluit is 'n ideaal om voor te hou, maar as gevolg van die kompleksiteit van die konstruksie en die onvoorspelbaarheid van die verbruiker se optrede is dit moeilik om dit te verwesenlik. Volgehoue navorsing in hierdie verband het tot op hede nog nie die saak vereenvoudig nie.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer satisfaction as the result of a consumer decision is generally considered the ideal outcome of consumer decision making. In consumer decision-making models the factors that could influence the consumer decision are usually proposed as inputs and the process of decision making is then expounded in more or less detail (depending on the particular situation). Almost without exception (as suggested in one of the well-known consumer decision-making models presented in Figure 1), consumer (dis)satisfaction appears as the output (Engel *et al*, 1973, in Westbrook, 1980); Du Plessis *et al*, 1990:17-41). In a dynamic model of consumer decision making, consumer satisfaction leads to the feedback of information that could colour the consumer's experience and therefore influence inter alia his or her motives, attitude and consciousness as inputs for subsequent consumer decisions (Walters, 1978:19; La Barbera & Mazursky, 1983; Richins & Verhage, 1985; Engel *et al*, 1995:192-197;222).

Often the various stakeholder parties (the producer, the retailer and the consumer him/herself) go to a lot of trouble during different stages of the decision-making process, and especially at the time of purchase of a product to influence or determine the final decision. The fact that the consumer and other parties involved have made an effort to deliberate the final purchase, leaves the consumer with a feeling that the particular purchase has been successful in terms of his or her initial expectations.

Consumer satisfaction has a positive influence on the consumer: the perception of risk that preceded the purchase disappears, the consumer's self-concept might improve because the purchase was accomplished successfully, and positive information is frequently spontaneously communicated to other

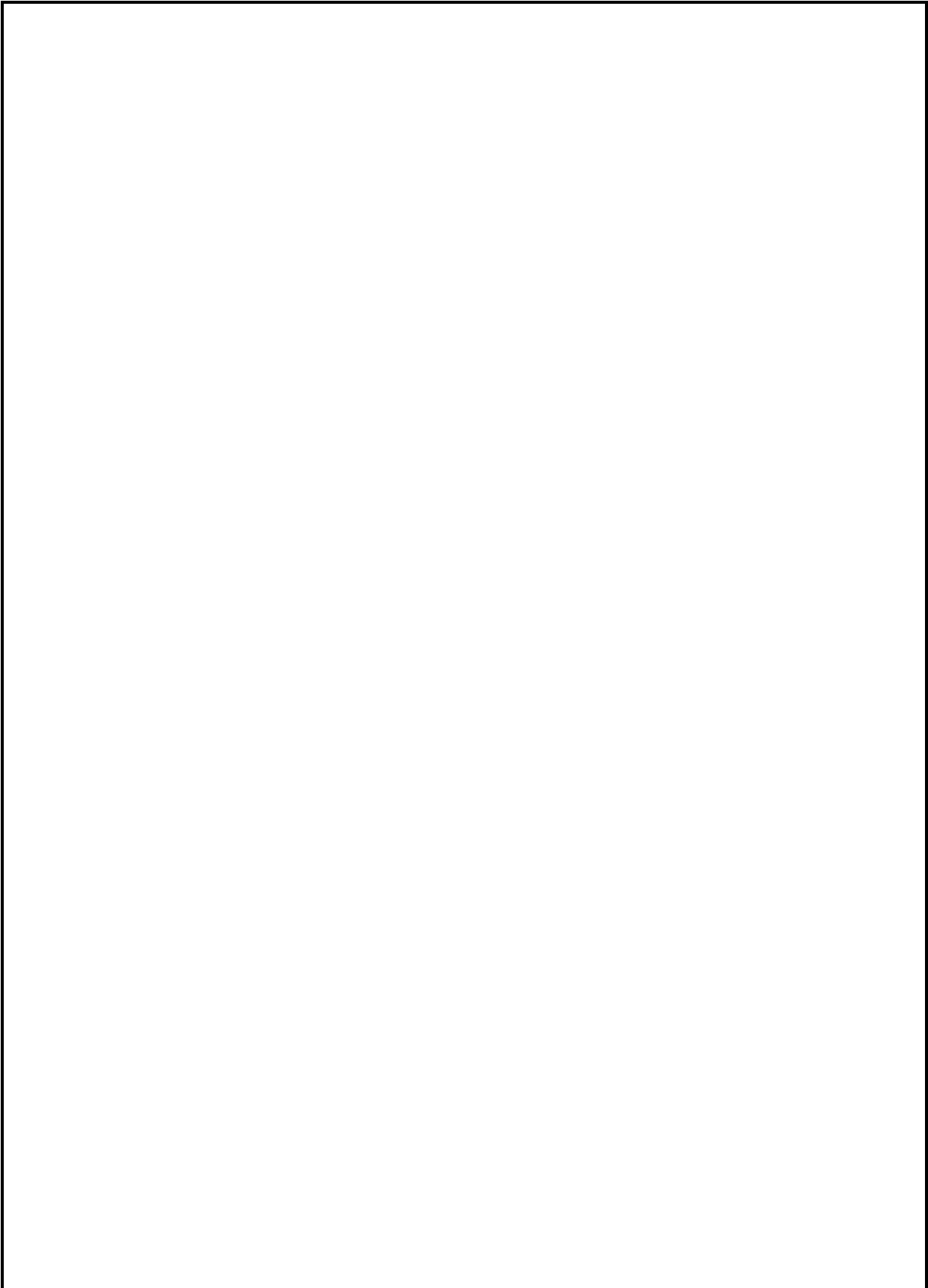


FIGURE 1: THE ENGEL-KOLLAT-MINIARD MODEL OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR (Du Plessis *et al*, 1990:30)

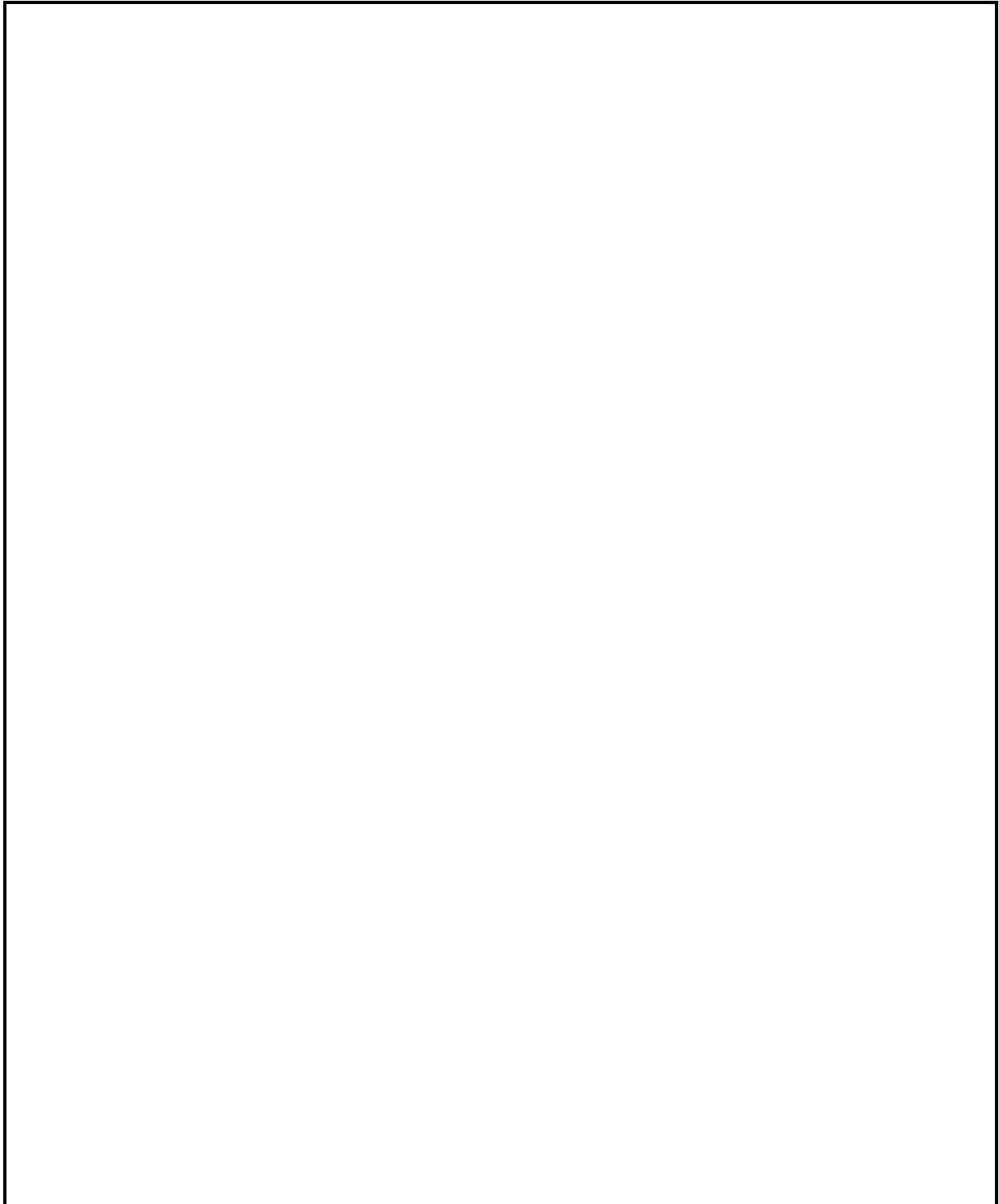


FIGURE 2: THE POSTPURCHASE EVALUATION PROCESS IN TERMS OF THE CONFIRMATION/ DISCONFIRMATION PARADIGM (Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:579)

consumers (Richins & Verhage, 1985). Consumer satisfaction also has a positive effect on subsequent decisions because the experience becomes part of a consumer's internal frame of reference (Walters, 1978:32-37; 173; Oliver, 1980; Hawkins *et al*,

1989:674). If a consumer is satisfied with a product, he or she would in future buy that particular product more confidently. Brand loyalty might even develop as a result (La Barbera & Mazurski, 1983). Any experience that is gained in the course of the

purchasing process (and this includes consumer (dis)satisfaction) represents an important component of the consumer's socialisation process which in the final instance affects future consumer decisions.

The benefit of consumer satisfaction to enterprises, is that they have managed to provide products to the market that satisfy the needs of consumers. This could in turn ensure the continued existence and growth of the enterprise, particularly if the consumer is satisfied to such an extent that he or she shares the positive experience with other consumers (Walters, 1978:32-37; 173; La Barbera & Mazurski, 1983; Hawkins *et al*, 1989:674). A successful purchase is therefore not only beneficial to the consumer, but also to the other parties involved (the retailer and the producer who could be represented by a brand or trade name).

It would therefore appear as if more knowledge and insight about consumer satisfaction - especially in order to gain greater insight into the factors that actually enhance consumer satisfaction - has considerable merit. Apart from the fact that the consumer's interests may be served thereby, consumer training programmes and counselling could be introduced and adapted accordingly. If there is consensus that (based on the advantages of consumer satisfaction) consumer satisfaction is the ideal, it is important to focus consumer counselling on aspects that would actually enhance consumer satisfaction, irrespective of whether consumer advisors consider the approach to contain the most relevant facts or to have the correct focus.

The aim of this brief the literature overview was to investigate the nature and the extent of consumer satisfaction as such, in order to determine how attainable it would be to actively promote consumer satisfaction. Based on research results that were found in literature, the nature and extent of consumer satisfaction are therefore discussed in terms of the implications for the compilation and provision of product-related information. It is particularly revealing that consumer dissatisfaction is in practice more likely to be attributed to either the product or the retailer, rather than to the mistaken judgment or decision of the consumer himself (Westbrook, 1980). Any effort or assistance to enhance consumer satisfaction would therefore in practice be of value to several parties.

DEFINITION OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

The definitions generally found in literature, do not necessarily provide sufficient insight into the complexity of the construct. Consumer satisfaction is for example defined as a consumer's evaluation of the actual performance of a purchase (product or service) in terms of preformulated objectives and expectations. According to such a definition, consumer satisfaction results when a purchase is evaluated in the course of its use, and the consumer concludes that it meets or exceeds his or her initial expectations (Swan &

Combs, 1976; Oliver, 1980:460). The interaction between expectations of a product and the eventual performance of the product therefore leads to either consumer satisfaction or consumer dissatisfaction.

Although the evaluation of products is partially objective, the process itself is mostly subjective (Hunt in Westbrook, 1980). This is due to the fact that the evaluation is done within the consumer's frame of reference (which depends on aspects such as knowledge and consumer socialisation) and because the evaluation is based on much more than hard facts and concrete features. Consumer satisfaction is in the final instance a function of affective influences which are integral to the consumer (for example a consumer's expectations) and purchase-related cognitive factors (a consumer's perception of how a product deviates from the preset expectations) (Oliver, 1980; Westbrook, 1980; Day in Tse & Wilton, 1988; Assael, 1992:51; 54; Hawkins *et al*, 1989:673-675; Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:580).

Consumers' expectations of a product, which may *inter alia* be based on theoretical knowledge, the recommendations of other people, normative standards, pure idealisation, or on personal experience, serve as standards for comparison and evaluation of a purchase. Every consumer enters the purchase process with certain ideas or expectations about a product - irrespective of whether another individual would consider that to be a fair framework for comparison (Walters, 1978:100; Woodruff *et al*, 1983; Tse & Wilton, 1988; Engel *et al*, 1995:273). The consumer's expectations of necessity include aspects of use, which implies that consumer satisfaction does not occur immediately - it only takes form as the product is used.

INTENSITY OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

According to Oliver (1980) and the writers Loudon and Della Bitta (1993:580), there is no direct relationship between the consumer's level of expectation of a particular product and the level or intensity of satisfaction that is eventually experienced. It is quite possible that a consumer who is less involved in the purchasing process or who is less interested in a particular purchase, could later be impressed to such an extent by the actual performance of the product, that outspoken consumer satisfaction is experienced. Intense and outspoken consumer satisfaction is therefore not necessarily the result of particular demands or extraordinary expectations that preceded the choice. Nor does this necessarily imply that the product is of exceptional quality (Hawkins *et al*, 1989:674; 680). The opposite also applies.

According to Assael (1992:105), consumers do not expect intense satisfaction with all their purchases. Involvement and interest at the moment of purchase could in particular limit expectations in this regard. In the case of products that are of less importance to

consumers, only a minimum level of performance is generally envisaged, whereas other products are intensively evaluated because the consumer wants to maximise his or her expectations. Consumer satisfaction is also based on a number of individual characteristics of the consumer, such as demographic variables, experience and personality attributes. The extent to which these factors further influence the consumer's experience, in conjunction with concrete factors such as product features, has been discussed by a number of researchers (Anderson *et al*, 1979; Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:580; Westbrook in Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:580).

Apart from the fact that individual characteristics of consumers (such as age, level of education, financial status) and personality differences have an influence on the experience of consumer satisfaction and the intensity of the experience subsequent to a purchase, consumer satisfaction as such is complex and difficult to predict. The intensity of consumer satisfaction is therefore seen in the light of the adjustment to reality and is compared with the adaptability theory as described by Helson (in Oliver, 1980) as far back as 1959. It was speculated that consumer satisfaction is influenced by:

- ◆ the product features, taking due account of previous experience, brand-name perceptions and symbolic elements
- ◆ the context of the purchase, which includes the influence of salespeople and social references (also discussed in Isen *et al* in Westbrook, 1980)
- ◆ individual characteristics that entail persuadability and perceptual distortion.

A lot has since been said about this issue - especially about its implementation - and although the opposite could not yet be proved, it is important to study the views of other researchers of this complex construct.

COMPLEXITY OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

According to the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm, consumer satisfaction is a complex experience that is related to the extent and direction of the disconfirmation experience (Oliver, 1980; Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Tse & Wilton, 1988; Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:579); Engel *et al*, 1995:274-275). Disconfirmation is the result when the performance of a product does not correspond with someone's expectations: if the product's performance exceeds expectations, positive disconfirmation results; when the performance does not meet expectations, negative disconfirmation is the result. If the product in practice complies with the previously formulated and anticipated expectations, a confirmation situation is experienced (Oliver, 1980; Engel *et al*, 1995:274-275).

Confirmation/disconfirmation therefore elicits an emotional reaction, namely consumer satisfaction or consumer dissatisfaction which is also experienced with some degree of intensity (Woodruff *et al*, 1983; Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:579) (see Figure 2).

According to Walters (1978:211-212) and Hawkins and his co-authors (1989:674), consumer satisfaction is relative and in fact a compromise between a consumer's expectations and his or her subsequent experience of the reality.

The relative importance of individual (personal) evaluation characteristics or criteria in obtaining consumer satisfaction

In view of the many advantages of consumer satisfaction for the parties involved (the producer, the retailer, the buyer / the consumer), one would expect more inputs and determination from producers, merchants and specialists such as home economists to ensure confirmation or positive disconfirmation among consumers. This, however, is difficult in practice. Oliver (1980) quotes several researchers in the field of consumer behaviour and a number of comparable studies in sociology and psychology to prove the effect of the confirmation / disconfirmation paradigm.

According to Swan and Combs (1976) as well as Hawkins and his co-authors (1989:673-675), every consumer evaluates a particular purchase in terms of a limited set of characteristics that have been individually (personally) compiled and prioritised. This means that it would be practically impossible for an outsider to predict the relative importance of certain characteristics on behalf of any consumer in any specific decision-making situation. However, consumers do set minimum standards for specific characteristics. This implies that some products could already be eliminated during a preliminary evaluation process. This happens because certain features, even in conjunction with other positive features, appear so unacceptable to the consumer, that the positive characteristics cannot compensate to make the product acceptable (Hawkins *et al*, 1989:618; 680).

The characteristics that eventually serve as a guideline for the evaluation of products could differ with respect to supplementary conditions such as the purchase situation and the mood of the consumer. Consumers could in some cases even find it difficult or too complex to recognise or verbalise their evaluation criteria.

The unpredictable importance of evaluation criteria that could contribute to consumer satisfaction

The complexity of consumer satisfaction is *inter alia* related to the fact that some characteristics or criteria that are considered during the evaluation of a product are not necessarily critical in terms of experiencing consumer satisfaction. The same characteristics could however, be critical in experiencing consumer dissatisfaction when the performance of a product does not meet expectations. A product guarantee could for example serve as a criterion for purchase, could be almost forgotten during initial use of the

product, and only become important again when the product unexpectedly breaks down. The extent of the disconfirmation would probably be more intense when the product breaks down than the confirmation would have been if the product had never developed any trouble. This phenomenon has been researched by Maddox and Oliver in particular (Oliver, 1992). They concluded that consumer satisfaction is actually experienced in stages and that it is quite possible that a consumer's focus in evaluating a product could shift according to the aspect or the situation that is considered to be of importance at any particular stage.

The influence of the specific performance dimension during product evaluation

Products have an instrumental as well as an expressive (symbolic) performance dimension that could influence the compilation of evaluation criteria as well as the mutual importance of the criteria during consumers' decision making (Swan & Combs, 1976; Walters 1978:517; Hawkins *et al*, 1989:674; Punj, 1992). In some cases the consumer's satisfaction is largely related to one of these performance dimensions, whereas other products might be sensitive to both the instrumental and the expressive performance dimensions (Swan & Combs, 1976; Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Hawkins *et al*, 1992:560).

The instrumental dimension represents the physical functioning of a product. As far as household appliances are concerned, this dimension *inter alia* includes the power of the motor, the number of different programmes, the durability of the material used for manufacturing, and the construction and design of the appliance. The extent to which the functional and the financial risks in particular determine a consumer's choice and purchase of appliances, would influence the importance of the functional aspects and consequently the instrumental dimension when the equipment is evaluated (Hawkins *et al*, 1989:674).

The instrumental dimension of a decision includes more concrete factors/features, and is therefore often the only dimension addressed during promotions, in consumer counselling and in education programmes (Glade, 1997). Assuming that consumers consider it important that products are able to perform the functions for which they were purchased, that consumers expect good service from the products they buy, that products have to be relatively durable and affordable, certain aspects such as durability, effective performance, energy consumption and design are generally emphasised in education programmes and in promotions. This fortunately also happens to be the easiest aspect to address. Any reference to aspects that specifically represent the expressive dimension of a consumer decision, should be approached more carefully and empathetically to prevent resentment and not to reflect negatively on other products.

It cannot be denied that the concrete product attributes are important - especially in the case of durable consumer goods. However, the importance of other, less conspicuous factors such as status factors which represent the expressive dimension of the consumer decision should never be undervalued or discounted (Hawkins *et al*, 1989:674).

The expressive or symbolic dimension refers to the influence of the product on the consumer's emotions. Congruence between the product image and the consumer's self-concept represents this dimension of consumer satisfaction. Aspects such as style, price, technology and trade or brand name often serve as symbols that make the consumer feel proud of his or her purchase and to command admiration from important others (Swan & Combs, 1976).

The expressive dimension of consumer satisfaction does not necessarily apply or is not equally important for all purchases. It would for instance have a negligible influence on purchases of groceries such as flour or sugar, but would be more important in the choice of socially visible products such as toiletries (Rosen, 1984; Nielsen Report, 1985; Kapferer & Laurent, 1985-1986; Erasmus, 1996), houses, cars, furniture and clothing, because possession and use of such products in the presence of others affect a consumer's self-image. Purchasing these products is therefore associated with social risk. These purchases are often actually made to reinforce the self-image, to satisfy a consumer's aspirations, to conform with certain groups, and to increase status and prestige. These purchases are more often also associated with financial risk, in other words the acquisition of expensive and durable products. It nevertheless remains difficult to anticipate *what* would be important, *when* and *whom* some aspects would be of importance in the evaluation of products in order to reach some conclusion about consumer satisfaction.

Maddox (1981), keeping with Herzberg's theory (1959), postulated that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are two separate constructs. Maddox argued that although the expressive dimension could be regarded of utmost importance during the evaluation of a specific product, the instrumental dimension could in fact contribute to eventual experience of consumer satisfaction. The positive inputs of the instrumental dimension would however in itself not ensure consumer satisfaction in the absence of the minimum anticipated requirements of the expressive dimension. In a subsequent study Maddox (1991 in Oliver, 1992) came to the conclusion that the importance of the instrumental and the expressive dimensions of products with respect to the realization of consumer satisfaction depends on the type of product at issue.

In view of the obscurity of consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction as constructs, various researchers have through the years approached the problem from

different angles. Westbrook (1987 in Oliver, 1992) for example endeavoured to link emotion with product consumption and the resultant consumer satisfaction or consumer dissatisfaction. He concluded that consumers generally come to two different types of conclusions: one conclusion based on the positive characteristics and the other conclusion based on the negative characteristics of the product. In terms of this finding the two types of emotion are actually independent although the sum total of the experience of these emotions would in the end manifest as consumer satisfaction or consumer dissatisfaction.

In a joint study by Westbrook and Oliver (1991 in Oliver, 1992) it is stated that consumer satisfaction is probably related to the emotions that are experienced regarding specific product characteristics. The authors identified three dimensions of evaluation in this particular study to make provision for the influence of a **surprise** element, for **interest** in a specific product as well as for **hostility**. According to these researchers the evaluation is based on two types of product characteristics: those associated with sustained product behaviour, as well as a once-off experience during purchasing (for example that the purchase is a bargain). This evaluation occurs in stages with associated emotions. The obvious product characteristics are evaluated first (for example dimensions, capacity and price of the product), followed by the presence of potentially surprising elements (for example the discovery of a factory defect or discovering the bonus of low noise levels during use), to be followed by the evaluation of long-term characteristics as anticipated initially (Oliver, 1992).

The above thus leaves one with the impression that consumer satisfaction has a bearing on the stage of usage of a specific product rather than on the presence of so-called satisfiers or dissatisfiers as was surmised in previous studies. Westbrook and Oliver (1991 in Oliver, 1992) therefore emphasized that consumer satisfaction consists of a synthesis of satisfaction with different characteristics, and that consumer satisfaction should therefore be regarded an affective view of a consumer process including both static and dynamic elements. It is also argued that, to some extent, consumer satisfaction is related to the experience of pleasure (Oliver, 1992). Oliver's findings (1989 in Oliver, 1992) in a previous study in fact identified pleasure as one of the five prototypes of consumer satisfaction.

SUMMARY

In simple terms, consumer satisfaction as the output of a consumer decision still appears to be the ideal. Apart from the advantages to the consumer him/herself, consumer satisfaction also has a positive effect on the market environment. Whether the outcome turns out to be confirmation or positive disconfirmation, it implies that the positive characteristics of the product overshadow its negative

characteristics and that the product at least conforms to the minimum standards required or anticipated by the consumer. The added positive outcome for the retailer could be that the consumer might share his or her product satisfaction with others and in so doing promotes the product and possible further sales.

Richins and Verhage (1985) found that consumer dissatisfaction has far-reaching implications. According to their research any negative experience with a product is generally communicated to an average of five other consumers - a situation which the retailer and the producer would like to avoid at any cost. Furthermore, the reason for dissatisfaction is often attributed to either the product or the retailer rather than the incompetence of the consumer (Westbrook, 1980).

Unfortunately, the general acceptability of a product by one, or a small group of consumers can not be transferred or automatically applied to consumers in general. It would also be very difficult, if not impossible, to predict the extent and the dimension of consumer satisfaction in any situation and with respect to any product (even if the product dimensions are known). The complex composition of consumer satisfaction, in association with situational, individual (personal) and personality factors, implies that external influences and even manipulation to realize consumer satisfaction, would be difficult.

It would appear that any attempt to realize or promote consumer satisfaction should take account of the multidimensional nature of the construct. It is for example important that home economists, consultants and sales personnel do not generalize about the significance of any criteria in the evaluation of products. It is *inter alia* possible to accommodate the instrumental dimension of consumer satisfaction by for example providing almost any information on durability characteristics and performance characteristics to consumers. Persuasion to purchase is however more difficult because it is difficult to anticipate how important certain product characteristics would be to consumers and under which circumstances a product would be used and evaluated.

The final evaluation also takes cognizance of the expressive dimension of the decision and this makes the entire issue much more sensitive as far as the consumer is concerned. It could have the opposite effect if the consumer were to experience the advice as pressure or if the personal area of experience of the consumer were entered and threatened. Any communication with a consumer about a product, which implies more than factual information within the framework of the instrumental dimension of consumer satisfaction, should be approached with care, empathy and very subtly - if it should ever be necessary to address this aspect at all.

It would also appear that Westbrook and Oliver's (1991 in Oliver, 1992) view of consumer satisfaction,

as a construct with a static and a dynamic dimension, should serve as a point of departure in consumer counselling. Counselling should therefore focus on more than the concrete, immediate characteristics such as price and durability. The consumer should be made aware of the fact that the functioning of the product after installation would further influence his or her impressions, so that any reason for positive disconfirmation at a later stage would not be accompanied by so much intensity that it is experienced as complete dissatisfaction.

Maddox's (1981) view that consumer satisfaction and consumer dissatisfaction are in fact two separate constructs could make consumers realize that a product has different characteristics and that positive as well as negative emotions would be natural after a purchase. These emotions should be evaluated separately as well as overall in terms of the expectations of the consumer before generalized statements are made about a product.

The training of home economists, which has always aimed at education and information without manipulating or enforcing, is ideally suited to this approach. It is indubitably true that consumer education and counselling should be approached with great circumspection by persons who have been well trained and who understand the complexity of the process.

Consumer satisfaction has so many advantages that it is unnecessary to speculate about its merits. However, the complexity of the construct and the delicate way in which consumers should be guided and supported in this regard remain problematical. Past research in this field has time and again emphasized and/or enhanced the complexity of the domain instead of simplifying it. Consumer satisfaction could consequently be regarded as an ideal that would be difficult (although not impossible) to achieve. Taking this into account, consumer support on request, with room for personal interpretation, is perhaps the only acceptable contribution external parties could make to enhance and realize consumer satisfaction.

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