Situation-Based Shifts in Consumer Benefit Salience: the Joint Role of Affect and Cognition

Sonja Wendel, Erasmus University, The Netherlands
Benedict G.C. Dellaert, Erasmus University, The Netherlands

This study addresses the process by which benefits become salient in consumers’ minds across usage situations. We explore two routes (cognitive and affective) by which the situation jointly influences benefit salience, in terms of both benefit importance and the number of salient benefits. We find support for the proposed dual route structure, indicating that individuals’ relative benefit importance ratings shift across usage situations both directly and indirectly through consumers’ positive affective state. We also find that more positive affect increases the number of salient benefits, providing insight as to why the number of salient benefits may vary across usage situations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Advanced information and communication technologies now allow firms to provide consumers with anytime, anywhere access to many of their communications and services (e.g., product information, after-sales services). This type of highly flexible interaction with consumers places new requirements on firms, because they need to design their interfaces and services to meet variations in consumer demands across a wide variety of usage situations (Seybolt 2001). In particular, the benefits that consumers require in products and channels may vary strongly across usage situations (Gutman 1982; Wendel and Dellaert 2005). Although previous research emphasizes that situational differences are particularly important in understanding consumer behavior (Belk 1974; Lutz and Kakkar 1975), few studies have addressed the question of how these benefits are made salient in consumers’ minds. It has been suggested that benefit salience is rooted in a selection process, whereby some benefits are cognitively more accessible in memory to the consumer in a particular usage situation because of their strong associations with past experiences (Ratneshwar et al. 1997). This cognitive structure implies that consumers process decision information in a selective manner, depending on the thoughts activated in a specific situation. The role of affective states in explaining variation in consumer benefit salience also has been suggested as an important area for research (Lutz and Kakkar 1975), although it remains a relatively unexplored research domain. The objective of this paper is to combine these two perspectives and jointly investigate the affective and cognitive routes by which situational differences in benefit salience may arise.

Specifically, we address the process by which benefits become salient in consumers’ minds across usage situations and explore two routes (cognitive and affective) by which the situation jointly influences benefit salience, in terms of both benefit importance and the number of salient benefits. We argue for a direct effect of usage situation on consumers’ benefit salience (cognitive route) and an indirect effect of usage situation (via affective states) on benefit salience (affective route).

We test the proposed hypotheses empirically by asking respondents to imagine themselves in a usage situation, in which they have a choice of web sites to look for food product information. The Internet particularly emphasizes the importance of anytime, anywhere access for many consumer–firm relationships, which raises the question of how firms can meet these varying needs across individual consumers. We collected data through an online survey run with two university panels. The sample consists of 276 subjects, 22.5% of whom are men. We adopt a 2 x 2 between-subject experimental design to vary the situation and assign respondents randomly to one of four conditions that represent the different hypothetical usage situations. We focus on time and social factors as two situational characteristics for manipulation (Belk 1975). To create the two time and two social conditions, we alter the time that respondents had available to search for a recipe on the Internet and the social context in which respondents had to search, respectively. To measure pleasure and arousal, we use seven-point bipolar adjectival scales (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). In total, we define 13 benefits: understandability, relevance, reliability, adequacy, scope, usefulness, usability, speed, hyperlinks, entertainment, navigation, interactivity, and decisional control. These benefits represent the main themes in current management information system and marketing literature (e.g., Mathwick and Rigdon 2004). To measure benefit salience, we asked respondents to indicate on a seven-point Likert-type scale how important they found each benefit to be in the particular experimental usage situation. We assessed the number of benefits made salient by determining how often respondents indicated a score of six or higher for each benefit (composite score) and adding those scores.

Next, we purified our scales by conducting two confirmatory factor analyses on pleasure and arousal as well as on the 13 benefits. We then performed two analyses by making use of a three-stage least squares approach to test the proposed model. First, we analyzed the effect of positive affect and situation on the number of salient benefits. Second, we tested the influence of positive affect and situation on benefit salience (relative shift). As anticipated, positive affect (i.e., pleasure) significantly increases the number of salient benefits. We also test for the effect of situation on positive affect and find significant positive results regarding the effect of social pressure on pleasure and arousal. Yet, we do not observe an effect for time constraint on pleasure and arousal. The results of the analysis of the situation on the number of salient benefits shows no effect for time constraint. Surprisingly, social pressure has a significant negative effect on the number of salient benefits, even when we control for the effects of affective state. The results further show that positive affect has the strongest influence on the benefit entertainment. To examine whether the differences between entertainment and the remaining benefits are significant, we perform several Wald tests and find significant differences between entertainment and all other benefits except interactivity. Moreover, the effect of situation on benefit salience illustrates that social pressure has a significant negative effect on adequacy, scope, usefulness, speed, entertainment, navigation, and decisional control and time constraint has a significant negative effect on entertainment. Given our interest in the relative shift of individual respondents’ benefit salience, we conducted a Wald test and restricted the shift within both manipulation conditions to be constant. The Wald test results are significant and provide further evidence that the relative importance of benefits shifts across the situations.

The impact of the situation on consumers’ benefit activation (salience) has received considerable support over the years; however, many of these studies are not very specific about the processes involved. We offer a first attempt to empirically untangle this “black box” and further understanding of the influence of the situation on consumer decision making. We examine two mechanisms that underlie the link between situation and benefit salience. We find support for both routes, which highlights the importance of accounting for cognitive and affective effects simultaneously in understanding the effect of situation on consumers’ benefit salience.

References


1The scale items as well as the results of the CFA can be made available by the authors upon request.


