



Approaches to consumer behaviour: An overview

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Abstract

Conditions of global competition are changing rapidly today and companies that strategize and react to these changes promptly and quickly are the most successful. Due to technological developments, physical differences of products have decreased. Differentiation should be made on the meaningful products bear instead of on their physical features. Hence it brings about rapid changes in consumer behavioral choice and decision making. The trend of consumer demand has undergone radical changes due to significant changes in the nature and structure of the economic set up. The traditional random consumer behaviour now just turned to be impulse and instant consumer which demand new techniques and multidisciplinary perspectives to understand the nature of purchase and consumption behaviour. Hence, a wider study must make to study the complex behavior of consumer in the context of lifestyle, values, priorities, and social context etc. So the present article looks upon the following.

Key words: *consumer buying behaviour, cognitive, traits.*

Introduction

Consumer behaviour is the study “of the processes involved when individual or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires”(Solomon 1995,7). In the marketing context, the term “consumer” refers not only to the act of purchase itself, but also to patterns of aggregate buying which include pre-purchase and post purchase activities. pre-purchase activity might consist of the growing awareness of a need or want, and a search for and evaluation of information about the products and brands that might satisfy it. Post purchase activities include the evaluation of the purchased item in use and the reduction of any anxiety which accompanies the purchase of expensive and infrequently bought items.

(Foxall 1987), Engel, et al.(1986,5)define consumer behaviour as “those act of individuals directly involved in obtaining, using, and disposing of economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts”.There are two factors mainly influencing the consumers for decision making :Risk Aversion and innovativeness. Risk aversion is a measure of how much consumers need to be certain and sure of what they are purchasing. (Donthu and Grilliland,1996).Highly risk adverse consumers need to be very certain about what they are buying.Where as less risk adverse consumers can tolerate some risk and

uncertainty in their purchase. The second variable, innovativeness, is a global measure which captures the degree to which consumers are willing to take chances and experiment with the new ways of doing things (Donthu and Gilliland, 1996).

It is argued that consumer behaviour itself emerged as a distinct field of study during 1960s; and it is characterized by two broad paradigms, the positivist and the non-positivist. The positive paradigm encompasses the economic, behavioural, cognitive, motivational/trait/and situational perspectives; these perspectives are referred to as the traditional perspectives as they pre-date the development of the non-positivist paradigm. The opposing, non-positivist paradigm, envelops the interpretive and post-modern perspectives, which have emerged more recently during the period post-1980 to date. The rational view and the ideology of a homogeneous social culture and thereby deny the complex social and cultural world in which consumers live. The traditional, positivist perspective takes a very utilitarian approach to benefits from consumption, while the non-positivist perspectives place much greater emphasis on the symbolic dimension of choice.

Different perspectives to consumer behaviour

I The traditional perspective

The traditional perspectives are built on the common foundations of “rationalism” and share allegiance to the principle of a single traditional, positive-based approach to consumer research. These are the behavioural, cognitive, trait, motivational, attitudinal and situational viewpoints.

II The Rational perspective

Economic theory holds that purchasing decisions are the result of largely “rational” and conscious economic calculations. Thus, the individual buyer seeks to spend his income on those goods that will deliver the most utility (satisfaction) according to his taste and relative prices. The antecedents of this view can be traced back to Adam Smith (1776). Alfred Marshall (1890) consolidated the classical and neoclassical traditions in economics, into a refined theoretical framework that came to be known as the theory of marginal utility. His theoretical work aimed to simplify assumptions and thereby examine the effect of change in single variables (e.g. price) holding other variables constant. While economic models such as the Marshallian theory of ‘marginal utility’ are useful to the extent that they provide behavioral hypotheses (e.g. the lower the price of the product the higher the sales), the validity of the hypothesis does not rest upon where all individuals act as calculating machines in making their purchase decisions. The Marshallian model ignores the fundamental question of how product and brand preferences are formed. Several studies have identified the impacts of price differentials on consumers’ brand preferences; changes in product cues on demand variations; changes in price on demand sensitivity; and scarcity on consumer choice behavior amongst many others. (Lewis et al. 1995)

III The behavioural perspective

As mentioned above, in contrast to the economic view which specifies the importance of internal mental processes in consumer decision making, the behavioural perspective stresses the role of external environmental factors in the

process of learning, which it is argued causes behavior. Thus behaviorist approach the consumer, as a "black box" and there by assumes that consumer behavior is a conditioned response to external events. While a number of researchers have proposed models to study learning principles e.g Thorndike (1911); Watson and Rayner (1920), this view is represented by two major approaches to learning: Classical conditioning and instrumental learning.

IV The cognitive perspective

The cognitive perspective stresses the role of information processing in consumer decision making. This perspective views people as problem solvers who actively use information from the world around them to master the environment. The information processing theory (cognitive theory) is central to the variety of hierarchy of effect models which as Barry and Howard (1992) explain, posit that consumers go through a "variety of stages namely cognitive, affective, and conative, in responding to advertising, and other marketing messages".

V Consumer Decision making models.

The three major comprehensive models for consumer decision making were proposed by Nicosia 1966; Engel et al. 1968; and Howard and Sheth 1969. These attempts to trace the psychological state of individual consumers from the point at which they become aware of the possibility of satisfying a material need by purchasing and consuming a product to their final evaluation of the consequences of having done so. Engel et al. (1986) suggest that the different stages of decision making process starts with problem recognition, followed by an information search, alternative evaluation, purchase and post purchase activities.

VI The personality perspective

As noted above, some purchases have more personal relevance than others. While this partly reflects on factors such as price, it also bears on the way in which some products enhance the consumers "self concept" i.e. possessions are considered to reflect on a consumer's image of him or herself. Personality has also been understood as the unique way in which traits, attitudes, aptitudes etc are organized in an individual (Marx and Hillix) and this draws attention to the ways in which individuals differ from one another through the peculiar configuration of traits and other characteristics each possesses. While individuals might not always be uniform and predictable in their patterns of choice in different situations, it might be possible to make sense of and to forecast the general reactions of broadly defined groups and classes of purchase.

VII The motivational perspectives and psychographics

Ernest Ditcher advocated the use of psychoanalytical techniques to uncover hidden motivations (e.g. to understand the deeper meanings of products and advertisements). He strongly argued that people could not be asked why they did what they did directly, because most of the time they did not know. Ditcher's ideology of "truth-is-in-the-subconscious" is truly valid under these situations.

VIII The Attitudinal perspective

Attitudes are predispositions felt by buyers before they enter the buying process. The buying process itself is a learning experience and can lead to change in attitudes (Politz 1958). Thus, attitudes do not automatically guarantee all types of behavior. They are really the product of social forces interacting with the individuals' unique temperament and abilities. Most researchers argued that an attitude has three components: affect, behaviour, and cognition. A consumer who is highly involved with a product category and who perceives a high level of product differentiation between alternatives will follow the cognitive hierarchy (beliefs-affect-behaviour).

IX The situational influence perspective

A situation is defined by factors over and above the characteristics of a person and product. According to the behavioural influence perspective of low involvement decision situations, consumer decision making is a learned response to environmental cues, and when a person decides to buy something impulse that is prompted as a "surprise special" in a store.

X The positivist perspective

The traditional positivist approach is established on the premise that consumers are highly rational, stable and knowable entities. Thus, the basis of the traditional perspectives is that consumer behaviour is controlled by forces which largely beyond the control of consumers themselves (Anderson 1983). Accordingly, change is not something which consumers do for themselves, rather it is a result of something that is done to them by some internal (trait) or external environment force over which they have little or no control (Shaughnessy 1985). The behavioral perspective suggests that consumer behavior is largely determined or conditioned, by external environmental stimuli (Bagozzi 1980). This static nature of consumer behavior, is further reinforced by assumption that consumers are "motivated primarily or exclusively to reduce tension and maintain an internal state of equilibrium" (Hjelle and Ziegler 1992). The traditional perspectives therefore, assume a highly "reactive" or passive consumer. The traditional perspective assumes that consumers lack a conscious self-reflective ability and as a result can be totally controlled and manipulated by marketers through environmental engineering (Foxall 1997; Hudson and Murray 1986; Rose et al 1990).

XI The Non-positivist Perspectives

In contrast to the traditional perspectives, the interpretive and postmodern perspectives of consumer behavior attribute consumers with the capacity to "proactively" assign to represent their environment rather than just passively respond to them (Hirschman 1986; Calder and Tryout 1987). The interpretive perspective view of consumer behavior is channeled by the content and structure of consumers' subjective meaning systems (Holbrook 1995). Shaughnessy and Holbrook (1988) explain that interpretive post-modern actions like buying are not simply matters of rational calculations with consumers computing up the pros and cons of objective facts, but rather are matters involving felt expectations as to how the consumption episode will be personally experienced. The post-modern perspectives

argues that there is no fixed or pre given essences residing inside consumers that make them behave what they do (Brown 1995; Fireat et al 1994). rather ,self identity and subjectivity are assumed to be constituted by particular form of languages, or discourses which in turn are mediated by the consumers Social Interactions (Foster 1983). Thus, identity said to be constantly influx and “changing” depending upon with whom the consumer is consuming, in what circumstances they are consuming. and for what purpose (Burr 1995). The post modern consumer behaviour points out the fragmentary and fluid nature of consumers “self-identity”. Fire et al (1995) contend that post modern consumer is inconsistent and improper while making radical decision making. Thus, the post modern perspective emphasis on creativity, autonomy, and power of consumers to define and change themselves and the world in which they live through different patterns of consumption and lifestyles (Brown 1995).

Conclusion

This broadened perspective has been recently reflected in the literature, as published research focus on the subjective aspect of consumption experience, such as hedonic consumption. Research methodology moves beyond positivism to naturalism in order to achieve a broader understanding of consumption on the consumer without any particular intent to change or influence the process. While some outcomes may be significant to marketing practice to over all goal of such research endeavour is to achieve better understanding of consumer behaviour.

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