A Contemporary Framework for Emotions in Consumer Decision-Making: Moving Beyond Traditional Models

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Abstract

Traditional models of consumer decision-making are largely cognitive and sequential in nature. While there is some recognition of an emotional component in the decision-making process, traditional models assume emotions are sequential in nature with the most important emotion being the final one, negative emotions are bad and should be overcome, cognitive and affective processes and multiple emotions cannot exist simultaneously, and a dichotomy exists between satisfaction and emotion in consumer decision-making. This paper examines contemporary research that challenges traditional assumptions about the role of emotions in consumer decision-making and introduces the role of consumer emotional intelligence into the process. The discussion concludes with a look at the strategic and ethical implications for marketers.

Keywords: consumer decision-making, emotions, consumer emotional intelligence, ethical marketing

1.0 Introduction

Traditional consumer decision-making models, like other forms of economic decision-making, are grounded in the theory of rational choices made by rational actors (Ramanathan & Shiv, 2001). Boone and Kurtz (2010) describe consumers as engaging in the following sequential steps when making a purchase decision:

1. They recognize a problem or opportunity.
2. Consumers search for the available alternatives.
3. An evaluation of the alternatives occurs.
4. A purchase decision is made.
5. The purchase act occurs.
6. A post-purchase evaluation is made producing feedback used in the next consumer decision.

While the authors recognizesome interpersonal and personal influences on decision-makers,the traditional model is primarily cognitive in nature. As marketing has evolved into the relationship and one-to-one eras of the 1990s, marketers have started to focus on human emotions and their role in consumer decision-making (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010; Peter & Olson, 2010). Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan (2010) argue that marketing has moved beyond the era of "messaging" to touching customers' emotions. To emphasize the importance of emotions, the authors quote Donald Calne: "The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to actions while reason leads to conclusions" (Kotler, et al., 2010, p.170). The authors also state that the "decision to buy and be loyal to a brand is greatly influenced by emotions" (Ibid, p. 170).

2.0 The New Role of Emotions in Consumer Decision-Making

The view of the role of emotions in consumer decision-making has evolved from a focus on positive or negative emotions at the *end* of a consumer transaction (Taylor, 2009), to understanding the impact of negative emotions (Garg, 2003; Khan, 2010; Morris& Luce, 2007), consumer ambivalence (Carrera & Oceja, 2007; Taylor, 2009), consumer conflict (Beverland, Chung, & Kates, 2009), openness-to-feeling (Chuang & Lin, 2007), and consumer emotional intelligence (Jewell, Cui, Kidwell, & Wang, 2009; Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008; Peter & Krishnakumar, 2010)*during* the decision-making process.While this paper is not designed to explore all aspects of the role of emotions in consumer decision-making, itwill update some of theassumptions associated with traditional models and describe the strategic and ethical implications for marketers.

2.1 Revising Emotional Assumptions of Traditional Models

Moving toward a contemporary framework for understanding the role of emotions in consumer decision-making requires us to reconsider some of the underlying assumptions about emotions offered by traditional consumer decision-making models.

This section will explore the assumptions related to sequential emotions, satisfaction/emotion and cognitive/affective dichotomies, and negative emotions.

2.1.1 Sequential emotions

Much like the traditional model of consumer decision-making discussed earlier in this paper(involving a rational set of sequential steps),emotions in consumer decision-making were also believed to be sequential in nature with the most important emotion being the final one. These emotional judgments were assumed to be exclusively positive or negative, occurred post-purchase, and were not necessarily related to post-purchase satisfaction (Taylor, 2009). Carrera and Oceja (2007) developed an Analogical Emotional Scale (AES) that has allowed marketing researchers to analyze the "simultaneous mixed emotional experiences" (p. 422) consumers often have when making consumption decisions.Using the AES has allowed marketing researchers to determine it is possible for multiple emotional states to exist during a consumer decision. Emotions occur either sequentiallyorsimultaneouslythroughout the decision-making process (Taylor, 2009; Carrera & Oceja, 2007). These emotions, defined as "consumer ambivalence" by Taylor (2009), are the result of "the interaction between internal factors and external objects, people, institutions, and/or cultural phenomena in market-oriented contexts" (Taylor, 2009, p.46).

2.1.2 Satisfaction/emotion & cognitive/affective dichotomies

Like Kotler, et al (2010), Taylor (2009) recognized that the evolution of marketing into the relationship era meant there were added dimensions to the formerly cognitive models of decision-making. Specifically,his studies demonstrated that consumer decision-making is a simultaneouscognitive and affective process with no dichotomy between satisfaction and emotions as previously assumed.

2.1.3 Negative emotions

While negative emotions play a variety of roles in consumer decision-making, traditional models have considered them undesirable as they can "adversely affect decision-making and can have both short and long-term consequences" (Khan, 2010).Some examples of undesirable attributes of negative emotions include delaying a consumer decision to get medical tests when the tests might indicate a serious illness (Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008), or avoiding the decision to purchase technology when the product is rapidly evolving due to the negative emotional factors of anticipated regret, confidence, and stress (Morris & Luce, 1997).Khan (2010) describes several other traditional beliefs about negative emotions in decision-making including negative affects leading to "impulsiveness and shallow-processing of information" (Kahn, 2010, p.263), as well as poor product evaluation and negative brand attitude.

However, recent studies have proposed positive impacts from negative emotions as they relate to consumer decision-making. Nelson, Malkoc, and Shiv (as discussed by Khan, 2010), have shown that regret plays a significant role in learning from past mistakes and leads to "better performance on decisions within the domain where regret is experienced" (Khan, 2010, p. 263).Research by Khan, Maimaran, and Dhar (2010) demonstrated that anger makes individuals less likely to defer choice, more satisfied with their decisions, and less likely to compromise resulting in more goal-consistent actions. A study by Zemack-Rugar (2010) indicated sadness can improve self-control in individuals with strong emotion-regulation cognitions (ERC). ERC is defined as "thoughts individuals have about what behaviors are useful for goal attainment" (Zemack-Rugar, 2010, p.265). A study by Chuang and Lin (2007) indicated that undesirable actions such as risk-taking in consumer decisions, which can be present when individuals are in a negative emotional state, can be "moderated by openness to feeling (OF) as a function of individual personality" (p. 65). OF refers to the "extent to which persons are receptive to their inner feelings and believe that such feelings are important to their lives" (p. 67). Persons with high OF are significantly influenced by their moods and trust their feelings, whereas low OF individuals discount and control their feelings and are less likely to engage in risky behavior as a result of negative emotions.

3.0 Consumer Emotional Intelligence

Adopting new assumptions about emotions in consumer decision-making moves us toward a more contemporary framework within which to discussthe role of emotions in consumer decision-making. These new assumptions include multiple emotions existing simultaneously, no dichotomies between satisfaction and emotion or the roles of cognition and affect, as well as negative emotions not always leading to undesirable decision outcomes.Within this new framework resides the emerging field of consumer emotional intelligence (CEI).

3.1 Origins of Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman (as discussed by Crainer, 2006) developed the concept of emotional intelligence in his 1995 book entitled *Emotional Intelligence*.

Goleman became interested in the topic when he noticed there seemed to be very little correlation between IQ, as measured by intelligence tests, and what it takes to be successful in life. Instead, the ability to handle one's emotions seemed to matter a great deal. Specifically, he found the ability to deal with frustration, self-awareness, self-discipline, persistence, empathy, and getting along with people to be important life-skills.Goleman's research found it was impossible to separate thought from emotion and that the brain naturally gives feelings priority over thought. However, he believed that emotional intelligence can be taught and individual's can learn to control their emotions to become better decision-makers and leaders (Crainer, 2006). Goleman introduced the concept of emotional intelligence in the business setting by applying it to leadership. In the work environment emotional intelligence is "based on the notion that the ability of managers to understand and manage their own emotions and those of the people they work with is the key to better business performance" (as cited by Crainer, 2006, p. 109). His research found that at senior management levels emotional intelligence was a better indicator of a successful leader than rational intelligence.

3.2 Emergence of Consumer Emotional Intelligence

Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2003) developed a comprehensive tool to measure emotional intelligence called the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). The instrument is domain-general and designed to be a general measure of emotional ability in a wide range of interpersonal contexts. The domain-generic aspect of the MSCEIT along with its cost and length (141 items) made it problematic as a measure of consumer behavior (Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008; Peter & Krishnakumar, 2010). To address this issue, Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers (2008) developed a domain-specific instrument to measure consumer emotional intelligence entitled the Consumer Emotional Intelligence Scale (CEIS). Kidwell et al. (2008) define consumer emotional intelligence (CEI) as "a person's ability to skillfully use emotional information to achieve a desired consumer outcome" (p.154). The CEIS is an 18 item ability-based scale and is designed to measure emotional abilities that allow individuals to recognize the meanings of emotional patterns underlying decisions.Specifically, the scalefocuses on the ability to perceive, facilitate, understand, and manage emotions. It differs from Chuang and Lin's (2007) work on openness to feelings by being a measure of ability to use emotional information in the decision-making process rather than just being aware of or open to one's feelings.

One of the significant outcomes of the development of the CEIS is that it allows marketing researchers to better understand the role emotions play in individual consumer decision-making. Some significant findings from Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers (2008) include:

- An individual's level of consumer emotional intelligence (CEI) determines how consumers use and manage emotions in decision-making.
- Gender was not a significant factor in emotional reasoning abilities.
- Emotional ability predicts consumer performance beyond the effects of cognitive ability.
- In a food choice task involving healthful eating behaviors, total calories consumed were predicted by the abilities to understand and manage emotion. There is a strong connection between consumer emotional intelligence and food consumption.
- Individuals who are unable to perceive their emotions were unable to resist the comfort of well-known brands despite their inferior product attributes.
- In non-food product choice decisions (considered to require less management of emotion) individuals with higher consumer emotional intelligence made better choices than those with lower CEI.
- Consumer emotional intelligence is a predictor of compulsive consumption.

In addition to the results discussed above, the authors describe several implications from their initial research that could serve as a direction for future inquiry. First, consumers with high consumer emotional intelligence might be less likely to purchase if they experience an incidental mood during a purchase choice situation. The emotional reaction will stand out to the consumer, causing them to delay a purchase decision as they recognize the mood is irrelevant to the situation. The authors also believe an understanding of CEI might help individuals minimize the undesirable outcomes associated with negative emotions. One example they cite is health decisions in which emotions of risk and fear might cause people to avoid medical tests that could detect life-threatening illnesses.

3.3 Additional Studies Using CEIS

As the study of consumer emotional intelligence is an emerging field of inquiry, few studies exist using the CEIS as a measurement device.

However, a study by Peter and Krishnakumar (2010) using both the CEIS and MSCEIT found a correlation between emotional intelligence, impulse buying, and self-esteem with the CEIS being a better predictor than the MSCEIT. Jewell, Cui, Kidwell, and Wang (2009) conducted the first study using the CEIS to compare consumer emotional intelligence between the United States and China. The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine if differences in consumer emotional intelligence existed between the individualistic culture of the U.S. and the collectivist culture of China. The results of the Chinese data indicated a good fit for the CEIS model supporting the notion that consumer emotional intelligence is a general construct that applies to consumers across cultures. The only significant difference between the two groups was in the dimension of understanding emotions. The researchers believed a possible explanation is that Chinese culture relies more on contextual cues to understand emotional states than Americans do.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications For Marketers

Our increased understanding of the role of emotions in consumer decision-making has resulted in a new framework within which marketers will work. The role of consumer emotional intelligence in consumer decision-making described by Kidwell et al (2008) has confirmed the necessity to remove some of the traditional assumptions about the role of emotions.Consistent with the findings of Carrera and Oceja (2007), Kotler et al. (2010), and Taylor (2009) emotions can exist along with cognition throughout the decision process. Depending on the individual’s level of emotional intelligence, dichotomies between satisfaction and emotion or the cognitive and affective may or may not exist. The consumer’s level of emotional intelligence will also determine how they use negative emotions. It is possible to use negative emotions to obtain positive outcomes. While we know emotions are a factor in decision-making, we cannot describe a general role for all consumers as consumer emotional intelligence determines how individuals use emotional cues.

4.1 Marketing Strategy Implications

Kotler et al. (2010) recognize the need to move from product and/or consumer-based marketing strategies to more holistic strategies that appeal to the whole person. The authors suggest creating marketing strategies that are collaborative, cultural, emotional, and spiritual. While this author does not disagree with the inclusion of affective components in marketing strategies, she believes marketers should not limit their appeals to this area. These types of affective strategies might appeal to those with lower consumer emotional intelligence, however, based on the findings of Kidwell et al., marketers risk losing a segment of their potential market without a cognitive element in their message. The optimal strategy would be to include both cognitive and affective messages in the marketing strategy.Another strategy might be to include the use of subtle emotional appeals as consumers with high levels of emotional intelligence might delay decision-making when presented with strong emotional appeals. As Jewell et al. (2009) state: “Emotional intelligence operates in a complementary fashion with the more traditional, cognitively-based knowledge in decision-making” (p. 549).

As consumers experience simultaneous cognitive and emotional dissonance, consumers may leave marketing exchanges with a ‘ratio of satisfaction’. This ratio might be closer to 50/50 positive versus negative and lead to ambivalence (Taylor, 2009, p. 57). The impact could be less customer brand loyalty with consumers influenced more easily by other factors (societal, cultural, reference groups) than by the marketing message alone. This ties to Kidwell et al.’s (2008) suggestion that more research needs to be done (by academics and marketing departments) to determine the emotional impact of interpersonal reactions (family, friends, coworkers) on purchase decisions. When should marketers target consumers indirectly through influencers? Are low emotional intelligence consumers more likely to be dependent on influencers to help them make decisions due to low self-esteem or fear? One strategy recommended by Lerner, Han, and Keltner (2007) is for marketers to focus on integral emotions (feelings that are normatively related to the judgment or decision at hand), rather than incidental emotions in messaging. One example would be helping people feel good about a problem the product purchased will solve rather than trying to convince consumers they will feel “happier” overall if they purchase the product.

4.2 Ethical Implications

What marketers do with an increased understanding of the role of emotions and emotional intelligence in consumer decision-making has significant ethical implications. Kidwell et al.’s (2008) research implies that emotional appeals are most effective on those individuals who are least able to use their emotions to make good consumption decisions.One example of potential ethical implications associated with this knowledge came from Chuang and Lin’s (2007) research.

The researchers recommend treating negative emotions as a marketing segment becauseconsumers in a negative emotional state are more likely to respond to “puffer” advertising as a means of removing negative emotions. Is it ethical to treat negative emotions as a segment when individuals with low CEI are unable to use those emotions to make effective consumption decisions? There are many opportunities to use this information to benefit society. According to Goleman (as cited by Crainer, 2006), emotional intelligence can be learned. As a society we have an ethical responsibility to begin teaching emotional intelligence at home and in our schools to help children become better decision-makers as adults. Marketers can play a part in educating consumers about issues such as the role of emotional intelligence in delaying important medical testing due to negative emotions. Marketers can work with restaurants to develop advertising and in-store materials (like menus) that promote healthy eating. Ethical marketers should encourage consumer emotional intelligence as a means to drive positive behaviors in consumers.As Kotler et al. (2010) suggest, using emotions in marketing without integrity is unethical.

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