

The Relationship Between Customer Satisfaction Emotions and Consumer Loyalty: Future Research Direction

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide future research directions in the area of the relationship between customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty. Two major issues are identified in order to provide future research directions in the area. The first issue being identified is the incomplete customer satisfaction measurement adopted by many of the satisfaction researchers. The second issue being identified is the lack of studies on the relationship between customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty. Three main recommendations for future studies are made based on the issues identified. The first recommendation is that future customer satisfaction studies need to include a separate emotional scale as part of the overall customer satisfaction measurement. The second recommendation is that the satisfaction emotional scale/component needs to be further developed and refined for different industry and cultures. The third recommendation suggests that future research needs to further explore the relationship between customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty.

1. Introduction

Researchers have adopted very different views on customer satisfaction definition and measurement. Some suggested that satisfaction is multi-dimensional while the others suggested that satisfaction is one-dimensional. For instance, Selnes [26] argued that multi-item satisfaction scales “do not make sense” because satisfaction is “one-dimensional and can be directly accessible from the informant”. Winsted [30] also argued that the satisfaction construct is “unidimensional”. On the other hand, it was argued that satisfaction is multi-dimensional and the satisfaction measurement needs to be

consistent with this multi-dimensional characteristic [31].

In spite of the debate between one- and multi-dimensional character, few recent satisfaction researchers have raised the importance of properly measuring the emotional component of satisfaction. However, while many satisfaction researchers would accept that emotion is one of the core components of satisfaction, it is still not commonly accepted that a separate emotional scale should be included as part of the overall satisfaction measurement to ensure that this core component is properly measured [31].

This paper therefore aims to review the existing literature related to the issues of including a separate emotional scale in the overall satisfaction measurement and its implications of using satisfaction to predict customer loyalty. It also aims to identify the future research direction based on the literature reviewed.

Based on the literature reviewed, there are two issues being identified in the area of satisfaction research. The first issue is the incomplete customer satisfaction measurement. The second issue is the lack of studies on customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty. This paper will firstly review the existing literature related to the incomplete customer satisfaction measurement. Future research implications related to this issue will then be identified with brief discussion. Secondly, this paper will discuss the existing literature related to the lack of studies on customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty. Future research implications related to this area will be identified and briefly discussed.

2. Incomplete Customer Satisfaction Measurement

To determine whether the existing customer satisfaction measurement is incomplete, it is necessary to exam the common satisfaction definitions and measurements employed by the studies in this area. This would enable the researchers to understand if both customer satisfaction definitions and scales employed to measure customer satisfaction are consistent. Therefore, the definition of customer satisfaction adopted by the recent studies will be firstly discussed in the following section.

2.1. Definition: Customer Satisfaction and Customer Satisfaction Emotions

Traditionally, satisfaction definitions have included both “evaluation” and “emotion” (feelings) elements [1] [16]. Andreassen [1] concluded that satisfaction is an evaluation of emotions, and that satisfaction should not be understood as an emotion but “an evaluation” of various emotions. On the other hand, while it is accepted that satisfaction is closely related to, or includes emotions, it is not clear whether satisfaction is an emotion itself, or consists of several emotions that form the overall satisfaction emotional component.

The confusion does not only exist within the construct - customer satisfaction, it also exists as compared to other constructs such as loyalty. For instance, Bennitt and Rundle-Thiele [4] suggested that the strong positive correlations between customer satisfaction and loyalty could be due to the fact that satisfaction and loyalty may not be different concepts. Stauss and Neuhaus [27] also consider loyalty as part of their satisfaction definition. If customer satisfaction consists of emotional, cognitive and behavioural components, there is a significant overlap between the constructs of satisfaction and attitudes, as attitudes also consists of emotional, cognitive and behavioural components [25]. Nevertheless, the majority of the satisfaction studies see satisfaction and loyalty as different constructs.

Despite the above confusions within the satisfaction construct itself and between satisfaction and other constructs, there are some characteristics that have been commonly accepted to form the theoretical understanding of the satisfaction construct. For instance, recent studies have argued that satisfaction tends to be

seen as short term temporal focus rather than long-term as compared to other related constructs such as perceived service quality [13] and trust [21]. Odekerken-Schröder, *et al.* [21] suggested that satisfaction is a short-term consequence of service quality, while trust is a long-term consequence of service quality. Roest and Pieters [23] argued that the construct of satisfaction is a reflection of the consumer (subject) rather than the service (object) and they suggested that further research restrict satisfaction to the post-purchase process.

In order to compare the results from different studies, it is important to employ a consistent definition [10], and since there are problems in reaching a universal satisfaction definition among satisfaction researchers, it is difficult to obtain a universal satisfaction definition to compare the results with other satisfaction study findings. After incorporating the key elements from the discussion above, satisfaction in this paper will be defined as “an aggregation of all previous transaction-specific satisfaction, and involves both cognitive and affective components” [31, pp. 235-236], and the affective component is an overall evaluation of different emotions. It is important to note that many current satisfaction studies still solely focused on the cognitive component of customer satisfaction and neglected the emotional component.

Many customer satisfaction studies have solely focused on measuring the cognitive component of customer satisfaction while some researchers argued that customer satisfaction measurement should also include a separate affective component in addition to the cognitive component. For instance, Stauss and Neuhaus [27] and Liljander and Strandvik [15] suggested that a separate affective component should be included as part of the satisfaction measurement and, as a result, have developed a satisfaction emotional measurement. Yu and Dean [31] also found that the satisfaction affective component served as a better predictor as compared to the satisfaction cognitive component. However, this view did not appear to be adopted by many satisfaction researchers as many still have not included a separate emotional scale in their customer satisfaction measurement.

The following section will discuss the possible dimensions of satisfaction emotional scale/component.

2.2. Customer Satisfaction Emotions Dimensions

Since it is appropriate to include a separate emotional scale/component as part of the overall customer satisfaction measurement, it is important that an appropriate measurement for the satisfaction emotional component is being developed.

The emotion frameworks identified by Machleit and Eroglu [16] considered human emotions in general have found that emotions can be classified as positive and negative. Researchers who have focused specifically on consumer satisfaction have obtained a similar conclusion that satisfaction emotions can be classified as negative and positive [15] [16] [31] [7]. For instance, Liljander and Strandvik [15] identified two dimensions of satisfaction emotions: positive and negative. The positive emotions included emotions such as happy, hopeful and positively surprised, on the other hand, the negative emotions included emotions such as angry, depressed, guilty and humiliated.

While many have suggested that satisfaction emotions are two-dimensional, the possibility that the satisfaction emotions maybe a three-dimensional construct was raised in a study conducted by Yu and Dean [31]. Using the same emotions framework as Liljander and Strandvik [15], Yu and Dean [31] reported a two dimensional solution with 'anger' loading on both the positive and negative dimensions. This finding suggested that there might be another emotional dimension in addition to positive and negative emotions, especially when the alpha coefficient dropped by only 0.1 when the anger item was removed.

Based on Mehrabian and Russell's study, three dimensions of emotions, namely, *pleasure* (that included satisfied/dissatisfied), *arousal* and *dominance* have also been identified [28]. In adopting part of this typology in their study, Sweeney and Wyber [28] demonstrated that the *pleasure* dimension was significantly related to some aspects of loyalty behavior, such as positive word of mouth and future intention for shopping at the same store. While satisfaction was considered as an emotion within the pleasure dimension, Foxall and Greenley [1999] have argued that *pleasure* can also be called

satisfaction because of the consistent utilitarian reinforcement nature of these two constructs.

Although few recent studies have started to acknowledge the existence of customer satisfaction emotional component and have attempted to explore the dimensions of customer satisfaction emotions, more follow up studies are needed to further develop an appropriate measurement in order to capture the dynamic of customer satisfaction emotions.

Having identified and discussed the relevant literature related to the issue of incomplete satisfaction measurement, some future research implications are identified in the following section.

2.3. Future Research Implications

Based on the discussion above, some suggestions for the future research in relation to the incomplete customer satisfaction measurement are identified in this section.

The first and most important research implication is that future satisfaction researchers need to include a separate emotional measurement to measure the emotional component of satisfaction.

The second research implication is to further explore and refine the satisfaction emotional measurement and dimensions.

The third research implication is that studies need to understand if different emotions are being experienced for different service consumptions and in different cultures. Due to the insufficient research in this area, it is not clear that if distinct emotions are experienced while consuming different services. It is also not clear if consumer from different cultural background would experience different emotions for the same service consumed.

After discussed the literature and research implications related to the first issue identified, the next section will review the literature related to the second issue identified in this paper.

3. Lack of Studies on Customer Satisfaction Emotions and Customer Loyalty

The second key issue being identified in this paper is related to the lack of studies on customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty. In order to discuss this issue, it is essential to briefly discuss the nature of customer loyalty as it is also a complex construct. The following section will briefly discuss the nature of customer loyalty. The focus of the following section will be on the differences between the two types of customer loyalty: attitudinal loyalty (also called future behavioural intentions) and behavioural loyalty.

3.1. The Nature of Customer Loyalty

Generally speaking, there are two types of loyalty, namely, attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. And similar to some of the satisfaction measurement issues discussed above, there is a lack of reliable and valid loyalty measures [22] [24].

Attitudinal loyalty tends to focus on attitudes towards loyal/dis-loyal acts, brand preference, commitment or attitudes towards the brand measures, and/or probability of purchase. On the other hand, behavioral loyalty tends to focus on market share, brand allegiance, exclusive purchase, elasticity's, and/or price till switching [24]. The behavioral approach has been heavily criticized due to the fact that various factors may influence the behavior, such as repeat purchasing, and by simply measuring the behavior itself, the studies may miss the "attitudinal" component of consumer loyalty, such as preference, namely "true" loyalty [6] [5] [14] [22]. The attitudinal approach has also been criticized for an over reliance on consumers' self-report, and the loyalty focus can be blurred in many cases [22]. For instance, it is could be unclear whether the consumer loyalty level measured indicates loyalty towards the brand or the service provider.

Of the various loyalty behavior/intentions aspects, word of mouth is considered to have significant impact on consumer purchasing behavior, and is often found to be associated with satisfaction/dissatisfaction [18]. It was also suggested that future behavioral intention is driven by different factors that depend on the level of the relationships. For instance, for high relational customers, their future intentions tend to be driven by trust and commitment, conversely, low relational customers tend to be driven by overall satisfaction [9].

After a brief understanding of customer loyalty has been established in the above discussion, this paper will then examine issues related to the relationship between customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty in the following section.

3.2. Customer Satisfaction Emotions and Customer Loyalty

Of the studies that have focused on the satisfaction-loyalty relationship, only a few have established an empirical relationship between satisfaction emotions and loyalty behavior [31].

For instance, Athanassopoulos [2] has found a significant relationship between satisfaction scores and switching behavior. However, the emotional element of satisfaction was neglected in the study. A similar problem has been found in McDougall's [19] study, whose findings support the relationship between satisfaction and intention to switch and remain loyal in four services industries (dentist, auto service, restaurant and hairstylist). Unfortunately, their 2-item satisfaction measure did not include a satisfaction emotional component [14].

In examining the emotions-loyalty relationship, Sweeney [28] argued that emotions can be significant predictors for both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty perspectives. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that complaining behavior is one of the methods for venting anger, and dissatisfaction has been linked to complaining behavior, especially when the likelihood of redress is relatively high [29]. Meuter's [20] study also suggested that there is a significant positive relationship between overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior. For satisfied users, the complaining is more of "future suggestion" rather than the true complain. Also, satisfied users tended to engage in positive future loyalty behavior. While these findings are interesting, it is important to note that Meuter's [20] study used only a single item, yes/no, question to capture respondents' satisfaction levels, and the emotional component of the customer satisfaction has also been neglected.

Even for the researchers who have included a separate emotional scale as part of the overall

satisfaction measurement, some important emotions were missing in their scales to predict the full customer loyalty. For instance, the emotions included in Yu and Dean's [31] study failed to predict customers' complaining behavioural intention. Zeelenberg, *et al.* [32], who focused on the emotions of *regret* and *disappointment*, argued that different emotions are likely influence different decisions.

Further support for the distinctiveness of the two emotions – regret and disappointment was provided by Inman, Dyer and Jia [11] who argued that regret and disappointment along with one's performance expectations can influence an individual's post-choice evaluation and an asymmetric effect of regret and disappointment on post-choice evaluation was found in their empirical study. Although Inman and Zeelenberg's [22] empirical study on regret further confirmed the positive significant relationship between the probabilities of repeat purchase and positive consumption experience, more studies need to be done to test the findings across industries and different cultures.

While it may be logical and easy to argue that positive emotions are positively linked to consumer satisfaction and loyalty behaviour or behavioural intentions, and negative emotions decrease customer satisfaction, the relationship between emotions, satisfaction and loyalty may not be as simple as it appears. For instance, Yu and Dean [31] found that positive emotions appear to have relatively more significant relationship with positive loyalty behavior. On the other hand, Dubé and Menon [7] found that certain types of negative emotions link positively with consumer satisfaction. And Inman, *et al.* [11] found that negative emotions seem to have a stronger impact on post-choice evaluation as compared to positive emotions. In addition, the question of how different satisfaction emotions related to each other is yet to be answered [3].

The area of the different relationships between customer satisfaction emotional dimensions and different behavioural intentions is largely unexplored and future research needs to be done in this area. Based on the discussion above, some research implications for the future studies are discussed in the following section.

3.3. Future Research Implications

The key future research implication is that comprehensive emotional scales need to be develop in order to predict the full customer loyalty. Few satisfaction emotional scales have been developed, however there is lack of comprehensive satisfaction emotional scales to predict all the customer loyalty dimensions. Cultural and industry factors also need to be taken into consideration when examining the satisfaction emotion-loyalty relationship.

Researchers may also consider adopting the concept of qualitative satisfaction model proposed by Stauss and Neuhaus [27], which includes cognitive, affective and behavioural intention component. Future research can further develop and refine the different types of customer satisfaction that are related to specific cognitive and affective evaluation. This may enhance the predictability of both cognitive and affective components on customer loyalty.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, two main issues related to customer satisfaction studies have been identified. The first issue is the incomplete satisfaction measurement. The second issue is the lack of studies on the relationship between customer satisfaction emotions and loyalty dimensions.

To address the first issue identified, it is suggested that a separate emotional measurement to be included as part of the overall customer satisfaction measurement. It is also suggested that more follow up studies needs to be conducted to develop a comprehensive and appropriate satisfaction emotional measurement for different industries and cultures.

To address the second issue identified, insufficient studies have been done to explore the relationship between customer satisfaction emotions and customer loyalty. Considering satisfaction emotions appear to have strong influence on certain loyalty dimensions, more studies are needed to further explore the relationship between different customer satisfaction emotional dimensions and customer loyalty dimensions. The relationship between these two constructs may not be as simple as it appears.

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