

Modeling Research on Consumer's Attitude Morphology and Functional Relationships of a Research Model for Consumer's Attitude

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Abstract

Attitude is often seen as an elementary process of consumer behavior. Over time, attitude was included in most models built in order to define and illustrate consumer behavior. Modeling research on consumer attitude takes into account the formation of attitudes, its size and the influence it has on actual consumer behavior. This paper proposes a research model that takes into account all consumer attitudes mentioned above as well as the influence of consumer attitudes on the decisions (s)he makes in the various stages of the decision to purchase an economic good.

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JEL Classification: *M31, L15, D47, C69*

Introduction

Consumer behavior is defined most often as a result of a system of dynamic relationships between the processes of perception, information, attitude, motivation and the actual event (actual behavior)^{1,2}.

Among the processes that define consumer behavior, attitude is the one that presents the greatest stability over time. Attitudes are the result of affective processes and knowledge that create the predisposition to act on convictions. They are an important factor influencing consumer behavior. Some researchers define attitude as a latent dimension of consumer behavior.

Attitude is nowadays defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, pp.1). This definition encompasses the key features of attitudes - namely, *tendency, entity* (or attitude

¹ Cătoiu, I., Teodorescu, N., *Comportamentul consumatorului. Teorie și practică*, Economic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997.

² Teodorescu, N., Stăncioiu, A., F., Mitu, A., *Considerații privind managementul calității în servicii ca instrument de marketing pentru creșterea satisfacției utilizatorilor de produse turistice* *Amfiteatru Economic*, vol. XI, nr. 26, 2009, pp. 412-418.

object), and evaluation. This conception of attitude distinguishes between the inner tendency that is attitude and the evaluative responses that express attitudes³.

A distinct and complex definition of attitude is evolving within the literature. A mental readiness to respond and a co relational consistency between attitude and behavior - although controversial and in need of further study and analysis - remain viable subcomponents within the definition⁴. Most agree that evaluation is the heartbeat of attitude⁵. Modeling research on consumer attitude cannot ignore the other elementary processes that define consumer behavior. Research of a basic process of consumer behavior cannot ignore the decision-making process that accompanies the purchase of an economic good.

Literature Review

Many experts in consumer behavior used in modeling behavior either attitude as an elementary process or its size as elements that actually influence consumer behavior.

Existing models are based on various theories such as theories of attitudes and preferences, learning theory, theories of hierarchy effects etc.

The best known research models of consumer behavior that address attitudes as an elementary process are:

- Katona's school scheme - this has the advantage of a more analytical approach to consumer behavior, interposing between it the environment, the market, the extremely complex consumer himself. This opens a new perspective in the knowledge of consumer behavior, which allows obtaining information required to amend in such a way the external variables that it makes possible influencing consumer purchasing decision.
- The Nicosia model - this is a scheme resembling a flowchart describing the structure of behavior, enabling simulation of decision-making. The essence of the model lies in explaining consumer behavior in terms of the relationship between it and the environment that highlights two loops, one for the buyer and one for the company.
- The Engel - Kollart - Blackwell model - this complex model includes purchase decision process with all of its phases as well as material and social stimuli that constitute the inputs in the model. Attitude is included as a product evaluation tool.
- The Howard - Sheth model - it is considered that the first attempt to develop a model to explain the purchase decision process belongs to John Howard (1963)⁶; Jagolish Sheth came five years later. These researchers believe that there is a typology in making decisions embodied in three distinct situations: routine behavior, limited problem solving behavior; behavior for the complete resolution of the problem.

³ Eagly, A.H. and C., Shelly, The Advantages of an Inclusive Definition of Attitude. *Social Cognition*: Vol. 25, Special Issue: What is an Attitude?, 2007, pp. 582-602.

⁴ Mitu, A., Cercetarea calitativă a pieței publicității, aspecte metodologice ale cercetării calitative, *Buletinul Universității Petrol – Gaze Ploiești*, volumul LV, seria Științe Economice, nr. 1/2005, pp. 19-24.

⁵ Shrigley, R.L., Koballa, T.R. Jr., Simpson, R.D. *Defining attitude for science educators*, Article first published online: 18 aug. 2006, DOI: 10.1002/tea.3660250805

⁶ Howard, A.J., Seth, N.J., *A theory of buyer behavior*, available at: <http://www.jagsheth.net/docs/A%20Theory%20of%20Buyer%20Behavior2.pdf>, 1969, accessed 09th of November 2013.

Many of the models developed by specialists are based on the theory of cognitive consistency (coherence). The usefulness of these models depends largely on their explanatory or predictive value.

According to the principle of cognitive consistency, consumers' value harmony between thoughts, feelings and behavior and need to maintain consistency between these elements, this need motivates the need to have a certain behavior. This desire for harmonization may make the consumer change their feelings, thoughts or behavior to comply with lived experiences.

Cognitive consistency principle always reminds us that attitudes do not appear "from nothing" but they are linked to other processes of consumer behavior. An important factor in the formation of a new attitude is how it fits existing attitudes.

The explanatory value of the models presupposes a structural approach of the cognitive and affective components. The predictive value aims mainly at the relationship between the emotional component, the conative and that actual consumer behavior.

Consumer Attitude Model

Cognitive theorists⁷ define attitude to an object as a composite between the perceived usefulness of an object, as a means to achieve certain objectives and the relative importance of these objectives. The model takes into account the strength of the individual beliefs about the object.

To create such a research model, we tested several variables, in terms of pattern matching components and its functional relations with theoretical precepts accepted as defining consumer attitude.

The proposed model consists of two main levels (morphological and functional), respectively, on the one hand, the strict observance of the requirements associated with the operation of open systems and, on the other hand, research on the attitude of the consumer - so that one can easily validate the conceptual and experimental valence associated with the created model.

When creating these functional blocks we considered, among others, some general properties of social systems (which are open systems) - as it is consumer behavior that stability, sensitivity to certain parameters and that such systems are not linear, i.e. they have feedback curves to control the system functions.

The model developed consists of five functional blocks, each on specific issues examined in the study of consumer behavior: the behavior of elementary processes, observable and exogenous influences and attitude as an elementary process of consumer behavior that determines, by its conative size, the actual conduct and the decision to make that purchase.

Block A. Observable influences

This block consists of external factors whose influence on consumer attitudes and behavior patterns can be measured. In this sense, the model takes into account the following factors as observable influences:

A1. Demographic factors: distribution of users by gender, age, education, occupation, marital status, area of origin.

A2. Economic factors: consumer income, the household from which it originates and expenditure by purpose.

⁷ Eagly, A.H. and C., Shelly, The Advantages of an Inclusive Definition of Attitude. *Social Cognition*: Vol. 25, Special Issue: What is an Attitude?, 2007, pp. 582-602.

A3. Specific factors to marketing mix: include components of the marketing mix, approached through individual and overall communicative potential. These factors account for all the influences of marketing mix components on the behavior of elementary processes.

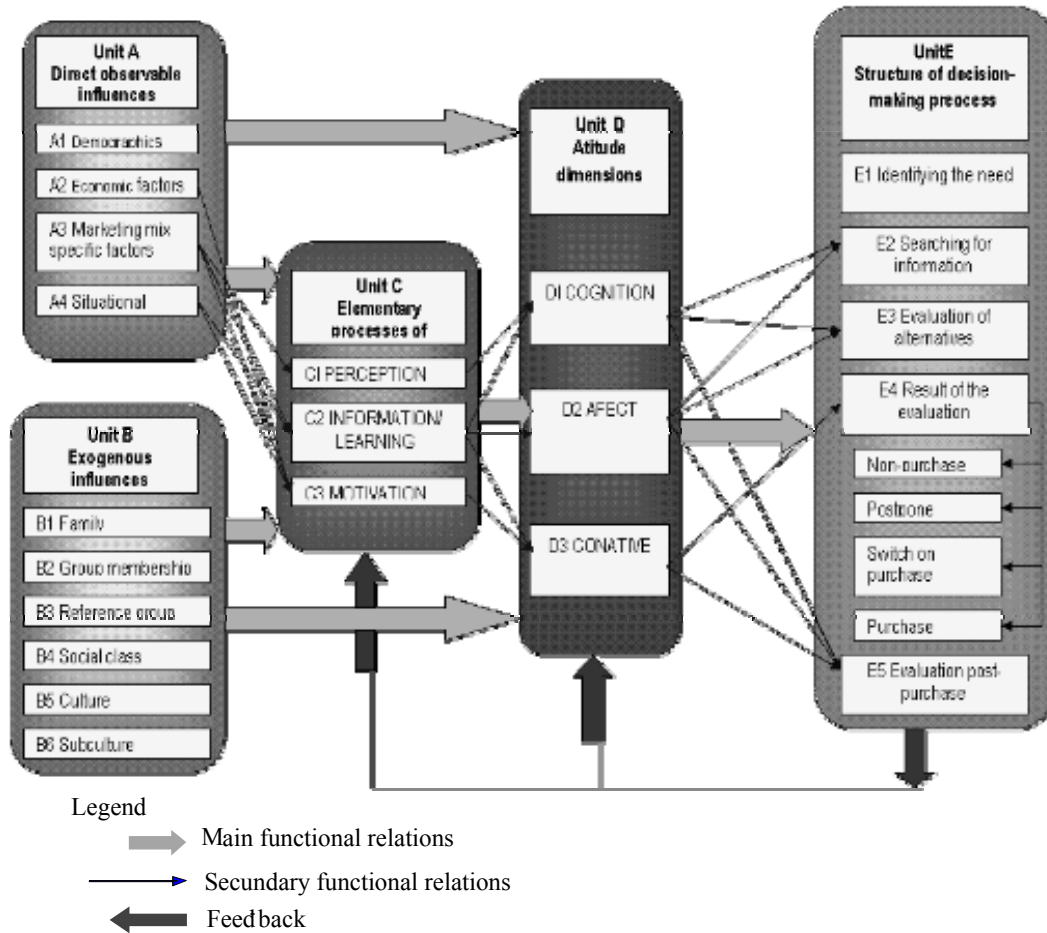


Fig. 1. Model proposed by the authors

A4. Situational factors: all those factors specific to an observation or well-defined situations in time and space, factors that result from intra-individual knowledge and personal attributes that characterize the stimulus (the chosen option), but have a demonstrable and systematic effect on actual behavior of the consumer.

Situational influences may be related to three distinct moments: the moment of marketing communication, time of purchase, time of consumption.

Block B. Exogenous influences

This block is composed of exogenous factors that influence the consumer attitudes and behavior. Components of consumer social environment have great importance especially for the formation and stability of consumer attitudes. Influential exogenous factors are considered the following:

B1. Family - group membership exerts the strongest influence on consumer attitudes on the whole especially at affective and conative level. Family is defined as a distinct social entity that

influences decisions of each member for a long time and whose structures for communication and interaction make possible the existence of a specific consumer decision-making and buying system.

B2. Membership to groups - it is a type of social structure, whose members have consciousness of belonging to that structure with a common purpose, a sense of unity and some common rules. One of the most popular groups is family membership. This includes the various professional organizations, groups of friends, education, ethnic groups, sports groups, etc. Interactions within a group are influenced in turn by the status of the members within it, their roles and how they exert influence.

B3. Reference groups - entities that are regarded as landmarks, as the standard for self-evaluation in the formation of opinions, attitudes, norms and behavior.

B4. Social class - in defining social class one considers more consumer characteristics such as income, occupation and education level. These variables are, however, difficult to aggregate because not all markets have the same correlation between the level of employment, education and consumer income.

B5. Culture - the whole rules, material and moral beliefs and habits created for mankind that we possess in common as members of society can largely determine individual attitudes and their actual behavior.

B6. Subculture - distinct cultural groups formed by various criteria: geographic, ethnic, religious, age. Subculture can influence consumer buying habits and especially regarding food, clothing and footwear.

Block C. Elementary processes of consumer behavior

It refers to the processes leading to the consumer attitude formation about a product or service. Basically, the 3 components of the block directly or conjugated influence both consumer attitude formation and its intensity and its stability over time. These elementary processes have a strong multidimensional character to be taken into consideration when designing any kind of behavioral studies.

C1. Perception: mental activity for finding, understanding, judging stimuli with the help of sensory receptors, it is an activity complementary to need, one usually perceives what (s)he is interested in, if there is no interest, it is ignored.

C2. Information: the process is closely linked to learning theory which shows that behavior change is a result of experiences represented (advertising or successful use of a product).

C3. Motivation: inner state mobilizing a body to fulfill a specific purpose. The reasons have a multidimensional character being built between biological and social, between subjective necessity and value as a reference system. Attitude is considered a latent variable of the human psyche, unobservable directly, which is interposed between reason and action, expressed in different behaviors to action of the same stimuli.

Block D. Attitude

Attitude is often defined as “learned predisposition to act consistently in a favorable or unfavorable way towards an object (Thurstone, 1946)”⁸ and as a “constant response syndrome to social objects (W.T. Campbell, 1950)”⁹. This syndrome has been associated 3 dimensions:

D1. Cognitive - knowledge or ignorance of the object in question

⁸ Shiffman, L, Kanuk, L.L., *Consumer behaviour*, 9th edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.

⁹ Cătoiu, I., Teodorescu, N., *Comportamentul consumatorului – ediția a II-a revăzută și adăugită*, Uranus Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004.

Cognitive dimension is closely related to age, personality, level of culture, as well as the outside concrete possibilities offered to an individual for information. Beliefs toward an object, product, event, etc., as essential elements of the cognitive component can be positive or negative. As they are often in large numbers, these beliefs are not always consistent, and at a time can be in conflict. However, the consumer has the tendency to give coherence to the data held about a product, service or brand.

D2. Affective - favorable or unfavorable disposition to a particular social object - includes emotions feelings present in different aspects and degrees of intensity. One cannot say that there is a clear and unequivocal relationship between emotionality and evaluation. Sometimes emotional evaluation may be prior to knowledge, in such a case, knowledge cannot confirm if any, the respective choice.

D3. Conative - intention to act or behave in a certain way to an object - is to formulate conclusions of the evaluation and expression of intent to buy. This may mean to postpone the purchase decision of a product or to refuse purchase.

Block E. Structure of purchase decision-making

This block consists of stages when consumers decide to purchase goods and services:

E1. Identification of the problem - can have two angles of approach: current deterioration (recognition of a need) or raise "standard" ideal state (recognition of opportunities). In general, recognizing the need arises when the supply is exhausted or no longer satisfactory, while opportunity recognition occurs when the consumer is confronted with higher quality products¹⁰;

E2. Searching for information - may be before buying, aimed immediate purchase of a product or permanently, the main aim of collecting information on a specific product or for a future purchase or to gain experience^{11,12}. Searching for information may be internal and external. In a situation of making a purchase decision, the consumer initially engages in a process of internal search, by using the information in memory. In most cases, this information is not enough; its completion is achieved by external search, using various sources (marketing, personal etc.).

E3. Evaluation of alternatives - at this stage it is necessary to use evaluation criteria, which is the size used for judging the comparative advantages of alternatives considered. Among the possible criteria, there are selected determinant attributes that are actually used to differentiate options. The complexity of the problem to be solved determines the practical alternatives that are evaluated.

E4. Decision - this stage is materialized in the actual behavior of the consumer, who can choose one of the following options:

1. Decides not to buy;
2. Decides to postpone buying or replace the option which was decided initially, with another option;
3. Decides to buy, in this case the final stage of the decision-making process follows.

E5. Post purchase evaluation - this may be influenced by the buying process itself, cognitive dissonance and the use of the product. When an item is selected due to superior functional performance implied or otherwise, the consumer forms a certain level of expectations for the

¹⁰ idem.

¹¹ Solomon, M., *Consumer Behavior: buying, having, being, 8th edition*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, 2009.

¹² Teodorescu, N., Stăncioiu, A., F., Mitu, A., *Considerații privind managementul calității în servicii ca instrument de marketing pentru creșterea satisfacției utilizatorilor de produse turistice* *Amfiteatru Economic*, vol. XI, nr. 26, 2009, pp. 412-418.

product. During and after using the product, the consumer perceives a certain level of performance, which may be equal to, greater than or less than expected.

Description of Functional Relationships

Functional relationships of the developed model are highlighted by three types of arrows as follows:

- Main functional relationship - green block arrows - which describe the fundamental links between blocks;
- Secondary functional relations - blue line arrows - describing the structural links between the various components of a block with other components of different blocks;
- Feedback curves - red block arrows - which outline the decision-making process of buying both on consumer attitudes and on other elementary processes of consumer behavior.

Functional relationships that enable realization of the model can be described as follows:

- Directly observable influence (Block A) on the elementary processes of consumer behavior (*Block C* and *Block D*) have both economic and demographic factors as well as the situational factors. A strong influence is exerted also by marketing communication aimed mainly at influencing cognitive and affective dimensions of attitudes and attitude change in the desired direction, by all means provided by the marketing mix.
- Exogenous influences (*Block B*) similar to external factors have an impact on all elementary processes behavior, family and social groups have a greater influence on the formation and stability of consumer attitudes, particularly influencing both the affective and the conative dimension.
- Elementary processes of consumer behavior (*Block A*) directly influence individually the formation and stability of the attitude. Perception, information and motivation influence each dimension of the attitude. Thus, perception and information tend to influence especially the cognitive dimension while motivation - the conative dimension. Daniel Katz¹³ argued that attitudes are determined by the motivation of a person. Consumers are expected to meet similar information in a future time, are more likely to form attitudes anticipated.
- *Block E*, purchase decision process is determined by the configuration and influences of behavioral processes and has two significant results:
 - on the one hand, feedback curve on consumer attitudes (Block D), especially by two of its components, namely the result of post-purchase evaluation and assessment and
 - on the other hand, substantial influence on other behavioral processes (Block B).

It is significant in this area the functional relationships that are established between attitude dimensions and all stages of decision making.

Thus, researchers believe that attitude influences the main stages of the decision, mainly its evaluative stages and actual behavior.

¹³ Shiffman, L, Kanuk, L.L., *Consumer behaviour*, 9th edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.

Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative studies on the impact of attitude on actual consumer behavior study primarily the way in which attitude as an elementary process of influencing consumer behavior influences evaluation of alternatives and the evaluation result. All experts agree that the attitude is often reinforced or changes depending on post-purchase evaluation. The attitude is formed mainly as a result of the learning process.

Usually, however, the cognitive process leading to the formation of attitudes is complex, influenced by many factors. Forming attitudes is strongly influenced by personal experience, family, direct marketing and media.

Knowing the importance of personal experience in forming attitudes towards products, marketers are trying to encourage consumers to try new products by making promotions, tastings or free samples. In this case the objective of marketers is to make the consumer try the product and then evaluate it.

Through permanent contact with the family and group membership, a consumer forms attitudes that influence his life. Family is an extremely important factor in shaping individual attitudes because it provides a set of core values by which one organizes his life.

The media constantly present consumers new ideas, products and opinions, influencing the formation of attitudes. Some research indicates a favorable attitude formation rather consumer exposure to an emotional advertisement unless prior exposure to the product.

In order to validate the proposed model it is necessary to develop a consistent methodology of qualitative and quantitative research. Because attitude is an internal process behavior, the nature of questions asked may influence the response and therefore research results; it is recommended particular attention to achieving an appropriate methodology for researching consumer attitude.

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