



A cross-cultural exploration of situated learning and coping



Mousumi Bose^a, Lilly Ye^{b,*}

^a Department of Marketing Fairfield University Fairfield, CT 06825, USA

^b Department of Marketing and Finance Frostburg State University, Frostburg, MD 21532, USA

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ABSTRACT

Extant consumer behavior research has alluded to learning in coping with stressful experiences; however, little research exists regarding situated learning or in situ learning that is dynamic and changing in nature. This exploratory study addresses the important but under-studied area: consumers' situated learning with stressful service experiences. It provides in-depth understanding of key factors influencing situated learning and its relevance to effective coping. Specifically, we examine the influencing factors of situated learning and how it relates to effective coping. Besides, we explore the differences in situated learning across two cultural contexts by understanding consumers in USA and China. Through Semi-structured and in-depth interview with 20 U.S. consumers and 16 Chinese consumers, we found that situated learning is an important mechanism that enhances coping. Need for closure, psychological closeness to the problem, and consumer expertise helped enhance consumers' learning and coping. Unlike their U.S. counterparts, Chinese consumers initiated the process of learning long before experiencing the actual service, possessed greater zone of tolerance towards stressful service episodes with attempts to even "save the face" of providers, and trusted their own ability to cope rather than depend on the service provider. Interestingly, U.S. participants discussed the importance of optimism as a way to learn and cope.

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1. Introduction

As consumers, we experience various stressful service encounters that are essentially demanding. From dealing with inadequate service information to experiencing unsatisfactory or unexpected retail services, coping with service problems is an everyday phenomenon (Pavia and Mason, 2004). Consumers tend to cope in many different ways, and learning during service episodes is an effective approach to handle stress. Extant research has alluded to learning from experiences as a way of dealing with stressful consumption episodes (Duhachek, 2005; Endler and Parker, 1990). Though consumer learning has been well documented in marketing literature, little is known about situated learning, or learning "on the go," as a valuable tool in coping with stressful service situations.

Situated learning takes into consideration the context as well as the existing consumer knowledge in shaping an individual's ability to cope with stressful service experiences. suggest that consumer's interaction with the environment and other individuals, the context of these interactions, and the role of individual cognition play

an important role in situated learning. Such interplay is pivotal in that situated learning is dynamic, adaptive, and changing in nature, compared with the static view of learning that is decontextualized, simplified, and inflexible. Situated learning has also been referenced in the context of coping with potential mortality: learning about a terminal disease helped individuals confront the impending difficulties of dealing with the disease (Pavia and Mason, 2004), and learning from mistakes while thinking about consumption situations from past experiences help relieve stress (Endler and Parker, 1990). As such, the first objective of this research is to understand situated learning as a distinct and essential mechanism in consumers' coping experience. Although considerable literature exists in the field of coping and situated learning respectively, the relationship between these two constructs has remained unexplored. By addressing this gap in the literature, we aim to provide insights on the mechanism of situated learning, its antecedents and its relation to effective coping.

Another objective of this research is to study situated learning and coping in different cultural contexts: that of an individualistic culture (e.g., U.S.A.) and a collectivistic culture (e.g., China). Jaju et al. (2002) have demonstrated different learning styles and processes for eastern and western cultures; learning is based on reflective observation and concrete experience for individuals in the United States while it is more abstract for those in China. The comparison of the U.S.A. and China not only represents differences

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mbosegodbole@fairfield.edu (M. Bose), LYe@Frostburg.edu (L. Ye).

between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, but also contrasts a leading, developed economy with established service standards and the largest transitional economy lack of well-defined service standards. The cross-cultural study will help marketing researchers and practitioners address consumers' needs as active learners and enhance service delivery mechanisms in different cultural settings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Coping with stressful services

This study attempts to find out the relationship between coping and situated learning and how consumers learn in different cultural contexts that would help them better cope with stressful service experiences. Coping has been defined as “the set of cognitive and behavioral processes initiated by consumers in response to emotionally arousing, stress inducing interactions with the environment aimed at bringing forth more desirable emotional states and reduced levels of stress” (Duhachek, 2005, p. 42). This system of bringing about desirable emotional states has been studied with respect to various daily activities. For example, Mick and Fournier (1998) discussed various behavioral coping strategies for managing technology paradoxes, while Whiting (2009) suggested that consumers use distancing, avoidance, social support, rational thinking, action, escape, positive thinking and emotional venting in dealing with crowded retail surroundings. A more comprehensive understanding of coping with stressful situations has been presented by Duhachek (2005) that encompasses a diverse set of strategies. These include action, rational thinking, emotional support, emotional venting, instrumental support, avoidance, positive thinking and denial. With regard to cross-cultural studies on coping, Weisz et al. (1984) have suggested direct coping methods such as taking direct action, confronting others or speaking up on one's own behalf amongst consumers from individualistic societies. However, these strategies are found to be ineffective in collectivistic societies where indirect strategies such as reinterpreting the situation so as to derive meaning from it, accepting the situation or changing one's own expectations or desires, or vicariously experiencing control by closely identifying with a more powerful other are dominant. Although considerable research related to cross-cultural aspects of coping exists, we believe that it is pertinent to discuss the construct in relation to situated learning in a cross-cultural context. This is mainly because coping, as discussed above, is different for consumers in different cultural contexts and situated learning (discussed next) is also different for consumers of these cultures. Such an understanding of coping with respect to stressful service encounters will help better understand its linkage with situated learning in the two cultural contexts, that of China and the U.S.A. Therefore, our first research question relates to:

Research Question 1: What are the similarities and differences between U.S. and Chinese consumers in coping with stressful service situations?

2.2. Situated learning and cultural influence

Situated learning assists in comprehending the environment based on the information and experiences stored in an individual's schema as well as the analysis of the current situation. The perception and assimilation of information helps a consumer to decide on coping strategies in the face of stressful service experiences. For example, an individual experiencing a legal problem gains relevant situated knowledge through his lawyer. The process

of assimilation of information brings a change in the product in terms of an updated schema of knowledge. Thus, learning from the extraneous source (the law firm) makes him more confident about his ability to deal with the stress of legal problems and gives him greater confidence to cope with the situation. Such information transfer is an ongoing learning process that can aid and lead to cope.

Research on learning suggests that knowledge is both learned and applied in context and as such, “is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context and culture in which it is developed and used” (Brown et al., 1989, p. 32). In essence, situated learning has been defined as a change in the mental models which occurs through social interaction in a given context (Goel et al., 2010). A highly decontextualized and simplified learning promotes understanding that is static, rigid and incomplete (Spiro et al., 1991). It does not take into consideration the constant transformations of a dynamic environment. Situated learning, in contrast, is inextricably related to developing a knowledge base built on an individual's own schematic understanding and the contexts in which it occurs (Bransford et al., 1990). Such learning is considered to be a dynamic by-product of the unique relationships between an individual and the context or environment (Choi and Hannafin, 1995).

To understand situated learning, one must understand how schemas interplay with the situational variables to develop situated knowledge (Machles, 2003). Schemas serve as the central concepts and interpretations that consumers develop over time as they interact with the world around them. When faced with a new situation, they usually frame the new schema on the basis of old schemas, that is, their changing interpretation of a new situation is related to what they already know. The creation of schemas starts with simplified ones, which then becomes much more complex as consumers continue to gain new knowledge. Essentially, the well-developed schemas become the building blocks for consumers to understand the situation and deal with stressful experiences. As schemas are dependent on the context in which they are learned (Reynolds et al., 1996), consumers can constantly revise, elaborate, and integrate these schemas, building a complex web of knowledge that shapes their thinking process. This mechanism demonstrates that situated learning is a product and a process. The product relates to the updated knowledge base (updated schema), and the process is the testing, building, revising, and integrating of schemas within a particular context of stressful experience (Elbasch et al., 2005).

To provide more insight about consumers' schema development in a dynamic learning process, the study incorporates the influence of culture, as culture plays an important role in shaping consumer experiences (Oxford, 1996). For example, culture affects learning and choice strategies: while consumers in individualistic cultures prefer more personal agency and control over events and surroundings, consumers in collectivistic cultures prefer more reciprocal social obligation to learning where individual rights are construed as one's share of the rights of the community as a whole (Nisbett et al., 2001). Hu and Jasper (2007) suggested that consumers from Chinese collectivistic culture have more in-group social preferences, while the U.S. individualistic consumers are more out-group and task oriented.

Finally, having discussed the concepts of situated learning and coping, one needs to explore the relationship between the two. As discussed in extant literature, learning has been considered part of coping by Duhachek and Oakley (2007). We agree that both situated learning and coping are ongoing and dynamic and therefore, are process oriented. However, we argue that the two concepts are different in that learning and knowledge about the events in a scenario helps individuals to cope better. For example, understanding and knowing the behavior of the contractor,

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