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Easy to please or hard to impress: Elucidating consumers' innate satisfaction☆

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the moderating role of innate satisfaction in the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty. The results from a mixed model estimation using survey data show that innate satisfaction moderates the satisfaction–loyalty relationship asymmetrically and nonlinearly. This finding indicates that at lower levels of satisfaction, an increase in satisfaction leads to a stronger increase in loyalty for innately satisfied customers compared to innately dissatisfied customers. Further, innately satisfied customers and innately dissatisfied customers differ in their responses to service recovery but not service failure. Efforts to increase satisfaction might provide different returns, relative to the innate satisfaction of the target segments.

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1. Introduction

Some customers are consistently easier to please than others (Grace, 2005; Mooradian & Olver, 1997). Furthermore, customers with the same consumption experience or satisfaction level (Eisenbeiss, Cornelissen, Backhaus, & Hoyer, 2014) can show different loyalty intentions. In fact, a recent review of the satisfaction–loyalty literature concludes that the effect of satisfaction on loyalty is weak, and that customer satisfaction by itself can hardly change loyalty in a significant way (Kumar, Pozza, & Ganesh, 2013). Despite the calls for more research to increase understanding of this phenomenon (Eisenbeiss et al., 2014; Ueltschy, Laroche, Tamilia, & Yannopoulos, 2004), research in this area is lacking.

In this respect, past research examines customer related issues such as age and gender, relational characteristics, such as transaction costs and the length of the relationship, and marketplace issues, such as on-line versus offline (Kumar et al., 2013). Understanding predispositions is extremely informative in other areas of marketing, such as product adoption (Im, Mason, & Houston, 2007) and e-shopping (Das, Echambadi, McCardle, & Luckett, 2003). Whereas research uses personality traits to further understand satisfaction, linking specific traits to behavioral measures proves difficult (Mooradian & Olver, 1997). The

present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the concept of the predisposition toward satisfaction (innate satisfaction), and by investigating its moderating role on the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Grace, 2005). Furthermore, differences between innately satisfied and innately dissatisfied customers following service failure and recovery to show how customers respond differently to the consumption experience are explored.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. The relationship between customers' satisfaction and loyalty

Generally, the empirical research confirms a positive relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004; Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999). However, the relationship is complex with conflicting or paradoxical results (Oliva, Oliver, & MacMillan, 1992). Further, evidence of a nonlinear functional form of the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is mounting (Dong, Ding, Grewal, & Zhao, 2011; Picón, Castro, & Roldán, 2014). The research positively and nonlinearly relates customer satisfaction to outcomes such as share of wallet, willingness to pay, and customer retention (Coil, Keiningham, Aksoy, & Hsu, 2007). Recent research (Dong et al., 2011; Finn, 2011) characterizes the functional form between satisfaction and the repurchase intention with both linear and nonlinear specifications and a nonlinear, asymmetrical relationship between satisfaction and loyalty aspects of repurchase and recommendation (Lam et al., 2004). Further, Eisenbeiss et al. (2014) show that returns on customer satisfaction are nonlinear and asymmetric because they vary across situations and consumers. Overall, the literature supports a nonlinear and asymmetric link between customer satisfaction and loyalty.

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2.2. Customer innate satisfaction

Innate satisfaction is a consumer's dispositional characteristic that describes a tendency to be more or less satisfied in a general consumption context (Grace, 2005). Innate satisfaction is defined as a generalized trait that reflects a person's inherently pleasing personality, predisposition, and learning history that, therefore, can be applied to multiple purchase situations. This conceptualization identifies innately satisfied or dissatisfied consumers who embrace this trait by systematically processing satisfaction judgments according to their orientation, ultimately driving their post-purchase attitudes and behavior.

The research that examines dispositional sources of satisfaction in the marketing literature is scarce. Personality attributes have been examined in relation to work satisfaction (Harris, Mowen, & Brown, 2005), career and job satisfaction (Gerhart, 2005), and customer satisfaction (Gountas & Gountas, 2007). The basic mechanism through which personality dispositions can affect satisfaction and loyalty is by influencing the positive and negative emotional states during the product's consumption (Faullant, Matzler, & Mooradian, 2011). Gountas and Gountas (2007) suggest that personality has a direct relationship with emotional states and that both have an influence on the consumer's evaluation of service satisfaction and intention to repurchase in the context of an airline service. Further, the research shows that emotions influence satisfaction and word of mouth behavior (Bigné, Mattila, & Andreu, 2008). Given the extent of emotions in the consumption process, customer's disposition is likely to have an effect on the satisfaction-loyalty link.

According to disappointment theory (Bell, 1985; Homburg & Fürst, 2005), the consumer's expected level of satisfaction acts as a baseline against which he/she judges the realized level of satisfaction. A positive (negative) disconfirmation of the realized satisfaction may lead to positive (negative) emotions. Furthermore, disappointment theory predicts how the emotions related to consumption alter the functional form between satisfaction and loyalty (Eisenbeiss et al., 2014). When predispositions intensify the feeling of disappointment or elation, the result depicts a steeper curvature for high or low levels of customer satisfaction.

Social sciences research suggests that predispositional differences among consumers relate to differences in attention to positive and negative cues (Mooradian & Oliver, 1997). Accessibility–diagnosticity theory (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989) predicts that innate satisfaction might impact the satisfaction's salience, or the gap between the reported satisfaction and the consumer's baseline satisfaction (the stronger the emotion, the higher the importance attributed to the gap).

The gap between the baseline and realized satisfaction is more salient for *dissatisfied* innately satisfied consumers, because the emotion is novel and unexpected. The gap acts as an important cue that increases the negative weight in subsequent judgments. As the level of satisfaction increases, the gap and its salience decreases for innately satisfied consumers, strengthening the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty.

The gap between expected and realized satisfaction is lower and less salient for innately dissatisfied consumers. *Unexpected* negative gaps lead consumers to an internal search for causal factors rather than external factors (Wong & Weiner, 1981). This portrays a reversal of the often reported hedonic bias (in which people tend to search for more internal attributes for positive rather than negative events). Therefore, the less pleasant, unexpected gaps lead to stronger responses. As the satisfaction level increases, the gap becomes smaller for *innately dissatisfied* consumers and, therefore, the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty strengthens, but at a lower rate compared to innately satisfied consumers.

For *satisfied* innately satisfied consumers, positive satisfaction gaps might be a natural, expected, and a regular occurrence. In this case, their responses are guided by the strongest sufficient cue, which is the

level of realized satisfaction (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Their response predicts the subsequent loyalty intentions. Research supports this idea by arguing that after successful outcomes, consumers direct their attributional inferences regarding the causes of the success toward external factors (Wong & Weiner, 1981), such as the product's (or service's) performance; concurrently, the salience of the gap (internal factor) becomes very low.

For satisfied innately dissatisfied consumers, the salience of the realized high level of satisfaction can theoretically determine stronger positive reactions compared to innately satisfied consumers. Therefore, the factors external to consumers are the cause of the satisfaction. Therefore, this paper predicts that at higher levels of satisfaction, consumers overlook the gap's salience, whereas higher satisfaction levels determine an increase in loyalty for both types of consumers, albeit with diminishing returns (Anderson & Mittal, 2000). Hence,

Hypothesis 1. For low levels of satisfaction, the impact of satisfaction on the willingness to recommend is stronger for innately satisfied customers compared to innately dissatisfied customers.

Hypothesis 2. For low levels of satisfaction, the impact of satisfaction on the repurchase intention is stronger for innately satisfied customers compared to innately dissatisfied customers.

3. Method

3.1. Study 1: measures, sample and data collection

This study uses Amazon Turk to collect customer satisfaction scores in 16 different service and product categories. The study also uses a pretest with a focus group (10 respondents) to select the categories of products and services used most in everyday interactions.

Satisfaction (S) is measured by using a 7-point scale based on Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, and Bryant (1996) and Gustafsson, Johnson, and Roos (2005) that comprises overall satisfaction, expectations, and comparison to the ideal for each service and product (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). Loyalty is measured with a 7-point, 3-item willingness to recommend (W) scale (Aksoy et al., 2011; van Hove, 2008; Cronbach's alpha = 0.93) and a 1-item repurchase intention scale (R) (Fornell et al., 1996). In addition, data is collected on income, age, gender, and the level of education.

To measure innate satisfaction, the average satisfaction level for consumers in each product and service category is measured first. Then, the average satisfaction for each category is subtracted from an individual customer's satisfaction score for that product or service to obtain a consumer's deviation from the mean category score. This deviation is important because it expresses both the differences in experiences compared to the mean experience for that category, and a tendency to be more (or less) satisfied in general. These satisfaction deviations are computed for each of the 16 categories for each respondent. Further, the mean satisfaction deviation is computed for each individual respondent across the 16 categories so that the random differences in the experiences average out and only the innate satisfaction remains, thus creating each respondent's innate satisfaction (I) score. Customers with a negative I score are assumed to be innately dissatisfied or harder to please, and customers with a positive I score are assumed to be innately satisfied or easier to please. Loyalty measures comprise the mean scores from the 3-item scale for willingness to recommend (W), and the 1-item repurchase intention (R) scale.

3.1.1. Sample characteristics

A total of 409 complete respondent-category observations are collected. The sample consists of 48.7% male and 51.3% female respondents primarily (64.1%) aged 31 or older. A majority (79.5%) have household

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