



The role of emotions in utilitarian service settings: The effects of emotional satisfaction on product perception and behavioral intentions



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ABSTRACT

The role of emotions in hedonic service settings is well established, but their role in utilitarian service settings has received scant attention. This research attempts to fill this gap by investigating the effects of customers' perceptions of service quality and servicescape on their emotional reactions, and their perceptions of product quality and subsequent behavioral intentions. Data are collected from 189 clients/patients who visited an optometry clinic. The study reports that perceived service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and service environment (atmosphere and layout) both increase positive emotional satisfaction. In turn, positive emotional satisfaction leads to a high perception of product quality, high recommendation, patronage intention, and likelihood of purchase. Additionally, product quality perceptions have a significant positive impact on behavioral intentions.

1. Introduction

Marketing scholars have increasingly recognized the important role of emotion in consumer decision-making (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Gaur et al., 2014). Studies dealing with emotion issues in marketing have expanded in the last decade (Gaur et al., 2014). Early research reports that both satisfaction and emotions are linked to behavioral intentions such as loyalty, recommendation, and willingness to pay more (Bigné et al., 2008; Chan et al., 2015; Jani and Han, 2015; Koenig-Lewis and Palmer, 2014; Ladhari, 2009; Ng and Russell-Bennett, 2015).

In the service marketing literature, early research has emphasized the role of emotional responses in hedonic service settings such as tourism, leisure, entertainment, and luxury (Arnould and Price, 1993; Bigné et al., 2008; Chan et al., 2015; Jani and Han, 2015; Kim et al., 2016; Koenig-Lewis and Palmer, 2014). Emotions are considered as a principal factor in understanding perceptions of service experience (Arnould and Price, 1993; Bigné et al., 2008; Jani and Han, 2015; Dubé and Menon, 1998; Lin and Liang, 2011; Mattila and Enz, 2002), but their role in utilitarian service settings is not sufficiently investigated. Even though the pleasure aspect of the service consumption is less important than its functional aspect for utilitarian services (e.g., healthcare services, bank services, and dental services), the affective responses still play a considerable role in understanding the service consumption experience and customer satisfaction (e.g., Dubé and Menon, 1998; Kwotnik and Ross, 2007; Ladhari et al., 2011; Ladhari and Rigaux-Bricmont, 2013; Ng and Russell-Bennett, 2015). For

instance, Andreu et al. (2006) find that the service environment influences shoppers' emotions and that this effect is stronger in shopping centres (mall) compared to traditional retail settings. Also, Dubé and Menon (1998) report a significant relationship between patients' emotions, particularly those experienced in the middle of the service process, and satisfaction with health services.

This study is conducted in a utilitarian service setting: a Canadian optometry clinic. In Canada, optometry clinics provide eye exams by optometrists or ophthalmologists and sell a larger assortment of products such as fashion, classic, and sport frames; contact lenses, sunglasses, safety eyewear, vitamins, and supplements. The staff, including optometrists, assist customers in finding the best product (e.g., eyeglasses or contact lenses) that answers their specific needs. They provide information, answer customer questions, and explain how different lenses and frames affect their vision and their look as well.

Considering this framework, this study aims to further understand consumer behavioral intentions toward utilitarian services based on cognitive and affective interdependent processes. In particular, it emphasizes the mediating role of emotions in explaining the effects of perceived service quality (reliability, empathy, responsiveness, and assurance of the optometric clinic and its staff) and store environment on product perceptions and behavioral intentions.

It pursues two objectives. First, it assesses the effects of customers' perceptions of service quality and servicescape on their emotional reactions, and their perceptions of product quality and subsequent

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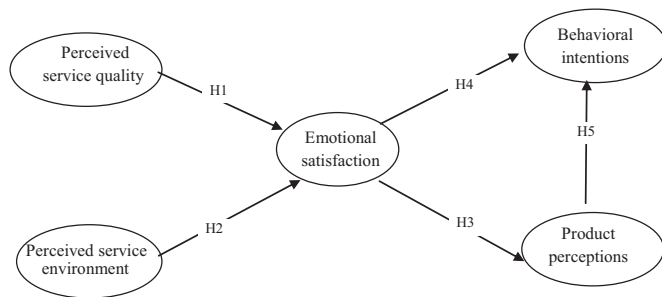


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

behavioral intentions. Second, it investigates the effect of product quality perceptions on behavioral intentions, namely, recommendation, revisit intention, and purchase decision.

This manuscript is structured as follows. First, we present a review of the role of emotions in hedonic and utilitarian service settings, and we discuss the hypothesized relationships in the conceptual model. Second, we present the methodology and the study findings. Finally, we discuss the results and provide some managerial implications.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

Proponents of the experiential view of consumer behavior strongly support the consideration of feelings and emotional reactions in decision models (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Emotional responses are a key component of service experience and value in many service settings, both hedonic and utilitarian (Chan et al., 2015; Edvardsson, 2005; Sandström et al., 2008; Kwortnik and Ross, 2007; Ng and Russell-Bennett, 2015; Wong, 2004). Claeys and Roozen (2014) report that in a utilitarian service setting, the effect of a functional component of an experience is stronger than the emotional component. However, the role of the emotional component of the experience is reported to be strong in a hedonic service context, but limited in a utilitarian context. Indeed, task-oriented shopping environments might not easily generate positive feelings among shoppers compared to hedonic/recreational purpose shopping environments. This study examines the role of emotions in the context of particular professional service firms such as optometry clinics. The particularity of the latter, compared to other services and retailing settings, resides in providing professional/medical services (i.e., examination of eyes' health and vision status) and selling products (eyeglasses, lenses, etc.).

The conceptual model presented in Fig. 1 emphasizes the mediator role of emotion in the service process. The model proposes that customers' perceived service quality and perceived servicescape impact customers' emotional reactions. In turn, customers' emotional reactions influence perceptions of product quality and behavioral intentions. In the optometry clinic setting, the perceived service quality construct splits into four dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Two dimensions represent the perceived service environment: layout and atmosphere. Behavioral intentions are composed of recommendation, patronage intentions, and purchase probability. All these concepts and the hypothesized relationships are presented in the next sections.

2.1. The role of emotions in hedonic and utilitarian service consumption

Most of the research on the role of emotions in consumer behavior, satisfaction, and service marketing can be traced to the development of experiential consumption by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). In their seminal work, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) and Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) exposed the experiential approach, which represents a revised view of consumer decisions and behavior. The experiential view recognizes that consumers are feelers as well as thinkers. It

stresses the role of positive and negative emotional responses in experiential consumption (Arnold and Price, 1993).

Emotions are defined as "a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals or events or thoughts" (Bagozzi et al., 1999, p. 184). They are typically elicited by events, objects or persons. Emotions, however, are different from moods in that the latter are not created because of any specific situation or object (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Emotions are a type of state created by the preexisting mood of an individual, tempered by responses to his environment surroundings (Rook and Gardner, 1993).

Emotions are one of the most valuable predictors of consumer behavior (Gaur et al., 2014) and when they are related to consumption, they refer to the set of emotional responses elicited during consumption experiences (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). Consumption emotions can be elicited by service encounters, interactions with service personnel, salespersons, and in-store features. In the last three decades, a large number of studies have investigated and supported the role of affect and emotional responses in advertising, consumer decision-making, behavioral intention, retailing, satisfaction, and services marketing (for review, Bagozzi et al., 1999; Gaur et al., 2014). Emotions have been conceptualized as discrete primary emotions such as joy, contempt, anger, distress, and fear (Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980), or as basic dimensions such as positive-negative emotions and pleasure-arousal (Russell, 1980). Emotions do not always influence satisfaction and behavioral intentions in a valence-congruent direction. In some service experiences (e.g., leisure experience such as rafting), negative emotion-feelings induce satisfaction and high recommendation levels (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Emotions may serve as a primary motivator for experiential consumption such as tourism and leisure activities (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). The literature suggests that affect provides a richer understanding of hedonic and experiential consumption. Experiential-hedonic services are sought for subjective, psychological reasons such as feelings and fun, whereas utilitarian services are sought for objective, functional, and instrumental benefits (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). However, the service experience value resides in both its functional and emotional value (Sandström et al., 2008). As the service consumption experience can provide service users with a more utilitarian or hedonic perceived value, a consumption experience could be relatively more utilitarian (objective – functional) or hedonic (subjective – emotional) (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). Confirming this opinion, Berry et al. (2002) and Sandström et al. (2008) advocate that service experience has both functional and emotional dimensions. For Sandström et al. (2008, p. 119):

"Even though value that motivates consumption behavior is typically attributed to functional, conditional, social, emotional, and epistemic utility, empirical research has traditionally focused on value as the trade-off between quality and price. The functional qualities, e.g. how to maximize effects such as timesaving and cost-efficiency for the users, have taken center stage. To fully leverage experience as part of a value proposition, organizations must manage the emotional dimension of experiences with the same rigor they bring to the management of service functionality."

Thus, the role of affect could be less important for utilitarian consumption settings compared to hedonic consumption settings (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). On the one hand, Machleit and Eroglu (2000) reveal that shoppers in more utilitarian and task-oriented environments (functional) such as grocery and discount stores experience lower levels of pleasure- and arousal-related emotions than shoppers at department stores or malls. On the other hand, few studies show that emotions still play a considerable role in influencing consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions in utilitarian settings such as banking (Ladhari et al., 2011) and healthcare sectors (Ladhari and Rigaux-Bricmont, 2013; Ng and Russell-Bennett, 2015). Upon entering a shopping environment or during a service consumption

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