Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services 43 (2018) 285–295

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jretconser

Using the Evaluative Space Grid to better capture manifest ambivalence in customer satisfaction surveys

Alice Audrezet[a,*], Béatrice Parguel[b]

[a] Institut Supérieur de Gestion, 147, avenue Victor Hugo, Paris 75116, France
[b] CNRS, DRM UMR 7088, Paris-Dauphine University, Place du Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny, 75775 PARIS Cedex 16, France

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Customer satisfaction
Ambivalence
Evaluative Space Grid
Measurement tool

ABSTRACT

Considering that midpoints on linear scales wrongly aggregates indifferent, uncertain and ambivalent responses, this research investigates the ability of the Evaluative Space Grid (ESG) to disentangle uncertainty from manifest ambivalence. Uncovering situations in which respondents hold simultaneous and conflicting but certain evaluations, manifest ambivalence reveals of utmost significance for market researchers. Using a mixed approach, both qualitative and quantitative, this research confirms that the ESG isolates manifest ambivalence in its upper-right zone, and provides implications for practitioners involved in service quality and consumer satisfaction measurement.

1. Introduction

Consumer satisfaction measurement is an important issue in market research. In the long run, it serves as a barometer of business performance that predicts other key marketing variables, such as future sales, profit and loyalty (Chen, 2012; Kasiri et al., 2017; Ruiz Diaz, 2017). In the short run, it provides a useful customer feedback to manage service quality and improve marketing plans (Engler et al., 2015; Fonseca, 2009). Hence, service providers and retailers almost systematically measure customer satisfaction shortly after any online purchase (e.g., Amazon.com, Booking.com) or offline services consumption (e.g., TripAdvisor.com). They usually do so in a global way using linear five-point rating scales. In line with most service researchers, who consider customer satisfaction as a unidimensional overall reflective construct (e.g., Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006; Fonseca, 2009), such scales are effective in capturing polarized evaluations, either strongly positive or negative, but display serious problems related to their midpoint (Kaplan, 1972; Thompson et al., 1995).

Concretely, this midpoint inappropriately aggregates indifferent responses (low positivity and low negativity) with uncertain ("I don't know" answer) and ambivalent (the simultaneous experience of positivity and negativity) responses. As an illustration, does a rating of three stars out of five stars on Hotels.com mean that the customer did not care about the hotel and only evaluated it to get a 10% discount voucher on the next booking on Hotels.com? That the customer was uncertain because he or she did not experience all its amenities (e.g., breakfast, spa)? Or that he or she was satisfied with its design but dissatisfied with its equipment? Reflecting different evaluations (Baka et al., 2012; Nadler et al., 2015), indifferent, uncertain and ambivalent responses bear different information, and should be treated in different ways by market researchers. Specifically, indifferent responses tell that respondents are not involved toward the object under evaluation (Baka et al., 2012; Nadler et al., 2015) when uncertain responses are shown to be poor behavioral predictors (Bizer et al., 2006; Fazio, 1987; Tormala and Rucker, 2007). As such, these responses should be excluded from the survey, making their identification of utmost importance.

Ambivalent responses are more promising, especially "manifest ambivalent" responses that uncover situations in which respondents are clearly aware of conflicting positive and negative information (Heuvinck, 2012). Those responses should be distinguished from "anticipated ambivalent" responses, where individuals only anticipate that there may exist conflicting information of which they are unaware (Heuvinck, 2012; Priester and Petty, 1996; Priester et al., 2007). Compared with anticipated ambivalent responses, manifest ambivalent responses are therefore more significant, being able to alert on the need to identify effective levers for improvement to retain consumers that are more likely to be loyal than clearly unsatisfied ones (Olsen et al., 2009). Still, to isolate manifest ambivalence, a separate evaluation of the object attributes using a multi-item scale is not satisfying as customers can still clearly experience ambivalence toward each attribute. For example, when measuring satisfaction after a stay at a hotel, one can assess the specific satisfaction toward the room, but the customer may still experience both positive and negative reactions toward this specific attribute, being satisfied with the comfort of the room, but dissatisfied

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: alice.audrezet@isg.fr (A. Audrezet), beatrice.parguel@dauphine.fr (B. Parguel).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.04.008
Received 25 August 2017; Received in revised form 22 March 2018; Accepted 13 April 2018

with the wifi connection in the room. Besides, overall ratings remain the evaluative standard to date, which calls for further exploration on how to capture manifest ambivalence in overall customer satisfaction surveys.

Conceptually derived from the Evaluative Space Model (Cacioppo et al., 1997, 2011), and subsequently applied in psychology (Cacioppo et al., 2009; Hunter et al., 2008; Larsen and McGraw, 2011; van Reekum et al., 2011), nutrition (Kwak and Lee, 2016) and business research (Andrade and Cohen, 2007; Audrezet et al., 2016; Kerns, 2011; Kim et al., 2017), the Evaluative Space Grid (ESG) proposed by Larsen et al. (2009) could help solve this methodological issue. From a practical perspective, the ESG comprises a 5 × 5 grid that measures the degree of both positivity and negativity of an evaluation within a bi-dimensional matrix. Contrary to other ambivalence measures, this innovative tool has drawn the attention of researchers from various domains because its specific matrix form allows a simultaneous assessment of positivity and negativity, thus providing the first measurement solution perfectly echoing ambivalence definition. Indeed, selecting a single cell, respondents must assess their positive and negative reactions at the same time. As such, Larsen et al. (2009) showed that the ESG disentangles ambivalent from indifferent responses along the grid's diagonal, with indifferent responses isolated at the bottom left of the grid and ambivalent ones at the center (see Fig. 1).

However, Larsen et al. (2009) did not distinguish between manifest and anticipated ambivalence, nor suggest that the center of the grid could still attract uncertainty. To fill the gap, this research explores whether the ESG can isolate manifest ambivalence in the context of customer satisfaction surveys. To do so, testable hypotheses are derived from the methodological literature and a preliminary exploratory qualitative study based on 12 semi-directed interviews suggesting that the different types of evaluations can be located on the ESG depending on respondents' levels of uncertainty and involvement with the object under evaluation. A quantitative study then locates manifest ambivalence in the upper-right zone. As such, this research provides important implications for practitioners involved in market research, such as helping them understand what lies behind the average performances they get from linear rating scales, or better target marketing plans depending on customers' attitudes.

2. Literature review

Uncertainty and ambivalence have long been confounded (e.g., Mehling, 1959; Pelham, 1991; Suchman, 1950). On the one hand, they tend to correlate positively, leading to the rationale that ambivalence generates uncertainty (Bassili, 1996; Gross et al., 1995; Petrocelli et al., 2007; Tormala and Rucker, 2007). On the other hand, they manifest similar characteristics, such as being less predictive of behavior and less resistant to persuasive intent than polarized evaluations (Armitage and Conner, 2000; Clarkson et al., 2008; Petrocelli et al., 2007; Wu and Shaffer, 1987). However, recent research argues that a person can be certain that he or she evaluates some attributes positively and other attributes negatively, hence be certain about holding ambivalent evaluations (Clarkson et al., 2008; Krosnick and Petty, 1995; Petrocelli et al., 2007; Priester et al., 2007). For example, if a customer evaluates a recent flight on a low-cost company, he or she can be highly certain of both the positive (e.g., low price) and negative (e.g., low level of service onboard) features of his or her experience. The next sections present the conceptual definition of uncertainty and ambivalence, and the solutions proposed to capture them, including the ESG.

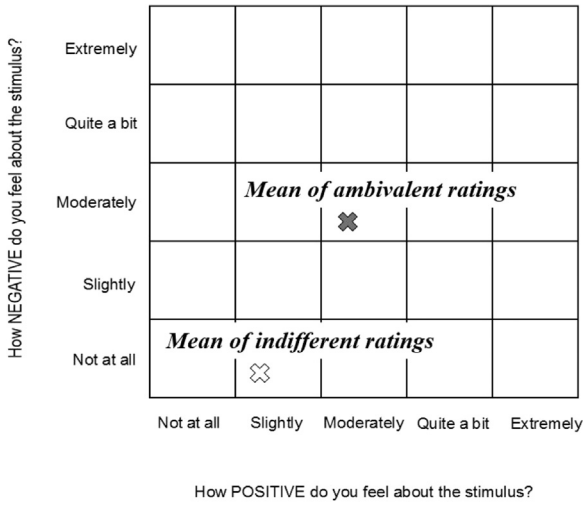

Fig. 1. Mean of indifferent and ambivalent ratings (adapted from Larsen et al., 2009).

2.1. Uncertain evaluations

Customer satisfaction surveys often assume that respondents can answer any question with absolute certainty (Converse, 1970; Hanemann, 1984). Still, research has long recognized that respondents can experience difficulties in providing definite evaluations and underscored the concept of response certainty (e.g., Dubois and Burns, 1975; Tormala and Rucker, 2007). Certainty refers to "the sense of conviction with which one holds one's attitude" (Petrocelli et al., 2007, p. 30), meaning one's subjective perception that one is certain of one's evaluation of an object. As such, response certainty is a metacognitive attribute of people's evaluations.

Respondents who feel competent or sufficiently informed to take a position are likely to display response certainty (Converse, 1970; Coombs and Coombs, 1976; Dubois and Burns, 1975), as are those who have already formed their evaluation (Antil, 1983; Converse, 1970). Response certainty usually increases with age (Helson and Wink, 1992), perceived social support for one's evaluation (Visser and Mirabile, 2004) or direct experience with the object under evaluation (Gross et al., 1995; Wu and Shaffer, 1987). It also increases with involvement with the issue at stake and is associated with more extreme evaluations, either positive or negative (Antil, 1983; Suchman, 1950). Besides, it decreases with task utility and complexity (Regier et al., 2014).

Response certainty is crucial for improving the statistical precision of econometric models and the conclusions drawn from them (Li and Mattsson, 1995; Regier et al., 2014). Failing to account for respondents' uncertainty may bias analyses, results and their interpretations. Statistical solutions allow accommodating for respondents' uncertainty in contingent valuation surveys (Alberini et al., 2003; Li and Mattsson, 1995) and choice experiment surveys (Lundhede et al., 2009; Regier et al., 2014). Excluding uncertain respondents from analyses also yields higher correlations between evaluations and behaviors (Antil, 1983; Bassili, 1996; Clarkson et al., 2008; Sample and Warland, 1973; Tormala and Rucker, 2007) as uncertain responses are less persistent and powerful (Krosnick and Petty, 1995). Still, excluding uncertain respondents first requires identifying them, which has proved difficult. Consumers displaying low confidence in their evaluations tend to select midpoints on linear rating scales, thus aiding in their identification if these midpoints were not actually selected for other reasons. The literature has proposed several solutions to cope with this issue.

Referring to the old debate between odd-point and even-point scales (e.g., Converse, 1970; Garland, 1991; Presser and Schuman, 1980), one solution is to suppress the midpoint, resulting in the gain of a substantive quantity of informative answers (Schuman and Presser, 1996). The problem with this solution is that when respondents are forced to choose a polarized rating, they transfer uncertain answers to one side of the scale or the other in a way that is not normally distributed but biased depending on the topic of the research (Garland, 1991; Worcester and Burns, 1975) or respondents' attitude (Nowlis et al., 2002). When respondents are indifferent, the omission of the midpoint