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Does product involvement influence how emotions drive satisfaction?: An approach through the Theory of Hedonic Asymmetry

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether the level of product involvement influences how emotions drive consumer satisfaction. Based on the Theory of the Hedonic Asymmetry we analyze through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) how emotions drive consumer satisfaction. A sample of 570 respondents was gathered for a high involvement product – wine –, while a sample of 431 consumers was collected for a low involvement product – a cup of coffee –. Results show that positive emotions exert a higher influence on satisfaction in low involvement products, rather than in high involvement products, suggesting that situational factors – such as the *occasion of consumption* – could be acting as qualifiers of pleasant emotions. Additionally, our findings support the moderating role of product involvement on the consumption-elicited emotions and satisfaction link.

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1. Introduction

Individuals are constantly consuming products in their everyday lives and experiencing emotions related to what they consume. Research on emotions and consumer behavior has appeared in marketing literature with an increasing importance, focusing on different aspects such as the emotions evoked by different products (Dube, Cervellon, & Han, 2003), the influence of emotions in consumer satisfaction (Phillips & Baumgartner, 2002), or even the influence of the emotional state on consumer loyalty and purchase intention (Wood & Moreau, 2006). Similarly, the research on emotional processes and satisfaction has deserved great attention, and the concept of involvement with a specific product category may be a useful explanatory element.

Previous research reports that high involvement products are those for which consumers invest time and effort to make the purchase decision (Bell & Marshall, 2003); being often expensive products that entail higher levels of purchase risk (Mittal, 1989). Conversely, low involvement products are cheap goods commonly consumed in a routine decision making, with minimal information search and low purchase risk (Bell & Marshall, 2003; Mittal,

1989). Interestingly, products that are the most satisfying in a traditional perspective are frequently the least involving (Richins & Bloch, 1988). For example, a radio that works reliably for years meeting all the expectations will rarely command any interest from the owner. However, there is little research on the relationships between consumption-elicited emotions and the level of product involvement.

This study focuses on the emotional state elicited by product consumption and the relationships with the level product involvement. The concept of involvement has been defined as being a characteristic of either a product or of an individual (Laaksonen, 1994). More precisely, we focus on *product involvement*, meaning that the nature of the product itself plays an important role in determining involvement. Finally, we have considered the *Theory of Hedonic Asymmetry* that suggests that individuals respond to products with primarily positive emotions (Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008). The present study addresses two main objectives. The first objective is to examine whether the level of product involvement influences how consumption-elicited emotions drive satisfaction. The second objective is to determine whether pleasant emotions prevail when consuming high involvement products. So, the underlying premise is that consumption elicited emotions may have a different impact on consumer satisfaction with the product, but this impact would be moderated by the level of product involvement. The present paper is structured as follows. First, a review of the literature on consumer emotions is developed. Then, the research

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hypotheses are presented. Next, we describe the methodology, followed by the results. Finally, we discuss the managerial implications and research limitations, suggesting guidelines for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotions in consumer behavior

Emotions are commonly considered as “a multi-component phenomenon with a multi-component response, consisting of a set of behavioral, physiological and expressive reactions and subjective feelings” (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Later, Scherer (1982) conceptualized emotions as “an episode of interrelated changes in the states of all or most of the organismic subsystems to the evaluation of a stimulus”. Similarly, other authors have defined emotions as “a brief, intense physiological and mental reaction focused on a referent” (Izard, 1977), or as “a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, giving rise to affective experiences” (Dube & Menon, 2000). The marketing literature assumes that emotions can be elicited by a product or a brand. Thus, we can refer to *consumption emotions* as “the set of emotional responses elicited during product consumption experiences” (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991).

Previous research on the influence of emotions in consumer behavior has focused on different aspects: the identification of emotions arising in consumption situations (Richins, McKeage, & Najjar, 1992), the emotions evoked by different products (Dube et al., 2003) or services (Dunning, O’Cass, & Pecotich, 2004); the examination of how emotions lead to different consumption behaviors (Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004; Macht, 2008); the influence of emotions on product attitudes (Dube & Menon, 2000), consumer satisfaction (Phillips & Baumgartner, 2002), loyalty and purchase intention (Wood & Moreau, 2006). More recent studies have also examined the relationships between the products’ sensory characteristics and the individual emotional response (King & Meiselman, 2010).

The consumption context, situation or setting refers to those elements involved in the act of consumption that are external to the individual and go beyond the specific product being consumed. Authors like Richins (1997) highlighted the importance of the context in which the consumption takes place, suggesting that emotions are context specific (Richins, 1997), and that the consumption context influences the emotional experience elicited by product consumption (Ferrarini et al., 2010). The concept of the context of consumption comprises three aspects (Barrett et al., 2007; Ferrarini et al., 2010). First, the consumption setting, such as the place where the product is usually consumed or the location of the consumption, such as at home, at work or at a restaurant (Marshall & Bell, 2004). Second, the habits of consumption, meaning that some products are consumed on particular occasions. For example, some food products are typically consumed at appropriate meal times, being considered as “meals” or rather as “snacks” (Birch, Billman, & Richard, 1984). Finally, the cultural meaning of products, representing cultural, geographical or historical differences in product consumption. Therefore, emotions not only represent the evaluation of a stimulus, but also the assessment of the occasion and situational circumstances in which the emotion is experienced (Barrett et al., 2007).

2.2. The influence of emotions in consumer satisfaction

The distinction between positive and negative emotions seems to be a basic emotional experience; and consequently pleasantness is one of the major dimensions of the emotional experience (Laros

& Steenkamp, 2005; Russell & Mehrabian, 1977). Accordingly, emotions can be classified according to the pleasant–unpleasant dimension (Diener, 1999), and individuals find it easy to classify emotions in terms of positive and negative valence (Schiffstein & Desmet, 2010).

Frijda (1986) proposed an asymmetrical adaptation of individuals to pleasure and pain that was named as the *Theory of Hedonic Asymmetry*, meaning that pleasure fades while displeasure persists. Then, the literature has focused mainly on negative emotions experienced by individuals. However, regarding the emotions elicited by food products, Desmet and Schiffstein (2008) showed that food products evoke a wide range of emotional responses that tend to be mainly positive. In other words, pleasant emotions are more relevant and most strongly experienced than unpleasant emotions.

This asymmetry for emotional responses to food products was confirmed for different product categories (Ferrarini et al., 2010; King & Meiselman, 2010; Schiffstein & Desmet, 2010), extending the *Theory of the Hedonic Asymmetry*. According to this theory, food products are likely to elicit more positive than negative emotions and consumers have a predominantly positive affective disposition toward products. All recent research on consumption-elicited emotions emphasizes the positive nature of the emotions associated with products; highlighting that individuals primarily respond to consumer goods with positive emotions (Schiffstein & Desmet, 2010).

Emotions are one of the core components of the consumer satisfaction construct (Barsky & Nash, 2002). Prior studies have conceptualized consumer satisfaction as either a cognitive response (Bolton & Drew, 1991), as an affective response (Halstead, Hartman, & Schmidt, 1994), as a psychological state (Howard & Sheth, 1969), as an overall evaluative judgment (Westbrook, 1987) or as an evaluation process (Johnson & Fornell, 1991). Similarly, Oliver (1997) conceptualized satisfaction as a fulfillment response, understood as “the consumer judgment of the product or service feature, or a judgment on the product or service itself, provided a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment”.

The seminal work of Westbrook (1987) showed that the relationship between consumption emotions and satisfaction could be characterized by dimensions of positive and negative affect; influencing satisfaction judgments. Accordingly, a great body of literature suggests that positive and negative emotions play an important role in influencing consumer satisfaction (Richins, 1997). More specifically, pleasant emotions positively correlate with satisfaction (Bloemer & DeRuyter, 1999); while being negatively correlated with negative affect (Mano & Oliver, 1993). Consequently, we propose that positive/pleasant consumption would positively influence consumer satisfaction. Therefore, we present the following hypothesis:

H₀. Positive emotions have a positive (or direct) influence on consumer satisfaction.

Conversely, when emotions are negative, the individual evaluations are likely to be negative (Clore, 1992). So, we propose that negative emotions will negatively influence consumer satisfaction:

H₁. Negative emotions have a negative (or inverse) influence on consumer satisfaction.

2.3. The concept of involvement

There is not a general consensus in the theoretical construct of involvement. According to Zaichkowsky (1986) there are three types of consumer involvement: with products, with purchase decisions and with advertisements. Further, Zaichkowsky (1986) highlights the three main antecedents influencing consumer

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