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Revisiting Cognitive Dissonance Theory: Pre-Decisional Influences and the Relationship to the Consumer Decision-Making Model

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Abstract - This paper examines pre-decisional dissonance as a motivating factor in consumer decision-making. A review of the marketing literature found the majority of research studies were limited to post-decisional influences. Several studies including measures of pre-decisional activity linked the construct to post-decision situations. The author provides evidence regarding the popularity and resurgence of research on cognitive dissonance theory and asserts that researchers in the field of consumer behavior may gain a better understanding of consumer decision-making when studying pre-decisional consonance and dissonance as separate entities and independent of post-decisions.

Keywords - cognitive dissonance, consumer decision-making, consumer behavior, consumer decision-making model, consonance, dissonance.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners -

This paper addresses the need for Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners to recognize and understand that the theory of cognitive dissonance is applicable to the early stages of consumer decision-making. Knowledge about pre-decisional dissonance is also important when developing useful marketing tactics.

Introduction

The premises developed by the author of this paper include the following; 1) Empirical evidence presented in the marketing literature has narrowly focused predominately on post-decisional dissonance. A large majority of marketing literature specifically in the areas of consumer behavior and advertising erroneously define cognitive dissonance as buyer's regret or buyer's remorse and in so doing have not fully realized the value of the theory . 2) Those conducting

research on the consumer decision-making process would benefit from a better understanding of Cognitive Dissonance Theory as it relates to pre-purchase dissonant decisions. 3) Research on pre-decisional dissonance as a motivating factor in consumer behavior is applicable to the field of advertising when the assessment of the efficacy of marketing tactics is the desired outcome.

It is not the intent of the author to question the empirical validity of past research in marketing on cognitive dissonance but rather to highlight the fact that the majority of findings have not presented results on the theory that address specifically how a marketer can influence a consumer's pre-purchase decisions. The assertions outlined in this paper provide marketers with an alternative approach to how pre-decisional dissonance motivates consumers to engage in decision-making that restores consistency.

Literature Review

An all-inclusive review of the literature on the theory of cognitive dissonance is beyond the scope of this paper. The author, in completing an online database search for articles that reference cognitive dissonance found 500 results using *Business Source Premier* and 2,512 results using *PsycInfo*. A sample review of the various disciplines where cognitive dissonance has been applied include but are not limited to; healthcare (Chimonas et al., 2007), pharmacy (Fisher et al., 2009), education (Carkenord and Bullington, 1993), religion (Burris et al., 1997) nursing, (Clark et al., 2004), and law (Collins, 2008).

Notable psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) developed the theory of cognitive dissonance nearly six decades ago and since its inception, empirical evidence on the theory has been widespread. The theory has been cited as one of the most popular, useful, and significant theories in social psychology (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 1999; Egan et al., 2007). The theory has been tested and critiqued in articles appearing in marketing journals from the late 1950s to the present day however the primary focus in consumer behavior has been the manifestation of dissonance after a consumer has made a decision (Engel, 1963; Bell, 1967; Cohen and Goldberg, 1970; Hausknecht et al., 1998; Sweeney et al., 2000). In a review of the research on cognition dissonance theory in marketing journals, Holloway offered the following account of the theory. "The theory is that if cognitions are inconsistent, consumers try to reduce the inconsistency, that is, to reduce dissonance, and that consumers try to reduce dissonance *after* making a buying decision" (Holloway, 1967: 39). The italicized word *after* used by Holloway emphasized his view that pre-decisional dissonance was not part of the theory. In fact, most studies in marketing and in

most textbooks written on consumer behavior do not cover pre-decisional dissonance at all. There is literature in the field of consumer behavior that either provides inaccurate descriptions of the theory of cognitive dissonance or inaccurately defines cognitive dissonance theory as post-decisional dissonance. The author offers the following examples as support for this assertion. Losciuto and Perloff (1967) studied only the post-decisional conditions of cognitive dissonance while others such as Belch and Belch (2012) define cognitive dissonance as post-purchase dissonance. “Another possible outcome of a purchase is cognitive dissonance, a feeling of psychological tension or postpurchase doubt that a consumer experiences after making a difficult purchase choice” (pg. 127).

Pre-decisional conflict (Oshikawa, 1970) and pre-decisional determinants (Cummings and Venkatesan, 1976) are two concepts mentioned in the marketing literature. A critical distinction between these concepts and pre-decisional dissonance as described in this paper is that pre-decisional conflict and pre-decisional determinants are a result of an inequity or inconsistency between two cognitive elements (pre-decisional information and choice after the purchase). In other words, the true measure of the existence of pre-decisional conflict (Oshikawa, 1970) occurs after the purchase. Pre-decisional conflict was a measure of the degree of inconsistency between pre-, and post-decisions, and not viewed as being a motivating factor prior to a consumer’s purchase.

Oshikawa (1969) in his paper entitled “Can Cognitive Dissonance Theory Explain Consumer Behavior?” clearly stated that dissonance exists under the following three conditions. “1) after making an important and difficult decision, 2) after being coerced to say or do something, which is contrary to private attitudes, opinions, or beliefs, and 3) after being exposed to discrepant information” (pg. 44). In all three cases, the operative word choice, after, appears and this is contrary to Festinger’s (1957) first hypotheses;

“The basic hypotheses I wish to state are as follows:

1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance...In short, I am proposing that dissonance, that is the existence of non-fitting relations among cognitions, is a motivating factor in its own right” (Festinger, 1957: 3).

A major premise of the theory of cognitive dissonance is that individuals prefer to be in harmony or consistency and avoid situations of disharmony or inconsistency. The theory postulates that individuals in a state of inconsistency will attempt to seek harmony. Inconsistency or disharmony is what Festinger (1957) denoted as a state of dissonance. Dissonance is a transient state of being; it

is not restricted to post-purchase decisions, and can occur prior to a consumer's decision.

“The pre-decision situation is generally regarded as one in which the person experiences conflict. The conflict exists, presumably, because of the simultaneous presence of a least two mutually incompatible response tendencies. Much of the theoretical thinking on the subject of decision situations has been concerned with how the person behaves during the period when he is in conflict, that is, before he has been able to come to a decision” (Festinger, 1964: 3).

Festinger (1957) clearly acknowledged the existence of pre-decisional dissonance and the author asserts that dissonance can occur throughout the consumer's decision-making process. It is also important to recognize that the recognition of a state of dissonance will prompt or initiate a response from the individual to attempt to restore harmony and alleviate the tension (dissonance). The addition of harmonious cognitions will assist an individual in the restoration of consistency also known as consonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance goes beyond the study of only cognitive dissonance. The theory is composed of two bi-polar but related components, dissonance or disharmony and consonance or harmony. Each can present itself either prior or after a consumer has made a decision. The choice alternatives for the consumer in a state of dissonance is to remove dissonant cognitions, add consonant cognitions or change the intensity of the dissonant or consonant elements to achieve consistency (Harmon-Jones, 1999).

Application of Cognitive Dissonance Theory to Advertising and the Consumer Decision-Making Model

The basic premises of cognitive dissonance theory are applicable to the consumer decision-making model beyond post-decisional cognitions. Festinger (1957) defined dissonance as the recognition of a problem. A discrepancy between a consumer's actual (current) and desired (ideal) state results in problem or need recognition which in the consumer behavior literature can be applied to models of consumer decision-making. One of the earliest models of consumer decision-making is the five-stage model proposed by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1973). Later, the EKB Model was renamed the EBM model (Blackwell, 2001) and consists of five stages including problem-recognition, search, alternative evaluation, choice, and outcomes. The first stage, problem recognition, is arguably conceptually the same as pre-decisional cognitive dissonance whereby the consumer acknowledges the existence of a problem and becomes motivated to resolve the problem or issue. A marketing example may shed light on the how this may occur. Many advertisements attempt to induce problem recognition or pre-decisional dissonance thus motivating

consumers to act to resolve the problem or reduce the dissonance. The advertiser may attempt to induce pre-decisional dissonance to get a consumer to purchase their brand of product, induce post-decisional dissonance when a consumer purchases a competitor's brand, or induce post-decisional consonance when a consumer is brand loyal. For example, consumers who view a TV advertisement promoting the purchase of a new gym membership may cause them to fall into a state of pre-decisional dissonance. Consumers who experience pre-decisional consonance or consistency would most likely not be responsive to the advertisement and therefore would be unmotivated to act (will not purchase the advertised gym membership). These consumers would not experience need or problem recognition. Similarly, they would experience consistent cognitions, are content with their current state, and do not acknowledge discrepancies between their actual or desired states.

In order to motivate consumers, marketers must construct advertising messages that induce pre-decisional dissonance. The motivation for these consumers to make a purchase is the reduction of their state of dissonance. Marketers use advertising messages to induce pre-decisional dissonance for consumers and then advocate a message (purchase the product) to restore consumers' consonance. Pre-decisional dissonance occurs at the point in time when consumers who are exposed to promotional messages acknowledge an inequity between their current and desired states. This may be accomplished by advertisers who induce pre-decisional dissonance by constructing commercials aimed at making the consumer anxious and uncomfortable about their current state. Viewers of these types of commercials evaluate themselves by making a comparison between the status of their current and desired outcomes. When the situation exists where a consumer acknowledges pre-decisional dissonance (they believe they are overweight and desire to engage in activity that is more physical) they would be in a state of pre-decisional dissonance. Adding consonance alleviates dissonance and in this scenario, consonance is available to the consumer in the form of the advertiser's advocated message – "Buy the new gym membership". One of the main criteria for a successful promotional campaign is to create pre-decisional dissonance for the respective target market.

Future Research

The focus of this paper has been to provide the reader with evidence on the importance of pre-decisional dissonance as a motivator for consumers during decision-making. Learning more about how marketers can use this information to motivate consumers to make purchases is equally important. Marketers may also benefit by a clearer understanding of the application of cognitive dissonance theory to pre-decisional and post-decisional consonance and dissonance. For example, marketing tactics aimed at inducing the occurrence of post-purchase decisional dissonance may be effective when attempting to encourage consumers to switch from a competitor's product or service. These tactics would in all likelihood, be effective to encourage consumers to change their brand to the alternative advertised brand.

Cognitive dissonance theory provides a sufficient and substantive framework for those interested in studying consumer behavior and specifically consumer decision-making with regard to pre-decisional dissonance. Pre-decisional dissonance should also be the focus of study for those interested in motivating consumers to make a purchase because the process of dissonance identification can be marketer driven. The reduction of pre-decisional dissonance can also be a direct result of the consumers' propensity to make the purchase (at the request of the marketer) of the promoted product or service. Future research should focus on empirical validation of the propositions provided in this paper by testing marketing tactics that induce pre-decisional dissonance conditions that result in the desired outcomes of the marketer.

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