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Post-decision cognitive reevaluation of instant coffee was primarily influenced by confirmation-disconfirmation experience with the product. Prior information resulting from brand familiarity influenced the direction of post-decision reevaluation.

The Dissonance Model in Post-Decision Product Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fundamental states of conflict in human behavior which can be heightened by decision making is that between the need for openness and flexibility, on the one hand, and structure and consistency on the other. To what extent does one approach a situation less than openly, guided by experience and expectations and recognizing, identifying, and evaluating stimuli according to what one "knows" is there?

Coping with the environment demands a balance between accuracy and economy. Precise perception and categorization, for all their value, are costly in time and effort since the time needed to make any one response may not only be crucial for its associated rewards and punishments but also for coming to terms with all other salient stimuli. Cognitive structures facilitate perception and categorization of stimuli, but they may distort or modify certain aspects of the situation. Ease of recognition and identification plus the fact that specific interpretations of many stimuli are socially learned and shared add to the utility of a compromise between unbounded flexibility and consistency.

As one becomes personally involved in an issue or sees a direct relationship between his self concept and an object or person, the exact nature of this compromise may change. He may wish to interpret such objects, is-

sues, and events in a manner consistent with important beliefs, especially following decisions in which psychological commitment and observable behavior combine to increase personal involvement. In such cases the balance may turn more toward consistency than openness. One's general preference for consonant (rather than dissonant) cognitions to give order, stability, and consistency to his perception may thus assume more of the qualities of a drive.

A vast amount of evidence testifies to the pervasiveness of attempts to avoid and reduce cognitive dissonance. Critics argue that the evidence has been gathered largely in situations in which the value of openness and flexibility (relative to consistency) is often quite low. The controversy surrounding dissonance theory and the increasing amount of contradictory evidence accumulated over the past few years (for recent reviews see [5, 8, 9]) have led to some disaffection with the theory [2, 5, 10].

Dissonance theory may not fit the role of a general theory within which all consumer decision making can be subsumed. The great enthusiasm, creativity, and sheer productivity of dissonance researchers have helped to oversell the theory to all too willing buyers. In part, this is because of the relative frustration of cognitively-oriented researchers to an absence of a general predictive model in any way comparable, for example, to that of reinforcement-oriented stimulus-response theorists. It has become increasingly clear that the dissonance model will not serve this function.

On the other hand, a hostile over-reaction by those who expected too much from the theory may be equally unwise and nonobjective. Despite discrepant findings and severe critics, dissonance theory does offer a parsimonious explanation for many otherwise disconnected observations. If it can account for important aspects of purchasing behavior, students of consumer behavior

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should identify those factors which increase its relevancy. An even more imposing task would be to combine dissonance theory with competing formulations (such as stimulus-response learning theory) in a more inclusive theory of the middle range.

Much of the research on dissonance theory has studied behavior in artificial and often trivial situations. For example, subjects have been paid to participate in boring or tedious tasks, to lie to others, or to write essays counter to commonly held positions, e.g., [1, 4, 11, 14]. In much of this research, the individual's prior experience, the relevance to him of the experimental task, and what he does after the experiment are irrelevant to the experimenter. For students of consumer behavior, however, these omissions are often of direct concern. Consumers' prior experience, perceived importance of decisions, and anticipation of product performance are all factors which influence not only whether there will be a cognitive reevaluation following a purchase, but, perhaps more importantly, what form it will take: decision justification or outcome-based learning.

One criticism levelled against the theory of cognitive dissonance is that the individual, rather than learning from his mistakes, increases the likelihood of making them again through justification and rationalization. This study attempts to define and examine two factors in consumer decision processes which should, in part, determine the form of cognitive reevaluation (learning vs. justification) expected: (1) prior information resulting from brand familiarity; and (2) the nature and quality of the post-purchase evidence.

METHODOLOGY

One hundred and twenty-eight subjects of both sexes were allocated by quiz sections to the various experimental conditions. They were students in an introductory marketing course at the University of Illinois who had signed up in 21 groups of up to 10 for a "new product research study" as part of the course requirement that they participate in a marketing research study that semester. They were told that the study was conducted jointly by the marketing department and "one of the country's outstanding marketing research firms."

The experiment was grouped into four stages: decision, immediate post-decision, nonconsumption, and post-consumption, described below. The figure sum-

marizes the measures taken at each stage. Specific questions used are reported in the respective tables.

Decision Stage

Two-ounce jars of the four leading national brands of instant coffee and 6-ounce jars of the unmarked test brand were displayed. It was explained that the test brand was presently available only in the 6-ounce size and that we had been sent the 2-ounce size of the other brands. Subjects were asked to select one jar as a gift. This technique was used to generate a reasonable distribution between choices of the test brand and national brands and to pose a dilemma likely to generate a workable amount of dissonance. Faced with such a decision, the uncertain quality of the larger gift made some dissonance inevitable no matter which brand was selected. Subjects were then told to carry their chosen brand with them through the rest of the experiment, since they would not be coming back to the room they were in.

Forty-eight subjects chose the test brand and 30 chose one of the national brands. Prior information about the chosen brand could not provide a filter through which the former group could interpret subsequent information about their chosen brand. However, national brands may have more stable and favorable initial evaluations and hence be much more immune [6, 7] to isolated and discrepant bits of information, especially extremely discrepant information. Inconsistent information may be seen as less believable, sources as less trustworthy.

The study design also called for a manipulation of ego-involvement in the process of decision making (distinct from involvement in the product, per se). Although the data presented include involvement as one of the sources of variation, a discussion of this variable may be found elsewhere [3] and is not relevant to the focus of this paper.

Subjects assigned to the no dissonance and control conditions were not told about their selection of a gift until the end of the experiment. It was not until all of the experimental manipulations were carried out that these groups selected a gift.

Immediate Post-Decision Stage

Subjects were assigned to high and low dissonance groups to determine if the amount of dissonance led to

MEASURES TAKEN AT EACH STAGE

<i>Decision</i>	<i>Immediate post-decision</i>	<i>Non-consumption</i>	<i>Post-consumption</i>
1. Importance of decision (Table 1)	1. Expressed dissonance (Table 1)	1. Brand preference (Table 4)	1. Brand preference (Table 7)
2. Brand choice	2. Purchase intention (Table 3)	2. Purchase intention (Table 5)	2. Purchase intention (Table 8)
			3. Distortion of product attributes (Table 9)
			4. Gift selection (Table 10)

Table 1
IMPORTANCE OF PURCHASE DECISION^a AND EXPRESSED DISSONANCE^b

	Percent	
	High dissonance	Low dissonance
High importance	60	17
Low importance	40	83
TOTAL	100	100
<i>N</i>	43	35

$\chi^2 = 7.11 p < .01$.

^a *Pre-selection measure of importance*: "Some people feel that in buying instant coffee getting a certain brand is important. Others feel that it doesn't make a great deal of difference which brand one buys. How do you feel about this?"

High importance: "Getting the brand I want is: very important/ reasonably important."
 Low importance: "Getting the brand I want is: neither too important nor too unimportant/ reasonably unimportant/ very unimportant."

^b *Measure of dissonance*: "When you compared your favorite national brand with the test brand, were there features of the gift you did *not* choose which (considering these by themselves) might have led you to choose *that* gift?"

High dissonance: "Definitely, some aspects of the other brand had a very positive appeal for me."
 "Possibly, some aspects of the other brand had a small, but positive, appeal for me."
 Low dissonance: "Neither alternative had more than a neutral appeal for me."
 "Probably not, hardly any aspects of the other brand had even a small positive appeal for me."
 "Definitely not, no aspect of the other brand had any positive appeal for me."

differences in post-decision brand evaluation. Ideally this assignment might be made on the basis of the conflict among alternatives at the moment of decision. It was felt, however, that forcing a person to report his perceived conflict during the decision-making process would not only create a highly artificial setting, but would probably directly influence his effort, commitment, and subsequent dissonance.

The assignment was made on the basis of a post-decision reconstruction of each person's prior state of conflict.¹ Table 1 presents the question used to generate

¹ This measure was made immediately after subjects announced their selections. Following a choice between alternatives, one tends to come to terms with post-decision regret inherent in giving up benefits associated with unchosen alternatives. Opposing forces operating to produce regret, on the one hand, and decision-justification (dissonance reduction) on the other should roughly equalize shortly after the decision. Less biased recall of one's pre-decision brand evaluation should be possible at this point. Walster [12] who varied the time interval

Table 2
CONTROL GROUPS' RATINGS OF TEST COFFEE BY 7-POINT SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL

	Percent	
	Tasted bad test coffee (N = 26)	Tasted good test coffee (N = 24)
Bitter (1, 2)	42	17
Neutral (3-5)	27	58
Not bitter (6, 7)	31	25
Total	100	100
Worthless (1, 2)	35	8
Neutral (3-5)	61	92
Valuable (6, 7)	4	0
Total	100	100
Sick (1, 2)	23	13
Neutral (3-5)	77	70
Healthy (6, 7)	0	17
Total	100	100
Bad (1, 2)	65	21
Neutral (3-5)	31	58
Good (6, 7)	4	21
Total	100	100
Poor quality (1, 2)	31	21
Neutral (3-5)	69	62
High quality (6, 7)	0	17
Total	100	100

subjects' expressed level of dissonance and a comparison with a pre-decision measure of perceived product importance. As expected from prior studies, there is a significant relationship between importance and dissonance, providing some evidence that the expressed dissonance question is valid.

Of the 78 subjects asked to select a brand as a gift, 43 expressed a high amount of dissonance following their choice; 35 expressed a low amount. Both groups were then asked to indicate the probability that they would buy either their favorite national brand or the test brand.

Nonconsumption Stage

A comparative evaluation of the non-taste attributes of the brands was undertaken by the high, low, and no dissonance groups. This was described as an "inspection test," a usual initial evaluation by the marketing

between choice and second rating of alternatives, provides supporting evidence. She found little spreading apart of chosen and unchosen alternatives immediately after army recruits chose occupational specialty assignments. Regret predominated with a four-minute delay, and dissonance reduction thereafter. Regret might very well be less a factor with a decision having fewer personal implications, such as in the present study.

Table 3
IMMEDIATE POST-SELECTION RATING^a

Source of variation	df	MS	F
Involvement (A)	1	1.44	1.85
Brand selected (B)	1	27.59	35.51 ^b
Dissonance (C)	1	.89	1.14
A × B	1	1.18	1.52
A × C	1	.51	.66
B × C	1	1.11	1.43
A × B × C	1	.02	.03
Residual	70	.78	

Group	N	\bar{X}
Selected a national brand	30	3.93
Selected the test brand	48	2.64

^a "If your favorite national brand and the test brand were priced the same for the 6 oz. size, which of these do you think you would buy?" (Would buy other brand 1-----5 Would buy selected brand)

^b $p < .001$.

research firm of the non-taste attributes of a food product. Those selecting a national brand as a gift compared it with the test brand. Those selecting the test brand as a gift were asked to compare it with their favorite national brand; the no dissonance group performed this same comparison.

Subjects were instructed to evaluate the appearance and aroma of the two coffees in labelled beakers. The intent, of course, was to provide a set of ambiguous stimuli to determine to what extent the process of choosing a gift influenced perception and evaluation of the chosen and unchosen alternatives. For this reason, the

Table 4
NON-CONSUMPTION PREFERENCE^a

Source of variation	df	MS	F
Involvement (A)	1	.13	.05
Brand selected (B)	1	.34	.14
Dissonance (C)	1	2.01	.80
A × B	1	.00	.00
A × C	1	.98	.39
B × C	1	8.22	3.28 ^b
A × B × C	1	2.66	1.06
Residual	70	2.51	

Selected a national brand		Selected test brand	
High dissonance	Low dissonance	High dissonance	Low dissonance
N = 20	N = 10	N = 23	N = 25
\bar{X} = 6.18	\bar{X} = 5.13	\bar{X} = 5.33	\bar{X} = 5.69

^a "On an overall basis which of the two brands you compared do you prefer?" (Prefer other brand 1-----9 Prefer selected brand)

^b $p < .10$.

Table 5
NON-CONSUMPTION PURCHASE INTENTION^a

Source of variation	df	MS	F
Involvement (A)	1	4.73	1.41
Brand selected (B)	1	.29	.09
Dissonance (C)	1	2.97	.88
A × B	1	4.05	1.21
A × C	1	3.19	.95
B × C	1	2.59	.77
A × B × C	1	.99	.30
Residual	70	3.35	

^a "If both brands were sold at the same price for a 6 oz. size, which brand would you probably buy?" (Would buy other brand 1-----9 Would buy selected brand)

coffee in each of the beakers was *exactly the same*. Questions regarding brand preference and purchase intentions were then administered to each of the subjects in the three dissonance conditions.

Post-Consumption Stage

Subjects were next served a cup of each of the two brands compared earlier. At this point, roughly half the subjects had their choice of coffee confirmed or disconfirmed by altering the taste of the test coffee with a poor tasting additive.²

Table 2 provides a check on the adequacy of the disconfirmation procedure. The 50 subjects not selecting a gift (no dissonance and control groups) rated this specially prepared coffee as somewhat more bitter and reasonably lower in quality and general evaluation than the good test coffee. Thus the manipulation seems to have succeeded in producing a believably bad coffee around which to structure disconfirmation experiences.

All subjects were then given a final questionnaire. Just before leaving the experiment subjects were told to leave the jars they had been carrying with them and take a fresh jar as a gift. The experimenter explained that they might as well take home a new-looking gift. As they filed by a table near the exit which contained a large number of jars of each brand, their choice was recorded by an assistant stationed at a distance behind the group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Immediate Post-Decision Stage

Table 3 reveals that, in the absence of any discrepant information or opportunity to selectively compare and evaluate the brands, only the brand selected (national

² The fact that the confirmation-disconfirmation experience was manipulated by altering the taste only of the test brand is important in that much greater variance in post-consumption evaluation of the test brand is expected. Approximately half of those choosing a test brand experienced much stronger disconfirmation than those choosing a national brand. Altering the taste of the national brand might well have produced disbelief.

Table 6
COMPARISON OF TREATMENT MEANS WITH CONTROL: NON-CONSUMPTION RATINGS

Treatment	N	Preference test (1) national (9)	Purchase intention test (1) national (9)	Evaluation of test brand		
				inferior (1) superior (7)	bad (1) good (7)	worthless (1) valuable (7)
Test brand-high dissonance	23	4.70	5.22	3.78	4.74 ^b	4.30
Test brand-low dissonance	25	4.32	4.36	4.32	4.60 ^b	4.44
Control	36	5.22	5.81	3.75	3.83	4.19
National brand-low dissonance	10	5.20	5.50	4.60 ^a	4.60 ^b	4.40
National brand-high dissonance	20	6.15	6.15	4.20	4.15	4.25

^a (Dunnett *t*) *p* < .05.

^b (Dunnett *t*) *p* < .01.

or test) produced a significantly different comparative rating. Those selecting a national brand rated their choice higher than those selecting the test brand. Since control subjects also rated national brands higher than the test brand without tasting either one (Table 6) it seems reasonable to assume that this belief existed prior to the experiment and was not materially altered by the choice process. Apparently prior information about national brands enabled those choosing one to rate it more highly relative to a new and unknown brand than those choosing the test brand could rate their choice relative to a national brand.

Neither the main effect of dissonance or situational involvement nor any of the interactions proved to be significant. Since this rating was made immediately after the self-report of expressed dissonance, it is possible that the effect of stating that "aspects of the unchosen alternative had a positive appeal" constrained immediate changes in the relative ratings of the two alternatives.

Nonconsumption Stage

Subjects went to a second room, where a different experimenter conducted nonconsumption evaluations of the coffees. Preference ratings are shown in Table 4. The dissonance-brand selected interaction approached significance (*p* < .10). No other significant relationships were found. The interaction indicated that the dissonance model correctly predicted the direction of preference ratings for the national brands but not for the test brand.

No support can be given for the dissonance model on the question of purchase intentions (Table 5). When Dunnett's test [13, p. 89] comparing all means with a control was run (Table 6) there was a consistent tendency of high dissonance national brand subjects to be stronger in praise of their own selection (columns 1 and 2) and more critical in their evaluation of the test brand (columns 3, 4, and 5) than low dissonance national brand subjects. Looking at the same comparison for the test brand subjects, in four of the five post-decision evaluations there was a tendency for the low dissonance

subjects to be more favorably disposed towards the test brand than the high dissonance subjects.

The evidence suggests that the dissonance model can account, to some extent, for differential behavior in the case of national brand subjects but not for those selecting the test brand. Prior information on the well established national brands would seem to be an important interactive variable determining the form of cognitive reevaluation. Caution is needed in interpreting these results since, for the most part, the experimental groups do not differ significantly in their evaluations from the control group.

The data presented thus far illustrate the effects of the first variable, prior information resulting from brand familiarity. In the post-consumption stage, the second variable (nature and quality of post-purchase evidence) is no longer ambiguous, but provides a definite confirmation or disconfirmation experience. The first stage of the experiment may be roughly compared to a typical post-decision first stage in which the consumer has lit-

Table 7
POST-CONSUMPTION PREFERENCE^a

Source of variation	df	MS	F
Confirmation-disconfirmation (A)	1	117.22	26.15 ^b
Brand selected (B)	1	67.11	14.97
Dissonance (C)	1	.00	.00
A × B	1	.35	.08
A × C	1	.29	.06
B × C	1	9.55	2.13
A × B × C	1	.92	.20
Residual	70	4.48	

Group	N	\bar{X}
Selection was confirmed	40	6.54
Selection was disconfirmed	38	3.81

^a "Now that you have completed the brand comparison, which of the two brands do you prefer?" (Prefer other brand 1-----9 Prefer selected brand)

^b *p* < .001.

Table 8
POST-CONSUMPTION PURCHASE INTENTION^a

Source of variation	df	MS	F
Confirmation-disconfirmation (A)	1	110.52	27.95 ^c
Brand selected (B)	1	87.04	22.01
Dissonance (C)	1	.33	.08
A × B	1	.45	.11
A × C	1	1.48	.37
B × C	1	14.00	3.54 ^b
A × B × C	1	1.50	.38
Residual	70	3.95	

Group	N	\bar{X}
Selection was confirmed	40	6.41
Selection was disconfirmed	38	3.76
Selected a national brand × high dissonance	20	6.80
Selected a national brand × low dissonance	10	5.71
Selected the test brand × high dissonance	23	3.51
Selected the test brand × low dissonance	25	4.31

^a "Which would you probably buy if the national brand and the test brand were sold at the same price for each size jar?" (Would buy other brand 1-----9 Would buy selected brand)

^b $p < .10$.

^c $p < .001$.

tle definitive feedback from his decision. This kind of situation is not conducive to learning or objective validation of behavior. It should be difficult to really evaluate the merits of the two products without meaningful performance information. Prior to the actual use of the product, the simplest and most gratifying course of action may be a positive reappraisal of one's decision. The post-consumption stage of the experiment provided an opportunity to measure behavior with respect to information clearly confirmational or disconfirmational in nature.

Post-Consumption Stage

Would high dissonance subjects be motivated enough to perceptually distort a clear disconfirmation of their selection, or would this be interactive with prior information based on brand familiarity? Tables 7 and 8 provide evidence that significantly different evaluations of the selected brand were a function of the confirmation-disconfirmation experience. If prior information regarding brands is a significant source of influence on the form of dissonance reduction, then there should be a significant interaction between brand selected and dissonance.³ This was not the case for preference ratings (Table 7). However, the hypothesized factor did approach significance ($p < .10$) for purchase intention (Table 8). In neither table, however, was there a significant main effect due to dissonance.

Results coded for an open-ended brand comparison question (Table 9) give further evidence regarding subjects' treatment of brand attribute information. High

³A significant main effect for brand selected is an artifact of the previously discussed disconfirmation manipulation.

dissonance subjects, contrary to dissonance theory, did not highlight positive attributes of the chosen brand and negative attributes of the unchosen brand to a significantly greater degree than low dissonance subjects. In fact, the direction of the results is opposite to the theory.

Perhaps the most telling data in support of the learning model are reported in Table 10. With the invitation to take fresh jars on the way out, subjects had an opportunity to take any brand, and could not see their new choices being recorded. Eighty percent of those whose choices were confirmed reselected the same brand as compared to 32% of those whose choices were disconfirmed. Of the 25 high dissonance subjects who reselected the same brand, only 32% did so following disconfirmation. Chi-square analysis demonstrated the significant relationship between brand switching and disconfirmation. There was no significant relationship between level of dissonance and brand switching.

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of a confirmation-disconfirmation experience appears to be the overwhelming factor in the cognitive reevaluation process. Subjects reevaluated positively when their choice was confirmed by the evidence and negatively when their choice was disconfirmed, a result suggested by learning theory.

It would be useful to categorize at least two post-purchase stages in a consumer decision model in terms of the potential for learning at each stage. If there is a reasonable time interval between purchase and product use, the potential for outcome-based learning is likely to be initially low. The probability of consistency-based justification would be greatest in this interval. The extent of cognitive justification at this point, especially if accompanied by increasing commitment (e.g., telling others about the purchase), may interfere with more objective appraisal following product use. A more conclusive disconfirmation may then be required before the buyer is willing to admit that the choice was not a good one, and there may be a greater probability that the mistake will be repeated.

Table 9
DISTORTION OF PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES^a

	High dissonance		Low dissonance	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Comparison consonant with brand selected	13	30	17	50
Comparison dissonant with brand selected	11	26	7	21
Lack of distortion	19	44	10	29
Total	43	100	34	100

^a "In your own words compare the two brands you tasted in this study."

$\chi^2 = 3.20$, n.s.

Table 10
POST-CONSUMPTION GIFT SELECTION

	Choice confirmed ^a				Choice disconfirmed			
	High dissonance ^b		Low dissonance		High dissonance		Low dissonance	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Reselected original choice	17	77	15	83	8	38	4	24
Switched	5	23	3	17	13	62	13	76

^a Confirmation-disconfirmation $\chi^2 = 18.58, p < .001$.

^b High dissonance-low dissonance $\chi^2 = 1.17, n.s.$

It might be a good idea to be skeptical of product evaluations taken during the pre-consumption stage (e.g., in supermarkets), especially pertaining to brands or products the consumer has not previously used. With little opportunity for the consumer's choice to be disconfirmed, one may be recording the full effect of cognitive justification. Follow-up studies with these same people might also be biased by the increased commitment generated by the earlier response.

The amount of dissonance was an important source of influence only as it interacted with brand selected, leading to the belief that differential prior information about brands must be taken into account in predicting the kind of cognitive reevaluation that will take place. This interaction seems reasonable since the impact of the new information should be less in the presence of considerable prior information. Viewed in this light, one function of advertising and other pre-decision sources of product information is probably to create a standard for judging product attributes and performance. This standard or baseline enables consumers to more easily discard isolated, discrepant information about a product obtained either through its direct use or from indirect sources.

These results were obtained for a product of probably minor importance for most people. Instant coffee may well be representative in this respect of a broad category of frequently purchased consumer non-durables. It should be noted, however, that the desire to positively reappraise one's product choice is likely to be an increasing function of ego-related product importance. For this reason one should be careful in generalizing the results of this study to products believed to be highly ego-involving.

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