

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: a Marketing Approach on the Conflict between Consumer Attitude and Behavior

João Paulo Ciribeli

Doutorando em Administração, Professor da FAGOC (Brasil)

E-mail: jpciri@hotmail.com

Wesley de Almeida Mendes

Graduando em Administração, Aluno do Curso de Administração da FAGOC (Brasil)

E-mail: wesleyadm@live.com

Leonardo Parma de Lima

Mestrando em Administração, Professor da FAGOC (Brasil)

E-mail: lparmadelima@gmail.com

Vanessa Aparecida Vieira Pires

Mestre em Administração, Professora da FAGOC (Brasil)

E-mail: vanessapires@fagoc.br

Wellington de Oliveira Massardi

Mestre em Administração, Professor da FAGOC (Brasil)

E-mail: wellingtonmassardi@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Cognitive dissonance can be understood as a state of mind generated by incoherencies or inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the relationship between consumer attitudes and behavior in order to ponder the consonant and dissonant aspects of this relationship. In terms of methodology, it consists of a literature review that aims to identify the cognitive dissonance of consumers regarding consumption, as well as ways to minimize it. It was noticed the existence of three conflicts – approach-approach; avoidance-avoidance; and approach-avoidance – which generate in consumers different ways to fight and reduce them. However, the basis of this theory is not to eliminate dissonance, but to motivate the individual to find ways to minimize it, either by seeking better information about the product to be purchased, or by defense mechanisms.

Keywords: *dissonance; conflicts; cognition; attitude; behavior.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The choice of products and services that have some degree of involvement by consumers is no easy task, considering the demands – which are limitless – and financial resources – which are limited. In addition to the family budget adequacy in relation to market offerings, consumers also face a range of variables to be considered during the purchase decision process.

These variables may be related to verifying the characteristics and the quality of the product (here understood as goods, services, ideas and experience), including the type of material used, different designs, the brand, its differential within the competition, existing product substitutes, warranty policy, packaging, the existence of extended products (as in the case of services attached to the product), payment terms (discounts, installment sales, number of benefits, etc.), distribution channels, among others.

Consumers' perception – combined with the requirement for business practices favorable to society – sometimes leads to psychological discomforts during the purchase decision process, which take into account the origin of the product, its impact on the environment and the way of disposal; thus, the more variables analyzed, the greater will be the dissonance.

Such discomforts are known as cognitive dissonance, which can be understood as a state of mind generated by the incoherencies and / or inconsistencies between attitudes or between attitudes and behaviors (Belch & Belch,

2011, p. 121; Chiavenato, 2006, p. 225; Cobra 1997, p. 42; Menegon, 2012, p. 63; Festinger, 1957, p. 1-3; Samara & Morsch, 2005, p. 36; Robbins, 2005, p. 61; Rodrigues, Assmar & Jablonski, 2012, p. 174-175; Solomon, 2011, p. 159; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2012, p. 185).

Attracting new consumers to the market becomes, then, a complex task, since the consumers' attitude is not always consistent (in whole or in part) with their behavior. Analyzing the existence of dissonance on consumption and minimizing its existence in the process of consumer purchase decision has become essential to better understand consumer behavior, as well as to enable a better matching of business products to the needs and desires of consumers.

A better understanding of cognitive dissonance – an area of knowledge treated mainly by social psychology – will allow researchers, businesses and academic community a better understanding of the factors that operate in the purchase decision process and trigger the dissonant situation. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the relationship between attitude and behavior of consumers in order to ponder the consonant and dissonant aspects of such relationship.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study consists of a bibliographical review (or research on secondary sources) that seeks to analyze the intrapersonal conflicts that occur during the purchase decision process in order to identify the cognitive dissonance of consumers against the consumption and the ways to minimize it.

According to Vergara (2006, p. 48), this kind of research is the systematic study which is developed based on material published in books, magazines, newspapers, electronic networks, i.e. material accessible to the general public. Therefore, there is no need for empirical contact with the object to be studied (Mascarenhas, 2012, p. 49). As for the methodological classification, the article can be classified as exploratory. This type of study aims to create more familiarity with the subject (Mascarenhas, 2012, p. 46), in addition to serving as a basis for empirical and / or descriptive studies.

3. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN THE MARKET SCENARIO

In 1957, the psychologist Leon Festinger published the book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, which became the basis for the research of cognitive dissonance that analyzes the relationship between consumers' attitudes and behavior (Robbins, 2005, p. 61; Rodrigues; Assmar & Jablonski, 2012; Samara & Morsch, 2005, p. 36).

Due to its wide applicability in decision-making, cognitive dissonance is present in various fields of study, including psychology, people management, sociology, anthropology, and marketing strategies.

From the marketing point of view, Paixão (2011, p. 40), Honorato (2004, p. 138), Kotler and Keller (2012, p. 128-129) and Jones (2002, p. 240) argue that there is cognitive dissonance in case of bad results when comparing what was expected in the product with its final result. This comparison does not only occur in a rational way, but through numerous elements that are associated, from the experience of what is happening to the moment of its use, the main expectations, the raising alternatives and the purchase itself (Giglio, 2005 p. 149). As for Solomon (2011, p. 159), the dissonance occurs during the process of choosing between two or more products. Other authors, however, consider that the cognitive dissonance can occur throughout the purchase decision process, extending from the desire to consume up to the post-purchase (Rodrigues, Assmar & Jablonski, 2012, p 176; Samara & Morsch, 2005, p. 37).

Consumer attitude can be understood as a psychological evaluation, a predisposition based on beliefs and customs, to respond favorably or not to what the individual feels about an event, a person or an object (Samara & Morsch, 2005, p. 118; Robbins, 2005, p. 60; Rodrigues; Assmar & Jablonski, 2012, p.160). On the other hand, the term "consumer behavior" is understood as consumer habits – their wants, needs, tastes and preferences, not only in the purchase stage, but throughout the decision process (Solomon, 2011, p. 33; Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2005; Kardes, Cronley & Cline, 2010; Belch & Belch, 2011; Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Mental conflicts generated in the purchase decision process are derived from the importance given to a characteristic of the product or the product itself. Such importance is given by the degree of involvement, culture, motivation, family, financial resources, physical resources, skills in using the product, among others factors (Solomon, 2011, p. 158-160; Giglio, 2005, p. 149-151; Chiavenato, 2006, p. 225). In short, the cognitive dissonance is the need to decide on a product or service as well as a comparison between the expected result and the result obtained (Table 1).

Table 1: Purchase decision process and the moments of dissonance

Stages of Purchase Decision Process	Purchase Decision Process	Possible Moments of Cognitive Dissonance Occurrence
Pre-purchase	Problem recognition	- Searching for information; - Knowing product origin, specification and characteristics; - Identifying different alternatives.
	Information search	
	Evaluation of product and place of purchase alternatives	
Purchase	Product choice	- High price of product; - Comparing similar products and identifying important characteristics in the product that will not be acquired.
Post-purchase	Consumption, Evaluation, Use and Disposal	- Technical Assistance does not meet what was promised; - The product does not meet the specified in the manual / contract. - No location for disposal.

Therefore, cognitive dissonance is a common state of mind, which becomes a consequence of decision-making process that all human beings constantly experience, given the need to decide at any time between choosing something and rejecting another (Samara & Morsch, 2005, p. 38; Robbins, 2005, p. 63).

3.1 The types of consumption and the level of involvement as dissonant factors

Decision making demands consumers' efforts of different proportions according to the degree of engagement used in the process. Thus, there are three models of decision making: normal decision making; limited solution to the problem; expanded solution to the problem (Solomon, 2011, p. 334-335).

In making normal decision, there is little or no conscious effort to seek information, because many of the purchases made in this process are uneventful and objective (Solomon, 2011, p. 335; Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2005, p. 91).

In the limited solutions to the problem model, consumers apply a moderate degree of importance to the product. In this case, purchases are simple, but eventful, which sometimes requires that he tries to know a little about the product to be purchased (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2005, p. 90-91). It is a more direct and simple process that uses rules to choose the best alternative (Solomon, 2011, p. 335).

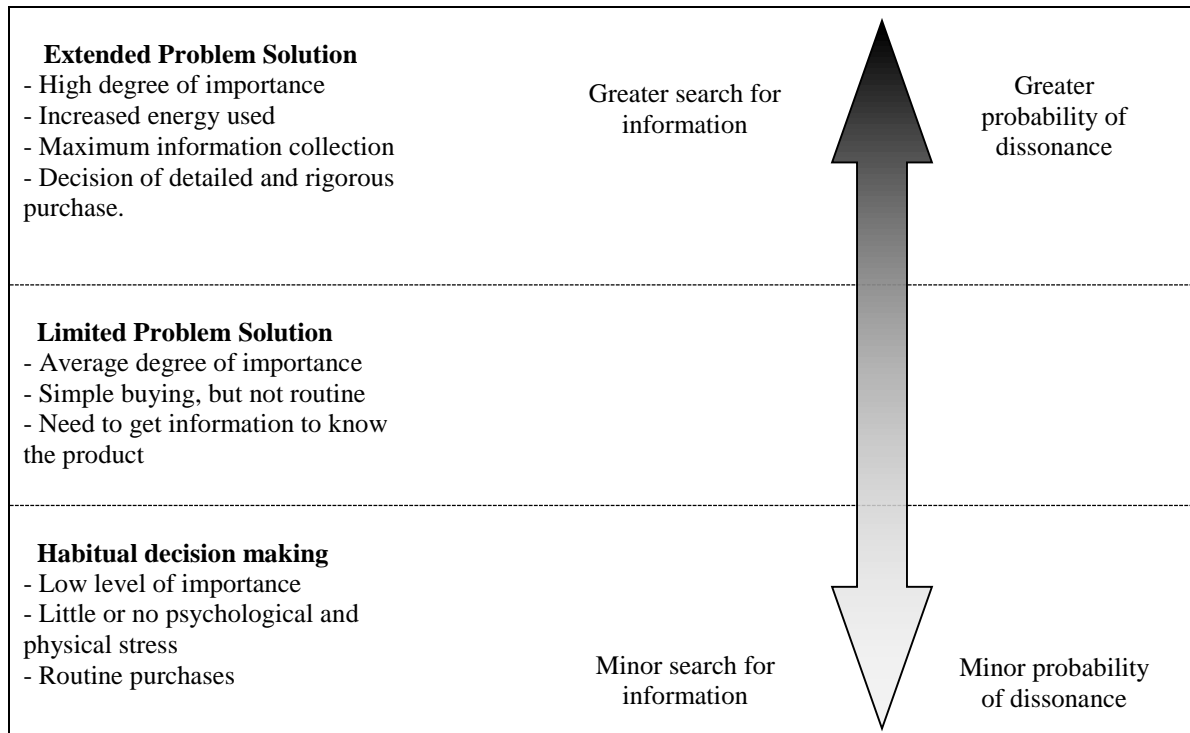
In the extended solution of the problem, the energy used is greater, given the large number of options in the market (Peter & Olson, 2010, p. 176). In the process of decision, the consumer collects as much information he can, either from internal sources (through his positive or negative memories about the product), or external sources (through research in newspapers, magazines, internet or information passed by others) in order to reduce the high degree of risk considered by the consumer in the purchasing process (Solomon, 2011, p. 335).

The expanded solution process occurs when the decision tends to be detailed and rigorous (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2005, p. 90). Thus, the degree of involvement in this case is high, given the complexity of the purchase decision process; therefore, the probability of cognitive dissonance tends to be higher.

The degree of involvement varies at different levels, depending on the product to be purchased and the consumer that analyzes it. When consumption shows high degree of involvement, people process more information in a more detailed and critical way, so there will be greater motivation to interact and seek information. In this case, it becomes a factor of great importance in the purchase decision process. However, in case of low involvement consumption, consumers seek limited solutions, due to the simplicity of the process and the previous knowledge on the product (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2005, p. 95; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2012, p. 158).

The types of consumption and the level of involvement employ a direct relationship, which helps identifying the cognitive dissonance, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Relationship between the decisions made, the degree of involvement and cognitive dissonance



4. DIFFERENT TYPES OF COGNITIVE CONFLICTS

The essence of the study of cognitive dissonance is the search for a harmonious state between attitude and behavior, by reducing mental conflicts caused in the moment of dissonance (Rodrigues, Assmar & Jablonski, 2012, p. 174).

Among the conflicts that affect the purchase decision process, those related to intrapersonal character are the ones that most operate in the consumer and can be classified into three types: approach-approach conflicts; avoidance-avoidance conflicts; and approach-avoidance conflicts (Table 2).

Table 2: Personal Conflicts

Types os conflicts	Characteristics	Types of dissonance
approach-approach	The options have only favorable items.	Giving up a favorable item.
avoidance-avoidance	The options have only unfavorable items.	Choosing necessarily a negative item.
approach-avoidance	The items have favorable and unfavorable factors simultaneously.	Giving up an item with favorable and unfavorable characteristics.

Source: Based on Solomon, 2011, p. 158-159; Schermerhorn Jr., Hunt & Osborn, 1999, p. 268-269; Peter & Olson, 2010, p. 181; John & Pervin, 2003, p. 299; Morris & Maisto, 2004, p. 376.

Conflicts of approach-approach type occur in the process of choosing one item from various desired by the consumer, for example, take a holiday trip to the South or to the North of Brazil; buy this or that book. The discomfort occurs in finding out which situation is more enjoyable (Solomon, 2011, p. 158-159; Schermerhorn Jr, Hunt & Osborn, 1999, p. 268-269; Peter & Olson, 2010, p. 181; John & Pervin, 2003, p. 299.). In approach-approach conflicts, dissonance occurs because one option is necessarily giving up the other.

The avoidance-avoidance cases occur when any choice to be made is undesirable by the consumer. The dissonance happens when you analyze what situations will affect less the consumer (Solomon, 2011, p. 158-159; Schermerhorn Jr, Hunt & Osborn, 1999, p. 268-269; Peter & Olson, 2010, p. 181; John & Pervin, 2003, p. 299). For instance, a consumer has exceeded his credit card limit and receives a traffic ticket in the same month, but he cannot afford to pay both debts, so he must choose which one to pay for.

In conflicts of avoidance-avoidance type, dissonance becomes a fact and tends to reach a higher degree of dissonance compared with other types of conflict, given that both options cause dissatisfaction to the consumer, hence a greater mental imbalance. There are situations when consumers choose to wait that occurrences solve the conflict by themselves (Morris & Maisto, 2004, p. 376-377). In these conflicts, marketers seek to minimize them by delivering less unpleasant features of one of the options (Solomon, 2011, p. 159).

The most common cases in the purchase decision process are approach-avoidance (or approach-avoidance) conflicts, which occur when the strengths and weaknesses of various products are evaluated in order to identify which is the best, or the least worst. In this type of conflict, the consumer assumes that, when purchasing a product, both positive and negative aspects will be absorbed and rejected (Solomon, 2011, p. 158-159; Schermerhorn Jr, Hunt & Osborn, 1999, p. 268-269; Peter & Olson, 2010, p. 181; John Pervin, 2003, p. 299).

Approach-avoidance conflicts usually occur at the stage of evaluation of alternative products, considering the features that attract consumers or keep them at distance, which generate the dissonant factor (Morris & Maisto, 2004, p. 377). This process shows characteristics that satisfy consumer desires, as well as others that inhibit the decision-making process of buying.

In order to minimize the approach-avoidance conflict, some advertising agencies try to convince the consumer that he is special and therefore he deserves to please himself with some luxuries and extravagances (Solomon, 2011, p. 159). Others offer more consumption options in order to please the consumer. Yet there are those who are specialized in target audiences, taking advantage of market segmentation (e.g. the green consumption) and offering products whose origin, use and disposal constitute a less negative interference in the environment.

5. DISSONANCE REDUCTION METHODS

Completely avoiding dissonance is a difficult activity, mainly due to the constant choices that occur over the course of the day. Furthermore, the greater the degree of involvement and relative importance that the consumer attributes to the product, the greater the energy performed to reduce dissonance (Robbins, 2005, p. 63).

The theory of cognitive dissonance predicts that the consumer is encouraged to reduce discomfort and seek a stable state (see Table 3), with a minimum of dissonance in the decision-making process (Jones, 2003, p. 240; Robbins, 2005, p. 63).

Table 3: Solutions to the dissonance and its interference

Solutions for the dissonance	Interferences
Search information.	Reduce the dissonance in the pre-purchase stage. One feels the need and seeks to know the means to eliminate it.
Distort perceptions and memories.	Deny the negative values of the product.
Depreciate the dissonant source.	Transfer dissonant condition to another product.
Search social support.	Search subjects experiencing the same dissonant situation.

Source: Based on Giglio (2005, p. 150-152); Gerrig & Zimbardo (2005, p. 496-498); Ries & Rodrigues (2004, p. 149-151); Goodwin (2005, p. 433-434).

In order to reduce dissonance, consumers seek different forms and methods, including the search for new information (Cobra 1997, p. 42, Belch & Belch, 2011, p. 121, Chiavenato, 2006, p. 225).

The search for information aims to reinforce the choices that were made. The more useful the information, the greater is the knowledge about the product to be purchased and the lower is the approach-avoidance conflict, since the consumer will have a wide range of choices in order to pick the one that best suits his needs (Jones, 2002, p. 242-243). In the process of purchasing decision, the search for information is a pre-purchase stage, in which the involvement with the product will enable identifying suitable market data for a more reasonable decision, in search of a better decision purchasing and greater satisfaction with the product (Solomon, 2012, p. 337-338).

Information can be acquired in two different ways: internally or externally (Solomon, 2012, p. 337-338). The internal information occurs when the individual already knows the product; in this case, he is less prone to be influenced in the purchase decision process, which minimizes his doubts about the origin of the product (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2012, p. 221).

External information occurs when individuals need to research details about the product to be consumed from external sources such as newspapers, books, magazines, internet, advertisements and even past experiences (Solomon, 2012, p. 337-338). Searching for external information causes a degree of discomfort due to the delay in finding required information, or by over-collected information. Thus, the best way to minimize dissonance is to seek the maximum possible effective information, in order to be able to respond to consumers' questions and assist in their buying decision.

Other methods to minimize the dissonance are related to ego defense mechanisms – first described by Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud's daughter, with whom he shared part of the studies published in 1937 –, which consisted of psychological strategies in order to defend oneself from daily conflicts (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2005, p. 496-498). These mechanisms are: distortion of perception and memory; depreciation of the source of dissonance; search for support from other people who had similar experiences (Giglio, 2005, p. 150-152; Goodwin, 2005, p. 433-434; Fontana, 2002, p. 229; Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2005, p. 496-498).

The distortion of perception and memory consists in seeking to forget the troubled feelings and / or overestimate the positive points of the product that was purchased (Giglio, 2005, p. 150). Therefore, it aims to find favorable factors in the acquired products and failures in the discarded ones (Solomon, 2011, p. 158-159). Thus, the distortion perception is a mechanism that is related to the post-purchase dissonance. As for green consumption, distortion occurs when the purchased product is less environmentally friendly than planned; therefore, green consumers seek to identify, in their functionality, positive factors of utilities, which distort the real perception of the product.

This mode to minimize the dissonance is connected to the defense mechanism known as denial, which consists in refusing reality in order to defend itself from suffering (RIES; RODRIGUES, 2004, p. 150).

Another case of dissonance reduction is the depreciation of the dissonant source, in which the individual seeks to transfer responsibility for the error to another individual or situation (Giglio, 2005, p. 150-151; Gerrid & Zimbardo, 2005, p. 497).

When depreciating the dissonant source, the individual uses projection and displacement as a defense mechanism. In the first case, he transfers the perception of his own shortcomings to others; in the second, the feeling of anxiety is transferred from the original object to another (Ries & Rodrigues, 2004, p. 150). In both cases, the consumer seeks to reverse situations, disparaging content that originated the dissonance (Giglio, 2005, p. 150-151).

When a consumer recognizes his flaws and therefore suffers from dissonance, sometimes he uses the search for social support, which is to find people who have gone through similar experiences (GIGLIO, 2005, p. 151-152). The search for social support is linked to the mechanism of identification defense: the consumer searches in others (either in the same social class or in upper classes) the same situation that he has experienced (Gerrid & Zimbardo, 2005, p. 497).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The paper aimed to understand the effects of cognitive dissonance and its relationship with the consumer, as well as the ways to minimize the psychological discomfort generated during the purchase decision process.

Based on the bibliographical review, it was noticed that cognitive dissonance is related to the purchase decision process, from pre-purchase (in which the individual seeks to know and evaluate the options available in the market) to the post-purchase (which is related to the lack of compatibility between what he expected from the product and its real use).

The term was coined by the psychologist Leon Festinger, who found that cognitive dissonance is a psychological factor with which the human being deals several times of the day, according to Robbins (2005), Rodrigues, Assmar & Jablonski (2012), Samara & Morsch (2005), among other authors, whose theory is not based on eliminating dissonance, but in stimulating individuals to find ways to minimize it.

Shopping with a higher degree of importance, which requires detailed and accurate researches on product characteristics, is more likely to generate dissonance, unlike routine shopping, which is less detailed and usually has the purpose of meeting basic needs.

The inconsistencies generated by dissonances cause intrapersonal conflicts, which were observed by several authors, including Solomon (2011), Peter & Olson (2010), Morris & Maisto (2004), who identified the existence of three of these conflicts: approach-approach; avoidance-avoidance; and approach-avoidance. Such conflicts provide the consumer with different ways of dealing with them in order to reduce dissonance.

The review showed that different authors – Giglio (2005), Ries & Rodrigues (2004) and Goodwin (2005), among others – consider that the motivational factors, as well as the situations experienced by each consumer, differ from individual to individual. Thus, there are different ways to minimize the dissonance, either by seeking better information about the product to be purchased, or by defense mechanisms.

Such defense mechanisms lead consumers to find different ways to reduce the dissonant factor, from the distortion of perceptions to the search for social support, taking into account the product, the time and the factor that generated this inconsistency.

The study showed that cognitive dissonance is a mental stress caused by the inconsistency between attitudes and between attitudes and behavior. The greater the desire for a product, and the more segmented the consumer market, the more complex the decision process tends to be and, consequently, the individual will suffer greater dissonance.

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