Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory and Brand

Subjects: Business

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Combining brand equity indicators with Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) provides insight into the hardly measurable influential variables of brand loyalty and brand equity evaluation. The results suggest that the satisfaction level (i.e., product evaluation) can be explained in more depth by the divided response shift indicator in the case of a familiar, low involvement product such as mineral water. It can be stated that the positive and negative disconfirmations of the response shift, which measures the weight of a brand in the overall evaluation of a product, can provide accurate information for brand managers.

Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) brand equity brand management

1. Introduction

Safety incidents in the food system have a deleterious effect on consumer trust [1]. Consumer trust is an essential aspect in the functioning of any market but mainly in the food and drinks sector [2]. Food scandals, such as the bovine spongiform encephalopathy outbreak in the 1990s, the ‘horsemeat scandal’ in 2013, dioxins in food in Belgium in 1999, and the detection of mad cow disease in Britain affect consumers’ trust [3]. In addition to food incidents, increased sophistication and globalization of food markets are accompanied by the distancing of the consumer from the production source. Similarly, this augmented complexity and distance have contributed to a decline in trust and simultaneously increased the importance of trust.

This is a challenging issue in developing countries such as Albania, where consumers lack trust in institutions, especially those linked to regulatory systems related to food [4]. Trust is essential in individuals’ food purchasing decisions and understanding the factors that stimulate and mitigate consumers’ trust in food, to inform the public and business sector, is necessary for both developed and developing countries. The trust concept is analyzed mainly in social sciences because of its substantial relationship with development in general and socioeconomic development in particular [5][6]. No single consensual definition is agreed on trust, and several nuances persist in the academic debate [7][8]. However, trust is essential for cooperative behavior and solving collective action problems [9]. In addition, rational choice scholars implicitly or explicitly equate trust with simple institution-induced expectations [10]. Similarly, in the entrepreneurial context, a firm owner expects a business partner to act in their interest or take such interests into account, which is also an expectation issue [8].

According to the research of consumers and trust, Hobbs and Goddard [7] mention four broad categories of trust as follows: (1) institutional trust (trust in regulatory systems), (2) generalized trust (measured through the general trust

that people have in others), (3) calculative trust (individuals behaving in such a way that does not cause harm for their interest, and (4) finally relational trust that derives from the cumulative experience between the trustee and trustor. The last one derives from familiarity [11][12]. The four mentioned categories of trust had been analyzed in the food context, showing an impact on specific consumer decisions. Ding and researchers [13] analyze the relationship between generalized trust and consumer behavior, showing that in the case of health-risk related functional food, trusting people are more likely to buy them. Although in the case of the environmental footprint related to food, generalized trust does not impact German consumer choices [14]. Peters et al. [15] also show that institutional trust impacts attitudes toward biotechnology in USA consumers and not in German ones. Similarly, Siegrist and Hartmann [16] show that trust in the food industry directly influences the acceptance of cultured meat. Consumers who trust the food industry are more likely to buy functional foods than consumers who do not [17].

Consequently, trust has an influence on customer choice and perceived quality, and therefore, on customer satisfaction [18]. Other studies show the interrelationship between trust and consumer risk perceptions in food choices; Janssen and Hamm [19] point out that German consumers show low trust in the European Union (EU) mandatory logo on organic products vs. German logos. In comparison, Albanian consumers show the contrary [4]. When dealing with consumer and trust issues, researchers have reiterated the importance of institutional trust by jointly merging public with private activities. Indeed, the lack of trust in public institutions in the food industry erodes consumer confidence even in private institutions [20]. In this framework, brands represent private institutions that might reduce the risks in food choices induced by the lack of trust in public institutions. In the definition of Lin and Nugent [21] (p. 2037), institutions are defined as "*a set of humanly devised behavioral rules that govern and shape the interactions of human beings, in part by helping them to form expectations of what other people will do*". In this vein, brand processes and activities shape human interactions around a product and service and generate expectations.

Consequently, strong brands can mitigate the effect of low trust in institutions and consumer decisions [22]. Origin bounded brands (OBBs) can mitigate through reputation the negative effect of low trust in institutions [23][24][25]. However, whether in people, organizations or marketing constructs such as brand, trust is not an immutable attitude, and most changes in it are in a negative direction due to the greater salience of negative information [26]. Thus, monitoring the trust levels in public or private companies is particularly relevant nowadays, given the amount of information that the individual has to process daily. In that regard, customer-based brand evaluation processes from a trust perspective play a pivotal role.

2. Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory

In markets where products and services have become similar, with no significant functional differences and consumer choices are more and more influenced by emotional aspects rather than rational thinking, experiences have surfaced as the primary form of differentiation [1]. Marketing academics and practitioners have acknowledged that consumers look for brands that provide them with unique and memorable experiences [2]. In this vein, from the consumer viewpoint, brands are relationship builders, and the sensory information that they convey affects satisfaction, trust and loyalty [2]. The sensory perception of consumers has explicit and implicit impacts on brand

evaluation. Haas and her mates show that the implicit factors have a notable effect on explicit characteristics and brand experience and do not contradict each other [22]. In the same vein, non-physical, intangible factors can affect consumer sensory perceptions.

Consequently, the customer believes more in the brand than the objective features in the absence of information. Many studies view brand trust as central and conceptualize it as a notable factor in the firm's success [27]. Brand trust is viewed as a long process that can occur by considering consumer experiences. Therefore, brand trust can be discussed as a cognitive component that may induce an emotional response and expectations [28].

Several researchers have analyzed the impact of product credence attributes such as brand, advertisement, packaging, label, price and origin on sensorial expectations [29][30][31][32][33][34][35][36][37][38][39][40]. The application of neuromarketing tools is also a common procedure in the research field [41][42]; however, the reliability of these methods is not yet widely accepted [43]. Scholars, as mentioned earlier, have used Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) to assess the influence of credence attributes on the consumer evaluations of several food products. However, this theory was not used previously to measure trust based on brand expectations.

Disconfirmation of expectancies refers to the difference between expectations and objective quality, or in other words, the real performance of a product [29][30][44][45][46][47]. According to Lee and his mates [48], expectations create the baseline for satisfaction—if disconfirmation occurs, customer satisfaction will be higher or lower than the baseline level. Disconfirmation is positive when product performance exceeds expectations and vice versa [45]. In addition, disconfirmation can be asymmetrical when positive and negative disconfirmations are not of the same size. Thus, analyzing the brand's perceived quality and expectations, its strength from a consumer perspective and the level of trust the latter confers to them can be evaluated.

When consumers taste a food product, their perception is often biased by preconceived ideas in product evaluation. Schifferstein [44] identifies a set of three alternative ways to isolate sensory from non-sensory preferences: (1) blind testing with a product, which provides experience attribute information; (2) expectation testing (E), which permits the collection of credence (accumulated trust) attribute information; and (3) full information testing (involving the provision to the consumer of experience and credence information regarding the product). The differences between the scores measured using these three tests can be used to measure BE and the trust score for the specific brand from the consumer perspective.

Full information test score (F) − Expectation score (E) = Degree of Disconfirmation

Expectation test score (E) − Blind test score (B) = Degree of Incongruence (reputation)

Full information test score (F) − Blind test score (B) = Degree of Response shift (trust on brand information)

Following the logic of EDT, a strong brand can significantly improve the full evaluation of a product—i.e., the type of evaluation that combines experience and trust in brand information. A strong brand prevails in a full evaluation situation; that is, the brand significantly affects the full product evaluation compared to a blind tasting scenario [30].

In contrast, weak brands may prevail in blind evaluations, i.e., brand reputation does not significantly affect the full product evaluation compared to blind tasting. Assimilation theory attempts to explain this behavior [49] by positing that assimilation occurs when unconfirmed expectation-related discrepancies are assimilated by aligning perceptions with expectations [29][44][49][50]. When assimilation is absent, this suggests that a brand name does not interfere with sensory perception in the overall product evaluation and that the blind score should be equal to the full information score [29][51]. A contrast effect (positive or negative) occurs when a change of product evaluation in the full information scenario moves in the opposite direction to the expected value information (ibid.). Contrast is more likely to occur with well-known products [52], since these tend to rely more on experience information than on credence (i.e., non-sensorial) information [51].

Another factor involved in BE is asymmetric disconfirmation. Schifferstein et al. [31], and Anderson and Sullivan [51] discovered that consumer satisfaction (CS) is more sensitive to negative disconfirmation than positive disconfirmation. Under these circumstances, product managers focus more on avoiding negative performance perceptions than on enhancing positive performance perceptions (ibid.). Thus, measuring this aspect is quite important in product and brand management. Several studies show the relationship between trust reputation and sustainability, especially with the increasing importance of community marketing [53]. Even though trust and reputation are a chicken–egg issue, the former allows the reputation to exist. By promising and meeting the expectations over time, organizations build trust.

BE with EDT indicators (presented in **Figure 1**) has been operationalized to assess the value of four brand reputation–trust instances, according to consumer perceptions. Following Aaker's [54] BE model, three indicators are proposed: (1) brand awareness, examined through brand recognition and brand dominance; (2) perceived value; and (3) brand loyalty, measured by evaluating the relative share of brand influence in the overall product evaluation, and through the asymmetrical effect of expectations on satisfaction. Brand awareness refers to whether consumers can recall or recognize a brand or simply whether they know about a brand [55]. Brand awareness and familiarity foster customers' recollection and recognition of brands [56]. The brand name activates a memory [54], and brand knowledge is linked to the brand name, culminating in brand equity [54][57]. However, incongruent, suggestive brand names can cause unintended detrimental effects related to product choice [58].

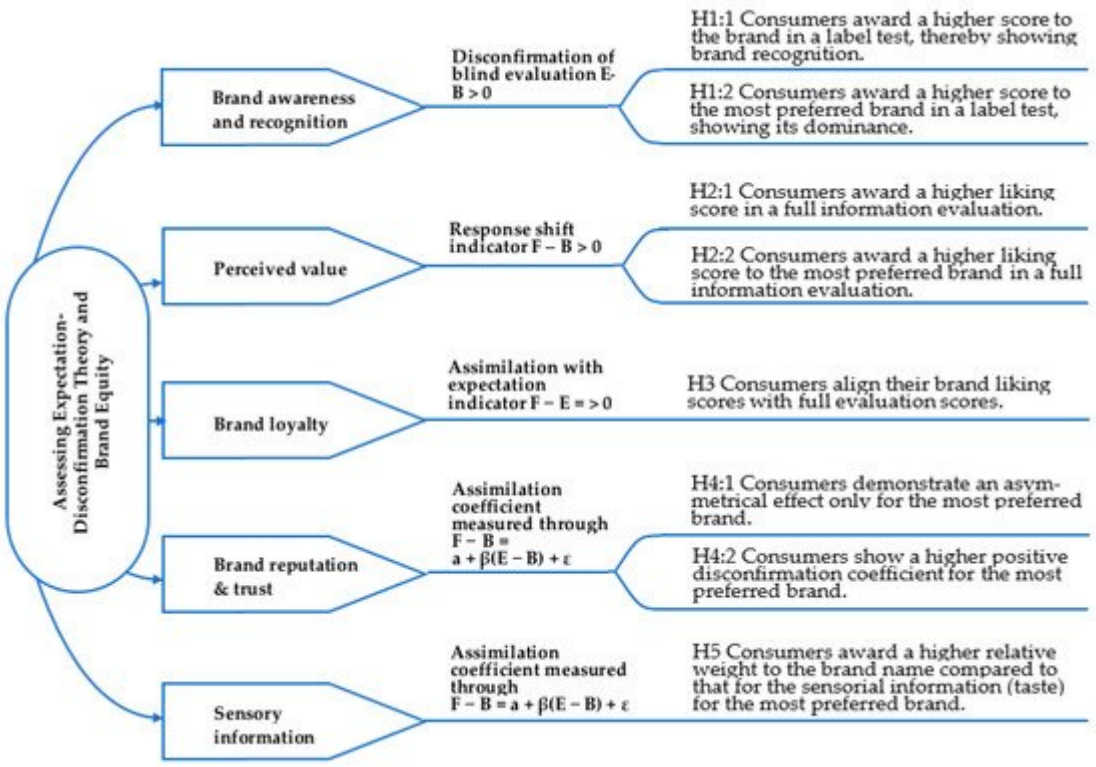

Figure 1. Mapping brand equity with Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory. Note: Expectation score (E); Blind test score (B); Full information test score (F); B1, B2, B3, B4: conducted brands; α: Level of assimilation (proportion of the response shift over the degree of incongruence); β, ε: function coefficients.

Several researchers [59][60] have confirmed the positive association between brand awareness and BE. In addition, brand awareness is an important indicator because it mediates between brand loyalty and BE. In the research, brand awareness is expressed in H1.1 and H1.2.

The second indicator considered in BE evaluation is perceived quality. Perceived quality is defined as a consumer's evaluation of a brand's overall excellence based on intrinsic (taste) and extrinsic cues (brand name); for that reason, perceived quality in itself is a compound construction [54]. In addition, perceived quality also generates value for consumers by increasing consciousness and providing them with a reason to buy and differentiating one brand from competing brands [61][62]. This suggests that perceived quality is one of the main elements of BE and an essential factor in evaluating brand equity. In marketing, the construct of perceived quality has been widely acknowledged as the primary driver of purchase intention [63]. When the informational process includes mention of the brand of the product, it has been reported that consumers who were formerly indifferent in terms of their preference for products in the blind test demonstrate a strong sensory preference for the most preferred brand. One of the theories that explain this behavior is Assimilation Theory. According to this theory, assimilation occurs when unconfirmed expectations discrepancies are assimilated by aligning perceptions with expectations [29][50][64]. According to Nobel Prize winner in psychology Daniel Kahneman, this behavior is linked with a well-known confirmation bias misconception. Individuals tend to interpret new information to become compatible with their existing beliefs and convictions. The more nebulous the pieces of information are, the higher the confirmation bias is. In that regard, trust has a vital role to play in the mitigation of this decision-making fallacy.

When the brand does not affect the sensory valuation, α equals zero, whilst the irrelevance of sensory characteristics in an overall evaluation leads to a score of one. When assimilation is absent, the brand does not affect the sensory perception in the overall evaluation of the product, and the blind score should be equal to the full information score. Thus, α should be equal to zero.

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