

## **Cognitive Dissonance and Its Impact On Consumer Buying Behaviour**

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the implications of cognitive dissonance on varied aspects of consumer buying behaviour. Some of the factors leading to dissonance post purchase and prior to it have been comprehensively studied in the article. The paper begins with the identification of the degree of involvement in the purchase of a product which creates dissonance for a customer. The authors argue that higher the degree of purchase involvement on behalf of the consumer, the lesser would be his dissonance level. If he takes the purchase decision on his own, he would be more satiated with his decision as compared to a purchase decision taken in consultation with others. Also it is proposed, that the more time a consumer devotes to his purchase decision, the more content he would be with his decision and lesser would be the dissonance attached with the decision. The study also unveils that, a consumer is likely to face more dissonance over his decision which involves the purchase of luxury and expensive products whereas less dissonance was found to be associated with the purchase of FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods). In other words, purchase of luxury products would make customers more dissonant as compared to a purchase of FMCG products.*

**Keywords:** *Cognitive dissonance, consumer behaviour, marketing, consumer dissonance, post purchase dissonance*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

For ages, dissonance in consumer behaviour has captured the imagination of the marketers the world over. Since consumer behaviour and its extensive study has been a backbone of the marketing strategy of every firm, a detailed and comprehensive study of all its aspects become imperative for the success of an organisation. And, hence, the concept of cognitive dissonance and its effect on the consumer behaviour has been a part of various significant research studies as well. One author even termed it one of social psychology's greatest theories (Aronson 1969).

Sweeney, Hausknecht and Soutar (2000, p. 383) noted, 'dissonance includes both cognitive aspects, as the title 'cognitive dissonance' implies, as well as an emotional dimension, as many definitions, including Festinger's original definition, imply'.

A social psychologist describes cognitive dissonance as a psychological phenomenon that occurs when there exists a discrepancy between what a person believes in and the outcome which questions a person's belief (Festinger, 1957). Festinger described cognitive dissonance as a state which comes into existence when a person gets confused between two cognitions (thoughts), which cannot exist together and hence create tension for him. As the person believes both the thoughts to be true, it invokes mental tension in his mind. The resulting dissonance motivates the individual to bring harmony to inconsistent elements and thereby reduce psychological tension.

Dissonance is known to arise mainly in three ways – First, any logical inconsistency can create dissonance. Second, dissonance can be created when a person experiences an inconsistency either between his attitude and his behaviour or between two of his behaviours. Third, dissonance can occur when a strongly held expectation is disconfirmed, notes Loudon & Della Bitta (2002). However, it must be noticed that in all the above mentioned three conditions, dissonance is not automatic. Rather it is imperative for a consumer to perceive the inconsistency; otherwise, no dissonance will occur. Further, dissonance occurs once a decision has been made as prior to making a decision an individual had an option of adjusting to any attitude or behaviour which he deemed right as per his choice but once a decision is being made, a commitment has been established between the buyer and the consumer, where he cannot further adjust himself and is liable to stick to his decision. This commitment and restriction might invoke dissonance in the consumer.

### **II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Once the purchase has been made, a human mind starts assessing the pros and cons of the purchase transaction made. This activity leads to emanation of myriad of conflicting thoughts in the mind of the buyer. The positive aspects of a choice forgone and the negative aspects of the decision made create ascending strain in

the human mind and make the buyer rethink about the decision made, notes Kassarian and Cohen (1965). Dissonance though is a psychological concept but has a great bearing on the way consumers plan their purchase and effect of the purchase made on their future alliance with the organisation. In an era of marketing, where a consumer is spoilt with a plethora of choices as regarding the product to buy, it is difficult to avoid a situation of confusion which leads to dissonance among the consumers. However, consumers make their efforts in different ways to reduce the conflicting views which arise in their mind.

When a purchase transaction gets completed, most of the consumers feel that their decision has got hugely effected by the sales interventions being made by the seller and hence their cognitive consistency has been compromised to the various marketing interventions made by the seller (Bell, 1967; and Cummings and Venkatesan, 1976). A consumer after making a desired decision may feel that by choosing a certain brand, he has forgone the positive traits of an alternative brand which he could have possessed if he had chosen the alternative brand. The guilt might get accentuated if bought brand doesn't perform as per the desired expectations of the consumers. In such a scenario, the consumer might ignore the positive traits associated with a product and consider them redundant.

Though dissonance can be felt by the consumer at any stage during the buyer's decision making process, it is during the post purchase stage that dissonance could cause even emotional discomfort in the consumer's mind. However, a consumer can try varied ways to reduce the dissonance - (1) through rationalization (2) he may seek additional information which is in consistent with the behaviour that he has shown and (3) by forgetting some of the dissonant elements and by changing his attitude and shifting it in favour of the decision made by highly emphasizing on the positive aspects of the decision being made.

Cognitive dissonance can categorically be found not only in the post purchase stage but is easily visible in the pre decision stage as well, according to Koller and Salzberger (2007).

Dissonance has the power to make the complete buying experience as sour and unfriendly. In order to retain long term customers, companies usually tend to avoid such schemes and such marketing strategies which can create dissonance among the consumers after the purchase transaction is being completed.

When a consumer rejects the positive attributes of a forgone product, he chooses the negative traits of a product which he chooses over the alternative available and this is the main reason behind the inconsistency that a consumer feels in his thoughts and ideas, hence Menasco and Hawkins (1978) measured this inconsistency in terms of the purchase decision difficulty that the consumers feels while making a decision which leads to dissonance arousal.

### **III. THE HYPOTHESES**

H<sub>1</sub>: The dissonance associated with a high involvement purchase is more than the dissonance associated with a low involvement purchase.

H<sub>2</sub>: More the time taken to make a decision, the more the dissonance felt

H<sub>3</sub>: Dissonance felt is higher when the purchase involves an FMCG product as compared to a luxury product.

Purchase involvement is necessarily a concept that is customer-defined than product-defined, as Traylor and Joseph (1984). The amount of energy, money and time taken to plan and execute a purchase of any product is defined as purchase involvement (Beatty and Kahle, 1988). Purchase involvement is considered to be high when the buyer invests a great degree of time and concern while making a purchase decision. In such a scenario, a more positive confirmation could be expected from the buyer (Smith and Bristor, 2006). The extent of interest and concern which the consumer brings to task while formulating a purchase decision has been defined as a significant aspect of purchase involvement. It can be defined as a cognitive response to overcome any kind of lurking uncertainty (Mittal, 1989). The pragmatic way to resolve conflicting views in explanation is to empirically verify the truth and hence, we have the following hypothesis.

Often dissonance is associated with the time constraint while making a decision. Time constraint can make the consumers to opt for spontaneous and unplanned decisions which the consumers had not prepared for earlier (Rook and Fisher, 1995). This might result in impulse buying in the case of some of the consumers. However if the purchase process is planned and is thought upon for long then the level of dissonance felt by the consumer would be less. The more time, a consumer spends in making a final decision of purchase; the less likely he is expected to ponder over his decision later on.

#### **H<sub>2</sub>: More the time taken to make a decision, the more the dissonance felt**

Income and the cost of the product are expected to have a direct relationship with the quantum of dissonance felt by the consumers after completing a purchase transaction. The higher price of the product always brings more dissonance to the consumers attached herewith. Luxury and expensive products can be defined as those products which are not essential for the survival of the mankind but are conducive to comfort and pleasure. A luxury item is considered to be an indulgence more than a necessity. However on the other hand, the dissonance attached with the purchase of an FMCG product will be much lesser as compared to an

expensive item. Since the value attached with an FMCG product is less as compared to a luxury product, hence it creates lesser dissonance.

H<sub>3</sub>: Dissonance felt is higher when the purchase involves an FMCG product as compared to a luxury product.

#### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research instrument that was used for carrying out the research was questionnaire. A survey was conducted among 120 respondents who were enquired about their consumer behaviour when affected by dissonance. The sample size was selected using the non probability sampling technique known as Quota sampling. Quotas of the sample were selected from Delhi wherein the research was conducted. The respondents were given adequate time to fill the questionnaires and any confusion pertaining to a question was solved on the spot for them. Hence the following quotas were made on the basis of gender, age, education and income to authenticate the research.

Gender Quota	Age Quota	Education Quota	Income (p.a.) Quota
Male	18-25 years	Undergraduate	Less than 1,00,000
Female	26-30 years	Graduate	1,00,000 - 3,00,000
	31-40 years	Postgraduate	4,00,000 - 6,00,000
	41-50 years		More than 6,00,000
	More than 50 years		

The data collected from the respondents was checked twice in order to discard any incomplete forms. Around 20 questionnaires were found to be redundant since some of them were incomplete while few were not answered in the prescribed way mentioned to the respondents. In order to make sure that the results obtained from the research are accurate to the maximum possible level, SPSS 16 Software package was used to derive the main values so as to accept or reject the formed hypotheses. The Cronbach's Alpha was calculated at 0.729, hence indicating acceptable reliability for all the measured constructs.

**Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.729	41

#### V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The hypotheses formed were tested with the help of the questions framed in the questionnaire. Dissonance has been defined as an uncomfortable stage and a consumer always try to reduce the level of dissonance to nil. The first hypothesis was upright rejected in the analysis made of the survey. The high degree of involvement while purchasing of a product led to lower degree of dissonance among the respondents surveyed as they presumed that their personal involvement in the purchase decision whilst seeking information about the product and making an actual purchase.

Table 1 indicates that there is positive correlation between the respondent making final purchase decision on his own without consulting with his family, friends or peers and him never having to ponder over his purchase decision again. Since the value of p is found to be lesser than .05, it can be inferred that there is a positive correlation. This positive correlation indicates that a consumer doesn't feel an after purchase dissonance if he is highly involved in the purchase decision himself where he doesn't consult with many. Similarly, respondents claimed that if the purchase decision is made after they have searched information about the product prior to making a final decision on their own, they would be less skeptical about their decision, hence stating a positive correlation between the variables.

Moreover, Table 2 indicates that those respondents who had been personally involved in making a final purchase decision always felt post purchase that they have made the best possible decision and were less likely to feel dissonance after the purchase transaction. Likewise, a positive correlation was also established between the respondents being actively involved in garnering first hand information about the product and they being less dissonant. Hence the correlation shows that high involvement in the purchase always brings less dissonance along with. Thus, the first hypothesis can be rejected.

H<sub>1</sub>: The dissonance associated with a high involvement purchase is more than the dissonance associated with a low involvement purchase – REJECTED

Dissonance has always been a significant aspect of assessing consumer behaviour. The survey conducted revealed that the more time the respondents spent while making the purchase, the more satiated they were with their decision. In order to test the hypothesis and to ensure the authenticity of the result, Kruskal Wallis Test was used depicting that those respondents who had consumed more time during purchase

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transaction never pondered over their buying decision, they always felt that they had made the best possible decision and even post purchase it would never spurt in their mind to ever return the product which is often a first reaction after the dissonance is being felt. The value of p was found to be lesser than .05 in all the three scenarios, as shown in Table 3, hence the hypothesis that the more time the consumers take while making a decision, the more they ponder over their purchase decision, they never feel that they have made the best transaction and the thoughts of exchanging or returning a product often mar their senses, or they are more dissonant, can be comprehensively rejected.

**H<sub>2</sub>: More the time taken to make a decision, the more the dissonance felt - REJECTED**

The results generated revealed that time is inversely related to the psychological feeling of discomfort known as dissonance.

It is a human trait that whenever we are inundated with information which is in conflict with our preconceived notions and our believed thoughts, we tend to get restless and become uncomfortable. In a developing nation like India, the feeling of dissonance is directly related to the value of the product. The price of the commodity plays a significant role in assessing the levels of dissonance among the consumers. The more the price attached with the product, the more questionable the consumer be about his purchase decision. On the purchase of a luxury expensive product, a consumer rethinks about his decision again and again, hence, leading to a feeling of incessant anxiety in him. Usually after an expensive purchase, a consumer feels guilty of forgoing the positive attributes of a cheaper product which he didn't buy. In our survey when the consumers were enquired about their experience with per se dissonance on the purchase of an expensive luxury product and an FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) product which costs much lesser than a luxury item, the results obtained confirmed the aforementioned notion. When the respondents were enquired that which product make them ponder over and rethink about their purchases more, most of them stated that they would rethink more about expensive products they buy rather than buying an FMCG commodity which costs lesser than a luxury product.

The results were tested using Kruskal Wallis Test which also acknowledged that the hypothesis that more dissonance is attached with the purchase of an FMCG product as against a luxury item can be uprightly rejected. (Table 4 & Table 5)

**H<sub>3</sub>: Dissonance felt is higher when the purchase involves an FMCG product as compared to a luxury product – REJECTED**

**VI. TABLES**

**Table 1**

		One's own first hand information search	I make my own decision	Never ponder over my purchase decision
One's own first hand information search	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1  100	0.269 0.007 100	0.297 0.003 100
I make my own decision	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.269 0.007 100	1  100	0.315 0.001 100
Never ponder over my purchase decision	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.297 0.003 100	0.315 0.001 100	1  100

**Table 2**

		I make my own decision	One's own active first hand info search	I always feel I have made the best decision
I make my own decision	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1  100	0.258 0.010 100	0.319 0.001 100
One's own first hand active info search	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.258 0.010 100	1  100	0.246 0.014 100
I always feel I have made the best decision	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.319 0.001 100	0.246 0.014 100	1  100

**Table 3**

Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>			
	Never ponder over my purchase decision	I always feel I have made the best decision	I never think about returning the purchased item
Chi-Square	17.786	17.474	12.758
Df	6	6	6
Asymp. Sig.	.007	.008	.047

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping variable - time taken to make the decision

**Table 4 – Grouping variable – Never ponder over my purchase decision**

Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>		
	An FMCG product	A luxury product
Chi-Square	10.790	6.303
Df	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.029	.178

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

**Table 5**  
Test Statistics<sup>a,b</sup>

	An FMCG product	A luxury product
Chi-Square	11.567	5.793
Df	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.021	.215

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Always feel best decision

## VII. CONCLUSION

The present study has attempted to fill the research gaps pertaining to dissonance and its implications in consumer behaviour. For decades, many companies have tried to delve in to the deep rooted grasp that this psychological concept has over the minds of the consumers guarding and clouting their buying behaviour. Dissonance has always been a paradoxical term for the marketers world over. In India too, it has been an enigmatic concept for the marketing gurus and agencies who have been trying to relate it with the consumer behaviour as accurately as possible. The research sprinkles light on the interrelationship between the involvement of the consumer in the purchase decision and the level of dissonance attached with it. The research concluded that if the consumer is more personally involved in making a decision – that is, he himself seeks information about the probable product to be purchased and the makes the buying decision on his own, then he is less likely to come across the uncomfortable feeling of dissonance. Hence it is safe to assume that the involvement level of the consumer in his purchase decision would have an imperative effect on the dissonance he feels post purchase and which might guide his future consumer behaviour as well. An organisation looking to control the unpleasant feeling of anxiety in their consumers post purchase should ensure that their customers are directly involved in the purchase decision and shouldn't take the purchase decision in consultation with others or under influence of others. Since dissonance is a psychological concept, it becomes a human tendency to doubt the validity of his decision if it has been taken in compliance with others. Time also plays a pivotal role in leveraging with the feeling of dissonance. If the purchase decision is made in the haste and the consumer doesn't spend much time in making the purchase decision, then the consumer would get more anxious over his decision as compared to when he takes considerable time before making a purchase decision. Hence this aspect of research can be used while training the sales employees in any organization. Often, salespeople are trained to be pushy and persistent but this study shows that the more time the consumers would take to make the decision, the better chances of them being happy, hence, salesmen should never push the customers to make the decision in the fit of fury lest they might regret their decision later on. The more time the salesmen give to the customers to make the decision, the more content they will be with their decision and might return to the same seller again. Dissonance is found to be prevalent more in the customer's decisions when they involve the purchase of luxury goods. Since the value attached with a luxury product is more, the level of anxiety and dissonance is more as well. .

### **Future Research**

The study has opened many doors for the future research that could be undertaken. The reasons that make the personal involvement of a customer in the buying decision an intriguing part of studying the dissonance in consumer behaviour can be more comprehensively studied. Besides, the significance of time constraint having a greater effect on a customer being dissonant can also be studied in depth.

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