

Time and Temporality in Consumer Research: Insights into Potential Time-related Themes in Consumer Behaviour and Decision Processes

Abstract

Time is a ubiquitous notion playing a dynamic role in consumer attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. An understanding of time and temporality can provide invaluable insights for marketing researchers, decision makers in the market place, as well as policy makers. However, studies of antecedents and consequences of temporal influences on consumer decisions and actions are scant and inadequate, and a better appreciation of related domains is indispensable. This paper presents some literature covering the notion of time in extant literature, and highlights key areas where gaps could be bridged via empirical investigations. Along these lines, the paper highlights two key themes the researcher targets for investigation through current and in-progress studies. The first theme addresses antecedents of temporally-emphasised benefits motivating consumption and consequent influences on the adoption decision process of a product category. The second theme addresses consumer punctuality based on morningness-eveningness tendencies in consumers' time-of-day preferences for services and self-reported service arrival times. All in all, this paper aims to bring into focus concepts of time and temporality as a marketing research area partially acknowledged and pursued and partially neglected and under-researched, despite potential implications for marketing theory and practice.

Key Words

Time and Temporality, Consumer Behaviour, Adoption Decision Process, Customer Punctuality

INTRODUCTION

Despite permeating every aspect of life, time has been inadequately researched within the context of marketing and consumer studies, where time research remains scant. In their long established interdisciplinary overview of time and consumer behaviour, Jacoby, Szybillo, and Berning (1976) posit that consumer behaviour is germane in consumer acquisition and use of goods/services and that time is essentially inherent in various consumer processes and activities. Nonetheless, time has – more often than not – been tacitly incorporated in marketing research with an incomplete acknowledgment of its varied dimensions (Hawes 1980; Settle 1980; Sherman 1990; Gibbs 1998; Bergadaa 1990). Research on the notion of time is limited to psychological, anthropological and sociological perspectives and its study in marketing and consumer behaviour is mostly restricted to certain areas.

A review of literature on concepts of time in marketing indicates that some time elements have received more attention than others; areas more heavily studied include the economic value of time, time budgeting, time consumption, time allocation and time pressure (Carmon 1991; Hawes 1980; Settle 1980). However, there is a shortage of in-depth research on consumer-temporal influences such as the effect of time on consumer preferences and decisions, consumer perceptions of time and speed in actions, the temporal dimension of product/service perceived benefits, factors influencing decision time, and time within consumer decision processes (Jacoby et al. 1976; Gronmo 1989; Bergadaa 1990; Gibbs 1998; Wang, Dacko and Gad Mohsen 2008).

In summary and as recognised by Robinson and Nicosia (1991, p. 171), “The notion of time has been largely invisible in consumer research and not very central in most social sciences. Yet observation of social relationships and of individual choices indicates that time is an all pervasive referent”. As a result, there is increasing necessity for further empirical research on under-researched time-consumer linked domains with the aim of drawing significant implications for both marketing theory and practice.

A POTENTIALLY INSIGHTFUL MARKETING DOMAIN FOR RESEARCH

Kaufman and Lane (1990) argue that “existing approaches used in time do not seem to be complete enough to model some aspects of consumer time” (p. 895). A review of more contemporary literature on time in marketing and consumer research demonstrates that this argument still holds. Relatively inadequate studies of time may be attributed to the difficulties associated with measuring time as it is viewed by some researchers as methodologically

challenging (Jacoby et al. 1976; Davies 1994; Halinen and Tornroos 1995) given the difficulty of encapsulating its various dimensions such as time points, intervals, duration, structure, extension, use patterns, allocation, perception, orientation, among others.

However, the latter is still insufficient rationale to relinquish the numerous insights that can be cultivated by engaging more research on time and temporal domains in marketing. Bergadaà's (1990) exploration of the role of time in consumer actions stresses the value of a more inclusive appreciation of inter-temporal elements in consumer decision making through pointing out that "by explicitly ignoring time, or simply regarding it as 'another variable', the decision making models of consumer research do not account for the way that individuals and societies view time and how this apprehension affects consumer choices" (p. 289). Still, time studies are additionally made more intricate when acknowledging that consumer perceptions of time are not one and the same in all cultures and in all consumer backgrounds.

In this manner, some researchers investigated temporal perspectives highlighting the role of lifestyle in individuals' perceptions of time driven by background, cultural education and the task performed, among other factors (Graham 1981, Usunier 1991, Usunier and Valette-Florence 1994; Zimbardo and Boyd 1999). For instance, Graham (1981) demonstrates three perceptions of time, with each bearing a heavy emphasis on the present or the future. These perceptions are the linear-separable, the circular-traditional and the procedural-traditional. The linear-separable time perception is prevalent in individuals who view time as a straight line that emanates in the past and progresses onto the present and the future. Alternatively, individuals with a circular-traditional time perception and those with a procedural-traditional time perception have a heavier emphasis on the present (Graham 1981).

The concept of time can be anchored in consumer behaviour from varied perspectives, including that of the marketing strategist, consumer researcher and consumer policy maker (Robinson and Nicosia 1991; Shores and Scott 2007). Specific to the focus of the paper at hand, an in-depth investigation of antecedents and consequences of temporality in consumer decision processes can be resourceful; particularly, studying time-linked factors at the background of decision processes as well as ensuing process outcomes can offer novel insights to marketing researchers and managers. The paper endeavours to address the need for a more systematic explanation of temporal influences on consumption behaviour along a number of dimensions, where some empirical research was carried out and more is in progress as detailed next.

Temporality in Consumer Decision Processes

Contemporary literature offers primary findings on dimensions of consumer temporal preferences and choices relying on frameworks such as the construal level theory (CLT), present-biased preferences, impulsive purchase behaviour and the time outcome valuation (TOV) model (Mowen and Mowen 1991; Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2000; Bergadaà 1990; Shores and Scott 2007; Lynch and Zauberma 2006; Castano, Suja, Kacker, and Suja 2008); these and other related studies mostly address issues such as consumer inter-temporal choices, temporal distance and valuation of decision outcomes, time orientation, and time discounting of future outcomes, mostly in relation to purchase decisions.

However, the present paper focuses a limelight on implications for adoption decisions rather than purchase decisions, where the time element studied is an investigation of temporal-based motivations of consumers pursuing short-term versus long-term gains in adoption decisions and behaviour.

Theme 1: The Consumer Adoption Decision Process

In pursuing the first theme presented in this paper, an empirical study was carried out by Wang, Dacko, and Gad Mohsen (2008) to complement scarce studies on perceived benefits within an adoption framework using a temporal perspective; the research addresses the importance of perceived benefits and costs in consumer decisions to adopt a really-new service along varying temporal distance, i.e., in terms of whether consumers are evaluating a new product/service for an immediate adoption or a future adoption. The study extends a motivation for continuing research that examines how consumers form preferences for short-term versus long-term rewards in making adoption decisions.

The objective of achieving a better understanding of benefits as drivers of consumer behaviour while acknowledging pervasive consumer temporal realities can enrich current understanding of the background of consumer adoption decisions and enhance the modelling of the consumer adoption decision process. It can help marketing strategists and consumer welfare policy makers to better focus on explicitly communicating benefits that appeal more to certain consumer groups.

The Study

Hence, the researcher set forth to identify antecedents of temporally-emphasised benefits and consumer value considerations in adoption processes. Through advancing a non-traditional classification of benefits based on *when* they take place, a study was carried out to reveal why some consumers are more likely to specifically pursue present-based benefits whereas others are motivated by an emphasis on future-based benefits of a product category. The study was operationalised on organic food – a non-durable product category representing a market trend.

The research probes factors influencing consumer pursued temporally-emphasised benefits to identify socio-demographic, psychological and behavioural variables linked with a higher likelihood to seek the present-based benefits versus future-based benefits of organic food. Further, the study proceeds to examine the influence of temporally-emphasised consumer value on speed as a proxy for time along the steps of the consumer adoption decision process and resultant process outcomes.

Towards this end, a survey was administered on a sample of 1667 consumers in the UK to draw conclusions on consumer motivations in organic food consumption and potential adoption, using a temporal perspective of benefits sought.

Research Results

Findings indicate that, while an individual's time orientation may systematically influence temporal-based benefits of organic food preferred and pursued, other psychological and behavioural factors may be of more influence individually and jointly; factors of most influence were found to be level of enduring product category involvement, prior product knowledge and level of product usage, while controlling for the effects of gender, education and income levels.

Furthermore, research results indicate that consumers motivated by the future-based value of organic food (better health, environmental and animal welfare, safer food) are more likely to move more speedily along an adoption decision process, symbolically adopting its notion before trying it, purchasing it with higher frequency and are more likely to decide to fully adopt it. Alternatively, consumers motivated by a present-based value of organic food (superior taste, nostalgia to the authentic, satisfying curiosity about it) are more likely to move slower along a possible adoption decision process, are less likely to symbolically adopt its idea, purchase it occasionally only and are less likely to decide to eventually adopt

it. Findings have implications for market stratification strategies impacting on marketing communications and media choice based on an advanced 'temporal-based' benefits/value marketing segmentation approach.

More Research

Another study using fashion consumption as an application vehicle to identify antecedent factors of present-motivated purchases versus future-motivated purchases of fashion clothing products is currently underway. Operationalising the study through a different product category representing a more durable consumer good - in comparison to organic food – can highlight similarities and differences in consumer background factors at play and subsequent speed and outcomes of the process.

Theme 2: Consumer Punctuality and Temporal Tendencies within Service Domains

Another theme within the context of time and temporality is customer punctuality and lateness in service provision contexts. In many services, customer punctuality or tardiness influences both the perceived quality of the service provided and the productivity of the service firm. It is generally recognised that there is a variation in the extent that individuals prefer to harmonise their wake-time activities to the hours in the day (Horne and Ostberg, 1976). At one end of the spectrum, there are individuals who may be labelled morning types typified by their preference for early waking times, the ease with which they start their days in a refreshed state of mind and body, and preference for early end-of-day sleep times. At the other end, there are individuals who may be labelled evening types as a result of their preference for late morning waking times, sluggishness upon waking, and late end-of-day sleep times. In-between, there are those who do not seem to demonstrate the characteristics of either type.

Also referred to as chronotype, morningness-eveningness addresses the extent that an individual is more alert and active in the morning versus the evening (Roenneberg, Wirz-Justice, and Merrow 2003). Far from being a benign individual characteristic, research in psychology and biology has shown that such differences have important implications for individual and social behaviours. For example, individual eveningness preferences have been associated with higher levels of procrastination in student populations (Hess, Sherman, and Goodman 2000) and linked to lower levels of self-control among students (Digdon and Howell 2008). Within marketing morningness-eveningness has been examined, where, for

example, Hornik and Miniero (2008) find that service evaluations, ad recall and ad recognition tend to be better among individuals who are at their peak alertness during the day.

The Study

The study presented along the lines of the second key theme in this paper addresses the under-researched relationship between morningness-eveningness and both service consumers' time-of-day preferences for services and self-reported service arrival times. Hypotheses involving such relationships were developed and tested through administering a 'scenario based' questionnaire using a sample of 200 students business school enrolled in two business schools in the UK and Portugal under the context of soliciting consumer views on a range of service situations.

Research Results

The results indicate that customer punctuality is affected by both morningness-eveningness and appointment time of day. Results carry implications for service firms to improve their efficiency and resource utilisation through a scheduling of appointments guided by a better understanding of consumer morningness-eveningness tendencies.

Findings also offer policy makers in the public sector, such as the National Health Service (NHS), an opportunity to cut costs through reducing 'no shows' or late attendance at appointments; the latter carries a negative ripple effect affecting service quality perceptions, thus reducing customer confidence and creating interruptions with heavy financial costs. For example, no-shows to hospital appointments in the UK have been determined to cost the NHS more than £600 million per year (BBC News 2009). This can be overcome through more research on customer punctuality and morning-evening tendencies.

More Research

Further research can extend findings into relating consumer punctuality/lateness to individual time perceptions influenced by social conditioning, cultural background and country of origin, educational experiences and upbringing. Most, if not all, extant studies in marketing focus on one time perception – the linear separable – which is the most common in European-

American cultures, while ignoring the existence and effect of others. It may hence become a limitation when the researcher adopts the view that all consumers share one perception of time or are adopting the researcher's particular perception of time. Along these lines, incorporating the notion of varying individual time perceptions in studying consumer temporal realities and activities can both advance insightful implications and explain unresolved behavioural differences among consumer groups.

CONCLUSIVE SUMMARY

This paper aims to highlight the need for a better appreciation and in-depth investigation of time and temporal notions in marketing and consumer research. It presents a brief overview of secondary research relating time to various consumer behaviour aspects and establishes two related research themes currently studied by the researcher. Along these lines, the paper reveals gaps in existing literature on time-linked relative to consumer attitudes, perceptions, behaviour and decision processes.

The research themes reflect on some primary research findings that can be further extended. One theme looks at time within the context of the consumer adoption decision process. It explains how time can be used to classify benefits sought in consumption as temporally-emphasised motivations which can be attributed to antecedent socio-demographic, psychological and behavioural consumer characteristics. It thus advances a temporal-benefits segmentation approach in marketing, which can also influence time and speed of consumer steps along adoption decision making of market trends and innovative product categories.

The second theme investigates consumer punctuality along morningness-eveningness as a consumer characteristic. It highlights implications for marketing managers and policy makers in understanding consumer morning-evening tendencies to improve scheduling practices and enhance firm efficiency and service quality perceptions. Findings can also pave a path for more research on more effective 'late policy' variations and on discouraging 'no shows' in service provision contexts. In addition, this paper suggests that a future study that integrates the effect of consumer varying time perceptions can enrich insights and marketing implications.

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