

# Situational influences on consumers' attitudes and behavior

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## Abstract

While classical and operant conditioning are frequently implicated in the formation of attitudes, there is no generally accepted theoretical portrayal of the processes involved and how the two conditioning processes might interact. We describe a model of attitude–behavior relations, the behavioral perspective model (BPM), which suggests how situational influences on consumer choice may be categorized, and employ Mehrabian and Russell's [An approach to environmental psychology. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1974] approach to environmental psychology to test that model in the contexts of attitude formation and attitude–behavior consistency. Venezuelan consumers ( $N=254$ ) rated descriptions of consumer situations based on the contingency categories identified by the BPM in terms of pleasure, arousal and dominance. The results indicate that attitude responses to consumer environments vary as predicted by the model. Moreover, the model presents a framework for managerial action through the understanding of how structural components of consumer situations (namely, utilitarian and informational reinforcement and behavior setting scope) are related to the generation of affective responses (pleasure, arousal and dominance) and approach–avoidance responses.

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## 1. Introduction

Since conditioning studies emphasize the role physical and social environments play in determining both overt and covert responding, the analysis of attitude formation from the viewpoint of classical and operant learning promises to integrate the learning theory and information processing perspectives on consumer choice. However, there is no unifying theoretical model for this and studies of situational influences on consumer response tend to be detached from studies of consumers' attitudes. We propose a theoretical account of consumer learning, which combines both types of learning and relates them to the formation of attitudes in situ. Foxall's (1990, 1997a) behavioral perspective model (BPM) provides a means of categorizing the antecedent stimuli that comprise the setting in which consumer choice occurs and the rewarding consequences of behavior in the setting that such stimuli signal. Each of the eight categories of consumer situations proposed by the model predicts a unique pattern of attitude response. The model was tested using Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) *Approach to Environmental Psychology*, which gauges emotional reactions to

environmental stimuli in terms of three affective responses—pleasure, arousal and dominance. The empirical investigation reported here replicates and extends a study of English consumers (Foxall, 1997b) to Venezuela. Findings support the earlier research by demonstrating the expected attitude differences among the eight varieties of consumer situations in a Latin American context.

## 2. Attitude–behavior consistency

The expectation that attitudes predict behaviors was questioned by Wicker (1969), who showed that attitude–behavior correlations were typically weak. Higher levels of consistency could be achieved by including personal factors like motivation and situational factors like the actual and expected consequences of the behavior in question. Wicker supported Fishbein's theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) as a solution. The TRA employed three variables claimed sufficient for the prediction of behavior: attitude toward the act, personal and social normative beliefs and motivation to comply with these norms. Ajzen's subsequent theory of planned behavior, for behavior that is not entirely under the individual's volitional control (Ajzen, 1991), additionally incorporates perceived behavioral control to account for the respondent's self-efficacy for

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achieving the behavior in question. The variance in behavior accounted for by variance in the prebehavioral variables posited in these models is typically within the range 25–50% (Ajzen, 1991; Foxall, 1997a), a significant improvement on the typically “less than the 10%” found by Wicker (1969).

These theories account for situational influences on behavior in two ways. First, they ensure that the situations to which the cognitive and behavioral variables refer correspond in definition and scope. Second, they take past behavior into consideration by employing measures that take account of the learning history (consumption history) of the respondent. Attitude toward the act captures the respondent’s evaluation of the consequences that behaving in the specified manner has produced in the past. Subjective norm (which measures social pressure that combines normative beliefs and motivation to comply with it) also depends on acquaintance with the views of significant others and the consequences of adhering to them. And perceived behavioral control necessarily reflects prior experience in the achievement of goals. However, these successful methodologies do little to clarify the situations associated with modes of attitude formation and subsequent behaviors.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The BPM explains consumer behavior in terms of the scope of the setting in which it occurs and the learning history of the individual (Foxall, 1997a). It thus explicitly incorporates the situational influences on behavior that recent cognitive theories of attitude have implicitly included to increase the accuracy of their predictions. It relies on both classical and operant learning theories that have long dealt with environmental influences on the formation and effects of attitudes and behavior. Staats’s (1996) psychological behaviorism paradigm in which a stimulus performs three functions is therefore particularly relevant. First, it elicits an implicit emotional response. It is this stimulus function in which a positive or negative emotional response or attitude is elicited, that is, at the heart of the classical conditioning of attitudes. Second, emotion-eliciting stimuli reinforce motor responses enacted prior to their presentation. Third, the stimulus elicits motor and verbal approach–avoidance.

A consumer behavior setting comprises the (three-functional) stimuli that form the social (including rule-based) and physical (including temporal) environment. These initially neutral stimuli are transformed into the discriminative (directive) stimuli that signal the probable outcomes of approach and avoidance responses in the setting by their intersection with the consumer’s learning history. This history adds meaning to the otherwise neutral setting stimuli by investing them with the consequences of previous behaviors in similar circumstances. The intersection of an individual’s learning history and behavior setting defines the

consumer situation that locates consumer behavior. The discriminative stimuli that result from this intersection define the scope of the consumer behavior setting, its capacity to facilitate or inhibit consumer responses such as browsing, choosing and purchasing (approach) or delaying, deferring and leaving the setting without purchasing (avoidance). In an open setting, several responses are available to the consumer who has discretion over which is chosen; in a closed setting, the consumer is denied such discretion as their behavior is determined by agents (e.g., retail designers) who control the setting but are not themselves subject to its contingencies. Hence, the scope of a setting reflects the degree to which consumers are encouraged to conform to a pattern of behavior set by someone else (e.g., on an airplane journey, a relatively closed setting) or are comparatively free to behave in a variety of ways (e.g., browsing for a gift in a luxury store, a relatively open setting).

The stimuli that comprise the setting signal three types of consequence contingent upon behavior: utilitarian reinforcement (the functional benefits of consumption), informational reinforcement (symbolic benefits such as social status and self-esteem) and aversive outcomes (costs). Whereas utilitarian reinforcement consists in the direct benefits of owning and using products and services, informational reinforcement is the outcome of socially and physically constructed aspects of the environment that influence behavior over and above these concrete and utilitarian benefits. Informational reinforcement is thus the symbolic feedback that stems from purchase and consumption. Its effects and intensity depend on the qualitative nature of the environmental stimuli that constitute rewards for particular actions. Physical stimuli that provide such feedback are those that excite sensual distinctions—larger pack sizes, brightly colored posters, the aromas of food detected in a restaurant, the feel of silky fabrics and haunting advertising jingles, for instance. Social stimuli that similarly provide feedback are those that signal the prestige and self-esteem that are contingent on enacting specific consumer behaviors—browsing and buying at Neiman Marcus or driving a Bentley, both of which reflect socially communicated life-style values.

The BPM distinguishes four operant classes of consumer behavior based on the relative levels of utilitarian and informational reinforcements, which maintain appropriate responses (Fig. 1). Accomplishment is consumer behavior maintained by relatively high levels of both utilitarian and informational reinforcements; hedonism, by relatively high utilitarian and relatively low informational reinforcement; accumulation, by relatively low utilitarian and relatively high informational reinforcement; and maintenance, by relatively low levels of both. Adding the dimension of consumer behavior setting scope to this operant classification of consumer behavior gives the eightfold categorization of the contingencies that may control consumer behavior shown in Fig. 1.

Testing the model employs Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) proposal that environmental influences on behavior

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