

Multiple reference effects in service evaluations: Roles of alternative attractiveness and self-image congruity

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Abstract

Customer satisfaction and service evaluation research has examined the reference effect but largely adopted an expectancy–disconfirmation paradigm that focuses on referents centered on the product or service in question. This study examines two additional reference effects, alternative attractiveness and self-image congruity, and their interaction. The framework of multiple reference effects in service evaluations integrates insights from regret theory, the investment model of interpersonal relationships, and self-image congruity theory. An empirical study of a hairstyling service confirms that comparisons involving other-object and self-based reference points contribute significantly to consumer service evaluations. Self-image congruity has the most significant impact on both customer satisfaction and commitment judgments. In general, the negative effect of alternative attractiveness on both customer satisfaction and commitment becomes weaker as the level of self-image congruity increases; as long as consumers find a good fit between their self-image and the service image, they are less likely to consider alternative services. However, for consumers with high self-image congruity with the focal service, the presence of an attractive alternative may induce them to exhibit an enhancement bias or “play up” effect (i.e., report higher satisfaction with the focal service).

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Introduction

“A nationally syndicated comic strip recently sketched one theory of how multiple reference points affect satisfaction with outcomes. In the first panel, a young boy is elated because he got two gumballs instead of the one he expected. In frame two he is deflated when a friend tells him that the machine was supposed to give him three. In the final panel, he becomes very unhappy when his friend’s quarter yields four gumballs: his two gumballs pale in comparison.” (Ordóñez et al. 2000)

The intuition that outcome evaluations are shaped by comparisons to reference points has been widely adopted to model how consumers behave in various contexts. In satisfaction

studies, the expectancy–disconfirmation paradigm suggests that consumers refer to their expectations when forming post-consumption satisfaction evaluations (Oliver 1980); across other disciplines, support for reference-based evaluations is equally strong. Social psychology (e.g., Folger 1984), behavioral decision (e.g., Bell and Bucklin 1999), and organizational behavior (e.g., Blau 1994) researchers postulate and confirm various types of reference effects. The prevalence of this phenomenon of human behavior points to the richness of the reference-based paradigm across disciplines.

Three major types of “referents” can be identified across the research fields of services, consumer behavior, and social psychology: focal-object, other-object, and self-based. A *focal-object* referent refers to a consumer’s existing expectations about the focal object (product or service) of the evaluation. When a consumer compares the perceived performance of the focal object with his or her expectations, any resulting disconfirmation affects satisfaction judgments about the focal object (Oliver 1980; Tse and Wilton 1988), such as if the consumer were to note that “this hair salon performs better/worse than I expected.” An *other-object* referent

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refers to the perceived performance of an alternative that the consumer compares with the focal object; the result of this comparison affects satisfaction and other judgments regarding the focal object (Ping 1993; Rusbult 1980). For example, the consumer might think, “this hair salon performs better/worse than an alternative hair salon.” Finally, the *self-based* referent refers to a self-image the consumer compares with the image (or symbolic value) of the focal object, which emerges from its perceived performance and stereotypes of the typical users it attracts (Sirgy et al. 1997). Examples of such references include, “the image of this hair salon fits/does not fit with how I see myself” or “the typical customers of this hair salon are similar/not similar to me.”

To understand the effect of the focal-object referent on service evaluations and purchase intentions, extant research has largely adopted the expectancy–disconfirmation paradigm and focused on “should” or “will” expectations about the focal object (e.g., Oliver 1980). Some studies also examine other comparison standards (e.g., Tse and Wilton 1988), but their focus remains centered on the focal object in question and omits the effects of other-object and self-based referents.

Evidence to support the salience of these two other types of referents appears in consumer behavior and social psychology literature. Inman et al. (1997) and Tsiros and Mittal (2000) adopt regret theory, whereas Rusbult (1980) develops an investment model of interpersonal relationships to examine the effect of the attractiveness of an alternative on consumer evaluations. The importance of self-image as a self-based referent in the formation of attitudes, preferences, and purchase intentions also has been confirmed (Aaker 1999; Graeff 1996; Sirgy 1985), though most studies focus on the predictive role of self-image on preconsumption evaluations rather than the role of the self in postpurchase satisfaction and commitment. Extant studies on other-object and self-based referents also examine their effects separately, thus failing to explore their relative impact and potential interaction effects on postpurchase evaluations.

In response to this research gap in exploring multiple referent effects in service evaluations, we propose a model that acknowledges the importance of disconfirmation but also examines multiple reference effects by incorporating other-object and self-based referents in the process of customer service evaluations. Specifically, we test for additional and relative contributions of other-object and self-based reference effects, as well as their interaction, on consumer satisfaction and commitment evaluations after accounting for the effect of the focal-object referent (i.e., disconfirmation). We test the proposed model empirically with survey data from 360 consumers of a hairstyling service. In the next section, we present our conceptual framework and develop corresponding hypotheses.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

We propose that consumers make comparisons with multiple referents when they form their satisfaction and commitment judgments. These referents are separately related to (1) the focal object under evaluation, (2) another object that is an alternative being considered, and (3) the consumer’s own self-image. We capture consumers’ subjective judgments of these three comparisons in terms of disconfirmation, alternative attractiveness, and self-image congruity, respectively. The three resulting reference judgments then influence consumers’ service evaluations in terms of satisfaction and commitment. Furthermore, self-image congruity moderates the impact of alternative attractiveness on customer satisfaction and commitment. We depict our conceptual framework in Fig. 1.

Customer satisfaction and commitment

Satisfaction has been defined in many ways by many researchers, but Oliver (1997, p. 12) brings together these

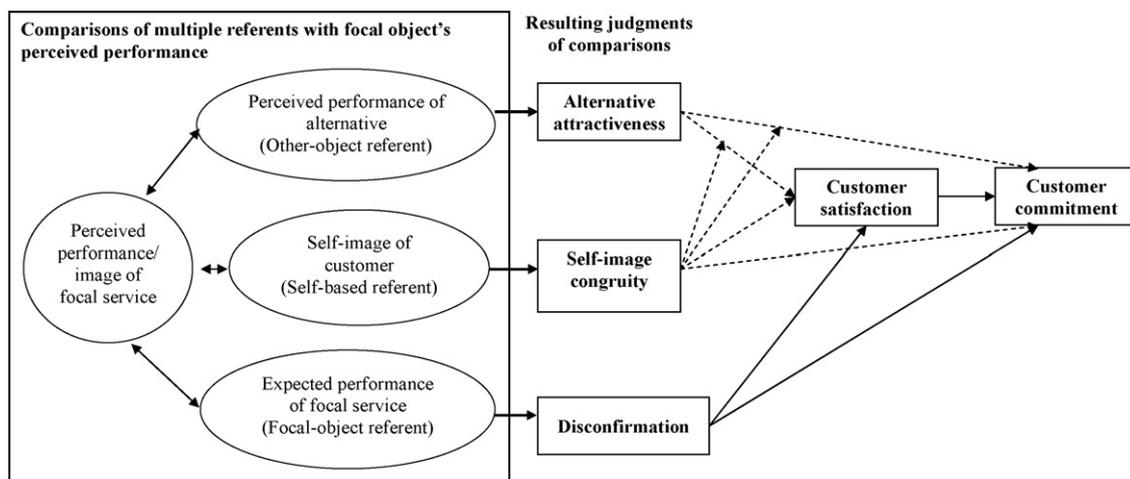


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework of multiple reference effects in service evaluations. Notes: Constructs in rectangular boxes are examined empirically in this study. Arrows with a broken pattern denote the focal relationships in this study. Arrows with a solid pattern denote relationships established in prior research.

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