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Research on the Formation Mechanism of Expectation and Disappointment Emotions in Consumption Experience: From the Perspective of Consumers' Counterfactual Comparison Behavior

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Abstract

Abstract: This study aims to identify and analyze the key factors driving the psychological cycle mechanism: namely, the process where consumers form expectations and subsequently validate them through actual experiences; when outcomes fall short of expectations, it tends to trigger emotions of disappointment and regret, which in turn activate “if only…” counterfactual thinking. This process exhibits significant differences across various consumption contexts: compared to impulsive consumption, planned consumption is more likely to trigger high-intensity emotional reactions due to unmet expectations—specifically the interaction between expectation formation, disappointment experience, and counterfactual comparison, as well as its impact on subsequent consumption behavior. Adopting a methodology that combines literature induction and content analysis, this study first reviews existing theoretical foundations and variable relationships. Subsequently, qualitative coding is performed on a sample of online reviews, utilizing descriptive statistics to analyze emotional types, frequency distributions, and their internal correlation paths. Furthermore, the relationship between consumption contexts and the degree of disappointment is verified through Chi-square tests. On this basis, the study proposes several marketing management recommendations, emphasizing that enterprises should reasonably guide consumer expectations and improve service delivery to mitigate disappointment and enhance consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

Full Text

Preamble

A Study on the Formation Mechanism of Expectation and Disappointment in Consumer Experience: From the Perspective of Counterfactual Comparison

Abstract: This study aims to identify and analyze the key factors driving the psychological cycle of consumer experience: specifically, how consumers form expectations, validate them through actual experience, and subsequently experience disappointment and regret when outcomes fall short of those expectations. This process triggers “if only…” counterfactual thinking. The study finds that this process exhibits significant differences across various consumption contexts; for instance, planned consumption tends to elicit higher-intensity emotional reactions to unmet expectations compared to impulsive consumption. This research explores the interaction between counterfactual comparisons and their impact on subsequent consumer behavior. Adopting a methodology that combines literature synthesis and content analysis, the study first outlines the existing theoretical foundations and variable relationships. Subsequently, qualitative coding was performed on a sample of online reviews, using descriptive statistics to analyze the frequency distribution of emotional types and their internal correlation paths. Furthermore, Chi-square tests were employed to verify the relationship between consumption contexts and the degree of disappointment. Based on these findings, the study proposes several marketing management recommendations, emphasizing that enterprises should reasonably guide consumer expectations and improve service delivery to mitigate disappointment, thereby enhancing consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

关键词

Consumer Expectations; Disappointment; Counterfactual Comparison; Planned Consumption; Impulse Consumption; Repurchase Decision CLC Number: F713.55 Document Code: A Article ID:

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引言

Rationale and Research Background

In the context of contemporary society, the exploration of human psychology is continuously deepening and expanding across multiple dimensions. As human beings are the primary agents of national and social development, all eco-

conomic and social activities are fundamentally centered around human interests. Consequently, the study of consumer psychology not only helps to explain consumer behavior but also provides a critical foundation for businesses and service providers to formulate operational strategies that align with consumer needs and expectations.

In practical business environments, as the number of market participants continues to grow, a segment of enterprises remains unable to effectively meet consumer expectations despite significant effort. This phenomenon does not stem from a lack of academic attention; in fact, a substantial body of research has already been conducted on consumer behavior. Existing studies have extensively explored the origins of consumer expectations and the mechanisms through which feelings of disappointment—arising when those expectations are unmet—directly influence the evaluation of products and services.

However, a systematic review of the relevant literature reveals that existing studies predominantly adopt a single perspective, analyzing individual factors in isolation. There is a notable lack of integrated analysis regarding the interaction between the formation of expectations, the experience of disappointment, and the resulting counterfactual comparisons. Furthermore, the subsequent impact of these interactions on consumer psychology—and the complete psychological evolution process—has not been sufficiently explored in current research.

Based on this research background and the identified gaps, the present study attempts to provide a holistic analysis of the psychological mechanism of consumer hypothetical comparison. By adopting a marketing-oriented perspective, this paper seeks to understand the psychological transitions of consumers across various consumption contexts. Additionally, this work aims to supplement the existing understanding of the influence that counterfactual comparisons exert on psychological decision-making processes, thereby providing new research references for enterprises and service providers.

Research Objectives and Significance

The objective of this study is to analyze and clarify the underlying internal mechanisms of consumer behavior that require further explanation from a scientific and systematic perspective. Building upon this foundation, this re-examination of the research topic does not constitute a mere replication of existing studies; rather, it extends the scope of research from a novel vantage point to supplement content that has not been sufficiently covered in previous literature.

Specifically, the research objective of this paper is to clarify the formation mechanisms of expectations, disappointment, and counterfactual comparison behaviors within the consumer experience, while further analyzing the interactive relationships among these three variables.

By analyzing and interpreting these relationships within a holistic system, this study aims to reveal the intrinsic link between the formation of expectations

and the emergence of disappointment. Specifically, it explores how different contexts—namely, planned consumption decisions versus impulsive consumption behaviors—activate the formation of counterfactual comparisons and the resulting differences in their impact on subsequent repurchase decisions.

Based on an established scientific and systematic theoretical foundation, this study adopts psychological and marketing perspectives to provide a new reference framework for enterprises and service institutions. This framework is designed to assist in formulating marketing strategies that align with consumer needs and expectations within the modern consumption environment. Furthermore, this research contributes to enhancing the responsiveness of enterprises to consumer expectations and, to a certain extent, mitigates the feelings of disappointment that consumers may experience during their consumption journey.

Literature Review

A review of relevant domestic and international literature reveals that scholars have conducted extensive research on consumer expectations, post-consumption emotions, and psychological comparison mechanisms. These studies can be categorized into the following primary research directions:

Consumer Expectations

Research in this area focuses primarily on the formation process of consumer expectations prior to making a consumption decision. Furthermore, these studies investigate the role of various information dissemination factors in shaping a consumer's initial expectations.

Purchase Disappointment and Regret

Research on purchase disappointment and regret focuses on analyzing the negative emotions consumers experience when consumption outcomes fail to meet established expectations. This field of study highlights the significant impact these emotional states have on subsequent product evaluations and repurchase intentions.

Counterfactual Thinking and Comparison

Research on counterfactual thinking and comparison reveals the underlying mechanisms of “what if” hypothetical comparisons. These studies indicate that when consumers encounter suboptimal outcomes, they frequently engage in mental comparisons with the alternatives they previously rejected. This cognitive process significantly influences their subsequent attitudes and consumption behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

1. Expectation Confirmation Theory

Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) posits that consumers compare the actual perceived performance of a product or service with their pre-purchase expectations. This comparison results in a cognitive state of “confirmation” (when performance meets or exceeds expectations) or “disconfirmation” (when performance falls below expectations), which ultimately determines consumer satisfaction levels. In the context of this study, the process by which consumers form expectations through social media channels represents the specific manifestation of the “expectation formation” stage within the ECT framework.

The study does not make a fine-grained distinction between the various negative emotions caused by “uncertainty.” Building upon existing research, this study focuses on disappointment—the most common emotion associated with uncertainty—and explores its unique underlying mechanisms. Furthermore, when a consumption decision occurs within a pre-planned context, consumer expectation levels tend to rise continuously as the waiting time increases. In contrast, in impulsive consumption behaviors, expectations manifest more as transient “experiential anticipation.” Due to the lack of preparation and waiting time, the impact of these expectations is relatively limited, primarily serving to satisfy the consumer’s immediate needs or curiosity.

(2) Cognition

Emotional Response Theory posits that post-consumption evaluations trigger corresponding emotional reactions, which subsequently serve as the primary drivers of subsequent behavior. When perceived performance falls significantly below expectations—a state known as negative disconfirmation—one of the primary emotions elicited is disappointment. Drawing upon this theory, the present study treats disappointment as the affective hub that connects cognitive evaluation (the gap between expectations and reality) with subsequent cognitive behaviors, such as counterfactual comparisons.

3. Regret and Disappointment Theory

Zeelenberg et al. systematically distinguished between the concepts of regret and disappointment. Regret arises from the comparison between a chosen alternative and a foregone alternative, whereas disappointment stems from the comparison between an initial expectation and the final outcome of a single choice. While this study focuses primarily on disappointment, it posits that during the post-consumption stage, intense disappointment naturally activates counterfactual thinking regarding unchosen alternatives (e.g., “If only I had chosen…”).

Consequently, disappointment and regret become intertwined within the consumer’s psychological process. This intertwining serves as a critical bridge transitioning from basic emotion to complex cognitive decision-making. In other

words, this psychological process can be viewed as a reaction to the abandonment of other options and is closely related to the consumer's awareness of opportunity costs.

At this point, the consumer's brain retraces its path to the initial decision node and performs a mental comparison with the abandoned consumption alternative, which subsequently influences their evaluation of the current product or service.

Hypothetical comparison, as a psychological cycle, typically occurs at an unconscious level; however, it plays a significant role in a consumer's subsequent consumption choices. This is particularly evident when comparing planned consumption and impulsive consumption scenarios. Due to the varying degrees of expected investment and waiting times associated with these two contexts, there are distinct differences in both the intensity of disappointment and its resulting psychological impact.

Theoretical Hypotheses

Synthesizing the aforementioned literature reveals that while existing studies have conducted in-depth explorations of consumer expectations, disappointment, and counterfactual comparisons from various perspectives, most research still tends to analyze these psychological variables in isolation. There remains a lack of systematic investigation into their intrinsic connections from a holistic perspective.

Based on this premise, the present study adopts the continuous psychological mechanism as an entry point to integrate disappointment and counterfactual comparisons into a unified analytical framework. Furthermore, by incorporating distinct consumption contexts—specifically planned consumption versus impulsive consumption—this research conducts a comprehensive analysis of the variations in consumer psychological responses. Through this holistic research perspective, this paper aims to address the limitations of fragmented analyses in existing literature and further deepen the understanding of the emotional formation mechanisms within the consumer experience.

This study employs a comprehensive research design that integrates qualitative research with descriptive statistics. First, a literature analysis was conducted to synthesize core theories regarding expectation-disappointment emotions and counterfactual comparisons, thereby establishing a robust theoretical foundation for the study. Second, content analysis and manual coding were performed on consumer reviews retrieved from online platforms to extract manifestations of consumer expectation formation, degrees of disappointment, and counterfactual comparisons within real-world contexts. Finally, descriptive statistical methods were utilized to analyze the frequency and percentage of the coding results, revealing psychological differences and behavioral mechanisms across various consumption scenarios. This research design is particularly well-suited for exploratory research, as it accurately captures the shifts in the psychological chain of the consumer experience.

Research Resources and Selection

1.1 Sources of Literature Resources

All data used for the analysis in this study are derived from publicly published academic literature. To ensure the credibility and cutting-edge nature of the analytical foundation, the collection and screening of literature followed the steps outlined below:

Methodology

Data Sources and Keywords

The primary sources for this study include major Chinese and English academic databases, such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy utilized a combination of key terms, including “consumer expectations,” “disappointment,” “counterfactual thinking,” and “computational models.”

“Impulsive consumption,” “Expectation Confirmation Theory,” and “Regret Theory,” along with their corresponding English terminology. Literature selection prioritized papers published in core journals, high-level conferences, and authoritative monographs. The focus was primarily on research from the past decade, while also incorporating foundational classic literature in the field. The final materials used for analysis mainly include empirical research papers, theoretical reviews, meta-analysis reports, and chapters from classic theoretical works.

2.1 Sources of Review Data

Review data were collected from platforms such as Meituan-Dianping and Xiaohongshu, specifically targeting “tourism services” and “catering services” consumption scenarios. Based on the research theme, a total of 80 effective reviews were screened from the past two years. The screening criteria included:

The comments must explicitly include the following: 1) The ability to identify the consumption context (planned consumption vs. impulsive consumption); 2) Inclusion of the source of expectations, the degree of disappointment, or counterfactual comparison information (these are prioritized); 3) Removal of advertisements, meaningless comments, and duplicate comments.

These reviews are regarded as naturalistic data that reflect the authentic psychological processes of consumers, making them highly suitable for the situational analysis conducted in this study. To ensure a structured analytical framework and the reliability of the resulting conclusions, the entire research process followed four systematic steps:

Phase 1: Domain Scanning and Problem Focusing

Through extensive literature review and domain scanning, this phase aims to identify the research gap concerning the lack of integration between “expectations, disappointment, and counterfactual comparisons.” Based on this gap, the core research questions for this study will be established.

Phase 2: In-depth Review and Theoretical Anchoring

This phase involves a comprehensive literature review of the three core variables and their associated frameworks (including emotion theory and other relevant perspectives). By conducting a deep dive into existing scholarship, we aim to establish a robust theoretical foundation and construct the preliminary theoretical lens that will guide this research.

Phase 3: Comparative Analysis and Model Construction (Core Phase)

This phase utilizes comparative analysis and descriptive statistical methods to develop the study’s core theoretical framework. First, a universal psychological chain is synthesized and integrated through rigorous data processing. Subsequently, this chain is deliberately situated within contrasting scenarios of planned versus impulsive behavior for deductive analysis. By comparing these contexts, differentiated theoretical propositions are derived. Finally, an integrated psychological mechanism model is constructed, accompanied by comprehensive data tables to illustrate the findings.

Phase 4: Interpretation, Refinement, and Generation of Insights

Based on the constructed model, this phase involves a systematic interpretation of consumer behavior and a logically rigorous derivation of theoretical and practical implications for marketing practice.

Results and Analysis

Based on the coding and statistical analysis of the valid review data, this study examines the dimensions of consumption context, sources of expectation, degree of disappointment, and counterfactual comparisons. These analyses reveal how the psychological mechanism of “expectation-counterfactual comparison” manifests across different scenarios.

Relationship between Consumption Context and Degree of Disappointment

The findings indicate that the consumption context significantly influences the intensity of consumer disappointment. When consumers engage in experiential

consumption, their expectations are often tied to subjective emotional fulfillment rather than purely functional utility. Consequently, when the actual experience fails to meet these expectations, the resulting counterfactual comparison—contrasting the “what is” with the “what might have been”—leads to a more profound sense of disappointment.

In contrast, utilitarian consumption contexts tend to trigger more objective, performance-based comparisons. While dissatisfaction still occurs, the emotional weight of the disappointment is often less severe than in experiential contexts, as the sources of expectation are more concrete and less tied to personal identity or emotional well-being. By analyzing these various dimensions, we can better understand the cognitive processes that drive negative post-purchase evaluations and the specific conditions under which counterfactual thinking exacerbates consumer dissatisfaction.

According to the statistical results, the degree of disappointment exhibits significant differences across various consumption scenarios. In general scenarios involving planned consumption, the proportion of high disappointment is the highest, followed by moderate disappointment. This indicates that these consumers invest higher expectations into their purchases; consequently, when the actual experience does not align with their prior planning, it easily triggers a strong sense of psychological discrepancy.

Highly disappointed: “The soundproofing is terrible, a world of difference from the online description; it is simply not worth it.” In the context of planned consumption and high-involvement scenarios, the distribution of disappointment levels appears more balanced. This suggests that while expectations are high in high-investment consumption, consumers are also psychologically prepared for potential risks. Consequently, although disappointment is common, it tends not to reach extreme levels.

Extreme disappointment: “I came here because it was ranked number one on Meituan’s top-rated list, but the result was absolute garbage…Don’t come! It really ruins the mood.” In the context of impulsive tourism consumption, the overall degree of disappointment is significantly lower:

External Stimulus Type: No disappointment observed. Immediate Demand Type: No disappointment observed. These findings are consistent with theoretical expectations: impulsive consumption lacks prior anticipation and preparation, resulting in a low expectation baseline and a lack of disappointment response. Consumers typically exhibit an experimental mindset, characterized by attitudes such as “This seems okay, let’s give it a try.”

结论

The degree of disappointment is significantly influenced by the intensity of prior expectations, with planned consumption resulting in significantly higher levels of disappointment compared to impulsive consumption.

Statistical Relationship Between Consumption Context and Disappointment

To further verify whether a statistically significant difference exists between “consumption context” and the “degree of disappointment,” this study employed a Chi-square test (χ^2 test). The results are presented in the table below:

χ^2 Tests Value

χ^2 29.89 <.001

The test results show that $\chi^2 = 29.8$,

$p < .001$, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between planned consumption and impulsive consumption in terms of the intensity of disappointment they trigger.

Specifically, planned consumption is more likely to lead to disappointment, whereas impulsive consumption is associated with a higher proportion of “no disappointment” responses. These findings are consistent with the results of the previously discussed psychological mechanism analysis.

The Relationship Between the Source of Expectations and the Degree of Disappointment

分析

(Reviews with a degree of disappointment \geq moderate)

This indicates that professional endorsements or celebrity recommendations can rapidly bolster consumer confidence; however, once the actual experience fails to align with the promotion, disappointment is more likely to escalate into “high intensity.” This is consistent with existing literature: an over-processed brand image that is inconsistent with reality easily leads to excessively high expectations.

This suggests that the existing frame of reference provided by “same brand, same product type” makes consumers more likely to perceive inconsistencies in experience as a “deviation from expectations.” Such expectations fall under the category of “emotional and social expectations,” which typically have a lower baseline and are less prone to creating a strong sense of disparity.

High Disappointment: “Me too. Watching mukbang streamers made it look so delicious, but when I went to eat it myself, it was just raw meat—slimy and cold. I really didn’ t like that sensation. Salmon is the thing that disappointed me the most.”

High Disappointment: “The taste is fine; I’ ve eaten here many times. This time, I just want to ask why the dishes aren’ t being served according to the quantity I ordered. I order ten portions, but only five or seven arrive. You should do business honestly; you have just lost two regular customers.”

No Disappointment: “I heard recommendations from upperclassmen long ago that this is the best barbecue restaurant in Jintan. Having tried it today, it truly lives up to its reputation.”

结论

The more “authoritative and professional” the source of expectations is, the higher the proportion of consumers who experience high levels of disappointment. This suggests that consistency between brand promotion and actual user feedback is critically important.

Analysis of Disappointment Intensity and Counterfactual Activation Mechanisms: Only high levels of disappointment significantly activate counterfactual comparisons (e.g., “If only I had chosen the other provider”). This finding aligns perfectly with counterfactual comparison theory: when a significant gap exists between consumer expectations and actual outcomes, the brain automatically traces back to “unselected alternatives” to seek a psychological explanation.

“The rooms were quite clean and tidy, so I thought a chain hotel would be about the same.” Regarding stimulus orientation, high disappointment serves as the key trigger point.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical analysis and comprehensive discussion, this paper draws the following primary conclusions: First, consumer expectations do not form spontaneously; rather, they are gradually established through information acquisition, cognitive input, and the accumulation of waiting time as the consumer approaches the final decision.

Second, the intensity of disappointment is closely related to the degree of consumer investment in their expectations. The higher the level of expectation, the greater the intensity of disappointment generated once those expectations remain unfulfilled.

Third, there are significant differences in consumer psychological reactions across different consumption contexts. Compared to impulsive consumption, planned consumption involves greater investments of time and psychological anticipation; consequently, it is more likely to generate high-intensity disappointment when expectations are not met, which further influences subsequent consumption attitudes.

Fourth, when consumers undergo a disappointment-based consumption experience, they often form hypothetical comparisons, such as “would it have been better if I had chosen another option?” As an important mediating psychological mechanism, this hypothetical comparison exerts a continuous influence on consumer product evaluations and repeat purchase decisions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications. (1) Theoretical Implications: First, this paper systematically examines the psychological evolution chain from consumer

expectations to hypothetical comparisons from a holistic perspective, addressing the limitations of existing research that tends to focus on single-factor analysis.

Second, by introducing differences in consumption contexts (planned versus impulsive consumption), this paper further enriches the theoretical explanation of psychological response variations across different consumption scenarios in consumer behavior research, providing a new analytical perspective for related studies. (2) Practical Implications: The conclusions of this study are particularly applicable to service-oriented enterprises with high customer contact, such as cultural tourism, catering, high-end retail, and online education. The implications for such enterprises are as follows:

Enterprises should utilize effective market research and communication mechanisms to continuously monitor changes in consumer psychology. By managing consumer expectations reasonably and avoiding over-packaging or exaggerated promotion, firms can guide consumers toward forming expectation levels that match the actual product or service.

When consumers experience disappointment during the consumption process, enterprises can promptly alleviate negative emotions through return or exchange services, compensation mechanisms, or active listening to feedback. This reduces the likelihood of poor evaluations regarding the brand and its services.

By continuously improving product and service quality, coupled with long-term and stable brand-building strategies, enterprises can gradually restore consumer trust and mitigate the negative impact of disappointing experiences on future consumption decisions.

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