The Conceptualization of Customer Delight:  
A Research Framework

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Customer delight and consumer satisfaction were shown to be qualitatively different by past research. These two look alike constructs are of interest to many researchers because of their uneven contribution to the firm profit. The capability of measuring a construct serves as a foundation to understand the empirical world. Being a new construct of increasing interest, there is a need to formalize various approaches currently used to measure customer delight. The current approaches are to either measure delight in a four-item emotions scale or in a single-item frequency scale. Still some other researchers conceptualized the most positive disconfirmation category at satisfaction scale be equivalent to delight. Six sessions of focus group discussion were conducted to derive words and phrases that best represent delight from customers own experience in consumption. A research framework for customer delight is drawn based on the outputs of this preliminary qualitative group discussion and the reviews of related literatures.

Keywords: Customer delight, Consumer satisfaction, Focus group

1. Introduction

The concept of customer delight has raised the interest of researchers in recent years [11, 16, 17, 19, 25, 29, 36, 40]. The discussions, however, were mainly concentrated on the theoretically differences between customer delight and consumer satisfaction as well as the strategic importance of delighting customers in rising competition. Among them, four studies had empirically measured delight as a construct but the results were mixed [8, 11, 19, 29]. Perhaps the problem was in the measurement, which the construct was misspecified. For instance, a single-item scale used by Oliver and his colleagues [29] is criticized not being able to capture the full diversity of customer delight as a domain. To resolve the confusion of scale used to measure delight, a process of items generation is recommended to improve both the scale reliability and validity [6]. 36 Chinese subjects were recruited to participate in six focus group discussions to share the latent meanings of delight from their own experience. Hence, the objectives of this paper are to

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re-specify the domain of customer delight and report the qualitative process of generating relevant survey items. This paper is organized in the following sequence. The first part provides an overview of research in customer delight and the measurement. Next, the research methodology is reported and a research framework of delight is proposed. Directions of future research are suggested at the end of this paper.

2. Past Research on Customer Delight

Current studies on customer delight can be broadly divided into three major streams. Customer delight has been emerged to be a construct of interest following a lengthy discussion of both practitioners [5, 44] and academics [14, 17, 40], which laid down the theoretical foundation for future empirical works. Discussions had been organized around the practicability of customer delight [25, 36]. Researching both delight’s antecedents and consequences were also popular among researchers [19, 29].

2.1 Customer delight – the theoretical foundation

The concept of customer delight was first raised by practitioners, who argued that satisfaction is basis but may not be sufficient to outperform competitors and increase sales [5, 10, 13, 37-39, 44]. Casting doubt about the returning rate of satisfied groups, they preached to delight customers to reach higher loyalty and achieve loyalty-driven profit. A research project lent its supports to these practitioners’ view, which showed the disproportional change between the loyalty of satisfied and completely satisfied (delighted) customers [15]. It echoed the findings in Xerox’s satisfaction study of a similar conclusion (please see Reichheld [34] for a detail discussion). Increasing number of business monographs were featured in customer delight [22, 31] and this new business philosophy has stretched to other service industries such as the architecture [4] and the insurance [32]. Oliva et al. [26] laid down the foundation to model the disproportional change in the satisfaction continuum using a catastrophe theory. A threshold is existed in the satisfaction continuum, which delight is resided [1, 7, 17, 25, 40]. This proposition is in the same line of thoughts of nonlinear relationship between attitude and intention [20], and in other complex consumer behaviors [21]. The theoretical foundation of customer delight is constructed on the nonlinear relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. It explains the paradox of why satisfied customer defects. A moderate satisfaction is not sufficient to retain customer repeat patronage. Borrowing Dick and Basu’s [9] classification, a merely satisfied customer is in a latent loyalty group of a high relatively favorable attitude toward the firm but a low repeat patronage tendency.
Pushing customer beyond the satisfaction realm to create competitive edges is the premise in delight studies [42].

2.2 Customer delight – is a high arousal positive affect

The emotion literatures suggested that delight is a positive affect [33, 45]. In Russell’s [35] circumplex model, delight falls between arousal and pleasantness in proximity to the former. The distinction between satisfaction and delight is laid on the intensity of different arousal levels. Westbrook and Oliver [43] reported that there was an emotional distinct among respondents scoring differently in the satisfaction continuum. They found that pleasantly surprise respondents gave the highest score in the satisfaction scale. In case of less or no emotional exchange, a moderate satisfaction was likely to be reported. These observations were consistent to what Jones and Sasser [15] called “apostles” and “terrorists.” The apostles are emotionally attached to the company and they are the most loyal group of customers. In contrast, the terrorists are extremely angry about the company’s act and spread the bad words. They are the outraged customers [40]. As in the emotion literatures, Plutchik [33] suggested that delight is a complex emotion (i.e., tertiary dyads; mixture of two emotions, twice removed), a combination of joy and surprise. In contrast, outrage is a combination of surprise and angry. Perhaps the challenge of marketers is to move customers from “boring-satisfaction” to “delight-satisfaction,” and to calm down the outraged customers, and if possible, to convert them into delighted customers by outstanding recoveries (e.g., delightful resolutions; Estelami [11]). Table 1 summaries the four possible conditions of cognition-emotion mix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Cognition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

2.3 Customer delight – is it worth to attain

Note that customer expectation will be raised after each incident of delight and driving up the costs of business subsequently, its business value is in doubt [12]. Ngobo [25] used the decreasing return model to argue that
delight might not be a worthy business goal. Customer loyalty is likely to be saturated in the stage of delight (or higher satisfaction), making the return less attractive. However, Rust and Oliver [36] argued that it is profitable if the company is able to raise competitor customers’ expectation and increase their likelihood of being dissatisfied. Everything the same, it suggests that these customers will switch to the company at the competitors’ expense under the market mechanism. Also is the effect of decaying memory that the company can take the advantage of customers losing mind and repeat the delight program at a lower cost. These discussions were found on the root that surprise is the prerequisite for delight. Another school of thought was seen in Kumar’s [19] work showing that the perception of volition is the key of delight even without surprise.

Firm has to continuously improve its offerings in a dynamic marketplace to remain a prime choice in customers’ mind. Also customers are increasing sophisticated, they demand better products and services. All these suggested company has to move a step forward to exceed customer expectation, and “delight” is one of the best indicator to monitor this initiative [18]. Increasing number of research showed the positive link between profit and loyalty [1, 26], whereas delighted customers are the true loyalist [17, 40]. Table 2 summarizes the four types of loyalty [9] in relationship with customer responses.

Table 2. Loyalty and Customer Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loyalty</th>
<th>Levels of Arousal</th>
<th>Confirmation</th>
<th>Scope of Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Steep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latent Loyalty</td>
<td>Low to Medium</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spurious Loyalty</td>
<td>Low to Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Steep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Loyalty</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4 Customer delight – unique causes and effects

Delight is seen as a separate construct with its own antecedents and consequences [19, 29]. Surprise is suggested to be the key antecedent of delight in past studies and is activated by high positive disconfirmation. Positive affect and arousal are come along with disconfirmation, which also influence customer delight [29]. In a similar fashion, Kumar [19] proposed that customer delight can be understood by examining the cognitive appraisal
in two levels. The primary appraisal includes dimensions of goal relevance, goal congruence, and types of ego-involvement. Volition, future expectations, responsiveness, anticipated effort, coping potential, and personalization are dimensions in the secondary appraisal. Both these authors modeled intention being the consequence of customer delight but in a higher degree of favorableness than satisfied customers.

3. Measurement of Customer Delight

There are four different approaches to measure delight in the literatures. Kumar [19] employed four emotional adjectives (i.e., exhilarated, thrilled, delighted, and exuberant) to measure delight in a 5-point intensity scale (1 = very little to 5 = very much). Oliver et al. [29], however, operationalized delight in a single descriptor “delighted” on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = never to 5 = always). As in DeSarbo et al.’s [8] and Estelami’s [11] studies, customer delight was scored in a dummy variable fashion by responding only the most positive disconfirmation category (i.e., five on the one-to-five scale). In attempting to include delight element in his original satisfaction scale [27], Oliver [28] added four statement-type items to measure delight (e.g., my car can do things I never expected, I am constantly surprised by the things my car can do). Obviously there is a great confusion of which scales are better to represent delight. Worst still, no consistent result had been observed from different samples (i.e., Park and Symphony; Oliver et al. [29]). A possible explanation of this inconsistency is the inherent weakness in the measurement [6].

4. Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to identify the delight incidents from customers in which focus group was chosen for its well known nature of “give and take” [2]. Items in some marketing constructs (e.g., service quality; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [30]) were gathered from the focus group discussions. 6 groups of total thirty-six Chinese were recruited by referral. Participants sharing a similar characteristic (i.e., working background) were put under one group and each group was equal in size. They were from all walks of life including business professional, clerk and secretary, engineer and technician, academic, student, and housewife. Ideas were freely flow among participants and all six sessions were facilitated by the same moderator. In the beginning, participants were asked to recall one of the most pleasantly surprise experience and share with others what happened in this reported incident. Several key words like “outstandingly good job,” “extremely well done,” “absolutely perfect,” are supplied to stir up
discussions among participants. Follow-up questions like what was so nice in this particular incident and how was their feeling. Each focus group was lasted about an hour and consistent pattern of results were emerged. The discussion was taped recorded to facilitate the author in preparing transcripts. A doctoral student in the mass communication assisted the translation of Cantonese dialogues to English statements. These statements were subsequently checked by the marketing experts to determine the face validity and categorized in the appropriate grouping.

5. Findings and Discussions

The commonalities in focus group discussions were extracted base on the frequency appear in dialogues and supplemented by the literatures related to customer delight [14, 17, 40] in providing a reasonable ground for identifying factors of measurement scale [28]. The result was a five dimensional framework consisting of 25 items (see Table 3). Rather than adopting the traditional expectation- disconfirmation paradigm in satisfaction research [28], inquiries on the behavioral consequences (e.g., repeat purchase) of customer delight can be started with this research framework.

5.1 The Needs-Based Approach

The unlimited need of human being is one the key propositions in classical economics. It follows that human needs cannot be ultimately met but are in a continuous process of gratification associated with pleasure and delight [40]. Reaching the high end need continuum is of vital to customer delight, which is an reflection of one's internal mind. The proposed framework, which essentially captures five basic human needs (i.e., Justice, Esteem, Security, Trust, and Variety), is then proposed to categorize delight stimuli ready for purifying in next step. The first three dimensions are from Schneider and Bowen [40], which justice, esteem, and security are of central to delight. Trust is another dimension suggested by Hart and Johnson [14]. Last, variety is added to be a new delight dimension, which is one of the basic human needs [3, 23].

5.2 Justice

Consumer demands a fair deal in each transaction. A delight experience goes beyond such to request the firm being held the best interest of customers in the heart. The firm is ready to sacrifice its earnings to continuously improve its product and service. It also implies the firm will spare monies on an excellent loyalty program to reward customer patronage. Such rewards
could be in cash or kind but after all they should be perceived of great value by the customer. Justice in delight is essential meant not reaping a huge profit and the customer gains a bit little from the firm. One participant reported his delight aroused from a private offer substantially below the market price. Giving sufficient choices to customer is also seen as an important component in the justice dimension of delight. 6 items were reported in this dimension

5.3 Esteem

Customers may wish to reinforce the self identity in a transaction [41]. The firm is then able to arouse delight by boosting customer’s ego in the deal. Customer’s self-esteem is likely to enhance by receiving a very personalized service and owning a product of limited edition. Similarly, giving one priority and actively seeking for his/her opinion are also help to raise one’s self-esteem. Last, allowing a greatest flexibility for customers to make choices is relevant to the esteem dimension in delight. One participant felt delight in an occasion that she could change items in the fixed menu to suit her tastes without extra money. 6 items were categorized in this dimension.

5.4 Security

Consumer wants to feel safe in shopping and his/her interests protected. The firm is then able to delight customers by providing a home-felt shopping environment. It is necessary to keep the atmosphere absolutely clean and tidy so as to deliver as well as maintain a customer’s peaceful mind. Protecting customer’s interest refers to a trouble-free refund policy and a life time product guarantee. The firm can maximize customers’ confidence by allowing unlimited trials. “It gives me a great pleasure that I take four to five jeans to the dressing room and try which best suits to me,” a delight episode recalled by a participant. 6 items were found in this dimension.

5.5 Trust

Trust is another well studied construct in marketing [24]. Trust in delight refers to the best crisis management in which the firm takes full responsibilities over its fault and admits frankly. It then responds to the crisis quick and resolves it in the most humanistic way. The firm always keeps its words and the performance is always above the industrial standard. In essence, the firm delights its customers by its exceptionally stable and beyond standards performance, which wins the customer’s heart. One participant found it was very surprise to the consistent services level of a firm even in time of a great demand. The staff were still very energetic and served in every detail. This dimension had 4 items.
5.6 Variety

Variety is proposed to be a relevant factor, which is in line with consumer’s variety-seeking behavior [3, 23]. It is argued that variety is equivalent to surprise that both of them capture consumer’s attention. The firm is able to delight its customers by coming up new products and services regularly and is ready to break the industrial norm. One participant felt delighted in each seasonal fashion change, which she was impressed by the new design. This dimension had 3 items.

Table 3. Delight Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improvements are made continuously</td>
<td>Being rewarded in different ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being rewarded in different ways</td>
<td>My patronage is highly valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reaping a huge profit</td>
<td>Feeling gains in the deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling gains in the deal</td>
<td>Giving me the largest number of choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Esteem</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boosting a self ego in the deal</td>
<td>Receiving a very personalized service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving a very personalized service</td>
<td>Products are in limited edition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products are in limited edition</td>
<td>Placing me on top of other customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing me on top of other customers</td>
<td>Always seeking my opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always seeking my opinions</td>
<td>Allowing me the greatest freedom</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Security</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt like at home</td>
<td>Peaceful mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful mind</td>
<td>Absolutely clean and tidy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutely clean and tidy</td>
<td>Full refund without question ask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full refund without question ask</td>
<td>Offering life-time guarantee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering life-time guarantee</td>
<td>Allowing unlimited trials</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking full responsibilities for complaints</td>
<td>Providing humanistic follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing humanistic follow-up</td>
<td>Always keeping the word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always keeping the word</td>
<td>Always performing best in the industry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always coming up new product/service</td>
<td>Always breaking the industrial norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always breaking the industrial norm</td>
<td>Felt surprise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusion

Twenty-five delight items had been generated from 6 focus groups. A framework was proposed in accordance with the needs-based approach, which 5 basic human needs were utilized (i.e., Justice, Esteem, Security,
Trust, and Variety). Two limitations were noted. The focus group was mixed in gender and there were only six sessions. The pool of items might not be exhaustive. Results in this qualitative research can then be used in next steps for purifying the measure as well as assessing the scale reliability and validity. Future research in delight can be included the discriminant analysis of consumer satisfaction and customer delight in different industrial settings.

References

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