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Situational Variables and Consumer Behavior

RUSSELL W. BELK*

This paper suggests that explicit recognition of situational variables can substantially enhance the ability to explain and understand consumer behavioral acts. A definition and description of situations is offered, existing research is summarized, and implications for consumer research are considered.

Growing recognition of limitations in the ability of individual consumer characteristics to explain variation in buyer behavior has prompted a number of appeals to examine situational influences on behavior. Ward and Robertson argued that "situational variables may account for considerably more variance than actor-related variables" (1973, p. 26). Lavidge (1966) cautioned that many buyer behaviors may be enacted only under specific conditions and necessitate situational investigations of intra-individual variability. Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1969) urged that *both* individual and situational factors must be considered in order to explain consumer choices. Nevertheless, these and other suggestions to include situational variables in research on consumer behavior have gone largely unheeded. The primary obstacle has been the absence of an adequate conception of the variables which comprise a situation. It is the purpose of the following discussion to explore such concepts and to suggest directions for the study of situational influence in consumer behavior.

CONSUMER SITUATIONS AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Situations, Behavioral Settings, and Environments

As a starting point for a definition, most theoreticians would agree that a situation comprises a point in time and space (Belk, 1975). For students of human behavior, a discrete time and place occupied by one or more persons identifies a situation of potential interest. A somewhat larger alternative unit of analysis would be Barker's (1968) "behavioral setting." A behavioral setting is not only bounded in time and space, but also by a complete sequence of behavior or an "action pattern." For example, a basketball game or a piano lesson is a behavioral setting because each involves an interval in time and space in which certain behaviors can be expected regardless of the particular persons present. But such patterns of behavior require stretching the time and place dimensions to broader and more continuous units than those defining a situation. While a behavioral setting might be a store which is open from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM (Barker, 1968, p. 19), the current perspective would recognize a number of discrete situations which may occur within this setting.

The concept of an "environment" extends the time, place, and behavioral dimensions still further. Although there is less agreement as to what bounds and defines an environment,[1] it is clear that situations and behavioral settings are subunits within an environment. In one of his early formulations Lewin pointed out that an environment may be thought of as the chief characteristics of a more or less permanent "situation" (Lewin, 1933). In this sense situations represent momentary encounters with those elements of the total environment which are available to the individual at a particular time. Environment is also broader in terms of the geographic area over which it applies. For example, while the "legal environment" may be described to consist of laws, legal institutions, and interpretive tendencies within a governmental territory, and the behavioral setting may refer to a certain courtroom, the specific experience of individual A being cross-examined by attorney G during trial M in city R at 4:00 on day X, can only be described from a narrower situational perspective. It is this latter view of the conditions for experiences and the effect of these conditions on specific behavioral outcomes which the current perspective seeks to develop.

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[1] A great deal of the effort in the emerging discipline of environmental or ecological psychology has been spent in debating boundaries. See for example Barker (1963), Craik (1970), Proshansky, Ittelson, and Rivlin (1970), Ittelson (1973), and Rivlin (1973).

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Situational Versus Non-situational Determinants of Consumer Behavior

A second group of concepts from which situations must be distinguished are the non-situational determinants of a particular consumer behavior. Figure 1 shows a familiar stimulus-organism-response paradigm which has been modified to divide the stimulus into an object and a situation. This split is analogous to the perceptual distinctions between figure and ground or focal and contextual cues (Helson, 1964). That is, because behavior with respect to a product or service object is of primary significance in consumer behavior, the object to which the consumer is directly responding will be regarded as a unique source of behavioral influence. In not including personal and object characteristics within the concept of the situation there is also a purposeful departure from Lewin's (1935) formulation of the life space. The rationnale for this more limited view of situation is the greater possibility of operationalizing a construct which has an existence apart from the individual's total consciousness. For there to be a hope of really adding to the ability to explain consumer behavior, this separate existence is essential.[2]

It might seem that a clear distinction may be made between persons, objects, and situations as separate sources of influence on behavior, but some potential for confusion exists in attempting to separate the characteristics of each determinant. R. L. Thorndike's (1947) concept of "lasting and general characteristics of the individual" is a useful device in distinguishing personal and situational characteristics. These individual features, including personality, intellect, sex, and race, are stable over times and places of observation and may therefore be attributed consistently to the individual. Where the feature is more transitory, such as having a headache, it must be considered to be at least partly a function of the situation. It is necessary to impose similar constraints on the conception of object characteristics in order to categorize a description such as a brand of soda being 10¢ less than competing brands. In cases where the characteristic tends to be a lasting and general feature of the brand it may be attributed to the object. Where the characteristic is specific to a time and place (e.g., a special sale) it should be regarded as a characteristic of the situation.

Characteristics of Consumer Situations

Consistent with the previous distinctions, a consumer situation may be viewed as comprising ". . . all those factors particular to a time and place of observation which do not follow from a knowledge of personal (intra-individual) and stimulus (choice alternative) attributes and which have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behavior" (Belk, 1974a). The greatest problem in operationalizing this view lies in defining "all those factors." Several attempts have been made to develop comprehensive taxonomies of situational characteristics. Using general guidelines suggested by Sherif and Sherif (1956), Sells (1963) constructed a subjective classification of over 200 situational variables including gravity, temperature, group structure, role requirements, and novelty of the situation in relation to prior experiences. Unfortunately, from the point of view of the current conception of situation, Sell's classification also includes some characteristics of the individual (e.g., age, sex, race) and environment (e.g., sources of food, erosion, language), and excludes certain descriptors of the physical locale (e.g., noises, colors, room or area size). Classification attempts by Bellows (1963), Wolf (1966), and Moos (1973), are less complete and suffer from similar drawbacks. Although also incomplete and parochial in its focus, a limited taxonomy by

[2] This point is elaborated by Belk (1975), Mausner (1963) captured the argument in stating that "if one specifies the stimulus in terms of the nature of the receiver, lawfulness becomes impossible."

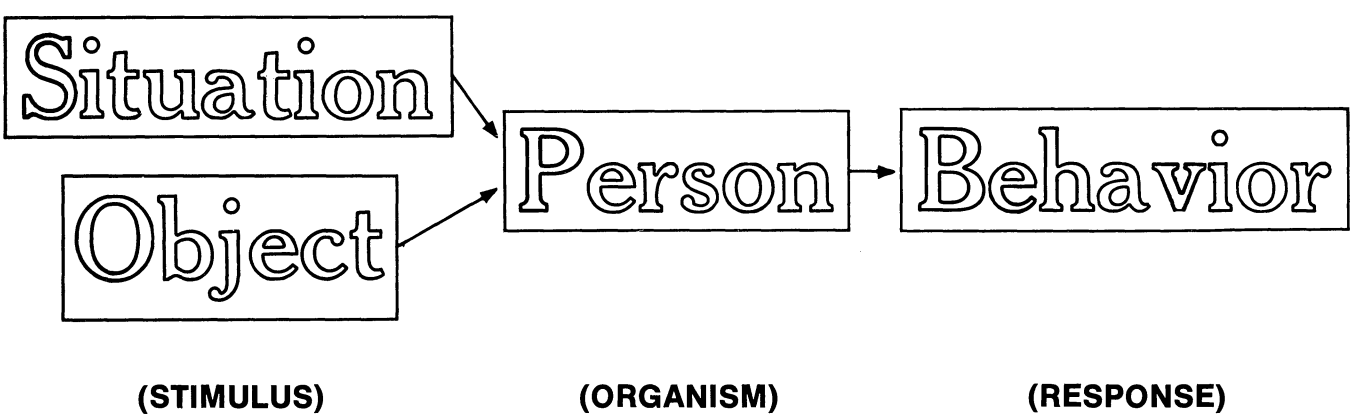


FIGURE 1
A Revised S-O-R Paradigm

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Allen (1965) of the situational factors found to affect conformity highlights several important social dimensions (e.g., public/private, interdependence of participants) and task dimensions (e.g., difficulty, importance) of the situation. These features contrast sharply with the taxonomy of 66 bipolar adjectival scales constructed by Kasmar (1970) to measure situations. From an initial list of 300 characteristics generated through room description protocols obtained from architecture students, scales were developed to describe 13 aspects of the situation; size, volume, scale, mood, color, texture, function, illumination, esthetic quality, climate, color, accoustical quality, and miscellaneous. Such characteristics provide a comprehensive description of the design features of the situation, but they completely neglect the social and task attributes which Allen's review (1965) emphasized. Furthermore a higher order factor analysis of data from Kasmar's scales has shown them to be highly redundant in terms of an underlying affective dimension (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Mehrabian and Russell's own (1974) attempt to develop three comprehensive situational descriptors (pleasure, arousal, and dominance) is also not very satisfying to depict the array of possible situational dimensions. However, by selectively combining features suggested in the various taxonomies cited, a skeletal notion of what is meant by "all those factors" comprising a situation may be offered. The following five groups of situational characteristics represent the general features from these taxonomies which are consistent with the current definition of situation.

1. *Physical Surroundings* are the most readily apparent features of a situation. These features include geographical and institutional location, decor, sounds, aromas, lighting, weather, and visible configurations of merchandise or other material surrounding the stimulus object.

2. *Social Surroundings* provide additional depth to a description of a situation. Other persons present, their characteristics, their apparent roles, and interpersonal interactions occurring are potentially relevant examples.

3. *Temporal Perspective* is a dimension of situations which may be specified in units ranging from time of day to season of the year. Time may also be measured relative to some past or future event for the situational participant. This allows conceptions such as time since last purchase, time since or until meals or payday, and time constraints imposed by prior or standing commitments.

4. *Task Definition* features of a situation include an intent or requirement to select, shop for, or obtain information about a general or specific purchase. In addition, task may reflect different buyer and user roles anticipated by the individual. For instance, a person shopping for a small appliance as a wedding gift for a friend is in a different situation than he would be in shopping for a small appliance for personal use.

5. *Antecedent States* make up a final group of features which characterize a situation. These are momentary moods (such as acute anxiety, pleasantness, hostility, and excitation) or momentary conditions (such as cash on hand, fatigue, and illness) rather than chronic individual traits. These conditions are further stipulated to be immediately antecedent to the current situation in order to distinguish states which the individual brings to the situation from states of the individual which result from the situation. For instance, a person may select a certain motion picture because he feels depressed (an antecedent state and a part of the choice situation), but the fact that the movie causes him to feel happier is a response to the consumption situation.[3] This altered state may then become antecedent for behavior in the next choice situation encountered, such as passing a street vendor on the way out of the theater.

Given a conception of the dimensions characterizing a situation, the final element of the definition of a situation requiring clarification is the requirement that these features have a "demonstrable and systematic effect on current behavior." To a greater extent than the problem of situational dimensions, this is an empirical question which has been the subject of some research. The following section reviews this research and examines the extent to which situational knowledge can be expected to add to our ability to explain consumer behavior.

ASSESSMENTS OF SITUATIONAL EFFECTS ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Inventory Evidence

In the past six or seven years a small but growing number of empirical tests of situational influence in consumer behavior have been conducted using inventories of situational scenarios and choice alternatives. These inventories ask subjects to rate the likelihood that they would choose each of several alternative products or services under each of several sets of situational conditions. Summary descriptions of seven of these inventories are provided in the Appendix. It may well be argued that the situations investigated in these studies do not constitute random samples of possible situations and do not always reflect the full range of situational dimensions just outlined. Despite the fact that most of the inventories have relied on pretests to generate familiar situations, the argument is undoubtedly valid. Even so, any demonstration that behavior differs widely between the situations specified is evi-

[3] Hansen (1972) distinguishes between purchase, consumption, and communication situations. Comments in this paper concentrate primarily on consumer purchase choices.

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TABLE 1
ANALYSES OF CONSUMER BEHAVIORAL VARIANCE[a]
(percents of total variance)

Source	Response Category[b]					
	Beverage Products	Meat Products	Snack products A	Fast Foods[c]	Leisure Activities[d]	Motion Pictures
Persons (P)	0.5%	4.6%	6.7%	8.1%	4.5%	0.9%
Situations (S)	2.7%	5.2%	0.4%	2.2%	2.0%	0.5%
Products (Responses: R)	14.6%	15.0%	6.7%	13.4%	8.8%	16.6%
$R \times S$	39.8%	26.2%	18.7%	15.3%	13.4%	7.0%
$P \times S$	2.7%	2.9%	6.1%	2.2%	4.0%	1.9%
$P \times R$	11.8%	9.7%	22.4%	20.1%	21.2%	33.7%
$P \times S \times R$	—[e]	—[e]	3.4%	—[e]	—[e]	—[e]
Residual	27.8%[f]	36.4%	35.6%	38.7%	46.1%	39.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

[a] Components of variance analyses for mixed effects model with subjects random. For computational details, see Gleser, Chronbach and Rajaratnam (1965) and Endler and Hunt (1966).
[b] Inventories are described in Appendix.
[c] Variance components from this inventory have not previously been presented.
[d] Means of four samples.
[e] Not obtained due to single presentations of each situation-response combination.
[f] Incorrectly reported as entirely $P \times S \times R$.

dence that there are important situational determinants for the class of choices considered.

Results comparing the relative influence from persons, products (responses), situations, and their interactions are presented in Table 1 for the six product categories that have been examined.[4] For all inventories the effects explaining the smallest proportions of variance are those which reflect superfluous response styles. For instance, a sizable interaction term for persons by situations would only indicate that some subjects view using any of the products in certain situations as more likely than do other subjects. Similarly, sizable main effects for persons or situations would have little meaning since they do not involve preference differences by product. A more dominant influence is the responses by situations interaction, especially for the meat and beverage inventories. This is the variance component which directly reflects the influence of systematic situational differences in product preferences. Furthermore, the lower contributions from the responses main effect in all inventories except motion pictures, suggest that general product popularity is a substantially less important determinant of consumer preferences than are situational conditions. For the meat and beverage inventories the small interaction terms for persons by responses reveal that in these categories situational influence also outstrips *individual* product preferences. For other inventories, again excepting motion pictures, the effects of situational and individual influences are jointly dominant. Motion pictures is the only category examined in which situational effects appear to be minimal. In this case individual preferences appear to be the consistent choice determinant with the general popularity of the movies following in importance.

A recent challenge to the validity of these inventory-based findings has been presented by Lutz and Kakkar (1975). They argued that the experimental procedure of having subjects rate the same choice alternatives under all situational conditions may have spuriously inflated the situations by products interaction term. In order to test this possibility they replicated Belk's (1974a) snack product inventory, but exposed each subject to only one level of the situation factor (see Appendix for a description of their experiment). Their analysis obtained a contribution of less than 6 percent for the situations by products interaction, with a residual term which accounted for over 86 percent of the variance.[5] Unfortunately, their analysis assumed an inappropriate completely randomized factorial design rather than the split plot factorial design which was actually employed (Winer, 1971, pp. 366-371, Kirk, 1968, pp. 245-318). This problem renders their analysis meaningless and leaves the question of artifactual situational influence open. By altering the numbers of situations or responses by a factor of one half, Belk (1974b) has shown the variance component estimates of this inventory to be relatively stable across the resulting formats. Comparable results have been found by Endler and Hunt (1969) for a similar anxiety inventory. However, since these examinations do not reduce the number of situations to one per subject, the possibility that situational influence has been overestimated by these inventories still exists.

[4] The research reported generally employed a situations by products by persons repeated measures experimental design. While nearly all main effects and two way interactions yielded significant F-ratios, proportions of variance accounted for by each effect are more revealing (Belk, 1974a).

[5] Hay's Omega squared statistic (Hays, 1964) was employed to derive these estimates. Since this statistic assumes a completely fixed effects model, results are not strictly comparable to those of the mixed effects components of variance method employed in the other studies reported.

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Other Evidence

Evidence of the importance of consumer situations has been found using other approaches which lend additional credence to a conclusion that situational influence is a pervasive factor in consumer behavior. Using multidimensional scaling Green and Rao (1972) found that consumer perceptions of and preferences for various bread and pastry items changed markedly over differing meal and menu situations. In a series of experimental choice simulations Hansen (1972) found that selection of a hairdryer as a gift depended upon characteristics of the supposed recipient, and that information seeking and choices from a fixed menu varied according to the description of the restaurant. Grønhaug (1972) found that buyers of tableware utilized different types and sources of information depending upon whether the purchase was for personal use or for a gift. By having subjects reconstruct word of mouth incidents, Belk (1971) found that one-third of the conversations about a new freeze dried coffee took place where the prior conversation concerned food, and that another third of the conversations began while drinking coffee. Sandell (1968b) was able to condition choice of specific cigarette brands to either stressful or boring situations and to consumption of a specific brand of beer.

Anecdotal evidence of situational influence abounds as well. For example, in retail settings the mere presence of children (Wells and LoSciuto, 1966), friends (Bell, 1967), and sales personnel (Albaum, 1967) have been observed to alter purchase outcomes; as time since last meal increased so did the total food bill of non-obese supermarket shoppers in a study by Nisbett and Kanouse (1968); Pennington (1965) found appliance sales were most frequent when customer and salesman were similar in their propensity to bargain; and greater risk was found to be perceived in buying the same good by mail than at a retail store (Spence, Engel and Blackwell, 1970).

From the variety of methods employed in these studies it appears that situational effects can be demonstrated both descriptively and experimentally. Although the amount of research specifically focused on situational influence is still quite small, a number of instances have been found in which situations can be shown to affect consumer behavior systematically. There is further encouragement for situational research from the refreshing fact that analyses of the behavioral inventories specifying situations have been able to explain the majority of variance encountered.

SITUATIONAL RESEARCH IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Despite the substantial promise and appeal of research which employs situational variables to explain consumer choice behavior, several basic issues require resolution before this potential can be fully realized. Foremost among the issues which this research must address is the question of the most appropriate means of measuring situations. Two alternative perspectives proposed have been labeled "psychological" (Lutz and Kakkar, 1975) and "objective" (Belk, 1975) measurements. Psychological measurements of situations rely on the subjects' perceptions of the situation and are an extension of sociological inquiry into the "situation as defined" (Thomas, 1927). The premise for such measurements is that the way an individual construes a situation should be more important to behavior than the inherent features of that situation. Objective measurements of situations restrict themselves to features of the situation as it exists before subjects' interpretations. The primary rationale for this perspective is that it removes the idiosyncracies of perception which may otherwise limit aggregation and manipulation of consumer situations. The possibility has also been raised that some situational influences, such as subtle cueing effects, may operate without the subject's perceptual awareness. Without some sort of hybrid measurement which merges these perspectives, it appears that situational research must utilize both types of measurements.

A related issue concerns the most appropriate means of manipulating situations in experimental research. Both psychologically and objectively defined situations may be manipulated by assigning subjects to different times, places, and conditions, although successful manipulations of psychologically defined situations may need to be more clever or elaborate. However, this sort of research is costly and is best limited to the investigation of one or two situational dimensions at a time. Alternatively, and more commonly, the projective use of situational scenarios may continue to be used. Typically these scenarios have ranged from a one phrase to one paragraph written description of situational conditions. Photographs, motion pictures, and video tapes are possible refinements of stimulus input in this procedure, but these methods favor visual cues and may unnaturally focus attention and control the *rate* of experience. Perhaps the best means of manipulation, short of actually modifying situational conditions, is to couple written descriptions of features such as temporal perspective, task definition, and antecedent states, with visual and auditory input of physical and social surroundings. Comparisons of results using each alternative means of manipulation will be needed to assess their relative adequacy.

Whether the existence of a particular situational effect has been determined under simulated or actual conditions, interpretation of the importance of this effect requires knowledge of the frequency of occurrence of these conditions. Because consumers can selectively seek or avoid many of the situations they encounter and because all unanticipated situations are not equally

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common, descriptive evidence of the frequency of situational occurrences is needed. A number of time budget studies based on consumer diaries (e.g., Szali, 1973) are available which provide general records of the times and places of consumer activities. But even the most detailed consumer accounts (e.g., Muse, 1946) seldom go beyond "shopping" in their descriptions of purchase situations. Nevertheless activity diaries appear to be a useful approach to gathering relevant data on situational occurrences. In addition to providing data on relevant situational variables, this approach may simultaneously measure individual characteristics and behavioral outcomes which can be cross tabulated with situations to obtain a picture of individual differences in situational exposure and susceptibility to situational influence.

The ultimate problem for all future situational research is the lack of a comprehensive taxonomy of situational characteristics and normal combinations of these characteristics. Hopefully this discussion has made some headway in establishing a general conceptualization of consumer situations, but obviously greater detail is necessary. It is a false hope at this point to expect that we can systematically investigate a complete list of situational characteristics, because no such list exists. Only by continuing to conceptualize and research situational characteristics under a guiding understanding of the scope and criteria for situations can such a summary ever be achieved.

APPENDIX: SUMMARY DETAILS FOR SEVEN SITUATIONAL INVENTORIES

1. *Beverages.* Sandell (1968a) presented 31 student subjects with ten beverages (e.g., coffee, water, beer) which they rated in seven situations (e.g., when alone, feeling sleepy in the afternoon, reading the paper in the morning) using a seven-point scale from "extremely unwilling" to "extremely willing" (to try). Situations and beverages tested were apparently chosen subjectively, although five subjects who did not appear to view the products as alternatives were eliminated.
2. *Leisure Activities.* Bishop and Witt (1970) investigated the effect of ten situations (e.g., returning from studying at a noisy library, relaxing Friday afternoon following a busy week, waking up fresh and rested on a Saturday morning) on the likelihood of engaging in each of 13 leisure activities (e.g., go shopping for clothes, watch television, visit a friend) using a five-point scale from "almost certainly" to "I would not feel like" (doing this). Situations were selected based on five alternative theories of leisure behavior, and leisure activities were based on their frequency of occurrence in previous community surveys. Subjects were male and female students at two colleges and totalled 141.
3. *Meat Products.* Belk (1974a) examined choices of 11 different meat products (e.g., hamburger, steak, chicken) in nine different situations (e.g., party for friends, meal on a weekday evening, at a nice restaurant with friends) using five point scales from "extremely likely" to "not at all likely", administered to 100 members of a community. Situations and meat products were chosen from protocols and familiarity pretests.
4. *Motion Pictures.* Belk (1974b) had 100 students rate 12 hypothetical motion pictures (e.g., The Motorcycle Freaks, Summer of Dreams, Only Fools are Sad) described in mock advertisements, in nine situations (e.g., on a weeknight with friends of the same sex, just for something to do, together with spouse or date at their request) on a five-point scale. Situations were selected via protocols and pretests based on familiarity, and motion pictures were structured to parallel currently popular themes.
5. *Snack Products A.* Belk (1974b) varied ten different situations (e.g., while watching television with family, going on a long automobile trip, an urge for a between meal snack) and had 100 student subjects rate the likelihood of choosing each of ten snack products (e.g., potato chips, pastries, ice cream) on two occasions (two weeks apart) using five point scales. Situations and products were chosen as in the meat inventory.
6. *Snack Products B.* Lutz and Kakkar (1975) replicated Belk's snack product inventory except that subjects in each of ten groups of from 24 to 36 students responded within only one of the situations and on only one occasion. Each group rated products in a different situation and a total of 306 subjects were employed.
7. *Fast Foods.* Using data collected by Leo Burnett U.S.A., Belk (1975) analyzed the effect of ten different situations (e.g., too tired to cook dinner, unexpected dinner guests, having a few friends over for a casual get-together) on responses to a six-point likelihood scale for each of ten (confidential) fast food outlets and related meal choices. Subjects were 98 housewives in a single community.

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