

INFLUENCE OF VENDOR EXPERIENCES ON BUYING CENTER DECISIONS AND RELATIONSHIP INTENT – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK EXPLORING JOURNEY FROM INDIVIDUAL PURCHASE INTENT TO BUYING CENTER PURCHASE DECISION

Abstract: Organization decision making is explored from a customer experience framework and conceptual model explaining the process of decision making in a buying centre has been proposed. Joint decision making process for industrial purchases is shown to be a three phase journey and the role of anticipated emotions influencing and leading to formation of behavioural intent in each of the phases explained. Socio-psychological factors influence on decision making in a buying centre has been integrated with the rational cognitive decision making process to develop an integrated model highlighting the journey from individual behavioural intent to group purchase decision in an industrial buying scenario.

Keywords: Anticipated Emotions, Customer Experience, Buying centre, Decision making, Psychological contract, Emergent leadership, B2B

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INTRODUCTION

Research in organizational buying decisions initially brought out the role of buying centers, with decisions portrayed as mostly rational process driven by well researched concepts like profits, risk, quality, technical specifications and other tangible factors (Cyert et. al., 1956; Levitt, 1965; Cardozo & Cagley, 1971; Ammer, 1972). It also brought out individual roles such as influencers and decision-makers, in the context of joint decisions, involving factors such as group dynamics etc. related to the buying center concept. Further, “non-task” related factors such as individual psychology, power play, inter-personal conflict resolution modes, and other similar non-tangible factors (Tosi, 1966; Webster & Wind, 1972; Sheth, 1973; Johnston and Bonoma, 1996). Though later frameworks such as those based on the IMP, advanced knowledge in this field, highlighting the role of relationships, structural and inter-organizational process frameworks, there has been less focus on integrative frameworks that incorporate these factors fully in the group based decision context in industry. There is a strong need to have a comprehensive model that includes these factors, particularly the aspects of joint decisions that characterize industrial buying.

Customer value frameworks are commonly accepted as a metric for describing evaluations of buyers in both B2C and B2B contexts. There are many value themed, attribute based frameworks that have been proposed in research over the years such as by Zeithaml (1988), Gale & Wood (1994) and Woodruff (1997). Recent research established the role of Experiential Value on consumer choices, helping integrate situational, affective and other psychological factors (Verhoef et. al., 2009; Tosti & Herbst, 2009; Klaus & Maklan, 2011; Rose et. al., 2012), along with cognitive evaluations, specifically in the B2C sector; more generalizable, perhaps, for individual choices. By their very definition they are situational in context, and reflect the personal element in experience – both factors so often ignored in other models of choice. Though it is more researched in the B2C context, this aspect finds support in recent research (Kaufmann et. al., 2017) which reveals that even in the B2B context, decisions are journeys anchored in both cognitive and emergent experiential and affective processes.

However, there is still limited research on how it affects group purchase decisions in B2B. The closest association has been in relationship marketing which involves interactions, relationships and networks (Gummesson, 2002) and professes that marketers meet customer expectations rather than the promises they have made (Gronroos, 2007). Value frameworks available in literature (Gronroos, 2007; Smith & Colgate, 2007) including those in B2B markets do not consider complexities of inter-personal relationships and group based issues in their framework. Existing frameworks such as Tellefson (2006), have on the other hand highlighted the role of conflict resolution, transient leadership roles and group norms within the buying center, and reflect to some extent the integrative models of initial literature; but do not fully depict the individual roles and preferences and its integration with joint decisions, which have been highlighted by these very models. The transition process and pathway from individual roles and influencing factors to group decisions, would be critical to fully understand the buying center decision process. The study proposes to explore this aspect further.

The social exchange, and the normative and affective aspects of the psychological contract presenting itself to individuals in the buying center, possibly also give rise to experiences connected deeply with the buying center role and task of vendor selection choices. These experiences may combine in their effects, and impact the value judgements made in the final choice as seen from experiential value literature. Bagozzi et. al. (2016) proposed that the affective elements of anticipated emotions (AE) related to buying and not buying a particular option may affect buying intention, in line with experiential value judgement models which incorporate a large number of cognitive, emotional, situational and other factors, which may be antecedents of the AE. Though limited research is available on this antecedent, a recent study highlights this possibility (Pandey et al, 2018). This paper presents a conceptual framework on how affective elements of customer experience influence the journey from individual behavioral intention to a joint purchase decision by buying center members, through social interactions, which have their own experiential consequences such as emotions (AE related to buying), which in turn lead to buying intent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational buying is usually considered a constrained, process driven, rational decision making mechanism which helps in fulfilment of organizational goals. It involves multiple stakeholders coming together to review the available options in terms of technical specifications, quality, price, risk, trust and vendor commitment (Cyert et. al., 1956; Zeithaml, 1988; Taylor, 1974; Peter & Ryan, 1976; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A joint decision is then taken to select the most qualified vendor. While the complete process appears to be rational, social interactions during this process bring in an element of affect and tend to influence the final decisions (Webster & Wind, 1972; Sheth, 1973; Kaufmann et. al., 2017).

Webster & Wind (1972) proposed the role of task and non-task related environmental, organizational, social and individual variables, in a group setting, where non-task related factors reflect the socio-psychological needs of the buying center members. The decision making which is a group process hence involves interactions and sentiments among members leading to output of the group in terms of both – a task oriented problem solution for the organization and non-task oriented satisfaction and growth for members of the buying center.

Sheth (1973) proposed an integrative model of industrial buyer behavior which noted the role of joint decision making mediated by mechanism like conflict resolution. Both joint problem solving and persuasion techniques were considered as rational methods of conflict resolution by Sheth (1973). However both involve the role of individuals whose personal choices are brought to the table. Situational factors like temporary economic condition of the organization, organizational changes etc. which are beyond the control of buying center members may also impact the supplier choice as suggested in the integrative model proposed by Sheth (1973). Though the model considers all the factors in an integrative manner, the process of this resolution is still required to be understood, especially in light of further research on such resolution.

Considering the variety of processes and methods involved in resolving individual level goals at the buying center level, a more integrative pathway that allows for all of the above phenomenon of resolution through a single framework would be more parsimonious, and perhaps offer a more cohesive theoretical paradigm in explaining group decisions and issue resolution, without being either overtly or solely cognitive/rational or affective/subjective in nature, but on a realistic note combining all elements. A framework such as experiential value that combines all such factors, and provides a clear set of antecedents and a pathway or process to choices, seems highly suitable.

If the social situation, interpersonal dynamics and varied processes which mediate these group decision process as denoted above, are to be combined to present a common pathway that accommodates all such factors, a suitable construct is required that captures both individual choices and their transition to a group decision, through a defined pathway that covers all routes of assimilation of opinion. Though experiential literature captures all the above aspects, there is still no literature in experiential value that explains group choices.

Most of the studies done in organizational buying show little consideration of the social aspects. Ajzen (1996) has explored the social psychology of decision making and suggests that judgements are generally based on systematic information processing, cognitive heuristics and biases along with motivational biases. Ajzen (1996) also suggests that group decision making can be considered as a problem of reconciling or combining the initial judgements or preferences of individual group members. Though group members share at least some critical goals, conflicts may arise due to differences in the subjective utilities assigned to each option based on personal experience and evaluation of all available options. The role of buying center members in such a scenario is then reduced to resolution of differences of these kinds which are at the heart of social judgement theory, and generally lead to exertion of mutual influence amongst buying center members to polarize decisions in the group.

The systematic information processing done by each individual of the buying center can also be compared with 'relevance' and 'implications' stages of the component process model (Scherer, 2009). The coping potential and normative significance stages as described by Scherer (2009) can be extended to the cognitive heuristics and motivational biases suggested by Ajzen (1996). The component process model (CPM) also suggests that stage wise appraisal of an event leads to an emotional experience. Extending this concept to the buying center scenario, we posit that vendor evaluation by each buying center member will also lead to an emotional experience during the assessment while systematic information processing is done.

Social interactions with other buying center members during the joint decision making process also leads to an emotional experience. Vendor evaluation process can be visualized as a customer experience process involving the dimensions of sensory, functional, relational, behavioral and emotional experience (Schmitt, 1999). Kaufmann et. al. (2017) conceptualize B2B decision making as a multiple process approach, and this may be further extended to assume that both processes of individual choice as well as group dynamics and interaction are involved.

Rousseau (1989) has described two types of unwritten contracts – psychological and implied, between an organization and its employees. These unwritten contracts become relevant in group interactions. Extending this to the buying center where we have members from different

departments interacting amongst themselves as well as with members of another organization, we can posit that both psychological and implied contracts will exist and influence the decision making of buying center members.

Tellefsen (2006) while discussing the buying center challenges suggests that conflict in group could be due to relevance of certain piece of information, validity of particular viewpoints or viability of the solution. These issues arise due to the inter-disciplinary nature of members creating confusion as well as different priorities, information sources and analytical frameworks adopted by the buying center members. This is further compounded by limited motivation to invest time and efforts in buying center activities (Tellefsen, 2006). Effective leadership can help the team to achieve a common goal. Leaders in buying center attain their position either through appointment (rank) or through emergence (group acceptance). In a cross functional team, there is limited opportunity for appointed leaders and one of the buying center member usually emerges as the group's de-facto leader by providing relational support and task support so as to help the group to succeed (Tellefsen, 2006).

Lewin (1947) while discussing group dynamics suggests that in a social field, the structural properties of a dynamic whole (the group) will be different from that of the parts (individuals) leading to a need to investigate both. It is the constancy of relationship between the parts which matters and changes the overall scenario of how the issue in hand is addressed by the group. An organizational decision making scenario is akin to a social interaction scenario in a constrained atmosphere where individual and group ideology interacts with organizational norms. Group decision making in buying center from a social perspective has also been studied by Mummalaneni (1984) who suggests a political-coalitional perspective as a viable approach to group decisions in organizational buying. He uses various social models to suggest that coalitions are formed with in buying center due to the pay-offs that coalition brings (game theory models), differing amount of resources that players can bring to coalition (social psychological models) and expectations of policies that the coalition is likely to implement (political models). Lichtenthal (1988) adopted a role structure approach focusing on task groups and the type of task performed to explain group decision making in organizational buying and study the relationships between organizational position (job titles), traditional buying center roles (gatekeeper, user, buyer, influencer and decider) and role based behaviors. Hence all stages in decision making are important as the group decision making and outcome are a result of composite of outcomes of individual task processes. This lends support to the idea that there are multiple stages, along with multiple processes (both individual and joint), that occur in group decisions, and are likely to be present in buying center decisions.

Bagozzi et. al. (2016) explored the mediating effect of anticipated emotions (AE) in formation of purchase intention and proposed that the amount of information received during a purchase decision process and the favourable/ unfavourable outcome decision post evaluation leads to consideration of both positive and negative anticipated emotions of purchase as well as non-purchase decision, prior to formation of the purchase intention. We extend this concept to the buying centre scenario and posit that anticipated emotions will lead to and influence the behavioural intent formation of each buying centre member. In this regard, the following may be considered: The joint decision making is a socio-psychological process driven by emotional experience. A decision making scenario emerges only if there is a difference of opinion amongst the buying center group members. As long as corporate guidelines for the vendor evaluation

process is to follow an objective assessment process as per pre-determined criteria, like selection of vendor in terms of lowest price (L1) or the best technical features (T1), group decision making is rarely involved and the evaluation process in such cases becomes a routine procedural exercise. This may be true for products where technical complexity is low. As the technical complexity of the solution being assessed increases, it is rare to have two vendors offering the same technical solution making it difficult to assess which one of them is the best. Lowest price cannot be decision criteria in such situations and there would be a need for further discussion between the buying center members. These interactions will bring in an element of subjectivity in decision making as each individual will have his/ her own perspective about the solution offered by the vendor and also their own perception on which solution meets the organizational norms. This would be further complicated due to interpersonal relationships between the group members as well as influence of external forces like corporate politics. This subjectivity leads to polymorphism in syncretic decision where conflict is generally resolved politically to reach a consensus. The resolution can be through coalition amongst group members, through bargaining or an authoritative influence of one of the group member.

INDUSTRIAL DECISION MAKING – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We build upon the industrial buying frameworks (Webster & Wind, 1972; Sheth, 1973), the social psychology of decision making (Ajzen, 1996), concept of psychological and implied contract (Rousseau, 1989), emergence leadership in joint decision making (Tellefsen, 2006) and view the group decision making process from an emotional experience perspective (Schmitt, 1999; Scherer, 2009; Bagozzi et. al., 2016; Kaufmann et al, 2017) to propose a comprehensive conceptual framework (Figure – 1) to explain the process of industrial decision making in three phases which are represented sequentially for analytical simplification.

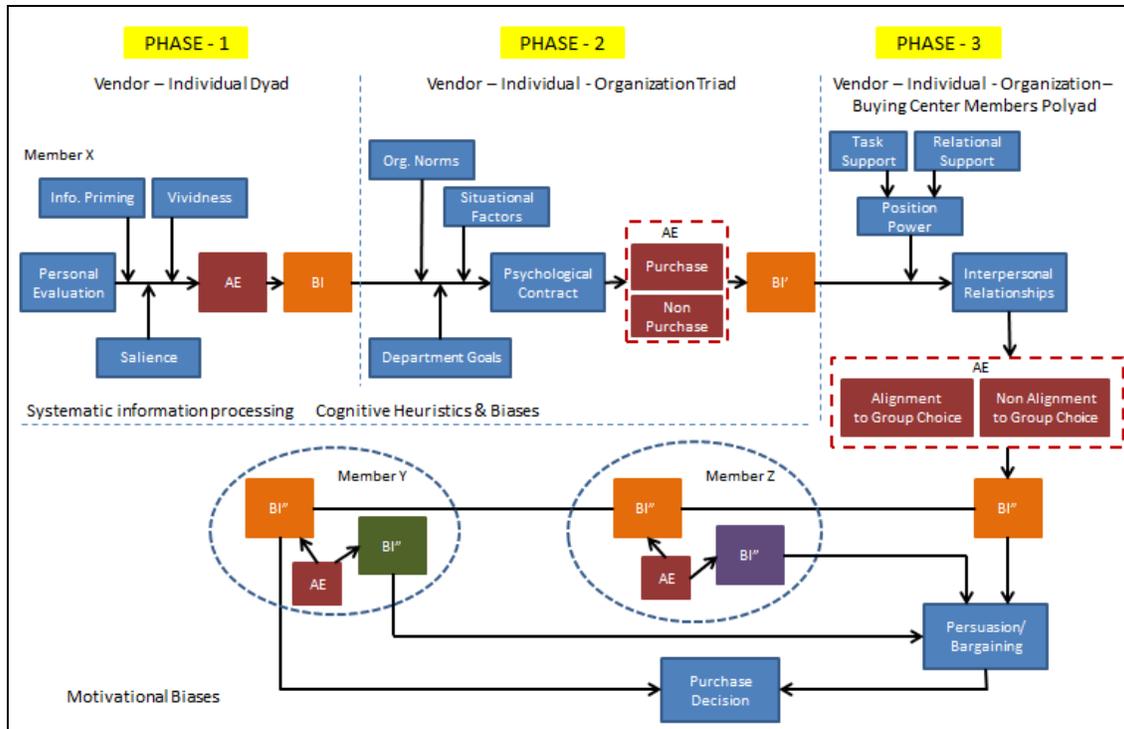


Figure – 1: Conceptual Framework for Industrial Purchase Decision Making

PHASE 1: VENDOR INDIVIDUAL DYAD

The first phase involves vendor – buying center member dyad where available options are reviewed by each buying center member at an individual level. During this judgment phase, systematic information processing is carried out leading to a customer experience at an individual level. Cognitive heuristics and biases (Ajzen, 1996) also influence the judgement based on information accessibility (relative frequency or memory of events). Information priming (recency), saliency (degree to which the event is unique or different) and vividness (visual information) moderate this customer experience which leads to formation of a behavioral intent (BI) mediated by the anticipated emotions of purchase or non-purchase (Bagozzi, 2016). The anticipated emotions of purchase or non-purchase from a specific vendor influence the assessor's behavioral intent towards that vendor. During this phase the assessor evaluates each of the vendors against organizational requirement and personal experience with the vendor during evaluation process manifests as experiential value which leads to behavioral intent formation and preference for a specific vendor. This leads to our first set of propositions –

Proposition 1: *Personal evaluation of each vendor by the buying center member will lead to formation of anticipated emotions of purchase or non-purchase from that vendor*

Proposition 2: *Information priming, vividness and saliency moderate the path between personal evaluation and anticipated emotions*

Proposition 3: *Anticipated emotions will lead to formation of behavioral intent and identification of the most preferred vendor at an individual level*

PHASE 2: VENDOR INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATION TRIAD

The next phase involves vendor, individual and organization triad wherein the individual assessor verifies if the behavioral intent from previous phase is in line with their understanding of organizational norms and departmental goals. An organizational buyer is expected to follow certain norms and the vendor preference from individual assessment may conflict with organizational norms. Cognitive heuristics and biases (Ajzen, 1996) again influence the decision in terms of perceived relevance, perceived causality, perceived covariation and attribution bias. In addition to this situational factors (Sheth, 1973) may also moderate the behavioral intent (BI) formed in the previous phase leading to formation of anticipated emotions of purchase and non-purchase from a specific vendor mediated by the psychological contract that individual may have with the organization. Anticipated emotions in this phase lead to formation of behavior intent (BI') which could be reinforcement of the previous behavior intent or its realignment. This leads to our next set of propositions –

Proposition 4: *Individual preference for a vendor will be moderated by organizational norms, departmental goals and situational factors along with mediating effects of psychological contract of that individual with the organization leading to anticipated emotions of purchase and non-purchase from each vendor*

Proposition 5: *Anticipated emotions will lead to reinforcement or realignment of individual behavioral intent*

PHASE 3: VENDOR INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATION BUYING CENTRE POLYAD

The final phase involves a polyadic interaction between all buying center members, their perceptions about each vendor along with their perceptions of organizational norms. The opinions formed so far by each of the buying center members may result in discursive dilemma and hence an internal conflict within the buying center member as well as a conflict with other members due to motivational biases (Ajzen, 1996) like ego enhancement and defense, need for effective control and consistency (cognitive dissonance). The interpersonal relationships each member has with other members of the buying center will act as a mediator and influence the behavioral intent (BI') formed during the previous phase. If a strong hierarchical group leader is not available amongst the buying center members, this situation will also lead to emergence of a leader within the group (Tellefsen, 2006), a generally accepted member who is able to provide relational and task support to all buying center members in the given situation and is perceived by all team members to help the team reach its goal. The hierarchical/ emergent leader will also influence individual behavioral intent (BI') of the previous phase and lead to formation of final behavioral intent (BI'') on the basis of anticipated emotions to align or not align with the expectations of the hierarchical/ emergent leader. Each member will form his own behavioral

intent (BI”) during this phase based on the anticipated emotions of aligning or not-aligning with the hierarchical/ emergent leadership. In both these cases – whether the leader emerges through social process of exchange of benefits and goal alignment or through a hierarchical structure, it represents the social dynamics of the buying center members and the organization along with the buying center member’s psychological contract with each one of them. Which one of these plays a dominant role will depend upon the positive or negative valence of emotions experienced during each of these interactions. Further, the hierarchical leader may represent elements of both organizational entity as well as buying center leadership. In the proposed model, both play a role and we only suggest an interactive effect in the latter case.

If the behavior intent so formed leads to identification of the same vendor by all buying center members, the purchase decision is taken to go ahead with the identified vendor. However, if the behavioral intent of all members is still not aligned, persuasion and bargaining techniques of conflict resolution (Sheth, 1973) will be adopted to reach the purchase decision. This leads to our final set of propositions –

Proposition 6: Individual behavioral intent will be influenced by interpersonal relationship with other group members during joint decision making

Proposition 7: Emergent/ Hierarchical leader in the buying center influences individual behavioral intent to reach the common goal

Proposition 8: Behavioral intent of individual will be influenced by anticipated emotions of aligning or not aligning with the behavioral intent of emergent/ hierarchical leader

Proposition 9: Alignment of behavioral intent towards the same vendor will lead to purchase decision being taken in favor of the same vendor

Proposition 10: Non-alignment of behavioral intent towards a common vendor will lead to adoption of bargaining/ persuasion techniques to ensure maximum alignment of buying center members towards a common vendor

BUYING CENTRE SCENARIO SIMULATION

The above phenomenon of affect formation due to vendor – individual dyad in the first phase, vendor - individual - organizational norms triad at the next phase and polyadic interactions between buying center members in the final phase, occurs at all stages of the purchase cycle whenever subjectivity is involved in decision making and highlights the complexity and polymorphism of affect in B2B decision making.

To further explain how emotions will guide individuals to reach a consensus, we focus on a specific situation – final selection of a single vendor from a finite set of vendors after vendor evaluation. This may lead to one of the following situations –

- All buying center members preferring the same vendor prior to phase 3 - This would be an ideal situation since the personal preference and understanding of corporate norms by each of the assessor leads to choice of the same vendor. There is no conflict for a group

decision to be taken. Rather it's a confirmation of individual choice leading to reinforcement of positive emotions in all the assessors.

- Buying center members preferring different vendors prior to phase 3 - This situation may lead to the members having same vendor preference coming together to form a coalition and trying to influence the other members in the buying center to change their opinion. It may be noted here that the valence related to vendor choices and their suitability as per organizational norms, being what it is, their change from an original position may engender both the positive as well as negative arousal contingent on choices in both conditions. This may occur as soon as there is a conflict between choices dictated by two situations or consideration of two conditions. One might see a further alignment when social elements such as group dynamics of leadership, combined with interpersonal issues, leads to a further change in position. The change itself is possibly configured on the basis of a greater total positive valence in changing position than otherwise. Hence one expects that again a conflict ridden change may arouse further negative emotions, but also leads to positive arousal due to the alignment (or re-alignment) with other buying center members that create more positive feelings on social account.

The behavioural intention of the buying centre members at the end depends upon both positive and negative anticipated emotions as discussed above. The anticipated emotions are also influenced due to social alignment as per normative aspects of the psychological contract with the organization as well as with each buying centre member. Both positive and negative anticipated emotions will be formed during this process and the final concurrence around the buying centre leader's opinion may be based on this aspect. It is quite possible that even if an individual initially had a negative feeling due to original choice not being accepted, might now have a positive feeling due to the fact that psychological/ social contracts which forced him to change his decision, also helped him to be in harmony with the organization/ other members within the organization, leading to a win-win situation for all.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper adds to existing literature on industrial buying decisions and explores the joint decision making process from an experiential viewpoint and proposes a three phase decision framework primarily guided by anticipated emotions. It also proposes that anticipated emotions of purchase and non-purchase are relevant as long as the decision is being taken at an individual level. As soon as the buying center members interact to take a joint decision, the focus shifts to interpersonal relationships and anticipated emotions of alignment or non-alignment with the group leader and other members of the team. The discussions also stress on the important role of emergent leader in a buying center as he can influence individual behavioral intent of buying center members and align them towards a common goal. As seen from the various scenarios depicted, the best situation of positive emotional experience by all buying center members is when their individual behavioral intent is in line with the final decision. All other situations where persuasion or bargaining is used to force one of the members to change his decision lead to negative emotions in the group.

MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper helps marketers understand the role of customer experience in B2B decision making and the need to move from a relationship oriented model to experiential oriented model in organizational buying. It gives an insight into the decision making process and social exchanges which take place in the buying center for final decision. Marketers need to identify the hierarchical/ emergent leader in the group so as to influence his/ her decisions.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

Future research may be directed towards further exploring this concept and conducting empirical studies to validate the model. The psychological need for consensus in a buying center along with the individual biases creates an illusion of unanimity by suppressing disagreements between the buying center members, rationalizing their shared beliefs, maintaining a preferred position aligned with the hierarchical/ emergent leadership (Tellefsen, 2006) in the group in spite of contradictory information as well as the protective shield created due to shared responsibility (Ajzen, 1996). The effectiveness of such decisions originating from group think may also be explored further and validated in an organizational buying scenario.

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