

The Parent as Consumer: A Conceptual Review of the Consumer Portion of the Proposed Consumer-Producer Choice Impact Diagram

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Abstract

This article, as part of a series, expounds on only the consumer portion of the Consumer-Producer Choice Impact model. The Consumer-Producer Choice Impact model was earlier published in *Essays in Education*, with the title, “The Mechanics of Microeconomic Choice: A school Option Perspective.” While the primary focus of that article was geared towards the Consumer-Producer Choice Impact model as a whole, and in a microeconomic sense, a conceptual review on a portion of that model, consumer section, is bound to expound on the general view of who the consumer really is.

Introduction

The concept behind the postulation of the Consumer-Producer Choice Impact model, relies heavily on the fact that we all exist in an economic environment. If this premise is worth its onion, then, with significant certitude, it is not far-fetched, as it is obvious, to assert that resources available to satisfy each individual and unlimited wants, are limited. Udechukwu (2003) notes, “Human wants, especially those of the consumers, are insatiable and remain infinite or unlimited” (p. 4). It is not difficult at this point to imagine the economic dissonance that might exist in individuals who try to satisfy such wants at all cost.

Because it is largely assumed that individuals and society at large are more rational than they are not, they act to diminish this dissonance essentially, in two ways. They do so, either individually or collectively, by searching for alternatives to satisfy those needs. The other option, which leads to a self-destructive path, is acquisition of resources through foul means, by going against established social norms. Stealing, cheating, or any imaginable rogue behavior are not uncommon in these instances.

Since education continues to be perceived as a public good, there is an inherent resistance to eliminate any economic foundations on which it currently exists (Harvey, 1996). Yet, we see that the consumer’s desire to push for greater school choice and performance remains largely undiminished. The alternative for the consumer based on their unlimited wants, which is greater school choice, and the availability of limited resources in the system, is to search for alternatives (Udechukwu, 2003). The public and

collective nature of education, negates the possibility that consumers will satisfy these unlimited wants through activities associated with rogue behaviors.

It is clear that education remains a public good in the public domain but is influenced by economic forces, because we exist in an economic environment, where resources are limited, wants are unlimited, and the only viable option to mediate this dissonance is to seek alternatives in satisfying such wants. While the consumer has remained the area of focus so far, the remainder of this conceptual review will focus on defining who the consumer really is. Below is the chart for the Consumer-Producer Choice Impact Diagram.

Figure 1.
Proposed Consumer-Producer Choice Impact Diagram

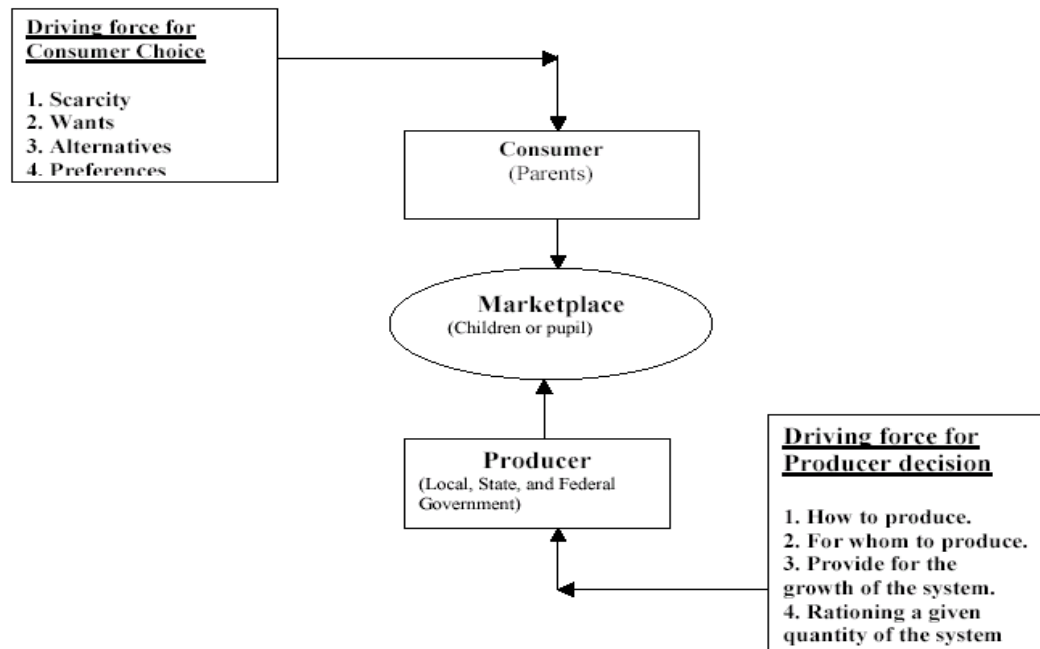


Figure 1. Proposed Consumer-Producer Choice Impact Diagram. Source: *Essays in Education* (Udechukwu, 2003).

Who is the Consumer?

There is a generally held belief that the consumer is whoever is legally responsible for the child up to 16 years of age, or in some cases 18 (Harvey, 1996; Udechukwu, 2003). It is further argued whether parents, who make educational decisions on behalf of their wards and children, should be labeled either customers or a clients (Harvey, 1996). The argument for using the term client for the parents is hinged on the

consumption of education as a long-term service, whereas the label as customers is hinged on consumption of education as a good and for only brief periods (Harvey, 1996). These classifications, appears to be of limited relevance, given the huge economic implications of a faltering K1 –K12 education system. Much of this type of classification emanates from a marketing perspective, which is drawn on while extending this review.

A rather unique approach to classifying consumers is that suggested by Goldsmith et al. (2003), “consumer innovator” and “market haven.” Consumer innovators are those (who wish to learn about and own the newest products.” (Goldsmith, et al., 2003). The authors note the well-versed nature of these consumers and their insensitive and heavy-use of the product. The market haven consumers, they suggest, “have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other aspects of the market place” (Fieck & Price, 1987; Goldsmith, et al., 2003).

While Goldsmith, et al. (2003) claims that there is no clear consensus on the distinctions between the two classifications except for their interest in and involvement in the market place. Goldsmith, et al (2003) provided a comparative chart for consumer innovators, when conceptualized through seven constructs on the same level as market havens.

Constructs of interest	Innovativeness	Market Mavenism
Information and Knowledge	Knowledgeable about specific product categories	Wide variety of market information; information seekers
Opinion Leadership	Act of opinion leaders for new products	Act as opinion leaders for many aspects of the market place
Search behavior	Exposed to a variety of information sources	Exposed to a variety of information sources
Involvement	Involved in the market place; especially new product	Involved in many aspects of the market place.
Promotion	Interested in information heavy or centrally processed communications	Heavy users of coupons; shopping lists, grocery budgets and ads
Brand awareness	Aware of new brands in specific product fields	Aware of new brands in many fields
Assertiveness	No reason to expect an assertive style of shopping and buying	More assertive than other consumers
Value Conscious	More interested in newness than price; not bargain conscious	More value conscious than other consumers; seek bargain prices
Fashion Consciousness	Fashion innovators are fashion conscious	Market Havens are not fashion conscious

Figure 2. Consumer Innovativeness and Market Mavenism Compared. Source: Goldsmith et al., 2003.

Much of this classification endears itself to how consumers use available information associated with the product or good of concern. Udechukwu (2003) had pointed out the importance of information for consumers in the Consumer-Producer Choice Impact model of school choice. What is clear is how one set of consumers use information on a general basis for specific products, while the other group uses the same information on a specific basis for a wide variety of products.

In line with education, it may be that because of the availability of various and sophisticated feeds of information, particularly, the Internet, consumers use such information in various innovative ways. The types of consumer classification, just noted, may be more relevant in clarifying the drive of parents towards school choice than the argument for or against the classification of parents as either clients or consumers.

Based on what is known and the emphasis on innovation on school choice, it appears, consumer innovators currently dominate the education system. These set of consumers, appear to be knowledgeable about specific school choices and act as opinion leaders for new school choices, sometimes with insufficient information in determining the effectiveness and consequence of such school choices on their wards or market. These consumers are likely to be heavily involved in the school choice process and saturated with more information than might be expected. These consumer innovators are also well aware of new developments in school choices and are more likely to influence the education system in an innovative direction.

However, these discussions do not entirely provide solace for consumers in general because of their insatiable quest for information related to school choice. In a related article, Mick, et al. (2004), notes that the ever increasing amount of buying, new products, brands, brand extensions, in developed economies all can lead to consumer hyperchoice. The authors note the relevance of hyperchoice phenomenon to information overload (Mick, et al., 2004). Much of the research on information overload has been attributed to single decision processes. Mick, et al. (2004) adds that, “empirical results showed that increasing the information load above a threshold led to choice processes based on simplifying rules, which produced lower quality choice outcomes relative to a normative standard. Additionally, information overload had detrimental effects on consumer’s psychological states, including increased confusion and cognitive strain, as well as other lower decision satisfaction” (p. 208).

The authors reported that Schwartz (2002) and Carmon et al. (2003) demonstrated that people who continually pursued the very best options, while thinking elaborately in doing so, had lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, and less comfort and satisfaction with their product choices (Mick et al., 2004). Judgementalism, diminishment of mindfulness and attention control, impatience and incivility, are further consequences hyperchoice on the consumer (Mick et al., 2004).

Consequently, Dhar (1997) had earlier concluded in a research on choice set effect that “expanding the choice set by adding an attractive alternative increased the preference for the no-choice option” (p. 228). This implies that with information overload

and increased choices, consumers are likely to revert back to the no-choice option, which represents the current status quo for many public schools. Dhar (1997) further adds that, “The decision to look for other brands or to seek more information was generally made only if the available alternatives did not allow for a compelling basis for choice” (p. 228).

Discussions

It is unlikely that the last of innovative alternatives to school choice has yet been borne by the education system. The explosion of information and innovation will counter-intuitively be the valve shutter for any stresses the education system experiences as a result of impacts emanating from the expansion of school choices. This may be so because economic systems always shoot for an equilibrium between the producer and the consumer, validated by the market (Udechukwu, 2003). Excesses which create imbalances on any side is counterbalanced by lags on the other. This means, as the consumer seeks more alternatives, the government is likely to respond by encouraging such alternatives. On the other hand, as the consumer experiences further confusion from an explosion of innovation and information, they are likely to withdraw back to the public school system, and the government, in response to that imbalance, would likely focus on public schools in innovative ways rather than encouraging the expansion of further school choices.

As another example, the manufacturers of say, Sara Lee bread, must maintain a strong market vigilance for its product given that alternatives to its products abound. Sara Lee could not sustain an indefinite production of its bread while a decline in the consumption of its bread is evident. Rather, Sara Lee would be well-advised to continue to provide its customers with other alternatives at great value or alternately, it can reduce its current production, given that its customers are armed with significant information on the alternatives in the environment. Given this explanation, education which is perceived as a public good, transformed by school choice, driven by consumers armed with relevant information, and supported by one manufacturer, the government, the current alternative for the government is to continue providing incentives to expand the school choice.

Nonetheless, every system will yield to an equilibrium based on the activities of the parties concerned in that system. The expansion of school choice cannot continue indefinitely. However, the very existence of school choice is vital to the health of the education system. The Consumer-Producer Choice Impact diagram does not suggest in any way that any component of the school choice system is more important than the other. Rather, it suggests that each component will move to create an equilibrium with the next component of the system, as it relates to school choices. Consumers are one of the important components of the education process. Hence, the focus on the consumer in this article.

Conclusion

This article was designed as a continuation of the earlier published article. It has also illustrated a different classification for consumers in the education system. Unlike

previous models that classified parents as either consumers or clients, it was felt that when consumers were perceived as a homogenous group, they are either consumer innovators or market havens. The article also noted the impediments and consequences that may result for over-exuberant consumers driving the innovative practices in the education system. It also illustrates the equilibrium that must inevitably exist in the economic framework of the education system. It finally acknowledges that education is likely to remain a product of public domain with significant influences from economic quarters.

Finally, it is likely that with increasing demands for greater school choice, consumers may begin to experience the no-choice option. Thus, leading consumers back to the public school system as we know it. This process by itself reflects the economic equilibrium that microeconomics delivers to our education system.

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