



Consumer Attitude in the Context of Private Education Services

Mădălin Lucian Cerceloiu¹ 
Valentina Iuliana Diaconu² 

Received: July 19, 2021
Accepted: November 15, 2021
Published: April 12, 2022

Keywords:

Attitude;
Consumer behavior;
Private education services;
Pre-university education;
Qualitative research



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission.

Abstract: *The paper presents an analysis of consumer attitudes regarding private pre-university education services and provides a view of consumer behavior with the use of the three components of attitude: affective component, cognitive component and conative component. The objective of this analysis was to study and identify visible and less visible attitudes regarding the use of private education services. Attitude is one of the essential variables of behavior that can influence the buyer's decision when they want to purchase a product or a service. The qualitative research that has been conducted in order to investigate the subject regarding attitude has revealed that attitude is closely linked to financial elements, distribution, placement, advertising or social pressure. Children's education is a very important subject for both parents and future parents and thus a series of particularities can be extracted from the relations that form between attitude and perception, attitude and learning, attitude and motivation and attitude and effective behavior. Attitude represents a state of mental promptitude, organized through experience, that exercises a dynamic influence on the response of the individual. Attitude can have a positive direction or a negative direction; it can have low or high intensity and can be of many types.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Political, economical, cultural and sanitary changes in the digital era have transformed the consumer into a more social being that constantly desires self-improvement and to remain in contact with their ingroup. Individuals transform the economy and become more and more aware of their impact on the environment, choosing in many cases to curb their consumption and purchasing items that are of a higher quality and that are more durable. In the case of education services, consumers have become more and more informed when it comes to new trends, so they can form a clear view before taking any buying decision.

An individual's consumption of a product or a service is not a fixed attribute and can go through change over time due to personal or professional growth. Consumption has become essential in people's current activities, discussions about a society of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970) emerged as early as the 1970s with a focus on the negative effects that it has on the individuals, such as obesity, stress or the negative effects that the society of consumption has on the environment through pollution and global warming. Modern society offers individuals the possibility to choose their own roles to pursue along their lives and postmodern society places the individuals within a social dimension that allows them to delimit their tangible reality (Perri, 2010).

Cultural, economical, political and technological changes, as well as shifts within the online medium, have contributed to the change in actual consumption behavior. The emergence of a socio-economical or sanitary crisis can limit or change the consumption pattern at any time, both from the perspective of the consumer and the economic agent. For example, with the start

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies Piata Romana nr. 6, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania

² Bucharest University of Economic Studies Piata Romana nr. 6, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania

of the global pandemic, people shifted toward safer environments with distribution channels adapted to the online medium. Thus, the need for wide distribution and multiple methods of payment or delivery have determined the appearance of numerous online activities that are easy to access by users.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20) were among the first to analyze attitude as a useful instrument in the study of cultural, economical and political changes. Allport (1935), Thurstone (1928) and others have elaborated procedures for the measurement of attitude in relation to changes in public opinions or the delimitation of social classes. Some authors (Krech et al., 1962) underline the fact that attitude represents a fundamental psychological link between a person's capacity to perceive a stimulus and to learn while adapting to a complex social environment.

Rosnov and Robinson (1967) considered that attitude is an attribute in organizing feelings, beliefs and predispositions. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined attitude as a learned predisposition to responding favorably or unfavorably to a situation or a certain object. In a psycho-sociological approach, Allport (1935) defines attitude as a mental state that is organized through the accumulation of experiences that influence the response or future action of an individual.

According to Murphy (1931), attitude can be established in accord with an object or against it, while Baldwin (1934) considers that attitude can be available for the attention or action of a defined consumption pattern. According to Warren (1934), the mental disposition specific to input type experiences through which routine is modified is considered attitude. Cantril (1932) underlines the fact that an attitude represents a semi-permanent state of preparedness of thought that predisposes an individual to react in a certain way to a given stimulus, good or situation. Individuals tend to have negative attitudes toward different nationalities.

LaPierre (1934) has demonstrated through an empirical study conducted from 1930 to 1932 that 92% of the American population had a negative attitude toward other cultures when it came to offering housing services, preferring to maintain their accommodations vacant and thus earning no income. Petrof (1988) states that attitudes determine the trajectory to which the organism will react in a certain way to new situation or different stimuli. Attitude is a complex concept that refers to the individual's behavior. It can be defined through 4 components (Mendras, 2001): attitude as a deductive variable, attitude that forms under a tendency, attitude in relation with emotions and personal beliefs, attitude as an external influence. Attitude has been integrated into consumer behavior within the model developed by Nicosia (1966), where he placed attitude as a key-component through the perspective of its influence over purchasing alternatives while leading to the purchase decision, but also having a role in the emergence of motivation. The integration and interpretation of attitude at a consumer behavior level were also done by Howard and Sheth (1969), the authors considering that attitude was a direct result of a predisposition, or a response-variable. Attitude is also present in the EKB model developed by Engel, Kolat and Blackwell (1968), where it is involved in the purchase decision within consumer behavior. Attitude is closely related to objects, people or beliefs and can have an initial motivational construct.

Through social interaction people can develop either a positive or a negative attitude, which depends very much on the ensemble of experiences and knowledge that the person possesses (Tassinari, Orr, Wolford, Napps, & Lanzetta, 1984; Englis & Lanzetta, 1989). Some authors

(Solomon, 2012) have defined attitudes based on three components: cognitive, affective and conative, and have used the hierarchy of effects to characterize the types of attitudes that are formed. The cognitive dimension contains the person's value system, perceptions and stereotypes regarding the object of the attitude. The affective component of social attitude underlines the emotional aspect of attitude, also being a component that is resistant to change. The conative, or behavioral component indicates the tendency to react in a certain way to the attitudinal object or the way in which the individual states he will act.

Cătoiu and Teodorescu (2004) state that attitude resides within a system of dynamic relations that result in consumer behavior. An attitude can summarize positive or negative evaluations, emotional reactions and predispositions regarding an object or an idea (Kotler, Dubois, & Manceau, 2003). The attitude of individuals can be inherited, at least partially, through genetic transmission from parents (Olson, Vernon, Harris, & Jang, 2001), can be learned through direct or indirect experiences (De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001), can be learned from the media (Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2000; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003) or through interactions with other people (Poteat, 2007).

3. ATTITUDE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Attitudes that are formed from cognitive, affective and conative components can influence the decision process in the purchase of products and services. Although the majority of attitudes are determined by feelings, values, knowledge and experience, some of them are based more on emotions, others on behaviors or more on values (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). In the case of the consumption of private education services, attitude is influenced by several variables that can be directly observed and by some that are less evident. An important aspect is illustrated by the desire to form and develop a pupil so that they benefit from a better future or an improved professional career in order to attain a greater social standing or by the fact that the education services that are provided by the state cannot cover the needs of the consumer.

Attitude is closely linked to learning, especially through the perspective of the user's education and when it comes to the consumer of educational services, regardless of them being provided by the state or private companies. Numerous studies regarding attitudes have shown the link between competency and beliefs (Mantley-Bromley, 1995), but also the influence that culture has (Horwitz, 1999). For example, in the case of learning a new foreign language, the student's attitude is based on primary factors that can influence the success or lack of success in achieving their goal. Also in the context of learning, Victori and Lockhart (1995) define personal values as being "general assumptions that individuals hold regarding their own self, regarding factors that affect or aid learning, but also about the nature of learning a new subject". Horwitz (1988) claims that knowledge of preconceptions or values of students regarding a new subject can help teachers better understand "expectations, motivation, success but also satisfaction when it comes to their course". Thus, this method can also be adjusted for education services in order to better facilitate the learning of a new ability, but also to lessen the manifestation of possible negative attitudes.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to understand and study the subject of attitude, qualitative research has been conducted in the form of 32 in-depth interviews that took place from November 2017 to January 2018. The selected respondents were recruited by using a selection questionnaire designed by the author,

carried out at fairs and expos related to education and education-adjacent subjects that took place in Bucharest. The participants were males and females between 20 and 59 years of age, that were parents or belonged to families where there are children present, but also people who have, or have not used private education services. The 32 individual interviews were divided into 4 age intervals: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59. Each group comprised of both men and women. The first two groups in which the individual interviews were conducted were comprised of: men and women with different occupations, medium and above medium income, medium or superior educational levels and who were users or non-users of private pre-university education services, but the respondents had to have children within their household. The age of the first two groups were between 20 and 39 years of age, represented by individuals who were at the incipient stage of their career and who were in the stages of starting their own family, or people who already had a degree of financial, emotional and social stability. The last two groups were comprised of men and women who were users or non-users of private pre-university education services, who had children within their household, individuals who have a relatively good financial situation and a certain social status, medium or high degrees of education and who were in the 40 to 59 age bracket.

The respondents belonged to families in which the head of the household had various occupations and professions, from all social classes: A, B, C1, C2 and D, with medium or above medium incomes and medium or above medium education level. Each interview lasted between 80 to 100 minutes. The interview guide sought to investigate in a structured manner many aspects regarding both the consumer of private education services and their behavior, investigating aspects pertaining perception, motivation, personality, learning and effective behavior, but maintaining a particular focus on aspects regarding attitude. The objectives of the qualitative study were determined by the following elements relating to private pre-university education: identifying the main attributes that consumers consider in their decision making process; identifying relations between attributes and consumer attitude; identifying the dynamic between consumer attitude regarding private pre-university education and the purchase of this type of services; establishing the way in which attitude influences consumer behavior; establishing the influence that demographic, economic, marketing mix or situational factors have on attitude; determining the influence that exogenous factors have and establishing the way in which attitude is influenced by perception, learning, motivation and effective behavior.

5. THE RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REGARDING THE ATTITUDE TOWARD PRIVATE PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SERVICES

Respondents that took part in the individual discussions had different jobs ranging from product managers to sales representatives or medics and most of them had at least a bachelor's degree or were on their way to obtaining one. Also, a significant part of them have described their lifestyle as active and their social status to be well defined. Almost none of the respondents had used private pre-university education services directly; only one respondent had been enrolled during childhood at a private kindergarten and a private after-school organization. Thus, respondents were grouped into individuals that had purchased this type of services or respondents who have directly used this type of services and respondents that have not used private education services. It is to be noted that even as early as the selection questionnaire was conducted, respondents that participated in the study had a mostly positive attitude toward private pre-university education services.

More than half of the respondents said that purchasing private pre-university education services does not indicate snobbism or elitism, a fact that underlines a positive perception toward these

type of services. Private education services were summarized as: “Kindergarten, school or high school where you have to pay a fee. A small number of students or children in one class, unlike what the state provides.” (Respondent R7), or “an improvement over the quality provided by the education services offered by the state.” (Respondent R9).

When they were asked to explain what it is that makes an education service be considered good, respondents offered answers such as: “A good education service can be defined as: structured education plan, highly trained personnel and the presence of the materials that are necessary for activities.” (Respondent R4) or “Services that are provided in an environment that has more to offer and by people who take more interest in teaching and preparing your child.” (Respondent R30). A series of keywords were noted following the answers provided by the respondents, words that kept being used when the respondents found themselves describing what high quality services meant to them. Thus, the words that were most frequently used were: competency and the behavior of teaching and administrative personnel, the location of the educational institution where the services are offered, the educational materials that are used, the building itself, the conditions under which the curricular or extracurricular activities and the additional services take place. Another aspect that was frequently mentioned by the participants of the qualitative study regarded the fact that they derive a sense of superior quality from the way in which the educational institution communicates with the parents. Generally, people offer a high level of importance to education services and consider them on par with health or safety and security services.

Unlike the other two types of services, education employs a higher degree of implication from parents, grandparents, tutors and children. Another subject that was broached during the study was the perception that other individuals might have regarding people who use private education services. In Romania, the education system provided by the state continues to inspire confidence and is capable to form the base for future development of the preschooler, fact that can determine a slightly negative attitude toward people who choose private education services. It must be stated that this particular aspect can be observed when it comes to segments of the population with average or below average income, households that are preoccupied with elements found in Maslow’s pyramid at base levels. Although there were cases in which respondents expressed a slight fear of being judged by others when it came to purchasing private education services, they considered that this purchase was the only way of surpassing their present condition and were willing to support their children in this endeavor: “People could judge them [people who purchase private education service]. People could say that they’re spoiling their children or that they’re throwing away money.” (Respondent R6) or “People shouldn’t judge, but unfortunately in this country of ours, if you have the means to invest in your children, it would seem that you’re judged by others.” (Respondent R17).

Furthermore, when it came to the financial aspect of education services, respondents were of the opinion that there are sufficient levels of fees from which to choose in accordance with their budget. “I have a very positive opinion regarding private schools. They invest in their teaching capacities. Classes and groups are not as overcrowded as in the state-run system. Educators and teachers are more financially motivated than in the state system and everything is overall a better alternative than what the state can provide.” (Respondent R8). The projective technique is known as the Martian technique during the in-depth discussions, during which respondents were presented with a series of situations. For example, the interviewer took the role of a person who has no information whatsoever about private education services and wanted to find out as much information as possible regarding these services. The questions that were received by

respondents regarded the segment that these services are intended for, the particularities that characterize these services, the main benefits that derive from using the services but also the differences between the public education sector and the private sector. The Martian technique offered a multitude of information regarding the respondents' attitude toward private pre-university education services by offering them the opportunity to be as explicit as they could and to use as a reference point their own experiences and needs. Thus, the information gathered from respondents could constitute a basis for elaborating the profile for a consumer or a non-consumer of private pre-university education services.

The attitudes that were investigated throughout the qualitative study regarding private pre-university education were predominantly favorable, and the most used words that were extracted from the opinions of the respondents were: modern, personalization, activities, organization, uniforms, amenities, meal, healthy, relaxation, culture or memories. These words show that values and experiences are tightly linked with the emotional side of the individual, as respondents seem to believe that the path to educational development for a student is facilitated by an environment that not only offers material amenities but also offers pleasant memories, relaxation and freedom granted by personalization.



Figure 1. Cloud diagram of the words associated with the images shown during the collage exercise used as a projective technique during the interviews

Source: Created by the authors

Regardless of the participants in the study had children within their household or not, they seemed to offer a high degree of importance to private education services and tend to compare them to medical services, another type of service that are always present during the life and development of individuals. The qualitative study has identified a set of attitudes that can influence the behavior of consumers:

- attitude toward private pre-university education services, which seems to be mostly positive;
- attitude toward the location in which the private pre-university education services are offered, whether it is the building itself or the amenities;
- attitude toward the personnel that works in private pre-university education services;
- attitude toward the price of private pre-university education services;
- attitude toward the advertising of private pre-university education services.

Following the analysis of the attitudes that were identified during the in-depth interviews a series of elements pertaining consumer behavior was found, elements that can both influence attitude and be influenced by attitude: demographic factors, economic factors, factors specific to the marketing mix, situational factors, the family, the ingroup, the reference group, social class, perception, learning, motivation, effective behavior and the purchase decision process.

6. LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSION

The private education sector will remain dynamic and will continue to develop, both in Romania and on an international level, in order to deal with the needs and desires of consumers both in the present and in the future but to also identify and integrate modern, sustainable and equitable teaching solutions. Consumer attitude seems to be positive when it comes to the use of private pre-university education services, thus signaling the possibility of an increase in consumers that desire a higher standard of living for their children. The limitations for the study were the use of a relatively small population from which this first set of information was gathered for the qualitative study. Another constraint was the fact that elements of social pressure felt by the participants could not be extracted, requiring at least another study.

REFERENCES

- Allport, G. (1935). *Handbook of social psychology*. Worcester: MA: Clark University Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (1970). *La société de consommation*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Cantril, H. (1932). *General and specific attitudes*. Albany, New York: Psychological review Company.
- Cătoi, I., & Teodorescu, N. (2004). *Comportamentul Consumatorului*. București: Editura Uranus.
- De Houwer, J., Thomas, S., & Baeyens, F. (2001). Association learning of likes and dislikes: A review of 25 years of research on human evaluative conditioning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(6), 853–869.
- Engel, J., Kollat, D., & Blackwell, R. (1968). *Consumer Behavior* (1st Edition ed.). New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.
- Englis, B. G., & Lanzetta, J. T. (1989). Expectations of Cooperation and Competition and Their Effects on Observers' Vicarious Emotional Responses. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(4), 543-554.
- Fishbein, M. (1966). The relationship between beliefs, attitudes and behavior. In S. Feldman, *Cognitive consistency: Motivational antecedents and behavioral consequents* (pp. 199-223). New York: Academic Press.
- Hargreaves, D., & Tiggemann, M. (2003). Longer-Term Implications of Responsiveness to 'Thin-Ideal' Television: Support for a Cumulative Hypothesis of Body Image Disturbance? *European Eating Disorders Review*, 11(6), 465–477.
- Hawkins, D. I., & Mothersbaugh, D. L. (2010). *Consumer Behavior Building Marketing Strategy*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The Beliefs about Language Learning of Beginning University Foreign Language Students. *Modern Language Journal*, 72, 283-294.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1999). Cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: a review of BALLI studies. *System*, 27(4), 557-578.
- Howard, J. A., & Sheth, J. N. (1969). *The Theory of Buyer Behavior*. New York: Wiley.
- Kotler, P., Dubois, B., & Manceau, D. (2003). *Marketing management* (11th ed.). Paris: Pearson Education France.

- Krech, D. C. (1962). *Individual in Society. A textbook of Social Psychology*. Tokyo: McGraw-Hill.
- LaPiere, R. T. (1934). Attitudes vs. actions. *Soc Forces*, XIII, 230-237.
- Levina, M., Waldo, C. R., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (2000). We're here, we're queer, we're on TV: The effects of visual media on heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30(4), 738–758.
- Olson, J. M., Vernon, P. A., Harris, J. A., & Jang, K. L. (2001). The heritability of attitudes: A study of twins. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(6), 845–860.
- Perri, P. (2010). *Quatre idées pour renforcer le pouvoir d'achat*. Paris: La Fondation pour l'innovation politique.
- Petrof, J. V. (1988). *Comportement Du Consommateur Et Marketing*. Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval
- Poteat, V. P. (2007). Peer Group Socialization of Homophobic Attitudes and Behavior During Adolescence. *Child Development*, 78(6), 1830 – 1842.
- Mantley-Bromley, C. (1995). Positive attitudes and realistic beliefs: A link to proficiency. *Modern Language Journal*, 79, 372-386.
- Mendras, H. (2001). Le lien social en Amérique et en Europe. *Revue de l'OFCE*(76), 179-187.
- Murphy, G., & Murphy, L. B. (1931). *Experimental Social Psychology*. New York: Harper Brothers.
- Nicosia, F. M. (1966). *Consumer Decision Processes*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Rosnow, R. L., & Robinson, E. J. (1967). *Experiments in persuasion*. New York: Academic Press.
- Solomon, M. R. (2012). *Consumer Behaviour: Buying, Having and Being* (10th Edition ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Tassinari, L., Orr, S., Wolford, G., Napps, S., & Lanzetta, J. (1984). The Role of Awareness in Affective Information Processing: An Exploration of the Zajonc Hypothesis. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 22(4), 89–92.
- Thomas, W. I., & Znaniecki, F. (1918-20). *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Boston: R.G. Badger.
- Thurstone, L. L. (1928). Attitudes can be measured. *American Journal of Sociology* (33), 529-54.
- Victori, M., & Lockhart, W. (1995). Enhancing Metacognition in Self-Directed Language Learning. *System*, 23(2), 223-234.