

Cognitive Dissonance: An Analytical Review of Its Concept, Causes and Effects

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Abstract

Cognitive dissonance is one of the most influential concepts in social psychology. It refers to a psychological discomfort when individuals encounter inconsistency among their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. The theory of cognitive dissonance was introduced by Leon Festinger in 1957. It proposes that people are motivated to reduce psychological discomfort arising from conflicting cognitions and restore a sense of internal consistency. Over the years, this concept has been studied across diverse areas and disciplines including decision-making, consumer behaviour, health psychology, education and interpersonal relationships. The present paper aims to provide an analytical review of cognitive dissonance by examining its conceptual foundations, theoretical assumptions, causes and psychological and behavioural effects. The paper also shows how cognitive inconsistency appears and how people use different strategies to reduce dissonance. These strategies include changing attitudes, modifying behaviours and restructuring thoughts. This review paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals manage psychological inconsistency and maintain cognitive balance in a complicated social environment.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance, causes, effects, attitude change, decision-making, psychological discomfort, behavioural change.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings constantly interpret, evaluate and respond to their environment through complex cognitive processes. A key part of these processes is the desire to keep beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours consistent. People usually prefer harmony between what they believe and how they act. However, daily experiences often lead to situations where thoughts and actions do not match and it may produce psychological discomfort. This psychological phenomenon is known as cognitive dissonance (**Festinger, 1957**).

The concept of cognitive dissonance was formally introduced by Leon Festinger through his work “*A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*”. Festinger (1957) proposed that cognition refers to an individual’s knowledge, beliefs or opinions about oneself, one’s behaviour or the surrounding environment (**Cooper, 2007**). According to the theory when two or more cognitions are psychologically inconsistent a state of dissonance occurs. This state creates an unpleasant psychological tension that motivates individuals to reduce the inconsistency and achieve cognitive harmony. Study conducted by **Festinger and Carlsmith (1959)** showed that individuals try to modify their attitudes when experiencing inconsistency between their actions and beliefs. It has also been found that people often experience dissonance after making difficult decisions and they attempt to justify their decisions to restore psychological consistency (**Brehm, 1956**).

The concept of cognitive dissonance has been applied to several domains. It has been applied to consumer psychology, education, health, organizational settings and social relationships. **Hamza and Zakkariya (2014)** found that consumers may experience dissonance after purchasing an expensive product and try to justify their decision. It has also been seen that individuals may experience dissonance when their health-related behaviours conflict with their knowledge about risks (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**).

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Cognitive dissonance provides valuable insight into how individuals respond to conflicts between their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Since the introduction of cognitive dissonance theory, it has generated extensive empirical research. It has been applied to study various psychological processes. These include justification of decision, modification attitude and behavioural change (**Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**). The existing literature on cognitive dissonance shows different areas of application. It can be seen that many studies have been carried out on consumer decisions, health practices, social attitudes and interpersonal behaviour. These studies have emphasized on specific outcomes of dissonance rather than conceptual framework. Hence, this study seeks to examine the conceptual and theoretical foundations of cognitive dissonance while analysing the factors that contribute to its occurrence and the psychological and behavioural consequences that result from it.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the concept and theoretical foundations of cognitive dissonance.
2. To analyse the causes of cognitive dissonance and evaluate its psychological and behavioural effects.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper employed a qualitative research design. The paper exclusively relies on secondary data obtained from published scholarly literature, books, articles and journals. The literature search was conducted using major academic databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, SpringerLink and other recognised academic repositories.

CONCEPT OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological discomfort that arises when an individual holds two or more cognitions that are inconsistent with one another. Cognitions may include beliefs, attitudes, opinions, knowledge, or awareness of one's own behaviour. According to Festinger (1957), dissonance exists when there is a relationship of inconsistency between different cognitive elements, creating an uncomfortable psychological state that individuals are motivated to reduce. The concept is based on the assumption that individuals possess an inherent tendency toward cognitive consistency. When inconsistency occurs between beliefs and actions, individuals experience tension that encourages them to restore harmony through changes in cognition, behaviour or the interpretation of the situation (**Festinger, 1957**). Thus, cognitive dissonance is not merely the presence of conflicting thoughts but also involves a motivational process aimed at reducing psychological discomfort (**Cooper, 2007**). **Aronson (1969)** further explained cognitive dissonance from self-consistency perspective. He showed that dissonance becomes stronger when people perceive inconsistency between their behaviour and their self-concept (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**).

Development of The Concept

The foundation of cognitive dissonance theory has emerged from Festinger's observations of human behaviour and the way of respond by the people to conflicting information. It was observed that, before the theory has developed many psychological research has emphasized consistency and balance among attitudes and beliefs. **Festinger (1957)** proposed that inconsistency can become a motivating factor which influences human behaviour. The theory has gained significant attention after the classic study conducted by **Festinger and Carlsmith (1959)**. They examined how individuals respond when their actions conflict with their internal beliefs. In their experiment, participants who performed a boring task and were paid a small amount to describe it positively later reported more favourable attitudes toward the task compared to those who received a larger reward. The findings suggested that individuals experiencing greater inconsistency between their behaviour and beliefs may change their attitudes to reduce dissonance. The concept has since developed into a broad framework for understanding psychological processes related to decision-making, persuasion, motivation and behavioural change (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**). **Festinger (1957)** identified components involved in cognitive dissonance such as cognition, consonance and dissonance. Cognition refers to an individual's knowledge, beliefs, opinions, or awareness about themselves and their environment. These cognitive elements influence how individuals interpret situations and make decisions. Consonance occurs when two cognitive elements are consistent with each other. Dissonance occurs when cognitive elements conflict. This inconsistency creates psychological discomfort and motivates efforts to reduce the conflict.

Nature of Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance has several important characteristics. It creates psychological discomfort by producing an unpleasant emotional state that may involve feelings of tension, guilt, anxiety, or discomfort (**Elliot & Devine, 1994**). Cognitive dissonance can also be motivational in nature. Unlike simple disagreement or inconsistency, cognitive dissonance includes a motivational component. When it occurs, individuals actively attempt to reduce the discomfort created by inconsistency (**Festinger, 1957**). Another important feature of cognitive dissonance is that it influences attitude and behaviour of the individuals. It can lead individuals to modify their attitudes, change their behaviours, or reinterpret information to restore consistency (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**).

Basic Assumptions of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Festinger's (1957) theory is based on several fundamental assumptions. First, individuals strive for consistency among their cognitions. Second, inconsistency between cognitions creates psychological discomfort. Thirdly, he mentioned that psychological discomfort motivates individuals to engage in actions which helps to reduce dissonance. The level of dissonance depends upon factors such as importance of the conflicting cognitions, number of inconsistent elements and level of commitment to the decision or belief by the people. It may be observed that greater personal relevance and stronger commitment produce greater dissonance (**Festinger (1957)**).

Formation of Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance develops when individuals encounter situations where their thoughts, beliefs, or behaviours cannot be easily reconciled. Common situations that generate dissonance include difficult decisions, receiving contradictory information, acting against personal beliefs, and experiencing conflicts between values and actions. An individual may experience uncertainty after purchasing an expensive product whether the decision was correct or not. To reduce this discomfort, the person may focus on positive aspects of the chosen product while minimizing the advantages of alternatives. This process is known as post-decision dissonance (**Brehm, 1956**).

Reduction of Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger (1957) proposed several strategies through which individuals can reduce or eliminate dissonance. He stated that it can be reduced by changing behaviour. Individuals may modify their actions or change behaviour to make them consistent with their beliefs. Another way of dissonance reduction is to alter their beliefs to justify their behaviour or changing an environmental cognitive element through modifications to the corresponding environmental situation. Dissonance may also be reduced by adding new cognitions or introducing new information that supports their existing behaviour. Moreover, importance of inconsistency also plays a vital role. Individuals may minimize the significance of conflicting beliefs or actions to reduce discomfort.

Relevance of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Although the theory of cognitive dissonance was introduced by Leon Festinger more than 60 years ago (**Yahya & Sukmayadi, 2020**) this theory continues to influence psychological research because it explains important aspects of human decision-making, motivation and attitude change. Contemporary research demonstrates that cognitive dissonance remains relevant in understanding responses to misinformation, health decisions, consumer choices, and social attitudes (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**). The cognitive dissonance theory is significant because it explains how people sometimes change their beliefs and justify their actions to achieve psychological consistency.

CAUSES OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance can occur in various situations due to certain conditions. The following are some of the factors which represent major causes of cognitive dissonance.

➤ Conflict Between Beliefs and Behaviours

The most common cause of cognitive dissonance is the inconsistency between what individuals believe and how they behave. Individuals experience psychological discomfort when their actions contradict to their personal values, knowledge, attitudes and they become motivated to reduce the psychological inconsistency (**Festinger, 1957**).

➤ Decision-Making and Choice Between Alternatives

Decision-making is one of the major sources of cognitive dissonance. When individuals had to choose between two or more attractive alternatives than they may experience uncertainty about whether they have selected the correct option. This leading to post-decision dissonance (**Brehm, 1956**). This type of dissonance occurs because choosing one option requires a person to give up the benefits associated with the alternatives. Therefore, people commonly try to reduce this kind of discomfort by emphasizing the positive aspects of their chosen option and minimizing the value of rejected alternatives (**Festinger, 1957**).

➤ Forced Compliance

Forced compliance occurs when individuals behave in ways that are inconsistent with their beliefs due to external pressure or circumstances. **Festinger and Carlsmith (1959)** demonstrated that when individuals engage in behaviour that conflicts with their internal beliefs, they may experience dissonance and alter their attitudes to achieve consistency. The extent of attitude change depends on factors such as perceived choice and external justification. When external justification is insufficient, individuals are more likely to change their internal attitudes to reduce dissonance.

➤ Effort Justification

Effort justification refers to the tendency where people try to increase the value of an outcome. They try to increase value of those outcomes where they have given their significant effort, time and resources to achieve it. Study conducted by **Aronson and Mills (1959)** revealed that individuals who experience greater difficulty in achieving something often develop more positive evaluations of the outcome. This process reduces dissonance by allowing people to view their effort as meaningful and valuable.

➤ Exposure to Conflicting Information

People often experience cognitive dissonance when they encounter conflicting information because it challenges their existing beliefs and understanding (**Festinger, 1957**). In response, people may avoid information that contradicts their belief, dismiss the source of information, or reinterpret the information so that it supports their existing beliefs. These responses are particularly relevant in areas such as political opinions, health beliefs and social attitudes (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**).

EFFECTS OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

The effect of cognitive dissonance can be observed in various psychological, cognitive, behavioural and social domains. The psychological discomfort associated with inconsistency motivates individuals to engage in cognitive and behavioural adjustments.

➤ Psychological Effects

Cognitive dissonance produces psychological discomfort. This discomfort may appear in the form of anxiety, guilt, frustration or emotional distress (**Elliot & Devine, 1994**). The emotional discomfort associated with dissonance serves a motivational function by encouraging individuals to resolve inconsistency. However, persistent dissonance may contribute to psychological strain. This can occur when individuals repeatedly encounter conflicts between their values and actions.

➤ Attitude Change

Attitude change or attitude modification is one of the most important influences of cognitive dissonance. Studies showed that experience of inconsistency by the people may lead to attitude change to align with their behaviours or decisions (**Festinger, 1957**).

➤ Behavioural Change

Cognitive dissonance can motivate individuals to modify their behaviours to achieve consistency. When individuals recognize that their actions conflict with their beliefs, they may modify their behaviour to reduce psychological discomfort.

➤ Rationalization and Self-Justification

People often rationalize their behaviour by finding explanations that make their actions seem reasonable. This process of self-justification helps to protect their self-concept and reduces the discomfort that arises from inconsistency (**Aronson, 1969**). Although it can provide psychological support but may sometimes prevent people from recognizing errors.

➤ Effects on Decision-Making

Cognitive dissonance plays an important role in decision-making process. Rather than considering all available information equally, they often focus on evidence that reassures them they made the right choice and avoid information that raises doubts. This process is known as selective exposure which helps to reduce post-decision discomfort (**Festinger, 1957**). Research shows that customers may experience post-purchase dissonance and attempt to reinforce confidence in their purchase decisions by focusing on positive product features (**Sweeney, Hausknecht, & Soutar, 2000**).

➤ Social and Applied Effects

Cognitive dissonance influences behaviour in many areas of social life. In personal relationships, individuals may explain away harmful behaviours or hold on to beliefs even when evidence challenges them. At work, employees may experience psychological discomfort when organisational demands conflict with their personal values. In health psychology, researchers have used cognitive dissonance to encourage healthier behaviours by drawing attention to the inconsistency between what people value and how they actually behave (**Stone & Cooper, 2000**). Similarly, in educational setting cognitive dissonance contributes to conceptual change by prompting students to reflect on and revise misconceptions when they encounter evidence that is inconsistent with their existing knowledge.

The causes and effects of cognitive dissonance demonstrate that it is not merely a state of mental conflict but an active psychological process which influences perception, decision-making, attitudes and behaviours. Individuals continuously strive to maintain cognitive consistency and their responses to inconsistency shape many aspects of human experience (**Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**).

DISCUSSION

Cognitive dissonance is one of the most influential frameworks for explaining how individuals respond to inconsistency between their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. The analysis of existing literature shows that cognitive dissonance is not simply a cognitive conflict but a motivational process that influences how individuals interpret experiences, make decisions and regulate their behaviour.

The theoretical foundation proposed by Festinger (1957) emphasizes that individuals possess a fundamental desire for consistency among cognitive elements. When inconsistency occurs, psychological discomfort motivates individuals to restore balance through various strategies, including changing behaviour, modifying beliefs, adding supportive cognitions or reducing the importance of conflicting information. This principle provides an important explanation for why individuals often engage in self-justification and attitude adjustment after making decisions or performing actions that conflict with their beliefs.

The review of causes indicates that cognitive dissonance emerges in several important situations, including decision-making, forced compliance, effort investment and exposure to contradictory information. These situations demonstrate that dissonance is closely associated with personal commitment and the perceived importance of the conflicting cognitions. The stronger an individual's attachment to a belief or decision, the greater the psychological pressure to reduce inconsistency (**Festinger, 1957**).

The effects of cognitive dissonance further highlighted its influence on human behaviour. It showed that individuals may alter their attitudes, modify behaviours or reinterpret information to maintain cognitive consistency. While these processes can support psychological adjustment and decision confidence, they may also lead to biased information processing and resistance to contradictory evidence.

Contemporary research continues to demonstrate the relevance of cognitive dissonance in modern contexts. In consumer behaviour, it explains post-purchase justification and brand preferences. In health psychology, it provides insight into the challenges associated with changing unhealthy behaviours. In social contexts, it helps to explain why individuals maintain beliefs despite conflicting evidence (**Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019**). Overall, the literature suggests that cognitive dissonance helps to understand the relationship between cognition, emotion and behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable psychological state occurs when people experience conflicting feelings simultaneously (**Keng & Liao, 2009**). The present paper discussed about the conceptual foundations of cognitive dissonance, its theoretical assumptions, major causes and psychological and behavioural effects. The theory highlights that psychological discomfort encourages people for effort to resolution. The study also discussed that cognitive dissonance may arise from various sources such as conflicting beliefs, difficult decisions, forced compliance, effort justification and exposure to contradictory information. These experiences can influence attitudes, decision-making processes, emotional responses and behavioural choices. The theory provides a valuable insight into how individuals manage internal conflicts and adapt to different challenging situations. Therefore, cognitive dissonance is referred as an important theoretical framework for understanding human cognition and behaviour.

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