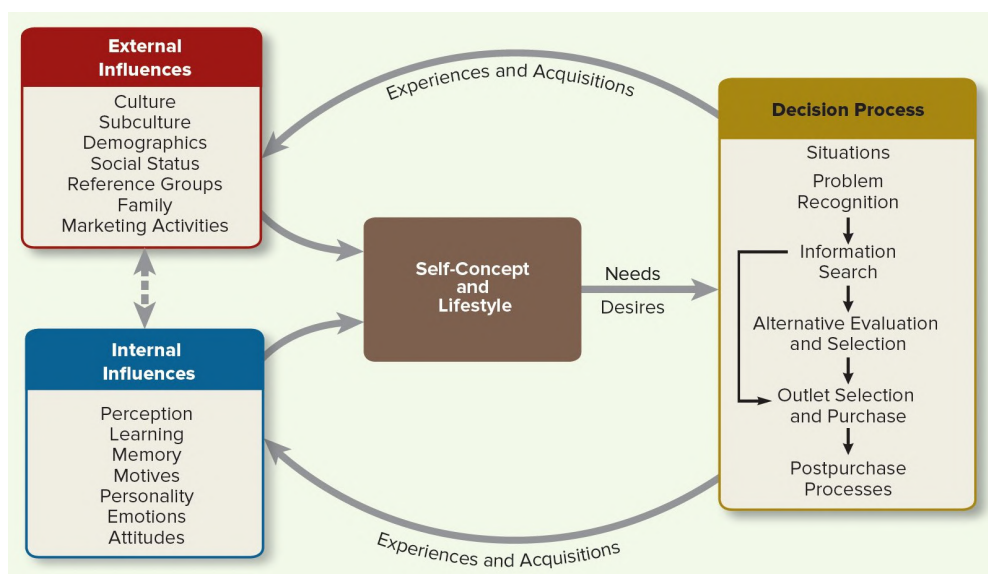


Situational Influences on Consumer Behavior

Imagine this: You're scrolling through Instagram late at night, stressed about finals, and suddenly you impulse-buy that overpriced energy drink on Amazon because it's 2 a.m. and you need caffeine now. Or picture you and your health conscious friend at a tailgate party, and you see your friend who is always counting calories, chowing down on chips and dip that she would never touch during a quiet study session at home. What's the difference? It's not just someone being "weird" — it's the situation. In consumer behavior, **situational influences are those sneaky factors** tied to a specific time and place that change how we shop, buy, use, or even toss products. **They don't come from who you are** deep down (your personality) or the product itself (like its price or brand), **but from the context around you.**

This chapter dives into why situations matter so much in marketing and everyday choices. We'll break it down into the basics, the four main types of situations, five key characteristics that shape them, special "ritual" scenarios, and how marketers cash in on all this. By the end, you'll see why that Las Vegas slogan — "What happens here, stays here" — isn't just catchy; it's a nod to how environments flip our behavior switches. Think of this as your guide to decoding why you might splurge on concert tickets but pinch pennies at the grocery store. Let's roll.



The Nature of Situational Influence

At its core, situational influence is “all those factors particular to a time and place that do not follow from a knowledge of the stable attributes of the consumer and the stimulus and that have an effect on current behavior.” Translation: It’s the vibe of the moment that makes you act out of character. Research shows we behave very differently depending on the scenario — sometimes wildly so.

Take Las Vegas as the ultimate example. The city’s whole marketing game is built on reinvention: Daytime you? Professional, cautious, maybe hitting a buffet. Nighttime Vegas you? Rolling dice at 3 a.m., dropping cash on neon-lit drinks. Ads like “Visit Las Vegas” play up this transformation, showing everyday folks turning into high-rollers under the city’s glow. It’s not that the people change; the situation does — lights, crowds, that electric “anything goes” energy.

Why does this matter for marketers? Because **ignoring situations means missing sales**. Brands that get it expand how and when people use their stuff. For instance, Daisy sour cream ads don’t just say “eat this with chips” — they show it in dinner parties, quick snacks, even fancy dips for date nights. Boom: **More usage situations = more sales**.

There are four key types of situations that marketers target:

1. **Communications Situation:** How and when you hear about a product. Think targeted ads popping up on your phone while scrolling social media — that’s situational timing.
2. **Purchase Situation:** The buying moment itself. Are you rushing through a campus convenience store pre-exam, or leisurely browsing Target on a weekend? Your picks change.

3. **Usage Situation:** When and how you actually use it. Coffee for a morning grind vs. an afternoon pick-me-up? Different brews, different moods.
4. **Disposition Situation:** What happens after — recycling, trashing, or donating. Eco-friendly vibes at a festival might make you save that water bottle; at home, it hits the bin.

These aren't random; they're levers for strategy. Marketers study them to match products to moments, turning "meh" into "must-have."

Situational Characteristics: The Five Dimensions That Shape Behavior

Situations aren't one-size-fits-all — they vary by five key characteristics (or dimensions) that tweak our choices. These are like sliders on a video game character: Adjust one, and the whole playstyle shifts. Understanding them helps explain why the same yogurt might feel indulgent at a brunch or boring in your dorm fridge.

1. Physical Surroundings

This is the "vibe" of the place — the sights, sounds, smells, and feels that scream (or whisper) "buy me." In retail, it's called *atmospherics* or *store atmosphere*, the total package of a shop's physical setup. For services like your campus gym or a coffee shop, it's *servicescape*.

Why care? *Atmospherics* mess with your brain's quality radar. Dim lights and soft jazz? Feels upscale, like you're at an upscale or luxurious bar. Bright fluorescent lights and chaos? Budget-bin alert. Colors play huge: Blues calm you for banking apps; reds rev you up for fast food. Aromas? Bakeries pump out fresh-bread smells to lure you in. Music tempo can speed up shopping (upbeat tracks = quicker carts) or slow it down (chill tunes = browsing bliss). And crowding? Too packed, and you bail; just right, and you linger.

Figure 13-2 (below) describes a typology: Lean environments (simple, functional — like a no-frills vending machine) vs. elaborate ones (think immersive theme parks). Marketers tweak these to match moods.

Physical Surroundings – Figure 13-2: Typology of Service Environments

Time Spent in Facility	Consumption Purpose		
	Utilitarian		Hedonic
Short [minutes]	Dry cleaner Bank	Fast food Hair salon	Facial Coffee at Starbucks
Moderate [hour(s)]	Medical appointment Legal consultation	Business dinner Exercise class	Theater Sporting event
Extended [day(s)]	Hospital Trade show	Conference hotel Training center	Cruise Resort

2. Social Surroundings

Who's around? Friends, strangers, influencers? Social vibes can make or break a buy. Solo shopping? You're practical. With your squad? Status symbols shine — suddenly that overpriced graphic tee “needs” to happen. At family dinner? Healthier picks win out. Marketers love this: Groups hanging out boost impulse buys, like group selfies sparking phone case sales.

3. Temporal Perspectives

Time's a tyrant. Temporal perspectives cover how deadlines, clocks, and seasons warp choices. **Limited time = limited search**; you're grabbing the first decent ramen packet. Time-rich? You comparison-shop like a pro.

Today's world amps this up. Dual-career families and single parents feel "time-starved." Nearly half of U.S. folks shop online for the 24/7 flex — anytime, anywhere. Instacart ads nail it: "Groceries in an hour? Yes, please," for that post-class crash. Deadlines like Black Friday or semester ends spike urgency, too.

4. Task Definition

What's the why behind your action? Task definition splits this: Self-purchases (your daily latte) vs. gifts (that last-minute birthday card). Gifts amplify emotions — social pressure, rituals, or "owing one back." Holidays? Total task-shift: Chocolates scream Valentine's, not midterms.

Consumers gift for reciprocity (return favors), norms (expected at weddings), or rituals (more on those soon). Marketers segment here: Self-care brands like Lush push solo spa nights; gift guides flood your feed pre-Christmas.

5. Antecedent States

These are your internal starters: Moods and momentary conditions. **Moods are fleeting feelings** — not tied to one thing, just "blah" or "pumped." They're sneaky, influencing without you noticing. Bad mood? Comfort food. Good one? Splurge on that tee shirt.

Momentary conditions are temporary states: Tired after a late shift? Easy-prep meals win. Flush with birthday cash? Treat yourself. Broke post-spring break? Coupons only.

Apps like Stop, Breathe & Think® get this — check your mood, get tailored mindfulness to shop (or chill) smarter. Antecedents remind us: Behavior's fluid, not fixed.

These five dimensions interplay, creating unique situational fingerprints.

Ritual Situations: When Traditions Take Over

Not all situations are casual — some are scripted, symbolic showdowns called ritual situations. These are “socially defined occasions that trigger a set of interrelated behaviors that occur in a structured format and have symbolic meaning.” Think holidays, graduations, game days: Prescribed actions, like carving the turkey or painting your face for the big match.

Why rituals rock consumer behavior? They’re critical because they lock in consumption patterns. Super Bowl? Pizza, beer, soft drinks, chips and dip, ads galore. Back-to-school? New notebooks, even if your old one’s fine.

For brands, rituals = gold. Candy giants flood shelves with heart-shaped treats for Valentine’s or ghost-peppermint for Halloween. Hershey’s Kisses ad? “A gift for Mom” taps Mother’s Day rituals, turning chocolate into love language. Practitioners are obsessed: Study rituals, match products, watch loyalty soar.

As undergraduates, you’re in ritual central - new school year orientation (branded swag), finals week (energy drinks), or post-exam bar or restaurant celebrations (specials). Situations like these aren’t just fun; they shape lifelong habits.

Applying Situational Influences to Marketing Strategy

So, how do marketers weaponize this? Situational influences and marketing strategy is about spotting opportunity in the chaos. Step one: Identify situations where your product fits (or could). Tools? Observational hangs at malls, focus groups (“When do you crave ice cream?”), interviews, or data dives.

Then, survey bigger groups: Quantify usage, benefits sought per scenario. Build a

person-situation segmentation matrix — a grid crossing consumer types (e.g., busy students) with situations (e.g., late-night study). For suntan lotion, cells might include “beach vacation” (high SPF, fun scents) vs. “daily jog” (light, non-greasy).

Evaluate each cell: Sales potential? Price sweet spot? Competitor heat? Costs to serve? Pick winners and craft strategies. Hillshire Snacking ads? They flip “office snack” into “desk warrior fuel,” expanding from parties to productivity.

Current usage intelligence fuels ads and positioning. Tired of one-note brands? Innovate — show new twists, like yogurt for post-gym recovery and midnight munchies. Five steps sum it up:

1. **Discover situations:** Observe, chat, data-mine product uses. **Observational studies** mean blending in — shadow shoppers at stores or events (e.g., watch beachgoers slather lotion during family picnics). **Focus groups** and depth interviews get folks talking: "Tell me about the last time you reached for sunscreen—was it a hike or a hangover recovery?" **Secondary data** pulls from existing goldmines like Nielsen reports, social media trends, or sales spikes (e.g., lotion sales jumping pre-vacation season). Tools like Google Trends or app analytics can flag patterns, such as "yogurt searches peak at 10 p.m. on weekdays."
2. **Quantify with surveys:** Nail down segment benefits per situation. Blast surveys to 200-1,000+ respondents via online panels (**SurveyMonkey**, Qualtrics) or email lists. Ask structured questions: "On a 1-5 or 1-10 scale, how important is 'quick-absorbing' lotion for a morning run? For a pool party?" Probe benefits like convenience, protection, or fun (e.g., "scent matters more at parties"). Segment by demographics (age, income) and psychographics (lifestyle).

3. **Build the matrix:** Map people by situations. Here's the visual magic — a person-situation segmentation matrix (Table 13-2 below – suntan lotion grid) that crosses consumer profiles with scenarios. It's your strategy's Swiss Army knife: Rows for segments (e.g., "Fitness Enthusiasts," "Family Travelers"), columns for situations (e.g., "Beach Vacation," "Daily Outdoor Work"). Each cell? A snapshot of fit, like high potential for "quick-dry lotion" in "post-pilates cool-downs." Use Excel or similar spreadsheet tools to grid it out.

Person–Situation Segments for Suntan Lotions

TABLE 13-2

Suntan Lotion Use Situation	Potential Users of Suntan Lotion				
	Young Children	Teenagers	Adult Women	Adult Men	General Situation Benefits
Beach/boat activities	Prevent sunburn/skin damage	Prevent sunburn while tanning	Prevent sunburn/skin change/dry skin	Prevent sunburn	Container floats
Home/pools sunbathing	Prevent sunburn/skin damage	Tanning without sunburn	Tanning without skin damage or dry skin	Tanning without sunburn/skin damage	Lotion won't stain clothes or furniture
Daily Facial moisturizer with SPF		Prevent skin damage/development of skin cancer	Prevent wrinkles/lessen need for cosmetic surgery	Keep skin moisturized/prevent development of skin cancer	Protects skin from harmful rays even on cloudy days
Snow skiing		Prevent sunburn	Prevent sunburn/skin damage/dry skin	Prevent sunburn	Antifreeze formula
Person benefits	Protection	Tanning	Protection and tanning with soft skin	Protection and tanning	

Source: Adapted from P. Dickson, "Person–Situation: Segmentation's Missing Link," *Journal of Marketing Research*, Fall 1982, pp. 56–64. Published by the American Marketing Association.

4. **Evaluate cells:** Profit math — volume, price, rivals, etcetera. Not every cell's a winner — time for the cold, hard ROI calc. Scrutinize each matrix spot for viability: Can you make money here without burning cash? This weeds out low-hanging fruit from pipe dreams. How to Do It? Crunch numbers per cell. Sales volume: Estimate users x frequency (e.g., 1M joggers buying 2x/month = 2M units). Price level: What's the sweet spot — premium (\$15) for vacations or value (\$8) for dailies? Cost to serve: Packaging tweaks? Distribution hurdles? Competitor strength: Who's dominating "beach" (Coppertone)? Use SWOTT

analysis or simple formulas (Potential = Volume x Margin - Costs). Tools like Google Sheets with pivot tables speed this up.

5. **Strategize winners:** Roll out tailored marketing. Finally, activate — craft special strategies for top cells, then launch and loop back for adjustments. This is where situations become sales: Customized messaging, packaging, and channels that scream "I get your moment." How to Do It? For each winner, build a mini-plan: Product: Adapt (e.g., scented lotion for parties). Promotion: Situational ads (Instagram Reels for "gym sesh" vs. email blasts for "vacay prep"). Place/Price: Pop-up displays in high-situation spots (beach shops) or bundles.

This isn't just theory — it's revenue. Brands ignoring situations stagnate; aces like **Instacart thrive by owning** "time-crunched chaos."

Real-World Examples and Why It Matters for You

Let's ground this in a college student's world. Physical surroundings: Why does Philz Coffee or Starbucks feel cozier with soft lights during finals? Atmospherics boost your dwell time (and upsells). Social: Group project Zoom? You're pitching budget laptops; solo? Dream MacBook or high end gamer PC laptop. Temporal: Last-minute paper? DoorDash dominates; weekend free? Farmers' market fresh fruits and vegetables.

Task: Grabbing coffee for a date? Aesthetic pour-over. For class? Cheap drip. Antecedents: Feeling tired? Gatorade run. Pumped from a win? Victory chili cheese fries.

Rituals hit hard — Big sporting event? Tailgate merchandise explosion. And marketing? TikTok ads timing thirst traps for your scroll breaks.



For future marketers (or just savvy shoppers), this chapter's a superpower. Spot situations, hack choices. Brands win by expanding “appropriate” moments — why limit chips to parties when desk-snacking rules?

Wrapping It Up: Situations as the Secret Sauce

Situational influences remind us: Consumers aren't robots; we're chameleons, shifting with the scene. From the four situation types guiding buys to five characteristics coloring choices, rituals scripting traditions, and strategies turning insights into dollars — this chapter unpacks the “why now?” of behavior.

Key takeaways? Situations amplify stable traits (like your eco-values) but can override them (Vegas wild-child mode). Marketers who map them crush it; ignore them, and you're background noise.

Situational Influences on Consumer Behavior Exercise

Review the material in the previous pages and answer the following questions:

1. The basics of situational influence can be seen with that 2 a.m. Amazon impulse buy during finals stress. How does this example show situational influences overriding your “stable” traits like frugality?
2. Share a personal “out-of-character” shopping story where you bought something you didn’t plan to.
3. Are situations more powerful than personality in everyday decisions? Why or why not?
4. Four Types of Situations – Communications, Purchase, Usage, and Disposition Situations. Imagine you’re marketing your favorite snack brand (e.g., chips for tailgates). How would you tweak strategies for the usage situation (party munchies) vs. the purchase situation (rushed campus store run)?
5. Physical Surroundings – dim lights and jazz make a spot feel upscale and special. Think about your go-to study spot like Philz Coffee — how do its atmospherics (smells, music, crowding) influence your drink choice or linger time? As a marketer, what one tweak would you make to boost impulse buys there?
6. Ritual Situations – Rituals lock in buys like Super Bowl chips-and-dip or back-to-school swag. Pick a campus ritual (e.g., big sporting event, going out with friends post-exam or big presentation, finishing the school year): What consumption patterns does it trigger?