De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum? the Impact of the Nature of the Chosen Option in Positive and Negative Contexts

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Although individual tastes reign supreme, consumers often criticize others’ choices or seek to defend their own. We propose that the negative (vs. positive) context in which these behaviors occur differentially affect the importance of the nature of the chosen option. In particular, since there is no arguing about taste, choice criticism is norm- (vs. attribute-) based. However, choice defense shifts the focus from norms to the option’s specific attributes. A series of studies demonstrates a large impact of the chosen option’s nature when forming criticism, whereas the ability to respond to criticism is rather insensitive to the option one chooses.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Much research on evaluation has focused attention on the role of preferences. For example, how preferences increase for the things we choose and receive (Festinger, 1957; Kahneman, Knecht, & Thaler, 1990). Whether our preferences reflect the immediate, prospective, or retrospective pleasure experiences or objects will bring (Kahneman, 1999). And whether we are too focused on what we prefer in the short term and do not account for decisions’ long term ramifications (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Research, however, has also demonstrated that negative events have a profound impact upon our lives, and that much of life is spent attempting to avoid them (Baumeister et al. 2000; Denrell, 2005; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Rozin & Royzman, 1999). The research we present focuses on what we dislike, and how our distastes influence decisions. It demonstrates why the unpleasant aspects of our decisions and their outcomes also deserve serious consideration.

Hsee first presents research on negativity bias in the judgment of alternatives. Whether evaluating penguins, politicians, or peers, his findings suggest that people are more likely to agree on what they dislike than what they like. In other words, there is greater consensus across individuals on what is bad than on what is good. Second, Kramer, Maimaran and Simonson examine the relative ease of assessing options’ strengths and weaknesses. They find that the peculiar attractiveness of compromise (utilitarian) options may be due to their superior resistance to criticism relative to risky (or hedonic) options, rather than to differences in the benefits they confer. Third, Morewedge presents research suggesting that negative outcomes appear specially intended to perceivers. He finds that people are more likely to attribute negative outcomes to the intentions of other people rather than to non-intentional causes (i.e., computer programs and chance), whereas people are more likely to ascribe positive outcomes to non-intentional causes rather than to the intentions of other humans. Finally, Dan Ariely will critique these papers, discuss how they relate to other existing research, and point out potential implications.

ABSTRACTS

“Do People Agree More On Who is Pretty or On Who is Ugly?”

Christopher K. Hsee, The University of Chicago

This research explores two general questions: whether people agree more on what they like or on what they dislike, and whether people err more when predicting what others like or predicting what others dislike. We find that in general people agree more on what they dislike yet err more when predicting what others like. We explore the underlying reasons of these effects and identify situations where the reserve effects may emerge.

“De gustibus non est disputandum? The Impact of the Nature of the Chosen Option in Positive and Negative Contexts”

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Given that consumers often criticize others’ choices or seek to defend their own, it is surprising that academic research provides such little empirical evidence on the impact that the specific nature of the chosen option has on both choice criticism and choice defense. That is, we currently know very little about whether consumers’ sensitivity to the choice type (e.g., virtue vs. sure-thing, or compromise vs. non-compromise) differs between criticizing others and responding to others’ criticism. Presumably, criticism of choice and response to criticism are two sides of the same coin: the option that is easier to criticize should be harder to defend. For example, if it is easier to criticize a choice of a cake over an apple, then choice of the cake should also be harder to defend.

However, we propose that the two actions are asymmetric with respect to the impact of the nature of the chosen option. In particular, we hypothesize that in the relatively negative context of criticizing choices, consumers tend to focus more generally on shared norms, whereas in the relatively positive context of defending choices, they focus more on the particular product attributes of the chosen option. Thus, the nature of the chosen option will have a larger impact when criticizing choices than when defending these choices.

Specifically, in order to respond to criticism of their choices, consumers can generate reasons justifying their choice based on the sovereignty of their idiosyncratic preferences (e.g., Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky 1993; Simonson 1989). Since tastes or preferences are highly subjective, choice options irrespective of their nature can be defended by reliance on the options’ attributes matching these particular values. In contrast, the particular nature of others’ choices is likely to play a relatively greater role in negative contexts of criticism. Since subjective tastes are difficult to argue (“de gustibus non est disputandum”), criticizing consumers for their choices may involve shared norms regarding which choices are the appropriate ones to make. For example, when choosing between a vice (e.g., a chocolate brownie) and a virtue (e.g., a fruit salad), it is common knowledge that one should choose the salad in order to maintain better health. Similarly, when choosing between a compromise and a non-compromise option, most individuals assume that choosing the compromise option is safer and minimizes losses, making it the “right” option to choose.

Thus, consumers are likely to base their criticism on known norms and shared rules, so that the nature of the option being criticized is likely to play a bigger role. Specifically, it is more difficult to criticize the choice of conventional options, those that are easier-to-justify (e.g., the compromise option; Simonson, 1989), or “sure-thing” options (Simonson, Kramer, and Young, 2004). Conversely, unconventional options (such as non-compromise or risky gambles) are more easily criticized. Therefore, we hypothesize and test in a series of studies that, whereas the choice of an option makes a large difference when forming criticism, the ability to respond to criticism is rather insensitive to the nature of the option one chooses.

In Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in the ‘criticism’ condition they read about other students’ choices between (1) vices and virtues (e.g., a brownie and an apple), (2) hedonic and utilitarian options (e.g., a candy bar and a calling card), (3) compromise and non-compromise options, and (4) ‘sure-thing’ options (e.g., $25 for sure) and risky gambles (e.g., a 20% chance to receive $250). Subjects were then asked to rate how easy it would be for them to criticize another student for his choice of
each option. In the ‘respond’ condition, participants rated how easy it would be for them to respond to criticism had they themselves chosen each option.

Across the various problems, we find an interaction between the task (criticize vs. respond) and the type of option. Specifically, participants reported that it would be significantly easier to criticize the choice of the non-compromise, the hedonic option, the vice and the gamble than the choice of the compromise, utilitarian option, virtue and the sure-thing, respectively. In contrast, the differences in ease of responding to choosing one option or the other (e.g., the vice or the virtue) were much smaller and not significant.

In Study 2, we (1) generalized the findings to additional choice contexts as well as replicated the previous results, (2) examined whether the effect also appears in a within-subject design, and (3) ruled out the possibility that the results of Study 1 are due to differences in difficulty of evaluating the ease of criticizing versus the ease of responding. In addition to the two between-subjects conditions, we included two within-subjects conditions in which participants rated both the ease of criticizing others’ choice and the ease of responding to others’ criticism (order counterbalanced; no order effects were found). All participants evaluated choices of (1) compromise versus non-compromise options (2) sure-thing versus risky gambles, and (3) dominating versus dominated options. Finally, participants rated the ease of completing the criticizing versus responding to criticism task.

As hypothesized, we found bigger differences in ease of criticizing each option (compromise vs. non-compromise, dominating vs. dominated and sure-thing vs. risky option) than in ease of responding to criticism for choosing each option. Specifically, criticizing the choice of ‘non-conventional’ options was judged to be significantly easier than criticizing the choice of ‘conventional’ options. Finally, the two tasks were equally difficult (in both the within and between designs) suggesting that the difference in difficulty of tasks cannot account for our results.

A third study (currently underway) seeks to provide direct support for our proposition that negative contexts of criticizing choices versus relatively positive contexts of defending choices affect the degree to which consumers focus more generally on shared norms versus on the particular product attributes of the chosen option. In particular, a ‘choice criticism’ group is presented with several problem types (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian options; compromise vs. non-compromise) and indicates in an open-ended format the reasons they could give for criticizing choice each of the options. Similarly, a separate ‘choice defense’ group is presented with the same problem types and indicates in an open-ended format the reasons they could give for defending choice of each of the options. Additionally, a third group of subjects will be recruited to evaluate the persuasiveness and effectiveness of the reasons for criticizing choices of the options (from group 1) and for defending choices of the options (from group 2).

“Negativity Bias in the Perception of External Agency”
Carey K. Morewedge, Princeton University

People seem apt to believe that machines have a “mind of their own” when they malfunction, and that referees were responsible for their team’s loss. Yet, when machines work well or their team is winning, the state of affairs is seldom attributed to the intentions of an external agent. This discrepancy reflects a general asymmetry in the way people ascribe intentional agency. Four experiments, employing ultimatum games and gambles, demonstrate that negative outcomes more often prompt one to infer the presence and influence of external intentional agents than do neutral and positive outcomes.