Special Session Summary    Consumer Decision Strategies Under Conflict

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The three papers in this session address decision strategies that people use when they are confronted with different types of conflict. When consumers are faced with purchase decisions, some type of conflict is inherent. Options that present the most positive attributes also may naturally contain negative elements. For instance, the designer sweater may also pose a challenge to the budget; the beautiful table you’d like may have been made with wood from an endangered rainforest, etc. How do consumers cope with these sorts of conflicts? These three papers suggest that consumers utilize cognitive coping skills to protect themselves from the affect inherent in the conflict. The papers address a coping strategy at each of the three levels of the decision process. Meloy and Russo’s paper shows that, when available, decision framing can make a big difference. By reframing the decision task to be compatible with the valence of the options, consumers experience less conflict and have more confidence in their decision. Ehrich and Irwin’s paper shows that, when faced with a decision they cannot reframe, consumers will implicitly and explicitly avoid information that has the potential to cause conflict. Finally, Mukhopadhyay and Johar’s paper shows that, if the attribute information cannot be avoided, consumers will engage in complex justification strategies aimed at reducing the conflict.

In the first paper, Meloy and Russo showed the importance of decision framing in choices between negative and positive options. When people are asked to choose among negative options (‘‘burdens’’) or to reject positive options (‘‘benefits’’), they experience negative consequences, such as conflict, confusion, and lowered confidence. On the other hand, when they are asked to reject negative options or choose among positive options, they cope much better, affectively and cognitively. Note, of course, that the framing of the task does not change the informational content of the decision. Thus, this work suggests that decision conflict may be avoided by reframing the question to be compatible with the valence of the options.

Reframing of the situation is not always possible because the options themselves may contain both positive and negative elements. In the second paper, Ehrich and Irwin showed that, in this situation, consumers avoid having to use information that causes conflict. It was found that consumers willingly used the conflict-causing information when it was presented to them prior to a choice task, but would specifically avoid requesting the information if they were told it was available. Ironically, they discovered that these findings are especially true for respondents who value the attribute that is causing the conflict (that is, respondents who are experiencing increased conflict). For example, people who were very concerned about the protection of endangered rainforests would avoid information about the source of the wood used to make a desk while consumers who felt that child labor was something to be highly concerned about avoided information about the labor conditions in the plants that manufactured cell phones on which they were deciding. Consumers were found to avoid the information explicitly (by not asking for the attribute information) and implicitly (by forgetting or misremembering) the attribute information.

The third paper, by Mukhopadhyay and Johar, consumers are faced with decisions with full attribute information that cannot be reframed. How do they cope with decision conflict in this situation? In several studies, the authors show that decision justification plays a large role. When consumers can justify their decisions, they experience less conflict and emotion. Note that these justifications are coping mechanisms, not (necessarily) earmarks for actual utility maximization strategies. For instance, the justifications become especially necessary when the conflict has been primed by a previous related conflict that did not lead to purchase.

Discussion leader, Baba Shiv, did a great job of tying the three papers together while noting the importance of studying how conflict impacts the strategies that consumers use in their decision making. He also answered audience questions and discussed future research directions for this area of consumer research.

“Conflict and Framing: Selecting versus Rejecting in Binary Choice”
Margaret G. Meloy, The Pennsylvania State University
J. Edward Russo, Cornell University

We examine information processing differences under instructions to select versus reject in binary choice. Although the experimental evidence provides support for previously hypothesized causes for select-reject differences, many of the predicted relationships were reversed when the decision alternatives were desirable rather than attractive. Selecting one of two negative options or rejecting one of two positives resulted in a more disrupted process and greater conflict. In these incompatible cases, individuals were less certain of their choice, less extreme in their attribute evaluations, and less likely to distort attribute information. Verbal protocols revealed that task re-framing was common to reduce decision conflict and increase compatibility.

“Willful Ignorance in the Face of Conflict: The Avoidance of Ethical Attribute Information”
Kristine R. Ehrich, The University of Texas at Austin
Julie R. Irwin, The University of Texas at Austin

We find that, when presented with the possibility of finding attribute information that conflicts with personal goals, in this case behaving ethically, consumers are likely to avoid this information; however, if presented with a full-information analysis, they will use it in their decision making. This avoidance of information is especially strong for those consumers who value this information and are therefore at an increased level of conflict. In two follow-up studies, we find that consumers who were asked to recall attribute information are likely to either forget the conflict-causing attribute value or to misremember the attribute as being more favorable than it actually was.

“When Desire Conflicts with Willpower: The Role of Justification in a Theory of Unintended Purchase”
Anirban Mukhopadhyay, Columbia University
Gita V. Johar, Columbia University

Consumers spend substantial proportions of their expenditures on products they had not intended to buy. Correspondingly, marketers spend billions of dollars trying to influence purchase incidence. What determines whether consumers give in to such temptations, or hold back from them? Research in this area typically looks either at compulsive consumption, i.e., behaviors of people who chronically succumb to purchase temptations (e.g. O’Guinn and Faber 1989), or at impulsive behavior not necessarily in purchase contexts (e.g. Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). This paper
addresses the question of how consumers respond to unintended purchase opportunities, and how a decision to either buy or not buy can affect responses to subsequent tempting offers. Distinct from the majority of research on self-control, it builds on the insight that purchase consists of the two related but independent activities of spending and acquisition, and proposes a conceptual model specific to situations of unintended purchase. This model suggests that exposure to an unintended purchase opportunity may simultaneously cue the two goals of acquisition and not spending. These goals may be in conflict under some conditions, and this conflict may be resolved through a search for reasons, and the relative justifiability of the two options available to the consumer, buy or not buy.

We present three studies based on scenarios where participants see tempting products on sale while waiting at a mall. A goal of not spending money unnecessarily was always salient. The products used were extensively pre-tested to be equally attractive, and were from two categories, books and software. Each purchase occasion was disguised as a choice between two similar offers within the same category and a no-choice option. The dependent variable whether either of the two offers was chosen as opposed to not buying anything. Building on Wertenbroch (1998), virtue products were defined as any products that deliver long-term value, but are relatively less valuable in the short term, such as science books and instructional software. Vice products, on the other hand, were defined as those that offer greater value in the short term than they do in the long term (e.g. thriller books and computer games), and stimuli were pre-tested to suit these definitions.

Experiment 1 studied responses to single unintended purchase opportunities, and found that under a low need to justify the purchase decision, proportions of subjects deciding to buy was the same across virtues and vices (approximately 50% as per the baseline propensity to buy established in a pilot study). However, under a high need to justify, the proportion choosing to buy vices dropped, while choice proportions for virtues remained unchanged. This demonstrates that under a high need to justify the purchase decision, vices are more difficult to justify buying than virtues. Analysis of thought protocols supported this contention.

Experiments 2 and 3 extended the investigation to an intertemporal domain. Theoretically, encountering a second unintended purchase opportunity while the first decision is still accessible in memory should have two effects. First, since both goals—acquisition and not spending—have recently been invoked, conflict should be greater at Time T2, and this should lead to a relatively high need to justify. This would imply that virtues would be easier to justify buying at T2. Moreover, if a second purchase opportunity is encountered while the reasons for the first decision are accessible, then behavior is likely to be consistent with these reasons. Hence the justifiability of buying at T2 should be driven by the nature of the decision at T1 as well as the nature of the product at T2, and the higher this justifiability (highest for T1 Buy T2 Virtue, lowest for T1 No buy T2 Vice, and intermediate otherwise), the higher the purchase likelihood. However, this need not always be the case. Specifically, those respondents who had not bought at T1, and have the reasons for their restraint made more accessible, may self-reward with a vice.

Experiment 2 was a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design, where subjects were made to go through the decision process twice (at different purchase opportunities within the same scenario). After being exposed to an offer at T1 (product category: books, vices only), they were told whether they bought or not, and were asked to generate reasons to support this decision. Then, after a filler task, they were asked to recall these reasons (or not—this was the accessibility manipulation). Then at T2 they saw another offer (product category: software), which was either a virtue or a vice. We found that under a baseline accessibility of reasons for the T1 decision (no recall condition), purchase likelihood decreased monotonically with justifiability. This was also the case in the heightened accessibility condition, except for the critical case of respondents who had not bought at T1 and were presented with a vice. In this case, normally the lowest justifiability of buying at T2, purchase likelihood was the highest.

The aim of Experiment 3 was to allow the decision at T1 to occur naturally, instead of being forced, and also to allow the product at T1 to be either a virtue or a vice, to investigate switching or balancing hypotheses. Similar to Experiment 2, after being exposed to an offer at Time T1 (category: books, virtue or vice), respondents chose to buy or not. We treated this response at T1 as a measured variable. Then at Time T2 they saw another offer (category: software), which could again be virtue or vice. As before, purchase likelihood decreased with justifiability of buying at T2. However, the nature of the product at T1 had no effect on the decision at T2, thereby refuting balancing explanations in favor of the proposed justification model.

In sum, this research contributes to the literature on consumer self-control, by demonstrating how conflict between desire and willpower plays out in purchase situations where consumers had not originally intended to buy. The study of purchase incidence over time is an important problem, and, across experiments, the justification model explains the observed patterns better than competing theories.

REFERENCES

