Belief Bracketing: Can Partitioning Information Change Consumer Judgments?

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When evaluating a product or service, consumers seek out information to judge whether that specific product will meet certain needs. As consumers gather such information, marketers choose how much information to provide at any one time. Consider, for example, a consumer forming a judgment about a restaurant who sees reviews one or two at a time, as compared to seeing a dozen all at once. Is it possible that breaking information into smaller or larger partitions has an effect on beliefs about the product under consideration? In other words, can presenting information in broad versus narrow brackets influence product assessment? This question motivates the research presented here.

When consumers use information to form beliefs about the probability that a product will meet a specific need, the normative standard is Bayesian updating (e.g., Hagerty and Aaker 1984). There has been considerable testing of whether individuals obey Bayesian updating in forming both probability judgments and product judgments. Findings suggest that individuals use averaging models to integrate new information (Anderson 1981), that inappropriate attention is given to the credibility of the source (Birnbaum and Mellers 1983), and that non-diagnostic information weakens beliefs (Troutman and Shanteau 1976, Fischhoff and Beyth-Marom 1983). Failure to attend to source credibility has also been studied in the context of using consumer agents for recommendations (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001), and influence of nondiagnostic information has been assessed in how consumers treat irrelevant product information (Simonson, Carmon, and O’Curry 1994). However, unlike these studies in which information varies in usefulness or credibility, we consider information that is diagnostic and relevant. Our main emphasis is not on the type of information being provided, but on how the bracketing of that information affects judgment.

The influence of bracketing is well-documented in choice (Read, Loewenstein, and Rabin 1999). Choice bracketing effects exploit gain/loss asymmetry (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and decision makers’ myopia (Kahneman and Lovallo 1992). Bracketing effects are less well-documented in judgment. One exception is the work of Ariely and Zauberman (2000, 2003), who find that breaking a hedonic experience into partitions dampens overall satisfaction, with broader brackets producing more extreme evaluations. Both choice bracketing and satisfaction partitioning effects result from a lack of information aggregation. Decision makers “miss the big picture”, failing to see how individual pieces of information fit into a larger pattern. Although Ariely and Zauberman focus on satisfaction, we propose that bracketing affects other judgments.

Our prediction is that consumers observing information divided into multiple partitions will form different beliefs than when the information is viewed as a continuous whole. More specifically, we propose an extremeness hypothesis: final judgments will vary depending on the size of the partitions, with those formed under narrow brackets being judged less extreme than those formed under broad brackets. We formalize a model in which each information partition is observed and evaluated based on its level of representativeness. Small partitions (narrow brackets) will seem less representative, leading to less extreme judgments, while large partitions (broad brackets) will seem more representative, leading to more extreme judgments. This “bracketed” judgment is then integrated into the overall judgment in a predictably biased way, due to unequal weight on the first and last partition-level judgments (primacy and recency effects). Thus, bracketing affects both information coding and integration. Although we expect that most sequences will be judged less extreme when observed in narrow brackets, we also expect an effect reversal for some sequences. More specifically, for sequences in which the initial and final partitions are particularly representative when observed under narrow bracketing, primacy and recency effects during integration may result in more extremeness in judgment.

To test these hypotheses, we conduct four studies that vary the number of partitions in which information is presented, and ask participants to make judgments regarding underlying characteristics of the product, service, or process being evaluated. Study 1 tests bracketing effects in the context of restaurant reviews. Subjects see restaurant reviews and judge which restaurants would appeal to a friend. We find that narrow brackets lead to less extreme judgments in the majority of cases. Analysis of partition-level judgments shows that primacy and recency operate during the integration process as proposed. Study 2 is identical to Study 1 except that there are no explicit judgments made by subjects after each partition. This tests whether on-line judgments are necessary for bracketing effects; based on evidence that individuals compulsively make judgments of information even when they are not required to (Russo, Meloy, and Medvec 1998), we predicted that the effect would persist. Our findings support this prediction; the results of Study 2 were not significantly changed from Study 1.

Study 3 more formally tests specific theoretical predictions. Participants judge the probability that a series of colored balls were drawn from one of two urns after seeing the series in brackets of one, two, or five balls at a time. Results again support the hypothesized effect of bracketing; probability judgments are typically more extreme when formed under broad brackets. However, as predicted, specific patterns produce the reverse effect, due to primacy and recency effects during integration. Study 4 is a complement to Study 3 to show representativeness’ role in these effects. Participants judged the representativeness of the patterns of colored balls used in Study 3. Shorter patterns are judged to be less representative than longer patterns, as predicted. Analysis of these data in conjunction with the Study 3 data shows that these bracket-level representativeness judgments can explain the Study 3 results.

Although these studies vary in the use of memory (display of sequence history), when judgments are collected (on-line or retrospectively), and the type of judgment (product-specific or probability), the results of all four studies support the existence of belief bracketing effects. The overall finding is that judgments are more extreme for information delivered in broad brackets, as our model predicts. The findings also provide strong evidence for our proposed mechanisms of representativeness at encoding and primacy and recency during integration. In addition to the findings for judgment, we find bracketing effects for behavioral intentions (Studies 1 and 2) and for accuracy (Study 3), suggesting that the implications of bracketing go beyond judgment.

REFERENCES


