The Interactive Effect of Timing and Attribute Alignability on Consumption

Selin A. Malkoc, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Canan Ulu, Duke University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - In understanding how consumers evaluate or choose among product options, it is important to consider the situations where the decision and the experience are temporally separated. One of such situations takes place when the consumption of the product is delayed. Consumers often face situations where the purchase decision is immediate but the consumption of the product is in the future. For instance, one can purchase a book in order to start reading it in the very near future (e.g., in the coming week). Similarly, one can buy a book to read in an undetermined time in the future (e.g., when she is finishes reading the books she already bought before). Does the consumer decision making process differ depending on the consumption immediacy? Will the changes in time horizon for consumption systematically affect the way consumers represent and evaluate the options?

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8857/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In understanding how consumers evaluate or choose among product options, it is important to consider the situations where the decision and the experience are temporally separated. One of such situations takes place when the consumption of the product is delayed. Consumers often face situations where the purchase decision is immediate but the consumption of the product is in the future. For instance, one can purchase a book in order to start reading it in the very near future (e.g., in the coming week). Similarly, one can buy a book to read in an undetermined time in the future (e.g., when she is finishes reading the books she already bought before). Does the consumer decision making process differ depending on the consumption immediacy? Will the changes in time horizon for consumption systematically affect the way consumers represent and evaluate the options?

There has been ample amount of research on how consumers make choices and form preferences, most of which concerning immediate consumption scenarios. A well-accepted answer to this question suggests that consumers represent options by their attributes and then compare these attributes in order to determine their preference (Bettman, Johnson and Payne 1991). It has been found that when evaluating alternatives, consumers mostly rely on attributes that are shared by alternatives (alignable differences) and mostly ignore attributes that are identical (commonalities) or that do not have a correspondence in other alternatives (non-alignable differences) (Gentner and Markman 1994).

However, characteristics that are unique to representation of future events can lead these results to be inapplicable. Temporal construal theory (Liberman and Trope 1998, Trope and Liberman 2000) suggests that distant future events have more abstract, general and de-contextualized representations (high-level construal) that relate to desirability considerations, whereas near future events have more concrete, specific and contextual representations (low-level construal) that are feasibility oriented. Therefore, product options that are considered for future consumption will have more abstract representations. This abstraction in the representation would enable the use of holistic (alternative-based) strategies and creation of abstract level attributes in the evaluation process (Johnson 1984). Consequently, in constructing abstract features or creating a holistic evaluation for each option, consumers are as likely to use non-alignable differences as they use alignable differences.

We hypothesize that the relative importance of non-alignable differences will be higher for choices in the distant future relative to choices in the near future. We tested this hypothesis with an experiment, by manipulating time horizon (tomorrow vs. six months from now) between subjects with the following scenario.

“Imagine that you have been chosen to be the part of the group who is going to prepare the end of classes party this year, which going to take place tomorrow night (six months from now). You have been given the responsibility of choosing and buying the microwave popcorns for the party.”

Following this, descriptions of two popcorn brands were presented (in a counterbalanced order), which had equal overall attractiveness ratings (Zhang and Markman 2001). Brand P is designed to be better in alignable attributes, while Brand Q is designed to be better in non-alignable attributes. Hence, a shift in preference between these brands in different time horizons will reflect the different attention given to alignable and non-alignable differences. Participants were asked to indicate their preference (11-point scale anchored Prefer P and Prefer Q, with a neutral point of indifference), allocate 100 points between the brands and provide thought listings.

We expected to find a preference toward the alignable-better brand in near future, and a shift toward the non-alignable better brand in distant future, since consideration of the non-alignable attributes would make non-alignable better brand as much or more attractive than the alignable-better brand. Thus, finding participants to be either indifferent or have a preference toward the non-alignable better brand in distant future, would be an evidence for increased attention to non-alignable attributes.

As expected, alignable-better brand was preferred by 77% (68 out of 88) of the participants in near future, but only by 65% (58 out of 89) in distant future (Z=-1.78, p<.05). In contrast, 23% (20 out of 88) of the participants were either indifferent or preferred non-alignable better brand in near future, as opposed to 35% (31 out of 89) in distant future (Z=1.78, p<.05). Similarly, mean number of points allocated to the non-alignable-better brand was greater in distant future (M=43.38) than in near future (M=37.80); (F(1, 177)=4.816, p<0.05).

Lastly in thought listings, which were coded by an independent rater who was blind to the hypotheses, we expected to find a greater mention of the alignable attributes in near future, but not in distant future. As expected participants mentioned alignable attributes (M=1.40) more than the non-alignable attributes (M=0.77) in near future (F(1, 176)=3.799; p=.053), but not in distant future (M=1.08, MNA=0.90; F(1, 176)<1 , p>.1), suggesting more emphasis on alignable difference in near future, but a more balanced consideration to both types of differences in distant future.

The results of the experiment provide support for the hypothesis that the representation and evaluation of alternatives are systematically different for situations with varying consumption immediacy. Specifically, we find that consumers put more emphasis on the non-alignable differences when the expected consumption is in distant future as compared to being immediate. This result is consistent with our prediction that people’s representations of the options in future time framing does lead to a more abstract and holistic processing.

Current findings add to the understanding of how consumers evaluate and choose among alternatives when the consumption is in the future, by demonstrating a systematic shift in attention paid to different types of attributes for immediate versus future consumption scenarios.

The findings in this paper also extends the structural alignment theory (Medin, Goldstone, & Markman 1995), by addressing the issue of when and how the contextual factors promote the processing of the non-alignable attributes, which have been found to be effortful and difficult. Specifically, we have showed that the differences in time horizon can moderate the effect of alignability on preference formation.

References


