Special Session Summary   Speed- and Online Dating: Insights Into Preference Construction in Frequent, High Involvement, Personal Decisions
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SESSION OVERVIEW
A central question in research on decision making refers to the drivers and evolution of consumer preferences and the correspondence between actual consumer decisions and what consumers say and believe about the drivers of their decisions. This question will be examined in the proposed session in the context of a very personal and often rather important decision—choosing a date. Both speed dating events and online dating involve repeated choices and thus allow for a more dynamic perspective on decision making and the manner in which preferences evolve over time. Thus, the proposed session will provide new insights into preference construction from a more dynamic perspective than prior research. Furthermore, all three papers are based on field studies (e.g., speed dating events) and involve real dating decisions.

The first paper, by Frost and Ariely, focuses on the important topic of preference learning, which poses a challenge to consumer researchers because in most cases the learning process is slow and thus unsuitable for laboratory experiments. Frost and Ariely examine the ability of people to learn and update their preferences by learning from the prior successes and failures of their online dating decisions. The research is based on secondary data from a major online dating service as well as on a field experiment that is being conducted in collaboration with that online dating service. The dataset they rely on makes it possible to examine how dating preferences evolve over time. For example, Frost and Ariely examine what online daters look for in terms of physical features (attractiveness, body type, and age), and how their preferences changed over time. Also, in the study being conducted, they examine the impact of forcing participants to define their preferences more carefully on their online dating success rate.

The second paper, by Iyengar, Simonson, and Fisman, examines the relation between what people say is important to them when selecting a date and what actually drives their dating decisions in a speed-dating event. Previous research has shown that there is a significant gap between stated attribute importance and actual decisions, with the correlation between the two often quite low (e.g., Slovic and Lichtenstein, 1971), and various explanation for the discrepancy between stated and revealed attribute importance have been offered (e.g., Barlas 2003). Prior research has implicitly assumed that the relation between stated importance beliefs and actual attribute importance derived from choices people make (hereafter, revealed attribute importance) is rather stable over time. The present investigation examines whether the gap between stated attribute preference and revealed attribute importance fluctuates over time based on the two-way feedback between stated preferences and revealed preferences.

This research, based on a series of actual speed-dating events, generated important new insights regarding the relation between stated and revealed preferences. Furthermore, the research revealed a series of important differences, related to attribute observability and gender, with respect to the dynamic relations between stated and revealed preferences. Also, consistent with prior work by Iyengar and Lepper (2000), the findings indicate that the correlation between prior stated preferences and revealed preferences is higher when the speed dating event involves fewer decisions, though this relation reverses after the event (i.e., the correlation between revealed preferences and stated preferences after the event is higher among those who had participated in speed dating events with more dates). Finally, a series of findings suggest that men and women recognize that their stated importance weights often differ from their actual attribute weights.

The third paper, by Raghunathan and Walker, further examines the drivers of judgments and preferences about dates, again in the context of speed dating. In particular, building on prior work regarding judgments that are based on “thin slices” (e.g., Ambady et al. 1993, 2000), they propose that nonverbal cues play a key role in evaluations of dates. Consistent with the research by Iyengar et al. (the second paper in this session), Raghunathan and Walker argue that the limited insight of men and women with respect to their own preferences makes them particularly susceptible to influence by less conscious, nonverbal aspects.

Study 1, which is currently being conducted in collaboration with a professional speed-dating organization, will involve two stages. In the first stage, participants will be videotaped as they are having a speed date with opposite-sex confederates. In the second stage, the videotaped dates will be edited and subsequently coded by groups of independent judges assigned to focus on different dimensions (such as personality, attractiveness, etc.). Among others, it is expected that the personality ratings of targets—which are known to correlate significantly with nonverbal cues (cf. Ambady 1993)—will be highly correlated with targets’ date-worthiness ratings. In the second study, we will assess whether targets who elicit “bad” ratings on the nonverbal dimension and “good” ratings on other dimensions (physical attractiveness, earning potential) are better off presenting the latter type of information to potential dates first (e.g., through email, telephone conversation, etc.) before meeting them face-to-face.

We believe that this session will be of much interest to a broad audience, not only because of the intrinsic interest of dating decisions, but because this unique decision category provides important insights into dynamic aspects of decision making in an area of great personal significance. Furthermore, because in such domains people may often be unaware of the drivers of their preferences and/or be unwilling to admit what drives their preferences, observing actual behavior in speed and online dating can provide valuable insights regarding the processes involved in preference construction.

“The Influence of Nonverbal Cues in Judgments of Dating Partners”
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Rebecca Walker, University of Texas at Austin

The objective of this research is to assess the relative weight men and women place on nonverbal cues versus other types of cues in assessing the dateworthy aspects of others they have met for a short (less than five minute) time. Evidence from thin-slice research (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal, 1992, 1993; Walker and Raghunathan 2004)—a thin slice can be defined as “a brief excerpt of expressive [nonverbal] behavior sampled from the behavioral stream” (e.g., Ambady, Bernieri, and Richeson 2000, p. 203)—suggests that nonverbal cues will have a significant impact on judgments of
potential dates. However, there is cause to believe that judges may rely less on nonverbal cues in dating (versus other types of) contexts since the context of judging others as potential dates (as opposed to that of judging them as teachers or as salespeople) is, arguably, more involving. As a result, judges may explicitly attempt to weight nonverbal cues “appropriately” or to even discount them when judging potential dates, since giving importance to nonverbal cues may be seen as irrational or even inhuman. Further, previous relevant research has not revealed evidence for use of nonverbal cues in dating contexts; findings reveal, rather, that while men find “physical attractiveness” desirable, women find “earning potential” desirable (e.g., Davis 1990; Deaux and Hanna 1984).

In sum, it is unclear whether and to what extent we may expect nonverbal cues (versus other cues) to influence judgments of the dateworthiness of potential dates. Towards addressing this question, we conducted a study consisting of two stages. In the first stage, five men and five women at a speed dating party were videotaped as they were engaged in a conversation with opposite-sex confederates. After the targets completed their speed dates with the other party participants, we gathered data on how many of the opposite-sex participants wished to see these targets again. In the second stage, videotapes of these target dates were shown to undergraduate students participating in a study for extra credit. One set of the undergrads was exposed to the full three minute video of the targets, containing both verbal and nonverbal cues, and asked to rate the targets’ earning potential, how fun-loving they were, and their sincerity and commitment. A second set was asked to rate targets on their personalities on the basis of exposure to 30-second video clips with the sound removed. Silent clips were used to eliminate contextual and verbal cues, thus forcing the judge to rely solely on nonverbal cues. On the basis of Ambady and Rosenthal’s (1993) findings, we expected that personality ratings would be significantly correlated with the target’s nonverbal cues, that is, we expected that targets with “good” nonverbal cues would elicit more positive personality ratings than those with “bad” nonverbal cues. A third set of undergrads rated the target’s physical attractiveness, based on a still photograph of them.

Then, a step-wise regression was conducted, using target’s personality ratings (based on silent video), their perceived earning potential, fun-loving nature, and sincerity/commitment (based on the full video), and their physical attractiveness (based on the photograph) as predictor variables and their dateworthiness (operationalized as the number of participants from the speed dating party who wished to see the target again) as the dependent variable. Results indicated that physical attractiveness and nonverbal cues were more significant predictors of the targets’ dateworthiness than were their perceived earning potential, sincerity/commitment, and fun-loving nature. These results are consistent with our thesis.

Given the evidence (from study 1) that nonverbal cues play a significant role in influencing perceptions of dateworthiness, it is important to assess how one should present oneself to a potential suitor: should one expose the suitor to one’s nonverbal cues first (e.g., by meeting them face-to-face or by exposing them to one’s video file), or should one first expose others to one’s verbal profile (e.g., a description of one’s personality, likes/dislikes, etc.) first?

To address this question, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the following 16 conditions: 2 (Nonverbal cues first vs. Profile first) X 2 (Valence of Nonverbal Cues: Good vs. Bad) X 2 (Valence of Profile: Good vs. Bad) X 2 (Target gender: Male vs. Female). That is, male and female subjects saw targets with good or bad video and good or bad verbal profiles, with the profiles or the videos coming first. After each exposure (video and verbal profile), subjects were asked to rate the target. The overall rating (second rating minus the first rating) and the overall positivity of the second rating were used as the dependent variables. Results indicated that a better overall impression is created with exposure to video first than with exposure to profile first when both the nonverbal cues and the profile are good. Exposure to a bad video and then to a good profile produces a far better impression than the reverse, perhaps because of contrast effects, or perhaps because there is a penalty for presenting misleading information. Finally, a bad video followed by a good profile produces a worse impression than a bad profile followed by a bad video. Thus, overall, if a target has good nonverbal cues, these should be exposed first. If however, the target has bad nonverbal cues, these should be exposed later (unless the profile is contrastingly good). Interestingly, women rating women were generally very forgiving of a bad video and of a bad profile, perhaps because such presentations are seen as a sign of honesty. Male participants did not show this effect.

References


“Dating Preferences and Speed Dating Decisions: The Relationship Between What’s “Important” and What Counts”
Sheena Sethi-Iyengar, Columbia University
Itamar Simonson, Stanford University
Raymond Fisman, Columbia University

The gap between stated attribute importance and actual decisions has been well documented and interpreted as a sign of poor insight into one’s decision process (for a review, see, e.g., Barlas 2003). Goldstein, Barlas, and Beattie (2001) showed that attribute importance is interpreted differently depending on people’s communicative goals. And Barlas (2003) has recently proposed that the goal to justify decisions influences (stated) importance beliefs more than choices whereas the goal to accurately assess preferences influences choices more.

Prior research has implicitly assumed that the relation between stated importance beliefs and actual attribute importance derived from choices people make (hereafter, revealed attribute importance) is rather stable over time. In a typical study, subjects are asked to state their attribute importance (e.g., by allocating 100 points among attributes), and they also make choices, which can be used to derive the revealed importance weights. However, it is
reasonable to expect that the degree of correspondence between importance beliefs and revealed attribute importance fluctuate over time.

In the present research, based on actual speed dating events conducted at Columbia University (with mostly graduate students), we examined the dynamics of the relationship between importance beliefs and revealed attribute importance weights by measuring the gap between the two at three points in time. First, we measured importance beliefs prior to making choices. Next, respondents made repeated decisions as part of a “speed dating” event in which they participated, followed by a second measurement of importance beliefs. Finally, three weeks later, they again indicated their importance beliefs. In addition, the revealed importance weights were derived from the actual choices, which allows us to track the relationship between importance beliefs and actual behavior over time.

The speed dating context provided a particularly rich environment for studying the determinants of consumer preferences. Among others, we focused on the impact of attribute type, the choice set size, and gender differences (building on a very large literature regarding mate selection). Since actual attribute importance is likely to depend on the available information, it was expected that the revealed attribute weights would be different from the importance beliefs stated prior to the event. For example, although women may consider sincerity more important than shared interests when evaluating prospective dates, the difficulty of assessing sincerity in a four-minute speed date is likely to shift the revealed importance weights in favor of the more easily assessed attribute of shared interests. Such changes in actual importance were expected to be reflected in importance beliefs measured soon after the repeated choice event, but that effect was predicted to be short-lived, with the previously held importance beliefs re-emerging after some time. These predictions were supported in the studies we conducted.

The results also showed that the correlation between stated and revealed preferences is higher when the speed dating event involves 10 rather than 20 dates, but the correlation between the two after the event was higher in those who had had 20 dates. Furthermore, whereas men give the same proportion of “Yes” (i.e., express interest in going on a regular date) regardless of the number of dates, women become more selective and select about the same number of dates in speed dating events with 10 dates and with 20 dates. These differences are consistent with the evolutionary psychological and social status perspectives of mate selection. Finally, a series of tests conducted as a part of a follow-up study indicate that men and women recognize that their stated importance weights differ from their actual (revealed) attribute weights, though they underestimate the magnitude of that gap.

References

“The Online Pursuit: Preference Learning in Online Dating”

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Dan Ariely, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Over time and with experience, consumers learn, change, and refine their preferences. Familiar examples are cases where consumers start by liking one type of food and years later end up liking another. For example, very few like heavy beers early in their drinking experience, but many do end up liking such beers later on. The same hold true, for example, for spicy foods, jazz, and even wine. Despite its importance, preference learning poses a challenge to consumer researchers because in most cases the learning process is slow (which makes it unsuitable for laboratory experiments), and there is no readily available data to examine such learning processes. In the current work, we examine the learning process in one domain—online dating—an activity that was common to about 40 million Americans last August [1]. The dataset we have, provided by a major online dating service, allows us to examine how preferences evolve in response to participants’ successes and failures and the impact of performance (e.g., getting dates) on their preferences.

In our first set of analyses of the learning process, we examined what online daters look for in terms of physical features (attractiveness, body type, and age), soon after they joined the online dating service. We then follow how their preferences changed over time. For example, we see that early on in the online dating experience the “ideal” woman tends to be in her late twenties to early thirties while the “ideal” man for most women is in his early 40’s. The difficulty of course is that the supply of these two popular types is below the demand, and thus most of those who are looking exclusively for these age groups are unsuccessful.

The online dating panel data allow us also to test the ability of online daters to learn who is likely to positively respond to them and who is likely to be a good fit. For example, we examined whether the (importance) weight online daters place on the attraction indicators (attractiveness, body type, and age) seem to decrease or increase over time, suggesting some learning based on their past success. Somewhat disappointing, the results show very little learning, suggesting that wishful thinking can overcome reality. We also identified a few patterns (or segments) of behaviors that we term spammers (online daters who send email indiscriminately), jugglers (online daters who have simultaneous relationships with many others), and passive daters (online daters who wait for others to email them). Again somewhat disappointing, the results show very little learning aside from general disheartening with the online dating service as a whole. An interesting question that arises from these results concerns the limited ability of online daters to learn how to increase their success rates. We provide some speculations about the nature of this limited ability to learn.

A different approach to examine the ability of online daters to learn how to better predict preference and success in email as well as physical dates relates to the possibility that the nature of the online dating market is such that it encourages behaviors that are ultimately self-defeating. In particular the temptation to send many people email and the free cost of these emails could promote lack of discriminating emails, lack of learning, and the spamming we see in our data. To test this idea, in collaboration with the online dating site (that provided the data), we are introducing a program that limits the number of emails members can send to others; this will allow us to test whether a market with a structure that causes people to think more carefully about who they send email to will force them to define their preferences and tactics more carefully and accurately and, ultimately, improve their success rate. Specifically, we will give some people a limited supply of introductory emails that we call virtual roses. The number of virtual roses will vary on three levels, with the high restriction of only 2 emails a month, a lower restriction with 8 emails a month, and a low level of restriction with 100 emails a month. This experiment will test whether, under more limiting market conditions, individuals are better able to judge their probability of success and learn what is most important for them. To the extent that this approach improves online dating, we could conclude that the temptations in the current market structure are just
too high and limit the ability of online daters to maximize their chances of corresponding and dating. This experiment started running in Early March and should be completed by May or June.

References