Reconciling Consistency and Contrast in Sequential Choices

Uzma Khan, Stanford University
Ravi Dhar, Yale University

Most choices follow other choices and decisions. However, there is little consensus on when an initial task leads to consistency versus contrast in subsequent decisions. The present research offers a framework based on highlighting vs. balancing mindsets to understand how a prior task guides subsequent behavior. We propose that when an initial task activates a self-concept it leads to a highlighting mindset, which subsequently guides consistent behavior. However, when an initial task activates a self-concept and establishes credentials for it, it leads to a balancing mindset that causes subsequent choices to contrast from the initial ones.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13287/volumes/v35/NA-35

[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/.
SESSION OVERVIEW

Despite decades of social cognitive research on mindsets (e.g., Gollwitzer 1990), relatively little attention has been paid to how shifts in different mindsets impact consumer decision making. The question is important and deserves attention as rather subtle cues can unconsciously activate different mindsets that can in turn have substantial effects on thought production, information encoding, information retrieval and ultimately behavior (e.g., Kray & Galinsky 2003; Sassenberg & Moskowitz 2005). Such influence of contextual cues is well documented in other areas of consumer behavior research. For example, task requirements (e.g., fluent or difficult-Novemsky et al. forthcoming), consumption settings (e.g., public vs. private-Ratner & Kahn 2002) and initial primes (e.g., elderly stereotypes-Bargh et al. 1996) have all been shown to impact consumer cognitions and behavior. Moreover, as mindsets have been shown to affect tasks that are not necessarily related to the task that stimulated these mindsets (e.g., Smith & Branscombe 1987; Chandran & Morwitz 2005), examining the impact of mindsets on consumer decision making is highly important, given the multiple cues and tasks consumers face. This session presents four papers that provide an integrative look on the interplay between mindsets and decision making by examining how prior tasks and contextual cues can lead to certain mindsets, which in turn affect consumer choices and other decisions.

In the first paper, Dalton, Lynch, and Spiller investigate how an implemental mindset affects following through on decisions once made. They find that an implemental mindset facilitates following through decisions only when consumers are asked to follow a single decision and not multiple decisions. When multiple decisions are activated, implemental mindsets weakens commitment which decreases likelihood of executing decisions. For example, they show that implemental mindset facilitates the decision to carry out virtuous activities such as eating healthy, only when participants were not committed to additional activities.

Keinan and Kivetz examine consumption of unusual and extreme experiences, such as staying at freezing-ice hotels. They propose that choosing these options is driven by a productivity mindset, i.e., a desire to use time productively. In a series of studies they demonstrate the impact of a productivity mindset on choice of collectable (unusual, aversive or extreme) options. They show that priming consumers with a productivity mindset increases the choice of collectable experiences and examine the process underlying this effect.

Khan and Dhar propose a distinction between a highlighting vs. a balancing mindset that provides a framework for understanding how a prior task leads to consistency versus contrast in subsequent behavior. They propose and demonstrate across a series of studies that when an initial task activates a self-concept it leads to a highlighting mindset, which subsequently guides consistent behavior. However, when an initial task activates a self-concept and establishes credentials for it, it leads to a balancing mindset that causes subsequent choices to contrast from the initial ones.

Finally, Maimaran and Simonson propose an integrative framework based on a distinction between bold and timid mindsets to explain and predict choice behavior across a wide range of problems. Specifically, they propose that some options represent more ‘timid’ choices that are associated with no risk-taking and convenient behavior (e.g., compromise, safe and standard options), whereas other options represent more ‘bold’ choices which are associated with standing for one’s beliefs and taking risks (e.g., extreme, risky and unique options). Across several studies they demonstrate this distinction between choice options and show that the tendency to choose a more bold or timid option is affected by consumers’ bold or timid mindsets.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Following Through on Decisions: The Costs and Benefits of Implemental Mindsets”
Amy Dalton, Duke University
John Lynch, Duke University
Stephen Spiller, Duke University

Seventy years of research shows that despite good intentions, most decisions are not acted on. Our main focus in this research is on a strategy that is supposed to help people do a better job at following through with their decisions—namely, forming implementation intentions (Gollwitzer 1999). Implementation intentions are plans that specify the procedures by which a decision will be implemented and the circumstances under which these behaviors will be executed. Research has shown that this specific planning has very large effects on following through with decisions. For instance, in one study, college students all made the decision to write a report over winter break. Some students simply committed to the decision, while other students also formed implementation intentions—they decided in advance when and where they would write the report. Even though the two groups of students said that they were equally committed to the decision, the group with an implemental mindset was much more likely to write the report (Gollwitzer & Brandstätter 1997).

The extant literature has looked at the benefits of an implemental mindset in the context of acting on a single decision. But most of us are juggling multiple commitments and jobs. This raises the question of how successful the implementation intention technique would be to accomplish multiple things we decide to do. In our research, we conjecture that it is less likely that an implemental mindset would benefit individuals who have decided to carry out a number of activities (e.g., a daily to-do list) vs. a single activity (e.g., tidy up).

To test whether decision follow through depends on the adoption of an implemental mindset, we compared participants who simply made a decision to carry out a behavior to participants who made this same decision but with an implemental mindset i.e., they went beyond committing to a decision and specified when, where, and how they would act on their decision. Moreover, some participants planned (or not) how to act on a single decision, while others planned (or not) how to act on multiple decisions. This second manipulation allows to tests whether the benefit of adopting an implemental mindset attenuate in a multiple decision context.

Several experiments support our main hypothesis that individuals are more likely to follow through with decisions in an implemental mindset, provided they adopt this mindset to act on a single decision rather than multiple decisions. Our first experiment demonstrates this effect by replicating and extending the procedures of Brandstatter et al. (2001). All participants made a decision
to respond particularly fast to a certain number or to a set of 3 numbers, and to do so while performing a second computer-based task. The difference between participants in the implementation intentions versus control conditions was that the former group made a resolution to respond particularly fast when their given number(s) appeared, and the latter group mentally prepared themselves by writing their number(s) down 25 times. Both reaction time data and accuracy data revealed that an implemental mindset helped participants who had decided to respond quickly to a single number, but did not help those who had decided to respond quickly to multiple numbers.

In another study, we examined decisions to carry out virtuous activities, such as eating healthily or tidying up. Some participants simply decided to carry out these activities over the course of a week, whereas others supplemented this decision with implementation intentions. Moreover, while some carried out a single activity, other participants committed to multiple activities. Again, we found that the benefit of an implemental mindset broke down among participants who adopted this mindset to act on multiple decisions. We also found that commitment mediated this effect. That is, among participants with multiple activities to carry out, adopting an implemental mindset significantly weakened commitment to their decisions, and this drop in commitment spoiled the benefits associated with an implemental mindset. Implemental mindsets also affected decision follow through by suppressing commitment to alternative activities (i.e., activities that participants did not decide to pursue in the context of the study). However, this inhibitory process was weakened when an implemental mindset was adopted for multiple decisions.

To summarize, the current studies explore two factors that influence the probability that one follows through on a decision once made. These factors are (1) whether or not one adopts an implemental mindset, and (2) the number of decisions for which one adopts an implemental mindset. We show that an implemental mindset improves decision follow-through among individuals acting on a single decision, but not multiple decisions. This occurs because implemental mindsets alter commitment when multiple decisions are to be acted on.

“Productivity Mindset and the Consumption of Collectable Experiences”  
Anat Keinan, Harvard University  
Ran Kivetz, Columbia University

“Man is so made that he can only find relaxation from one kind of labor by taking up another.” Anatole France

“Finally, a to-do list you’ll really want to do.” Advertisement for Mohegan Sun hotel, casino and spa

Recent marketing trends suggest that many consumers are attracted to unusual and aversive consumption experiences and choose vacations, leisure activities, and celebrations that provide low predicted and experienced utility. A fascinating example is the increasing popularity of Ice Hotels, where visitors sleep on beds made of ice in frigid temperature of 25°F. A similar trend is observed in restaurants that are trying to attract consumers by offering unusual entrees and desserts. Such gastronomic innovations include tequila-mustard sorbet, bacon-flavored ice cream, and chocolate truffles with vinegar and anchovies.

Why do consumers desire these unusual consumption experiences, and voluntarily engage in activities that are uncomfortable, unnecessary, and even aversive? The sensation-seeking literature has tried to explain this as an “irrational” preference, suggesting that consumers seek unusual experiences because they provide immediate pleasure. This literature is premised on the notion that such consumption is counterproductive and reflects myopic, impulsive, and spontaneous tendencies and individuals.

We challenge the assumptions of the sensation-seeking literature and propose that there is something farsighted and purposeful in this seemingly irrational behavior. The present research demonstrates that consumers derive utility from collecting new experiences and “checking off” items on their “experiential check list” (or “experiential CV”). We explain this phenomenon by the continual striving of many consumers to use time efficiently and productively. This desire to constantly improve oneself and achieve is so powerful that it not only affects consumers’ performance in achievement settings, but can also influence their consumption and leisure preferences and non-vocational choices. By collecting memorable experiences, consumers obtain a sense of accomplishment and progress, and enhance their self-worth.

Consistent with this proposition, we show that the consumption of collectable experiences is driven (and intensified) by productivity mindset. The studies demonstrate that priming productivity and time efficiency, or creating a desire to correct unproductive usage of time, enhances the preference for unusual and collectable experiences. Furthermore, the studies show that farsighted and planned consumers, who are concerned about time efficiency and productivity, are more likely to desire collectable experiences. Such consumers measure their own worth in terms of productivity and accomplishment and are inclined to see all situations (including consumption and leisure choices) as opportunities to be productive and build their “experiential CV.”

A series of nine studies examined the relationship between productivity mindset and the consumption of collectable experiences. We begin with a pilot study that demonstrates consumers’ tendency to choose unusual and even aversive consumption experiences. We show that consumers choose experiences that they predict to be less pleasurable. This study also provides initial evidence suggesting that such choices are motivated by a desire to create special memories.

We then report a series of studies that explain this phenomenon using the constructs of productivity mindset and collectable experiences. Studies 1a and 1b examine the effect of priming productivity mindset on the choice of collectable experiences. Study 2 investigates the effect of priming the collection of physical items on vacation preferences, and demonstrates the similarity between collecting items and collecting (intangible) experiences. The study examines the conditions under which consumers spontaneously mention collectable characteristics when describing desirable vacations.

Study 3 examines the effect of a need to correct unproductive use of time on a real choice of a familiar vs. exotic restaurant. Study 4 explores how the need for productivity affects preferences for retirement activities and demonstrates that collecting experiences is related to consumers’ sense of identity. We show that high achievement motivation consumers, who view productivity as central to their identity, tend to seek leisure activities that provide a sense of progress and purpose, and hence consume collectable experiences.

Whereas studies 1-4 examine individual differences that are measured using self-reports, studies 5a and 5b, employ observational measures of “productivity mindset,” such as consumers’ tendency to set their watch fast and use their waiting for a train productively. We find that consumers, who tend to set their watch faster or try to use their waiting time productively, are more likely...
to choose consumption experiences that are collectable (e.g., memorable vacations and unusual birthday celebrations).

We conclude with a field study that was conducted at Times Square on New Year’s Eve. The study explores the effect of increasing the collectability and memorability of aversive experiences. This tendency to prefer memorable but less pleasant experiences is part of a broader phenomenon that we define as “memory management.” In addition to testing the proposed conceptualization, we examine alternative explanations, involving such factors as misprediction of hedonic experiences and present-oriented sensation-seeking.

“Reconciling Consistency and Contrast in Sequential Choices”
Uzma Khan, Stanford University
Ravi Dhar, Yale University

Most consumer choices follow other choices and decisions. However, there is little consensus on when an initial task leads to consistency versus contrast in subsequent decisions. For example, recent choice research has shown that after expressing their better natures in an initial task, people are more likely to self-indulge in subsequent choices (Khan & Dhar, 2006, cf. Monin & Miller, 2001). However, these effects are inconsistent with other findings in social and cognitive psychology showing that an initial task causes people to act consistently in subsequent tasks (Bargh et al., 1996, Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). For example, LeBoeuf et al. (2007) primed college students with scholarly (socialite) identities in initial tasks and showed that they subsequently chose scholarly (social) magazines over social (socially) ones.

The present research offers a framework to understand when and which prior tasks guide consistent subsequent behavior rather than lead to contrast. As per Dhar and Simonson’s (1999) characterization, we propose that an initial task can lead to either a balancing or a highlighting mindset, which subsequently leads to mindset-consistent behavior. We distinguish between two types of tasks and propose that an initial task that activates a self-concept leads to highlighting mindset, which guides consistent subsequent choices. Whereas, an initial task that activates a self-concept and establishes credentials for it, by providing evidence of progress towards it, leads to a balancing mindset and thus inconsistent choices later. Four studies illustrate our idea.

In Study 1, participants chose between a gift-certificate to a bookstore and an equally priced gift-certificate to a restaurant in three between-subject conditions. The former was pretested to be more scholarly than the latter. In the control, prior to this choice participants unscrambled some unrelated words. The second condition primed a highlighting mindset by activating a scholarly self-concept. Specifically, prior to the gift-certificate choice, participants wrote why learning was important to students at their university. In the third condition, instead of writing about the importance of learning, participants indicated some recent activities (including classes) that added to their own learning. This manipulation primed a balancing mindset by activating a scholarly self-concept and at the same time providing evidence of scholarship. Consistent with our theorizing, participants were more likely to balance and choose a restaurant gift-certificate (65%) after writing about their own learning compared to the control (41%; $\chi^2=4.2, p<0.05$). However, only 35% chose a restaurant gift-certificate in the highlighting mindset, i.e., after writing about importance of learning.

Study 2 provides a conceptual replication of the role of progress in highlighting and balancing mindsets. We primed an academic self-concept by asking people to think about either their own or someone else’s academic activities. Other’s academic activities are likely to prime a highlighting mindset by activating scholarly self-concept without providing evidence of progress towards it and will therefore lead to scholarly subsequent choices. In contrast, thinking of one’s own academic activities will not only activate a scholarly self-concept but will also provide evidence of scholarship hence leading to a balancing mindset, which will subsequently lead to less scholarly choices. Results were as predicted. Compared to the control (55.6%), significantly more chose a Cosmopolitan (less scholarly option) over a Newsweek (scholarly option) in the balancing mindset (76.7%; $\chi^2=4.39, p<0.05$). Moreover, choice of the Cosmopolitan was less than the control in the highlighting mindset (34.9%; $\chi^2=3.79, p=0.05$).

Self-affirmation research has shown that people’s defensive ness (in face of a threatened self-image) reduces if they are self-affirmed in totally unrelated domains (Steele 1988). Similarly, Study 3 shows that a balancing mindset influences choices across different domains as long as the initial task provides progress on an important dimension of one’s self-concept. In a between-subject design, participants either wrote an essay on a value that was most important or least important to them (Sherman et al. 2000). Control participants wrote an unrelated essay. Finally, everyone decided whether to buy/not-buy a concert ticket for $50. Results show that compared to the control (61%), significantly more participants balanced and chose to buy the concert ticket after writing about their most important value (89%; $\chi^2=7.29, p<0.05$) but not after writing about their least important value (53%; $\chi^2=0.33, p=0.57$). This study suggests that a balancing mindset initiated by progress in one domain can impact choices in unrelated domains if the initial progress is on self-relevant dimensions.

Study 4 shows that the ease with which an initial task establishes credentials towards activated self-concept determines which mindset gets activated. Our findings contribute to work on sequential choices and to research on prime-to-behavior link by proposing a framework to explain when initial tasks lead to consistency vs. contrast.

“The Bold – Timid Divide in Consumer Choice”
Michal Maimaran, Stanford University
Itamar Simonson, Stanford University

In consumer decision making research the focus tends to be on studying individual phenomena, such as identifying conditions affecting preference for compromise options (e.g., Simonson 1989; Drolet 2002), low risk options (e.g., Thaler & Johnson 1990), or unique options (Maimaran & Wheeler, forthcoming). However, a closer examination suggests that there are some basic similarities in the options consumers face in seemingly unrelated choice problems. For example, in some respects, choosing an extreme option can be seen as related to choosing a risky gamble, a unique option, and a hedonic option. Similarly, compromise options, safe options, standard, and utilitarian options have common features and reflect related choice tendencies.

In this research we try to identify such cross-problem similarities and the manner in which they correspond to particular consumer mindsets. By doing so we attempt to offer more parsimonious explanations to seemingly unrelated phenomena and identify factors that moderate choice behavior across different problem types. Building on distinctions previously discussed in the literature, including regulatory focus (e.g., Higgins 1998; Chernev 2004), uniqueness vs. conformity motivations (e.g., Snyder & Fromkin 1977; Simonson & Nowlis 2000), and arousal seeking (e.g., Mehrabian & Russell 1973), we propose that some options represent more ‘bold’ choices, and some represent more ‘timid’
choices. Bold options are unconventional, distinctive with respect to the choice set and are self expressive. Based on this definition of ‘bold’ choice behavior, we refer to extreme, risky, hedonic, innovative, unique, high-price high-quality, mixed-value and action-oriented options as the ‘bold’ choice options. In contrast to this ‘bold’ choice behavior, other choice options represent more ‘timid’ choice behavior, which in turn is associated with conventional, bland (i.e., dull or boring), non-expressive behavior. Timid choice options include compromise, standard, sure-gains, utilitarian, traditional, low-price low-quality, all-average and inaction-oriented options.

We further propose a parallel distinction between bold and timid mindsets, which in turn affect the type of chosen option (‘bold’ vs. ‘timid’). A bold mindset is associated with a desire to engage in unconventional or more meaningful behaviors, and to take a stand. The ‘timid’ mindset, on the other hand, is associated with ordinary, conventional behavior and with a desire to fit in. Consumers’ mindset, which is affected by situational cues, affects their choice between bold and timid options. When in a ‘bold’ (‘timid’) mindset, consumers are more likely to choose ‘bold’ (‘timid’) options across different problem types in order to maintain this mindset and to fulfill the goals associated with it. In five studies we demonstrate this distinction between bold and timid options and the corresponding mindsets, showing that the same situational cue has the same effect across different problem types.

In Study 1 (N=58) we ask participants to rate choices that previous participants supposedly made on four scales: boldness, self-expressiveness, timidity, and conventionality. We find that indeed the options we define as ‘bold’ (extreme, risky gambles, unique, hedonic, innovative, mixed-value, and HP/Q) are rated as more bold, more self-expressive, less conventional and less timid than the options we define as ‘timid’ (compromise, sure gains, standard, utilitarian, traditional, all-average and LP/Q).

In Study 2 (N=161), we find that priming the ‘boldness’ mindset leads to more bold decisions. Specifically, using sentence unscrambling task, we primed participants with ‘bold’, ‘timid’, or neutral words. Participants then made a total of 9 choices among various products (between compromise and extreme options, between sure-gains and risky gambles and between hedonic and utilitarian products). Across all problem types, we find that those primed with ‘bold’ words were more likely to make ‘bold’ choices (i.e., chose more extremes, risky and hedonic options), compared to those in the ‘control’ and ‘timid’ conditions, which in turn did not differ.

Studies 3-5 examine the effect of choosing first the choice domain on the making of bold decisions. We propose that choosing the choice domain can lead to a bold mindset by triggering a desire to express the self when making later a selection within this chosen domain. As a consequence, we predict that when consumers first choose in which domain they want to make choices, they will later make more bold choices in this domain. To test this prediction, in Study 3 (N=231), about half of the participants first chose the domain to make a choice in. Participants in the control condition only made choices within some of these domains. We find that across the six problem types, participants who chose in their chosen category were more likely than those in the control condition to choose ‘bold’ options, namely mixed-value, unique, risky, extremes, hedonic and HP/Q. The effect holds also when controlling for products knowledge and expertise. In Study 4 (N=346), we find that this ‘choose category’ effect is strengthened after a time delay, suggesting that this effect operates through a motivational route. Finally, in Study 5 (N=225) we find across four problem types that the choose-category effect is eliminated when the ‘bold’ option is framed as the status quo option, and thus presumably is no longer perceived as bold.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that certain manipulations, which induce bold or timid mindset, have the same effect on choice behavior across many different problem types. In our next studies we gain further insights into the process of inducing these mindsets and their impact on choice behavior. For example, we have preliminary data suggesting that when consumers first have an opportunity to express themselves (by drawing a picture of themselves or by writing about themselves) they are then more likely to choose bold options (risky gambles, unique options and extremes).

REFERENCES


