The “Sticky Choice” Bias in Sequential Decision-Making

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Consumers often encounter product information in stages. Sometimes new information favors an option that was not favored by the initial information set. Because choices are based on available information, new information may challenge an earlier choice. In response, consumers might be expected to switch to an option favored by new information. However, we show that expressing an initial decision produces a “sticky choice” bias; consumers who make sequential choices are less likely than those who make a single choice to ultimately choose an option favored by new information. In this research, we aim to show that “sticky choice” bias is caused by consistency-seeking across repeated decisions.

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Consumers often encounter product information in stages rather than all at once. Sometimes new information favors an option that was not favored by the initial information set. Because the basis for a choice is restricted to whatever information is available at the time, new information may challenge a choice that was predicated on earlier information. In response, consumers might be expected to switch to the option favored by new information rather than sticking to their original selection.

To illustrate, consider two consumers with identical preferences deciding between dessert options at a restaurant (cheesecake or tiramisu). Consumer A reviews the dessert menu and selects cheesecake. After taking the order, the waiter mentions that tiramisu (the non-selected option) is the restaurant’s specialty and asks whether she would like to reconsider her choice. Consumer A must now decide whether to stick to her original choice (cheesecake) or switch to the option favored by the new information (tiramisu). In contrast, Consumer B reads the same dessert menu, but is informed by the waiter that tiramisu is the restaurant’s specialty prior to placing her order.

Several divergent predictions could be made about the final decision outcomes for the above scenarios. Since the same set of information was available in both scenarios, Consumers A and B might be equally likely to choose the option favored by the new information (tiramisu). Alternatively, Consumer A could be more likely than Consumer B to choose the favored option. The basis for this claim is that people often experience regret immediately after making an initial choice because other high utility options have just been sacrificed (Carmon and Ariely 2000). As a result, when new information favors the foregone option, individuals in a repeated choice task may be extremely motivated to switch. Another possibility is that Consumer A could be less likely than Consumer B to choose the favored option. The theory behind this notion is that the mere expression of an initial choice creates a “sticky choice” bias so that the final decision is biased toward the initially selected option, even when new information favors another option. Our research provides evidence supporting the last prediction—that consumers who make sequential choices are less likely than those who make a single choice to ultimately choose an option that is favored by new information.

We identify three antecedents that could generate the “sticky choice” bias in repeated decisions: reevaluation of initial information, discounting of new information, and consistency-seeking across repeated decisions. First, the act of expressing a choice may alter the perception or evaluation of the initial set of information (i.e., prior to the provision of any new information). Perhaps consumers who make an initial choice assess alternatives or weight attributes differently than those who do not make an initial choice. Additionally, choosing itself may make one’s preferences more certain or salient. The notion that choice affects evaluations of one or more members of the original option set is supported in the literature (Botti and Iyengar 2004) and consistent with research on mere-possession (Sen and Johnson 1997), loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 1984), and the endowment effect (Thaler 1980).

A second explanation for a “sticky choice” bias is that the act of selecting an option may cause new information that challenges the initial choice to be processed incompletely or less discriminately than it would have been otherwise. Brand loyalty research has demonstrated attentional blocking of new information within a consumer learning context (van Ossewaard and Alba 2000) but has focused primarily on blocked associations of specific attributes. Even if new information is processed thoroughly, it may be discounted to resolve cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) or biased by confirmatory reasoning (Klayman 1995, Chernev 2001).

Finally, the “sticky choice” bias may arise from the repeated choice context itself; consumers who make an initial selection may demonstrate persistence in choice that is driven by desire for consistency or resistance to change rather than by differential information processing. Behavioral consistency describes the tendency of individuals to regulate actions—and, we would argue, choices—so as to be consistent with prior behavior and choices (Funder and Colvin 1991). Resistance to change suggests that an earlier choice prompts a tendency towards inertia (Arkes, Kung, and Hutzel 2002) or maintaining the status quo (Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988).

Across four experiments, we attempt to demonstrate the “sticky choice” bias and isolate its underlying mechanism(s). In experiment 1, we compare the choice shares of two options in a scenario where all participants receive the same set of information. Participants begin by setting attribute values so as to equate their preference for two products. Then, some participants choose between the two products and other participants do not. Next, new information about a third attribute is provided to all participants that clearly favors one option. Finally, participants make their final decision between the two products based on the complete set of information. We find that the final decision outcome of participants who express an initial choice is biased toward the initially-selected option (relative to those who make a single choice after all the information is available). In the remaining experiments, our goal is to show that the “sticky choice” bias occurs when consumers seek consistency across repeated decisions, even after controlling for changes in the evaluation of initial and new information.

Overall, this research demonstrates the robustness of choice consistency in a sequential decision context even in the presence of contradictory information. We provide evidence that when new information favors an option that was not favored by the initial information, the final decision of consumers who express an initial choice is biased toward the initially-selected option relative to consumers who make a single choice after complete information is available. We aim to attribute this “sticky choice” bias to consistency-seeking across repeated decisions.

References