Feast Or Famine: How Expectations Polarize Judgments of Ambiguous Alternative Set Sizes

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This research explores how expectations influence judgments of choice-set size. Two online experiments illustrate that limited or extensive set-size expectations have little effect on perceptions of actually limited or extensive sets, yet expectations significantly influence reactions to more ambiguous moderate sets. Participants expecting sparse sets view a moderate set as complete and overwhelming with low choice confidence, similar to their perceptions of extensive sets. Participants expecting an extensive set view the same moderate set as incomplete and restricted but have high confidence, similar to their limited set perceptions. When external cues resolve moderate set-size ambiguity, expectation effects are significantly attenuated.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13556/volumes/v35/NA-35

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The current proliferation of online storefronts and inventory customization techniques make judgments of choice set size increasingly difficult. As choice set size becomes ambiguous, the role of expectations in determining consumers’ actual set size perceptions becomes increasingly important. This paper explores into how set-size expectations impact set-size judgments for various-sized alternative sets, and how the role of expectations is constrained to ambiguous sets where expectations serve as the major cue for set-size judgments. Are judgments of variety malleable, or does objective experience dominate once consumers are presented with the actual consideration set?

We propose that expectations are especially important when it is difficult to objectively judge the size of the choice set. When a choice set is truly limited and sparse, or overwhelmingly extensive, the reality of the choice set should overpower any incorrect expectations and the set size should be perceived accurately. In contrast, a moderately-sized set is at neither size extreme, and thus more difficult to judge. Expectations, then, can serve as a highly salient cue with which ambiguous choice sets can be evaluated.

Prior research suggests that expectations tend to negatively bias shopping experiences, and expectations tend towards contrast rather than assimilation, especially when the expectations are directly relevant to the target category. In light of these findings, we propose that when consumers are presented with a limited or extensive choice set, however, expectations will have no effect on set-size judgments. But when consumers are presented with a moderate alternative set, set size judgments will exhibit expectation contrast regardless of whether the expectations were for a limited or extensive set. In short, the reactions to a moderate alternative set given prior expectations should follow a “mirrored” pattern: consumers expecting a large set should perceive a moderate set as similar to a limited set, while consumers expecting a limited set should perceive a moderate set similarly to an extensive set.

To test these propositions, an online choice study was conducted using choice sets of digital cameras at a fictitious online electronics store. Expectations were manipulated by telling participants to expect either a very limited or very extensive set, then participants presented with a choice set of either four, twelve, or twenty-four cameras. Six separate websites were created to ensure that subjects did not see the stimuli from other conditions, and attribute scores ensured no camera was strictly dominant. After choosing a camera, participants entered measures as to how restrictive and overwhelming they perceived the set to be, as well as measures of set completeness and error likelihood.

An ANOVA revealed a main effect for expectations on the outcome variables. Participants who expected an extensive set viewed their alternative sets as significantly more incomplete, more restrictive, less overwhelming, and felt they were significantly less likely to make an error in choice than participants who expected a sparse set. So overall, extensive expectation participants felt their sets were more limiting, while limited expectation participants felt their sets were more extensive.

The analysis also revealed an important significant expectation by set-size interaction effect. Consistent with propositions, the effect of expectations is largely confined to the moderate set size. When the actual set size was limited or extensive, no significant differences were revealed between extensive and limited expectations conditions on any DV in planned-contrast t-tests. When the actual set-size was moderate, however, those expecting a limited set viewed the moderate set as significantly more overwhelming, less restrictive, and more complete, but found the choice more difficult and were more concerned that they had chosen suboptimally when compared with those expecting an extensive set.

The results support the propositions: expectations of set size significantly affect ambiguous set perceptions, but have little effect when the presented set is actually limited or extensive. The ambiguous set appears to disconfirm expectations regardless of whether they were for an extensive or limited set; those expecting a limited set view the moderate set as extensive while those expecting an extensive set view the moderate set as limited. This carries beyond perceptions of the set, and impacts judgments of choice difficulty, frustration, and error likelihood.

In order to attempt to tease apart ambiguity from set size, a follow-up study utilized only the moderate level of alternatives. Online digital camera choice sets were retained as the stimuli. Expectations were manipulated by telling the participants to expect a limited set, a sparse set, or telling them nothing. Ambiguity was then manipulated by introducing a set size descriptor to the top of the camera set labeled as limited, labeled as extensive, or not labeled.

An ANOVA reveals that participants in the extensive set descriptor condition perceived the moderate choice set as significantly more overwhelming and significantly less restrictive than participants in the limited set descriptor condition regardless of expectations. Both the limited and extensive set descriptor conditions were also each marginally different from the no descriptor control condition in the expected directions. In contrast, the difference between the limited and extensive set expectation conditions for feeling restricted or overwhelmed by the set size was only significant in the no set descriptor condition. When a set descriptor was present, participants rated the set in line with the descriptor and expectations had no significant effect upon set size judgments. These results are consistent with the proposition that expectations only play a role in set-size evaluations when the set is ambiguous. By giving participants an external size descriptor, expectation effects were reduced to insignificance.

In summary, expectations of limited or extensive set sizes had little effect on evaluations of actually limited or extensive sets. But when the choice set was of ambiguous size, participants expecting either a limited or extensive set exhibited expectation contrast rather than assimilation. Extensive expectations made the moderate set appear limited while limited expectations made the moderate set appear extensive. A second study focused on the moderate set size, and showed that decreasing the ambiguity of the set by directly labeling it as sparse or extensive significantly decreased the effect of expectations on set-size evaluations.

References


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