Choice With Inference Is Different From Choice Without Inference

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In three studies it is shown that encouraging consumers to make explicit inferences about missing attributes leads to significantly different choices compared to choices made without being asked to make inferences. Being prompted to make explicit inferences reduced the tendency to draw on the availability (absence) of an important attribute as a reason for (not) choosing an option; decreased indecisiveness (not choosing any options); increased the attractiveness of chosen options and reduced the perceived difficulty of choices. The inferences made for different attributes of different brands were all interrelated suggesting a more complex inference making process in multi-attribute multi-product choice sets.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Products and services are seldom described completely; therefore, consumers often need to form inferences that go beyond the information given (Kardes et al. 2004). Some researchers have argued consumers do not form inferences in many situations even if it is logical to do so (Simmons and Lynch 1991). Others have suggested ways that consumers make inferences such as using other available attributes for the given brand (within-brand processing) or comparing the same attribute among other brands in the choice set (across-brand processing). In one stream of research, respondents were typically given a single product option with a number of attributes, one of which was missing. The inferences they provided for the missing value were compared with available attributes within-brand and the inference making processes were modeled based on the existing information about the target product (e.g., Johnson and Levin 1985). In another stream of research, participants were given multiple choice options one of which had a missing attribute. Participants’ inferences for that missing value were compared to the available values for the same attribute in other choice options (e.g. Huber and McCann 1982; Ross and Ceryer 1992).

Both streams of research developed important insights for inference making, such as the models that explain the effects of available attributes and the discounting of inferences. On the other hand, an implicit assumption has been that forcing participants to make explicit inferences leads to the same process as not prompting decision makers to infer missing attribute values. Would people make the same choices if they were not required to make explicit inferences? The focus of past studies has been on the inferred values solicited from research participants, whereas the effects of missing information and being asked to make inferences about them on decision outcomes have largely been overlooked. How does making inferences about missing attributes change consumers’ perceptions of the options in a choice set and affect the final decisions compared to when they are not required to make inferences during their choice process? Do explicit inferences make it harder or easier for consumers to choose? Does prompting inferences lead to a more analytical processing style? How do consumers make inferences if there are multiple missing attributes for multiple product options?

Another potentially important factor that has not been considered in the inference making literature is that consumers in the market place usually have the option of not selecting any of the available alternatives. Do inferences affect indecisiveness (lack of choice)? These are the questions this manuscript seeks to address.

Our research is an important attempt to discover the differences of choice made with prompted inferences from choice without prompted inferences and investigate the above questions. Drawing on the inference making and the missing information literature, we conduct three experimental studies to investigate the effects of multiple inferences in multi-attribute, multi-product choice environments. We also compare the forced choice situations that dominate the literature with more realistic conditions in which a no choice option is available. Our findings contribute to past literature by providing a better understanding of the inference making process in more complicated choice situations and by demonstrating the important consequences of inferences for consumer choices.

In study 1, missing attribute information and inference making were manipulated. The choice sets consisted of product-attribute matrices for three product categories. A different attribute was missing for each of the three options in all product categories. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions. Those in the Non-prompted Inference condition were simply asked to make choices, whereas those in the Prompted Inference condition were asked to make inferences for missing attribute values before making choices. Results indicated that choices made after inferences were significantly different from choices made without inferences. Assigning different values to missing attributes significantly decreased perceived choice difficulty, increased attractiveness of chosen options and decreased the focus on availability (absence) of important attributes as a reason for (not) choosing particular options. In addition, inferences made across brands for different attributes were significantly correlated with each other suggesting that participants have used a combination of within-brand and across-brand processing strategy.

In study 2, an identical design was used with one exception. Besides the three options in each choice set, a “no choice option” was included, such that participants also had the alternative of not choosing any of the options as in real purchase situations. Results showed that being asked to make explicit inferences significantly decreased the selection of the “no choice option” (indecisiveness) as well as reducing perceived difficulty of decisions for all product categories. Finally, study 3 replicated the findings in the previous studies and verbal protocols collected in study shed light into the underlying process and provided more direct support for predictions.

Our research has an important role in integrating past studies on inference making based on alternative-based and attribute-based processing. We used a more complex choice environment with multiple missing attributes for multiple brands from a diverse set of product categories. Inferences about missing attributes are not only affected by other available attributes for the same brand and by the same attribute for different brands but also by other attributes for the other brands in the choice set. In addition to providing a better understanding of the nature of the inference making process, a major contribution of our research is that it demonstrates the important consequences of making explicit inferences. While our introduction of a no choice option increased the realism of decision context, more importantly, it allowed us to observe that making inferences reduced the tendency to select the no choice option. Given the prevalence of missing information in online shopping environments, there are important opportunities for marketers to manipulate choice sets or design advertising messages that encourage consumers to make inferences and thereby increase the probability of purchase decisions.

References


