Gender Differences in the Cognitive Organization of Spending Attitudes

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This applied study examines multidimensional cognitive maps of participants' shopping concepts in order to inform the design of more effective debt counseling messages. The study suggests that specific inter-attitudinal relationships among shopping-related concepts can provide the bases for more effective consumer help messages, and that these relationships are affected by gender. It is clear that a more complete picture of maladaptive consumer attitudes is necessary if programs are to develop that offer opportunities for real, lasting change.

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Gender Differences in the Cognitive Organization of Spending Attitudes
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This applied study, part of a larger ongoing project, examined Galileo cognitive maps of shopping concepts in men and women in order to inform the design of more effective debt counseling messages.

To study Galileo cognitive maps, a space containing attitude concepts that are relevant to the target population must be generated and analyzed. Several pilot studies were conducted to determine an appropriate set of shopping-related concepts to occupy such a space. Then, the final study employed Galileo spatial plot analysis and structural equation modeling to test the hypotheses about gender differences between the maps. The participants in this phase of the project were undergraduate students at a large eastern university.

Three hypotheses were tested:

H1: Men and women will possess different cognitive organizations of shopping-related concepts.
H2: When an individual receives a persuasive message directed toward a single concept, the force of that message will cause attitude change that will be reflected by motion in linked concepts.
H3: Gender will affect attitude change among linked concepts in a structure of shopping-related concepts.

So, the purpose of the study was two-fold: (1) to examine the effects of an inter-attitudinal structure upon attitude change for shopping-related concepts, and (2) to determine if gender affects such change. In order to induce attitude change, three persuasive messages differing only in their focal concept were employed. These focal concepts represented the categories of the first independent variable, Message target. The second independent variable was Gender. Finally, because there was a concern that some participants may have greater accessibility of the study good.

The primary dependent variable of the study was attitude. Magnitude estimation was used to measure attitudes. Consistent with Galileo mapping theory, an attitude was represented by the distance between a concept and things I like whereas an analogous evaluative believe was represented by the distance between a concept and good. It was also necessary to create one new dependent variable that captured the movement of the concepts in the study that were not targeted by any message. The existence of non-targeted concepts allowed examination of the indirect effect of the target message on concepts merely associated with the target concept.

The Galileo computer program V56 calculated the adjusted geometric mean distances among the nine experimental concepts which resulted in 2 sets of distances, one for men and one for women. When the distances were plotted together, a multidimensional cognitive space resulted. The program then rotated each space to the same orientation and transformed it to a least-squares best fit so that the spaces would be similarly aligned and visual comparison could be made between them to detect the changes across experimental conditions. Additionally, structural equation modeling determined the causal relationships between the variables of interest.

The Galileo results showed that, overall, the women’s cognitive space of shopping concepts was significantly smaller than the men’s, which corresponds with a greater liking of the shopping concepts overall (recall that smaller distances=more liking, greater distances=less liking). This was further supported by the results of a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) x 2 (Priming: priming vs. unprimed) x 3 (Message Target: shopping vs. clothes vs. food) analysis of variance on attitude toward shopping which found, as expected, that women like the shopping concepts significantly more (M=4.55, SD=.06) than do men (M=4.79, SD=.09), F (1, 177)=4.78, p<.05, η2=.02.