Attribute Order Effects on Consumer Judgment: the Role of Ideal Point Availability and Attribute Importance

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Bond et al. (2007) show that consumers’ initial disposition toward a product biases their evaluations of subsequent attributes (also known as the “information-distortion” effect). Our research extends this theory by proposing that the availability of a consumer’s ideal points for attributes and the relative importance of the attributes moderate this effect. Specifically, an important attribute will have a stronger distortion effect on subsequent attributes for consumers with (vs. without) ideal points for the attributes. In contrast, a trivia attribute will have a stronger effect on subsequent attributes for consumers without (vs. with) ideal points for the attributes.

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The primacy effect in a decision context refers to the fact that information appearing early in the sequence has a stronger effect on judgment than does subsequent information (e.g., Kardes and Herr 1990). One explanation to this effect is that individuals bias their interpretation of the subsequent information to cohere with the disposition evoked by the initial information (also known as the “information-distortion” effect). For example, Bond et al. (2007) found that consumers tend to form an initial disposition (e.g., like or dislike) toward a product based on a positive or negative attribute, and this disposition subsequently biases their evaluations of other attributes. This finding suggests that presenting positive (negative) attribute information early in the sequence increases (decrease) consumers’ favorability toward the product.

An underlying assumption of the above finding is that consumers’ initial disposition toward a product is installed by valenced attribute information. However, in many occasions product information is presented neutrally or is perceived to be neutral. Hence, an interesting question is whether neutral attribute information can also evoke an evaluative disposition that subsequently influences the interpretation of other attributes. Further, the two attributes used to install the initial disposition in Bond et al.’s (2007) study are both important attributes (e.g., functionality and price of a PAD). Thus, it is yet to know whether the disposition evoked by a trivial attribute can bias the evaluation of subsequent important attributes. In this research we propose that the impact of a target neutral attribute on the evaluation of other attributes depends on whether consumers have readily available preferences (or ideal points) for attributes and the relative importance of the target attribute. These propositions are explained in detail below.

When approaching a decision problem, some consumers have well articulated preferences for product attributes whereas others do not (Chernev 2003). For example, consumer A wants an MP3 player with a memory of at least 8GB, a battery that can last for at least 24 hours of audio play, and a price within the range of 200 dollars; whereas consumer B does not have specific requirements although acknowledging the importance of these attributes. Previous research suggests that the availability of ideal points influences consumers’ decision process (Chernev 2003). In particular, consumers with readily available preferences evaluate product alternatives in search of attributes that match and confirm these preferences. Therefore, when a target attribute, although presented neutrally, matches (does not match) a consumer’s ideal point for the attribute, it may lead to a positive (negative) predisposition that can influence the evaluation of subsequent attributes. However, this predisposition is only likely to have a strong effect on other attributes when the target attribute is perceived to be more important than or at least equally important as the subsequent attributes. In contrast, when consumers do not have specific requirements for attributes, the neutral target attribute is less likely to cause a strong evaluative disposition that can bias the interpretation of subsequent attributes. Therefore, we propose that:

**H1:** When a target neutral attribute is perceived to be more important than or at least equally important as other attributes presented later in the sequence, the neutral attribute will have a stronger distortion effect on other attributes for consumers with (vs. without) ideal points for attributes.

When the target neutral attribute is less important than the attributes presented later, consumers are likely to form a weak disposition toward the product regardless of the availability of ideal points. For consumers with readily available ideal points, a weak disposition may not bias their evaluation of other attributes because they will use the ideal points as a benchmark to judge these attributes and form strong evaluative opinions. However, for consumers without readily available ideal points, a weak preliminary disposition may still influence their evaluations of other attributes presented later as they do not have specific criteria to judge these attributes. Therefore, we propose that:

**H2:** When a target neutral attribute is perceived to be less important than other attributes presented later in the sequence, the neutral attribute will have a stronger distortion effect on other attributes for consumers without (vs. with) ideal points for attributes.

To test the above hypotheses, we conducted an experimental study using undergraduate students from a North American university. The study employed a 2(ideal point availability: available vs. not available) x 2(target attribute importance: important vs. less important) between-subject design. Participants were first given a decision scenario in which they needed to purchase an MP3 player as a gift for their friend. In the scenario, the ideal point availability and the relative importance of the target attribute were manipulated. Based on the established procedure of Bond et al. (2007), we used the stepwise evolution of preference (SEP) method to measure if the target attribute presented early in the sequence would 1) bias the evaluation of the subsequent attributes; 2) influence consumers’ purchase decision of the product; and 3) influence consumers’ confidence about their decisions. Furthermore, follow up studies have been designed to replicate the expected findings from the current experiment by using different products and decision scenarios.

Our research expects to contribute to the literature of information distortion in product judgment in several ways. First, previous research shows that consumers’ preliminary disposition toward a product can be evoked by valenced attribute information (Bond et al. 2007) or product comparison (Carlson, Meloy, and Russo 2006). However, we suggest such predispositions can also be installed by neutral attribute information. This extends the existing theory by generalizing the information-distortion effect to different judgment tasks. Second, prior research has primarily examined the information-distortion effect as a main effect. Little is known about the moderating factors that could lead to a more nuanced set of effects. This research aims to take our understanding about the information-distortion effect beyond the simple main effects by demonstrating key interactions and contingences in the contexts of product judgment.