The Effect of Option Number in Directional Comparison

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Past research has shown consumers focus on one option more than the other when they compare two options by attributes. They attune to focal option’s attributes and compare them with non-focal option. They prefer focal option more (less) when its attributes are attractive (unattractive). This is called “direction-of-comparison” effect. We examined the direction-of-comparison effect in situations where more than two options are considered. We drew implication from previous studies which suggest increasing option make the effect disappear because consumers cannot compare all specific attributes mentally. We, however, showed that the effect was not only sustainable but more prominent in multiple-option settings. We offered an explanation and tested the underlying mechanism.

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used in that particular situation, however, should not be influenced by people’s self-awareness. Two experiments investigated these possibilities.

Method

In experiment 1, participants were asked to evaluate a series of products under conditions in which their self-awareness was experimentally manipulated by placing participants in front of a mirror (for evidence of the effectiveness of this procedure, see Duval and Wicklund 1972). Participants were randomly assigned to six conditions of a 2 (high vs. low self-awareness) x 3 (music type: social vs. relaxing vs. none) design. The products they judged varied systematically in terms of the criteria used to evaluate them (hedonic vs. utilitarian) and the context in which they were used (social vs. non-social).

In the music conditions, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate how students do two things at the same time. They were listening to either the social or non-social relaxing music while reading a simple passage. After listening to the music for 3 minutes, they were asked to perform an ostensibly unrelated product evaluation task while the music was playing. On this pretense, they evaluated 14 products that pretested to vary in terms of the criteria normally used to judge them (hedonic vs. utilitarian) and the situational context in which they were typically used (social vs. non-social). After making these evaluations, participants reported their reactions to the music. In the no-music conditions, participants evaluated the products without the music playing.

Experimental design and procedures in experiment 2 were identical to those in experiment 1 except that participants evaluated a list of products that were typically used either in a social, or in a non-social relaxing environment.

Results

The results of both experiments confirmed our predictions. Participants reported being more likely to report imagining themselves using the products when they participated in front of a mirror (high self-awareness conditions). Furthermore, participants in both studies evaluated hedonic products more favorably in the presence of a mirror than in its absence, whereas their judgments of utilitarian products were unaffected. When social music was played, self-awareness increased evaluations of products that were normally used in a social environment, and when relaxing music was played, it increased evaluations of products that were normally used in a relaxing environment.

In combination, the results provided insight into the conditions in which consumers are likely to use their affective reactions as a basis for product evaluations, the impact of situational context on these evaluations, and the different ways that self-awareness can exert an influence on consumer judgments.

References


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Research shows that when consumers compare between two options based on their specific attributes, they pay more attention to one of the options (the “focal” option) than the other one (Dhar and Simonson 1992). They map attributes of the focal option onto the attributes of the non-focal option, and weight the unique attributes of the focal option more heavily than those of the non-focal option. Hence, they prefer the focal option more (less) when the unique attributes are favorable (unfavorable) (Houston, Sherman and Baker 1989). This is referred as the “direction-of-comparison” effect. The direction of comparison effect has only been demonstrated in experiments in which two alternatives were considered, and has not been generalized to a more realistic, multiple-option comparison settings (Sanbonmatsu, Kardes and Gibson 1991, Mantel and Kardes 1999, Houston and Sherman 1995, Houston, Sherman and Baker 1991). The purpose of our study is to investigate the direction of comparison effect in multiple-option comparison.

Past research has shown that the direction-of-comparison effect requires one to store the specific attributes of the available options in memory, such that they can later serve as a basis for an attribute-based comparison (Mantel and Kardes 1999). When specific attributes are not available in memory, no feature matching occurs between the focal option and the non-focal option, so the focal option is not preferred more (or less). When the number of alternatives increases, it becomes harder to store attribute information in memory. Feature matching among options is also less likely. If so, the direction-of-comparison effect should disappear as the option number increases. We, however, showed that this was not the case in 3 lab experiments and 1 field study. In experiment 1, we required participants to compare 2, 3, and 4 alternatives, respectively, and showed that the direction-of-comparison effect not only sustained, but became more and more apparent as the number of option increased from 2 to 4. We demonstrated the focal option was more likely to be chosen when the