Pulling-Up Or Pushing Down? Exploring Pro-Leader and Anti-Trailer Processing in Multi-Option Consumer Choices

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Tentative preferences that emerge during a binary choice cause consumers to bias their evaluations of new information to favor the currently preferred or leading option. This paper examines what happens to information evaluations when consumers make a choice between more than two options. Specifically, do decision makers evaluate new information to favor the leading option, or do they evaluate new information to disfavor the trailing (i.e., currently least preferred) option(s)? An initial experiment shows that individuals engage both in pro-leader and anti-trailer processing, and that these forms of biased processing increase as the number of options increases.

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Prior research has demonstrated that consumers distort new information to favor the option that is leading during a binary choice process (Carlson and Pearo 2004; Russo, Meloy and Medvec 1998). However, an unanswered question is whether and how consumers distort information in choices involving more than two options? Specifically, do decision makers evaluate new information to favor the leading option, to disfavor the trailing option(s), or do they do both? And what effect, if any, does the number of options in the consideration set have on how new information is evaluated? The current work seeks to address these questions.

Payne (1976) found that in multi-option settings, individuals quickly eliminate certain options from their consideration sets using limited information (see also Ordóñez, Benson, and Beach 1999). As such, the earliest focus in a choice process might be on eliminating options, perhaps by denigrating the trailing option(s). After the set is sufficiently reduced, processing to favor the leader may be the norm. As such, a primary objective of this work is to separate two types of processing: pro-leader and anti-trailer, and to determine if either or both dominate multi-option choice.

In pro-leader processing, respondents evaluate attribute information as overly favorable toward the option that is currently leading. Alternatively, anti-trailer processing involves the evaluation of new information as overly unfavorable toward the option that is trailing. The trailer is the option that was least preferred after seeing the previous piece of information. We test for both types of processing, as well as their onset, in an experimental study.

To examine the roles of pro-leader and anti-trailer processing in preferential choice, we traced not only how individuals processed new information, but we also tracked the relative strength of preference for each of the options throughout the choice process. Two decision contexts were used, restaurants and scholarship applicants. Restaurants represent a context in which individual preferences are more likely to drive the decision and the attributes used were more narrative. The scholarship scenario required that participants be more objective in their evaluations.

Participants and Design

The sample consisted of 244 students who received extra course credit for their research participation. Each was randomly assigned to one of twelve conditions. The manipulated factors were the number of available options (2, 4, or 6), the scenario (restaurants or scholarship applicants), and the order in which the attributes were presented (counter balanced forward or backward). Neither the scenario nor the information order had any impact on the results so they will not be discussed further.

Measures

Participants reviewed attribute information sequentially, where one page contained information for all of the options for that attribute. After reviewing the attribute information, participants gave two separate sets of responses. The first asked for an evaluation of each option using only the information on that page. Responses were captured on 9-point attractiveness scales (one for each option), where 1=“very unattractive” and 9=“very attractive”. The second set of responses captured current cumulative preferences based on all the information seen to that point. This was accomplished with a race track image, on which participants placed the names of the options on the track for the portion of the choice process (i.e., race) that had been completed so far. Since the choice process was divided into six attributes, the race track was divided into six equal length segments. After each attribute was reviewed, participants put the name of the leading option at the front of the segment and the names of the other options somewhere further behind on the race track. The relative positions of the options were used to assess which option(s) were leading, trailing, or in between after each attribute.

By computing mean evaluations for each option on attribute t, conditional on whether the option was leading, trailing, or neither on attribute t-1, we can assess whether individuals engage in pro-leader, anti-trailer, or both types of processing. That is, pro-leader (anti-trailer) processing occurs when evaluations of the leading (trailing) option are significantly higher (lower) than when this same option is not leading (trailing).

Results

The evidence reveals that participants engaged in both pro-leader processing (M=0.51, t(243)=7.87, p<.05) and in anti-trailer processing (M=0.42, t(243)=6.68, p<.01). Moreover, analysis of variance revealed that both pro-leader processing and anti-trailer processing increased as the number of options present in the choice set increased (pro-leader: F(2,232)=3.18, p<.05; anti-trailer: F(2,232)=4.56, p<.05). In other words, the greater the number of options being considered, the greater the tendency to support the leader and denigrate the trailer.

We used paired samples t-tests to assess the point at which (i.e., the serial position in the choice process where) each type of biased processing became significant. In the two-option case, the onset of pro-leader and anti-trailer processing were identical. In this case, biased processing occurred at the fourth attribute (t(58)=2.64, p<.05). In the four option case, pro-leader processing occurred earlier, on the third attribute (i.e., there was evidence of pro-leader processing on attribute three, four, five, and six, all p<.05), whereas anti-trailer processing did not appear until the fourth attribute (i.e., it existed for attributes four through six, all p<.01). In the six option case, pro-leader processing occurred even after just one attribute (all p<.01), while anti-trailer processing started with the third attribute (all p<.05).

Discussion

Participants engaged in both pro-leader and anti-trailer processing of new information, and the tendency to do so increased as the number of options increased. We did not find evidence to support the idea that consumers would use anti-trailer processing to eliminate