The Role of Common Features in Decision Conflict Resolution

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During decision conflict resolution, features that are shared among alternatives are thought to cancel out and not play any role in choice because they are non-diagnostic; only the unique features help the consumer make a decision. In this research, we specifically examine how features that are shared among alternatives affect decision difficulty. Our results indicate that common attributes do matter; they do not simply cancel out. Further, how common attributes matter seems to depend on the type of decision conflict. Under approach-approach conflict, common attributes enhance the perceived advantage; thereby increasing the ease in decision-making. However, under avoidance-avoidance conflict, common attributes seem to enhance the perceived disadvantage, thereby increasing decision difficulty.

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Abstract
During decision conflict resolution, features that are shared among alternatives are thought to cancel out and not play any role in choice because they are non-diagnostic; only the unique features help the consumer make a decision. In this research, we specifically examine how features that are shared among alternatives affect decision difficulty. Our results indicate that common attributes do matter; they do not simply cancel out. Further, how common attributes matter seems to depend on the type of decision conflict. Under approach-approach conflict, common attributes enhance the perceived advantage; thereby increasing the ease in decision-making. However, under avoidance-avoidance conflict, common attributes seem to enhance the perceived disadvantage, thereby increasing decision difficulty.

Introduction
Consider a consumer who faces a choice between two cars, car A and car B. Both the cars share a few bad features such as bad warranty, low horse-power, etc. However, each car has unique good features; car A has better fuel efficiency whereas car B is very safe. Such a decision creates an approach-approach conflict because the consumer is drawn towards both the alternatives. Alternatively, consumers face avoidance-avoidance conflict when they have to choose between two products that are equally unattractive. In the above example, consider both cars share a few good features such as good warranty, high horse-power, etc. However, each car has unique bad features; car A is not fuel efficient and car B is ranked low on safety. The literature argues that during such a conflict resolution process, the features that are shared among the alternatives cancel out and do not play a role in choice because they are non-diagnostic (Houston and Sherman 1995; Tversky 1972). The decision rests upon comparing only the unique features. Decisions that involve a comparison of only the good unique features (approach-approach conflict) are easier and take less time than those involving a comparison of only the bad features (avoidance-avoidance conflict).

In this research we question the assumption that common features cancel out and have no role to play in conflict resolution.

Decision Conflict and Decision Difficulty
Research shows that an approach-approach conflict takes less time and is easier to resolve than an avoidance-avoidance conflict. This has been verified in a number of experiments (Barker 1942; Chatterjee and Heath, 1995; Dhar and Nowlis 1999; Houston, Sherman, and Baker 1991; Hovland and Sears 1938; Sears and Hovland 1941; also see Anderson, 2003 for a review). The question of whether common features cancel out and play no role in the decision is an interesting one. Products often share a number of features with their competitor’s products and it is logical to assume that the common features should cancel out and not affect the outcome. In fact, prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and the information restructuring framework (Coupey 1994) argue that the common features are cancelled out by consumers before they evaluate the relative attractiveness of the products. However, recent research has shown that common features can affect choice (Chernev, 1997, 2001). For example, using the confirmatory reasoning framework (Klayman 1995; Lord, Lepper, and Ross 1979; Russo, Medvec, and Meloy 1996; Russo, Meloy, and Medvec 1998), Chernev (2001) showed that that when consumers have already established preferences and the common features shared between the products are attractive, consumers make choices that confirm their prior preferences. However, when the attributes are equally important or consumers have no prior preferences, common features seem to have no impact on preferences. Even if that is the case, we believe that common features may impact other decision process characteristics such as decision difficulty.

Hypothesis Development
Consider the case of a consumer who is deciding between two cameras that have better features than a previously viewed camera, which is out of stock. This situation creates an approach-approach conflict (Chatterjee and Heath, 1995). Although consumers might face decision conflict, it is much easier to make a choice in such a situation because both the products are equally attractive (Chatterjee and Heath, 1995; Dhar and Nowlis 1999; Houston, Sherman, and Baker 1991). Once the consumer realizes that both the cameras are attractive and develops a liking towards one of the products, the other features of the camera, albeit shared with the other camera, should strengthen the already established preference for the camera and make the decision easier (Chernev 2001; Russo, Medvec, and Meloy 1996; Russo, Meloy, and Medvec 1998). Hence, as the number of common features increase, the decision to choose one of the two attractive cameras becomes more and more easy.

H1: In an approach-approach conflict, decision-making becomes easier as the number of common features shared between the products increases.

Now consider the case of a consumer who is deciding between two cameras that have worse features than a previously viewed camera, which is unfortunately out of stock. This situation creates an avoidance-avoidance conflict (Chatterjee and Heath, 1995), making the decision very difficult. It is reasonable to suggest that the consumer will process the other features of the cameras to help make the decision. However, if the other features are shared, it would add further to the frustration and disappointment of not being able to break the tie. Thus, we propose that when consumers face two unattractive products, the common features will make the decision even more difficult.
H2: In an avoidance-avoidance conflict, decision-making increases in difficulty as the number of common features shared between the products increases.

We now describe study 1 that tests the hypotheses stated above.

Study 1: Effect of Common Features on Decision Difficulty
Eighty-two undergraduate college students participated in study 1 in exchange for a chance to win a $50 gift certificate from the university bookshop. Participants were exposed to either approach-approach or avoidance-avoidance conflict using product descriptions that were adapted from Chatterjee and Heath (1996). Common features were manipulated at four levels, zero common features, one common feature, two common features, and three common features. The principal dependent variable was decision difficulty which was measured by asking the participants the following three questions, “How simple was the task to evaluate the cameras (reverse-coded),” “how difficult was the task to evaluate the cameras,” and “how easy was the task to evaluate the cameras (reverse-coded).” All three questions were anchored at “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree.” The mean of the three questions was calculated to give a single measure of decision difficulty (Cronbach-alpha=0.94).

Results
Conflict type significantly affected decision difficulty (α=-1.14, p<.05). This indicates that approach-approach conflict is more difficult to resolve than avoidance-avoidance conflict, which is a surprising result. The number of common attributes also significantly affected decision difficulty (β=-0.52, p<.05). More importantly, the interaction was also statistically significant (β=0.99, p<.05). We found that under approach-approach conflict, the number of common attributes significantly affected decision difficulty (α=-0.47, p<.05). The negative significant coefficient suggests that as the number of common attributes increases, decision difficulty decreases. Thus, H1 received support. Under avoidance-avoidance conflict, the number of common attributes also significantly affected decision difficulty (α=0.22, p<.05). The positive significant coefficient suggests that as the number of common attributes increases, decision difficulty increases. Thus, H2 received support. Results of both hypotheses’ tests are unchanged when the importance ratings of all attributes, unique and common, are included in the model.

Discussion
Our results indicate that common attributes do matter; they do not simply cancel out leaving decision-making unaffected. Further, how common attributes matter seems to depend on the type of conflict in decision-making. When decision options are superior to an unavailable option (approach-approach conflict), common attributes enhance the perceived advantage even more and thereby increase the ease in decision-making. On the other hand, when decision options are inferior to an unavailable option (avoidance-avoidance conflict), common attributes seem to enhance the perceived disadvantage even more and thereby increase the discomfort in decision-making. Our findings indicate that assuming common attributes to be irrelevant can lead to incorrect conclusions about decision-making. Our results are promising and we intend to conduct further research to understand the role of attribute valence (both common and unique attributes can be positive vs. negative in valence) and consequences for the final decision (are some options more vs. less likely to get chosen).

References