When Choice Deferral Does (And Does Not) Generalize to Subsequent Decisions: a Metacognitive Analysis

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Past research has shown that when a choice feels difficult, consumers are likely to defer choice. We examine when such choice deferral does or does not generalize to related choice tasks. Generalization of deferral across tasks occurs when consumers attribute the initial difficulty to their own lack of expertise, thus rendering it relevant to all tasks in the same domain; generalization across tasks does not occur when consumers attribute the initial difficulty to attributes of the initial choice set.

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SESSION OVERVIEW
A growing body of evidence demonstrates that consumers’ judgments and preferences are not only based on cognitions, but are also influenced by their metacognitive experience. However, there is debate about the scope and extent of the effects of metacognitive experience. On the one hand, it could be argued that all judgments are characterized by some sort of metacognitive experience. Some judgments feel easier than expected, while others feel more difficult. This view suggests that the effects of metacognitive experience will be pervasive. On the other hand, it has been argued that the effects of metacognitive experience are moderated by naive theories and an attribution process. This view suggests that metacognitive experience will affect judgments only under specific situations. This symposium tries to address this debate by examining when and why metacognitive experiences affect consumers’ judgments and preferences. The four papers identify hitherto unexplored factors that moderate the effects of metacognitive experience.

The first paper by Labroo and Herzenstien looks at how consumer’s motivational orientation determines the impact of metacognitive difficulty on consumer preferences. The second paper by Cho and Schwarz examines when choice deferral caused by metacognitive difficulty of choice may or may not generalize to subsequent decisions. The third paper by Tormala, Henderson and Clarkson examines when easy (or fast) attitude generation positively affects attitude certainty and when it negatively affects attitude certainty. Finally, Thomas and Maitre examine whether repetition of a disfluent linguistic structure will mitigate or strengthen the effect of linguistic disfluency.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Complicated Lives of the Intrinsically Inclined: Why Some Seek Metacognitive Effort”
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Much research has focused on how feelings of ease are good and increase people’s preferences towards associated products. This occurs because people associate ease with familiarity and personal relevance; as personally relevant and familiar objects come to mind easily, people mistakenly reverse this association, to also infer that if a product is easy to think about it must necessarily be familiar (Schwarz 2004). Thus, even when feelings of ease arise independently of the characteristics of a product, the product feels more familiar, and people infer that it is personally relevant and more likeable. More recently, research has started to consider when feelings of effort might be good, and to suggest that the impact of such feelings might depend upon the naive theories that consumers bring to bear on their judgment. For example, when consumers consider why a product will help accomplish important goals, feelings of effort (vs. ease) associated with the product exert a positive effect on its preference—as people usually associate attaining goals with exerting effort and the most effective means and they mistakenly reverse this inference as well (Labroo & Kim 2009).

Building on this research, we argue that products that feel subjectively easy (vs. effortful) to process are preferred, as shown previously, but only if consumers are extrinsically motivated. Such consumers misattribute positive feelings of ease to product superiority and infer the product is more rewarding. However, intrinsically-motivated people, who engage in activities because they value the process rather than the outcome, ironically prefer products that feel subjectively effortful (vs. easy) to process. Easy to process is also seen as intrinsically less engaging, and lower engagement is attributed to inferior product quality. These effects are mitigated when intrinsically-motivated consumers believe the negative feelings reflect their own incompetence.

In Experiment 1, consumers evaluated a cooking cheese. Participants completed either an extrinsic or intrinsic orientation priming task, then either read an easy vs. effortful to read ad for the cheese (Novemsky et al. 2008), and finally indicated their willingness to pay for the cheese, how many things they would cook with the cheese, and how much they would enjoy cooking with the cheese. Participants with extrinsic orientation indicated higher WTP, more usability, and more enjoyment when they previously viewed the easy vs. effortful to process ad. The reverse was true for participants with intrinsic orientation. Experiment 2 replicated these effects using an individual difference measure of motivation (Amabile et al. 1994). Once motivational orientation had been measured, participants clicked on and evaluated a website for their current course book. The font was either difficult to read, easy to read, or difficult to read but participants attention was directed to font being the cause of feelings of effort. Extrinsic-oriented respondents indicated higher intent to use the website when its font was easy (vs. difficult) to read. Interestingly, and replicating experiment 1, the reverse was true for intrinsically oriented participants. When participant attention was directed to the true source of effort, these effects were mitigated. To further investigate underlining process among participants who are intrinsically oriented, in Experiment 3, everyone first completed a short SAT-type analogies task, for which approximately half were given false failure feedback (the rest were not given such feedback), in an attempt to associate negative feelings to ones’ incompetence (vs. not). Next, all participants were primed with intrinsic orientation, and then they were assigned to read an easy (vs. effortful) ad for Omega 3 (memory) pills. As expected, non-failure participants preferred the pills when they read an effortful (vs. easy) to read ad, and their preference was mediated by perceived product efficacy and engagement. This preference for effort was attenuated when participants previously received failure feedback.

Taken together, these findings support our premise. They suggest that people who look for intrinsic value undervalue activities that feel too easy to engage in and these feelings might be misattributed to associated products reducing liking towards them. In valuing products associated with effort, these people might unnecessarily be complicating their lives, especially when effort does not signify any real benefit of engaging in an activity.

“When Choice Deferral Does (and Does Not) Generalize to Subsequent Decisions: A Metacognitive Analysis”
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When a choice is difficult to make, consumers are likely to defer it. This effect of choice difficulty on the likelihood of deferral has been observed not only under conditions where the difficulty derives from attributes of the choice alternatives (Dhar 1997), but also when the difficulty derives from incidental manipulations of...
the metacognitive fluency experience. For example, presenting the information in a difficult (vs. easy) to read print font or asking consumers to provide many (vs. few) reasons for a choice has been found to increase deferral in the absence of any objective differences among the choice alternatives (Novemsky et al. 2007). Such findings highlight that the subjective experience of difficulty is the key driver of deferral. Supporting this conclusion, increased deferral is not observed when consumers attribute the experienced difficulty to an incidental source, like the print font (Novemsky et al. 2007), thus undermining its informational value for the choice at hand. These attribution effects are consistent with the logic of the feelings-as-information approach to metacognitive experiences (Schwarz 2004).

This logic further holds that any given metacognitive experience is compatible with a variety of different naïve theories of mental processes that “explain” its occurrence (Schwarz 2004). For example, a consumer who experiences a choice as difficult may attribute the experience to the nature of the choice alternatives (“This is difficult because the options are all pretty similar, making it hard to tell which one is better.”) or to her own lack of expertise (“This is difficult because I know little about digital cameras.”). In both cases, the consumer is likely to defer the difficult choice. However, the different explanations of the experienced difficulty have differential implications for subsequent choices. When the difficulty is attributed to the choice alternatives, it is silent on subsequent choice sets; but when it is attributed to one’s own lack of expertise, it may discourage subsequent choices in the same domain as well. Hence, how consumers “explain” their difficulty is likely to determine whether deferral is limited to a given choice task or generalizes across tasks. To date, the generalization of deferral, and the generalization of inferences from metacognitive difficulty in general, has received little attention. The present research begins to fill this gap.

Specifically, participants received a shopping scenario that presented them with information about four products (binoculars) available in the market. We further told them that only two of the products were available in the store they visited. These two available products were either similarly attractive, making a choice difficult, or one was clearly more attractive than the other, making a choice easy. We then induced participants through two questions to think either about the similarity of the products or about their own expertise; a control group received no questions at this stage. Finally, participants selected one of the two available products or deferred their choice until all products are available at the store. Following this first task, participants received a second scenario that presented them with two different products from the same domain (binoculars), which were of differential attractiveness, making a choice easy. They could select one of these products or defer choice. The manipulations result in a 2 (first choice: easy vs. difficult) x 3 (attribute: product vs. expertise vs. control) factorial design.

The results were consistent with predictions. First, replicating the usual findings, participants were more likely to defer choice on task 1 under difficult than easy conditions. Second, this effect was independent of the attribution manipulation—after all, difficult to distinguish alternatives or a lack of expertise are both good reasons for deferral. Third, and more important, how participants explained the difficulty encountered on task 1 influenced their decisions on the easy task 2. Participants who attributed the difficulty experienced on task 1 to their own lack of expertise were more likely to defer choice on the easy task 2 than participants who attributed their task 1 difficulty to the specific products presented in task 1.

These findings extend our understanding of the role of metacognitive experiences in the deferral of choice. Attributing a previous experience of difficulty to characteristics of the specific choice set of the previous task renders it irrelevant for subsequent tasks. In contrast, attributing a previous experience of difficulty to one’s own lack of expertise renders it relevant to all tasks in the same expertise domain and the influence of previously experienced difficulty generalizes across related tasks.

“It’s Not Just the Speed that Counts: Perceived Evaluation Duration and Attitude Certainty”
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People hold their attitudes with varying degrees of certainty. For example, two consumers might report liking a new product or favoring a specific brand to the same degree, but differ in how certain they are of that evaluation. Attitude certainty has stimulated considerable research interest in psychology and marketing, partly because it has been shown to have a number of important consequences for consumer-relevant outcomes. For instance, the more certain one is of one’s attitude, the more predictive that attitude is of behavior and choice (e.g., Berger and Mitchell 1989; Bizer, Tormala, Rucker, and Petty 2006; Krishnan and Smith 1998) and the more resistant that attitude is to change (e.g., Bassili 1996; Tormala and Petty 2002).

Over the years, an extensive body of research has been dedicated to understanding the antecedents of attitude certainty (Tormala and Rucker 2007). One well-documented antecedent is the speed with which one’s attitude comes to mind (Fazio 1995). A number of studies have shown that the faster one’s attitude comes to mind, the more certain one is of that attitude (e.g., Berger and Mitchell 1989; Bizer et al. 2006; Holland, Verplanken, and van Knippenberg 2003; Petrocelli, Tormala, and Rucker 2007). Interestingly, however, other recent research suggests that slower evaluative processing can be associated with greater certainty. For example, the more time one has to form an impression of a person, the more certain one is of that impression (Willis and Todorov 2006). Presumably, more time spent evaluating indicates that one has been more thoughtful, and perceived thoughtfulness positively influences certainty (e.g., Wan, Rucker, Tormala, and Clarkson forthcoming).

The current research takes a new tack, suggesting that perceived evaluative speed (or duration) can have dynamic effects on attitude certainty that depend on numerous situational or individual difference factors. We explore three such factors in this research. First, the impact of perceived evaluative speed on attitude certainty might depend on whether consumers are focused on attitude expression or formation. Specifically, perceived evaluative speed might positively affect certainty when one is expressing one’s attitude, but negatively affect certainty when one is forming one’s attitude. The logic is that faster expression indicates that one has already considered the issue and decided where one stands, whereas slower formation indicates that one has been more thoughtful and rational in making one’s decision. Second, the effect of perceived evaluative speed on attitude certainty might depend on the familiarity of the attitude object or issue. When an attitude object is already familiar to consumers, faster evaluation should facilitate greater certainty because it implies that one has already invested the effort to consider one’s opinion. When an object is unfamiliar, however, the need for careful deliberation should be more salient, meaning consumers might be more certain after forming their evaluations more slowly. Third, the effect of perceived evaluative speed on attitude certainty might depend on consumers’ lay theories that quick gut reactions or more thoughtful judgments are more accurate. We present 3 studies testing these hypotheses.
Study 1 explored the possibility that perceived evaluation duration would have different implications for attitude certainty depending on whether people were focused on attitude expression or attitude formation. In this study, undergraduate participants were asked to consider their opinion of an issue. Participants were instructed to think about this issue until they had formed their opinions, and then click “continue” on the computer screen. Participants were then presented with a single scale along which they reported their attitudes. Shortly thereafter, participants received false feedback indicating that they had taken either longer or shorter than most participants to either form or express their attitudes. Results indicated that when the feedback focused on attitude expression, participants felt more certain of their attitudes when they believed they were faster rather than slower than most participants. In contrast, when the feedback focused on attitude formation, participants felt more certain when they believed they were slower rather than faster.

In Study 2, we examined the moderating role of familiarity. Participants underwent a similar procedure as in Study 1, but in this case they were asked to consider their attitudes toward an abstract painting that, based on random assignment, was either familiar or unfamiliar to them. All participants evaluated the painting and then received false feedback concerning the amount of time it took them to do so. Among participants who were familiar with the painting, greater attitude certainty was associated with perceptions of fast rather than slow evaluation. In contrast, among participants who were unfamiliar with the painting, greater attitude certainty was associated with perceptions of slow rather than fast evaluation.

Finally, Study 3 investigated the moderating role of lay theories. This study followed the same basic procedure as Study 1, but we assessed participants’ beliefs about the validity of gut reactions versus more thoughtful judgments. Among participants who believed that gut reactions were more trustworthy, we observed greater attitude certainty in the perceived fast rather than slow evaluation condition. Among participants who believed that thoughtful judgments were more trustworthy, we observed greater attitude certainty in the perceived slow rather than fast evaluation condition.

In summary, evidence from three studies highlights a dynamic link between perceived evaluation duration and attitude certainty. When consumers focus on attitude expression, evaluate familiar objects, or generally believe that gut reactions are more valid, perceived evaluative speed positively affects attitude certainty. In contrast, when consumers focus on attitude formation, evaluate unfamiliar objects, or generally believe that thoughtful judgments are more valid, perceived evaluative speed negatively affects attitude certainty. Taken together, these findings expand current understandings of the origins of attitude certainty and suggest that perceptions of evaluative speed can play an important and dynamic role in guiding people’s assessments of their own attitudes.

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Which of the following two descriptions will evoke a more favorable response for a new brand of bubble bath—“Barbie Bubble Bath” or “Barbie Refreshing Bubble Bath for Adults and Kids”? Coming up with the appropriate description for a new product label is one of the difficult decisions that marketers often face. Several studies have shown that linguistic qualities of the new product description affect consumers’ responses to new products (Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Miller and Kahn 2005; Yorkston and Menon 2004). However, most of the previous research has focused on the cognitive effects of linguistic structures. In this research we examine whether the metacognitive experience evoked by linguistic structures could affect consumers’ evaluations of new products. Specifically, we address two hitherto unexplored questions that are of substantive and theoretic importance: (i) Does the length of a label on a new product influence consumers’ responses to the product? (ii) When does brevity or length of label matter?

To investigate the effects of fluency induced by linguistic structures, we ran four laboratory experiments. In Experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two between-subjects conditions—fluent vs. disfluent product descriptions. Participants saw six new product descriptions and were asked to indicate how much they disliked or liked each new product. Participants assigned to the fluent condition saw product descriptions that were short and fluent (e.g., Barbie Bubble Bath). For participants in the disfluent condition, we created a longer and less fluent product description by adding positive and/or neutral descriptive elements (e.g., Barbie Refreshing Bubble Bath for Adults and Kids). In both conditions, participants were first asked to evaluate how likely they were to try the new product, then to assess how easy or difficult the name was to pronounce, and finally how clear the benefit of the product was. The results from this study showed that perceived ease of pronunciation mediated the effect of linguistic fluency. Having established the role of linguistic fluency in new product descriptions, we then turned our attention to the second question: When does brevity or length of label matter? In Experiment 2, we examine whether repeated exposures to a disfluent linguistic structure will mitigate the unfavorable effect of linguistic disfluency on preferences? Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in a 2 (repeated prior exposures vs. no prior exposures) x 2 (fluent vs. disfluent) design experiment. The stimuli and procedure were similar to Experiment 1, except for the fact that participants assigned to the “repetition” conditions were exposed to the product descriptions several times before they evaluated the new products. We found that repeated exposure to the less fluent linguistic structures mitigated the effect of linguistic disfluency, even though it did not impact the ease of pronunciation. In Experiments 3A and 3B, we examine why repeated exposure moderated the effect of linguistic fluency on preferences. Experiment 3A shows that linguistic fluency influences preferences even for very familiar stimuli (e.g., Arabic numbers such as 3 vs. 23). Experiment 3B shows that repeated exposure does not mitigate linguistic fluency for unfamiliar stimuli (e.g., foreign names). Together, these results suggest that any factor that makes fluency seem surprising will encourage people to consider linguistic fluency as a diagnostic cue in evaluative judgments.

REFERENCES


