Jack of All Trades, Master of None: the Impact of Assortment Inferences on Choice

Chrissy Mitakakis, Baruch College, CUNY, USA
Thomas Kramer, Baruch College, CUNY, USA

This research examines how inferences related to store assortment variety influence consumer attitudes and choice. We find evidence for the existence of a “jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none” lay theory, such that consumers are found to base their attitudes and choice on the assortment variety of seemingly irrelevant products available at a store. In particular, the first study demonstrates perceived quality and purchase likelihood are lower for products that are part of relatively larger (vs. smaller) assortments of unrelated items. A second study currently underway examines the moderating role of comparability of items that are part of the assortment.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15219/volumes/v37/NA-37

copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com.
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 37) / 867


Jack of all Trades, Master of None: The Impact of Assortment Inferences on Choice

Chrissy Mitakakis, Baruch College, CUNY, USA
Thomas Kramer, Baruch College, CUNY, USA

Imagine that Sue and Bob would like to purchase a notebook for school. Sue is shopping for the notebook in a store that has a great assortment variety (i.e., in addition to paper products it also sells household cleaners, fruits, among many others). Bob is shopping in an equally well-known store, which sells only a few different types of items besides notebooks (i.e., only paper products, household cleaners, and fruits). Would the size of the assortment available at the store, which is de facto irrelevant to the choice of the notebook, nonetheless differentially impact Sue and Bob? The current research examines this question. We propose that the number of noncomparable items in an assortment can indeed affect consumers’ perceptions and choice of a target product. Although prior studies have investigated the impact of the number of options under consideration (i.e., Chernev 2001, 2003; Lancaster 1990; Broniarczyk, Hoyer, and McAlister 1998; Chernev 2003; Greenleaf and Lehmann 1995; Huffman and Kahn 1998; Kahn and Wansink 2004; Lin and Wu 2006; Menon and Kahn 1995), such research was focused on the number of alternatives from the same product category. However, the literature is lacking an investigation into the effect of assortment size of unrelated options on consumer responses to a particular product. This lack is even more surprising considering the growth of retailing formats such as supercenters or hypermarkets, which sell a seemingly endless variety of products.

In particular, we argue that consumer responses to a product will be less favorable when it is sold in a store with a greater assortment of unrelated products. We further posit that these effects are driven by a lay theory that consumers hold about the marketplace, such that stores that offer products in too many categories cannot offer quality products in all (“jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none”). Thus, we propose that consumers perceive a product that is found in a large assortment of noncomparable products as worse in quality than one that is found in a small assortment of noncomparable products. We define noncomparable products as “those that have few attributes in common” (Bettman and Sujan 1987, p.142), and are generally considered to come from different product categories (Johnson 1984). According to our proposed theory, a large number of noncomparable products can signal the notion that the store’s attempt to carry many different types of products detracts from its knowledge about any one product. Consequently, the product will be perceived as having lower quality, compared to the identical one found in an assortment consisting of only a few noncomparable products. Additionally, since these judgments involve conscious, cognitive components, it is also argued that the proposed effects will occur only under full cognitive capacity.

In this research, we propose a new lay theory that consumers hold during the decision making process. Consistent with previous research that has found that people act as intuitive scientists and develop naïve theories about the world around them (Hong, Levy, and Chiu 2001; Kruglanski 1990), research in consumer behavior has been able to identify several different beliefs that consumers may have about the marketplace (Pratap, Mathur, and Maheswaran 2009). For example, consumers have been found to hold lay theories about the relationship between price and quality (Cronley et al. 2005; Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley 2004), ease of accessibility of information (Menon and Raghubir 2005; Schwarz 2004), and hedonic contrast effects (Novemsky and Ratner 2003). Our research proposes that consumers hold a lay theory based on the lack of comparability of surrounding products that are found in an assortment, and thus use this information in making judgments about a single product.

To examine the proposed lay theory consumers have regarding the presence of noncomparable products, we investigated the effects of the size of the assortment of noncomparable products in the purchase environment on consumers’ evaluations of a target product (a notebook). In order to assess consumers’ utilization of the proposed lay theory, we told participants that the notebook was found in an assortment with either three or twenty noncomparable products (such as household cleaners, food items, etc.), as well varied some participants’ cognitive resources with a cognitive load task. After the presentation of the hypothetical shopping scenario, we assessed participants’ attitudes toward the product as well as their likelihood of purchasing that product. Our results support the hypothesis that consumers perceive a target product to be of significantly lower quality, and are significantly less likely to purchase it, when it is found in an assortment with several noncomparable products, as opposed to when it is found in an assortment with only a few other
noncomparable products. However, as hypothesized, this effect occurs only with participants who have the cognitive resources available for the “jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none” inference.

We contribute to the literature by proposing a new type of lay theory that consumers use when perceiving product assortments containing different, noncomparable products. This paper demonstrates that consumers use a specific lay theory based on the context of the product assortment to render judgments about a target product. In addition to our theoretical contribution, our findings can also help contribute important managerial implications about retailers’ assortments. Thus, we offer new insight about consumers’ perceptions about a product when the variety of noncomparable products in an assortment increases. Based on our findings, our second study (currently in progress) examines the moderating role of the extent of comparability of other products in an assortment. Future research might also examine whether consumers use this lay theory for all types of products, or whether the product type (i.e., necessity versus luxury) would make a difference.

References

Ethnic Chinese Representations in Indonesian Advertising
Angeline Nariswari, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA
Xin Zhao, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA

This paper moves beyond the primary discourse of advertising as a promotional tool and views advertising as a cultural system (Lears 1994; Leiss 2006; Sherry 1987) that distortedly reflects the social aspirations of consumers, the ideals of its creators (Marchand 1986) and the views of the power dominant (Hall 1997). We take advertising as a cultural text to examine how particular social groups and ethnic minorities are represented.

Existing research shows that images created during slavery period emphasized the subordinate status of black people, deducing them to particular physical characteristics and portraying them as inherently lazy and uncultured (Hall 1997). More recent portrayals present African Americans among others in lower-status roles, perpetuating class distinctions with the White majority (Bristol, Lee and Hunt 1995). On the other hand, Asian Americans are persistently represented as the “model minority,” and are strongly associated with