When Unique (Nonalignable) Differences Acquire Greater Importance Than Shared (Alignable) Ones: the Role of Noncomparison-Based Choice Processes

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Choice is often a function of shared (alignable) and unique (nonalignable) attributes of the available options. Past research shows alignables to be more influential than nonalignables. This is marked by a well-documented tendency for consumers to choose options that are superior on the alignables over options that are superior on the nonalignables. Nonetheless, we show that there are several individual-level, contextual, and situational factors that influence decision makers to pay more attention to nonalignables. The studies provide evidence that while alignables dominate in decisions involving extensive comparisons, nonalignables loom larger when individuals are encouraged to engage in non-comparison based processing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Choices are often a function of the shared (i.e., alignable) and the unique (i.e., nonalignable) attributes of the options under consideration. Past research in a variety of areas has shown that alignable attributes tend to have a greater impact on choice than nonalignable attributes. This is marked by a well-documented tendency for decision makers to choose options that are superior on the alignable attributes (i.e., the alignable-better brand) over options that are superior on the nonalignable attributes (i.e., the nonalignable-better brand). We refer to this robust and well-documented phenomenon as the alignable superiority effect (ASE).

In this paper, across five studies, we show that several individual-level, contextual, and situational factors are capable of either attenuating or enhancing this effect. More importantly, the studies presented collectively provide strong evidence that the degree of noncomparison-based processing is a critical factor in determining the relative influence of alignable and nonalignable attributes in choice tasks. Alignables dominate in decisions involving extensive comparisons; however, nonalignables loom larger when decision makers are encouraged to engage in non-comparison based processing. This conceptual rubric not only explains the moderators we present in this paper, but it might also explain moderators that have been documented in the past. In fact, we believe that the dominance of alignability found in consumer behavior studies so far, is in part due to the fact that most of the experimental tasks encouraged extensive, attribute-by-attribute, comparison-based processing of choice alternatives. In fact, as we later demonstrate, small changes to these often-used experiment features can have important consequences for the alignable superiority effect.

The preceding discussion naturally begets the question, what is noncomparison based processing? The details regarding the theoretical underpinnings of our argument regarding the impact of noncomparison-based processing on the ASE are provided in the main body of the paper. However, to provide a nutshell summary, we essentially propose that anything that dampens the comparison processes that are usually ubiquitous in choice decisions, either directly (e.g., by reducing the number of attribute-by-attribute comparisons), or indirectly (e.g., by increasing holistic, alternative-based processing), should significantly weaken the ASE. We conducted five studies to investigate this basic proposition. Studies 1-4 were designed to investigate the impact of reduced comparisons on the ASE, and study 5 was designed to look at the joint effects of reduced comparisons and increased holistic processing on the ASE.

We first show that individual-level predispositions to not engage in comparisons mitigate the ASE (study 1). More specifically, we showed that the ASE is prominent among individuals predisposed to engage in comparative behavior (e.g., those who score high on the Comparison Orientation scale), but that the ASE is significantly attenuated among individuals predisposed to not engage in such comparisons (e.g., those who score low on the Comparison Orientation scale).

We then manipulate the contextual descriptions of product features and show that if contextual characteristics discourage extensive comparison of the choice options, then reliance on the nonalignable attributes increases significantly and the ASE is eliminated (study 2). We find that a relatively simple manipulation of the information presentation format suffices in reducing the ASE, in keeping with past research (e.g., Bettman and Kakkar 1977, and Painton and Gentry 1985) that has shown that relative to a tabular format, a paragraph presentation format tends to inhibit a decision maker’s ability to make comparisons. Thus, study 2 showed that a paragraph (tabular) information presentation format inhibited (facilitated) comparisons and attenuated (bolstered) the ASE.

In study 3 we extended the generalizability of our research by replicating our findings in three different product replicates, each with a varied set of attributes. We also varied the kind of attribute descriptions that were used as alignable or nonalignable attributes by “rotating” the attributes that were used as alignables with the ones that were used as nonalignables.

As a more complete test of our proposed relationship between the ASE and comparisons, we not only show that discouraging comparisons weakens the ASE (like in studies 1-3), but also demonstrate that encouraging comparison-based processing actually strengthens the ASE (study 4). To situationally induce a more comparative mindset we used Mussweiler’s (2003) procedural priming method, that has been successfully used in a wide variety of domains, from classic anchoring-adjustment tasks (Keil, Mussweiler, and Epstude 2006) to financial decisions regarding stocks (Mussweiler and Schneller 2003). To induce a less comparative mindset we used Shiv and Huber’s (2000) intervention, in which participants are asked to anticipate satisfaction with the options prior to making a choice. Thus, by simultaneously showing both that noncomparison-based processing favors the nonalignable-better brand, and that encouraging comparison-based processing has an effect that is opposite to that of noncomparison-based processing, these results provide stronger support for the central claims of our research. In addition, given the description of the manipulations above, this study also showed that unrelated situational factors, like the comparative mindset induced in an independent and unrelated preceding task, could also significantly affect the ASE.

Finally, study 5 addresses one missing piece of the puzzle. We had claimed that there were two possible routes to dampening the ASE. So far, in looking at personality (study 1), contextual (studies 2-3), and situational (study 4) factors that dampen or augment the ASE, we have always implicated either a reduction, or an increase, in comparative processing as the key driving force behind our results. Study 5 provides strong support for the second route, and shows that greater holistic processing can, independently, dampen the primacy of the alignables that has been observed in the past.

The issue of comparability is central to structural alignment theory, since it is only through comparisons that alignment is established. Logically, therefore, comparisons should play a big role in the dominance of alignable attributes that has been observed in past work. Up to now, however, this comparison process that should be so central to the dominance of alignables over nonalignables, has gone relatively unexamined. We try to address this gap through this research.
REFERENCES