The Effects of Mindset Abstraction on Memory-Based Consideration Set Formation

Fang-Chi Lu, University of Iowa, USA
Dhananjay Nayakankuppam, University of Iowa, USA

Three studies, using alternative manipulations of mindset abstraction in different decision contexts, supported our hypothesis that individuals in concrete mindsets, compared to abstract mindsets, think more contextual and specific details about certain decision scenarios and the concrete, fine-grained mental presentations activate more associations in memory, leading to larger consideration sets.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1010172/volumes/v39/NA-39

[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/.
**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

“Memory-based consideration set” is suggested to be a set of products consumers recall from memory when facing needs to be fulfilled, and then they make their final choice from this set (Ratneshwar and Shocker, 1991). Consideration set formation is considered as a fundamental stage of pre-choice decision making. Consumers usually engage in a two-stage decision process, screening available brands/products in a product category to form a smaller subset of brands and then making an explicit utility comparison or cost-benefit trade-off before making their final choice decision. Understanding the formation of consideration sets is important from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Consideration of a brand is suggested to mediate the influence of attitude and attitude strength on choice (Priester et al., 2004). Using the scanner data, Hauser and Wernerfelt (1989) found that 70% of the variance accounted for in choice is explained by consideration.

However, consideration sets are dynamic, being influenced by a variety of factors. First, the composition of consideration sets is influenced by personal goals and motives. Ratneshwar and his colleagues (1996) found that across-category consideration was high when there was either goal conflict or goal ambiguity. Chakravarti and Janiszewski (2003) suggested that motivations, to simplify the choice process or to optimize the choice outcome, determine the size and heterogeneity of consideration sets. Second, attitude and attitude strength influence whether a brand is included in a consideration set (Priester et al., 2004). Finally, situational variables, such as usage situation (e.g., Desai and Hoyer, 2000), assortment size (e.g., Heller, Levin, and Goransson, 2002), and advertising (e.g., Mitra and Lynch, 1995) were also suggested to influence the content of consideration sets. In the same vein, the model of constructed choice processes asserts that preferences are construed during the choice process, and subjective construal, experiential information, attribution, goals and satisfaction influence the choice process in a lower-level perceptual, non-conscious way (Griffin, Liu, & Khan, 2004). Taken together, it is implied that influencing the way consumers construe their choice decisions might alter the nature of a consideration set.

More recently, the construal level theory, proposed by Liberman and Trope (2007), suggests that psychological distance of an object systematically changes how the object is mentally construed, which in turn influences people’s thoughts and behaviors. According to the theory, low-level construals are concrete, relatively unstructured, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features or event; whereas high-level construals are abstract schematic, decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information. Previous research showed that individuals in concrete mindsets are more susceptible to incidental social influence, and have more flexible attitude toward a certain evaluative object (Ledgerwood, Trope, and Chaiken, 2010).

Building upon the construal level theory, we propose that construal levels used for the mental representation of a choice decision influence the search of alternatives in memory and the composition of the formed consideration set. More specifically, we suggest that individuals in concrete mindsets, compared to abstract mindset, are likely to think more concrete, specific details about certain choice decision contexts, and the concrete, fine-grained mental representations activate more associations in memory, thus leading to bigger consideration sets. Findings from two studies, using alternative manipulations of mindset abstraction and different decision contexts, provided support for our main hypothesis that concrete mindsets induce bigger consideration sets. In Study 1, abstract versus concrete mindset was primed by asking participants to generate either superordinate categories or subordinate exemplars for 20 objects (e.g., actor, book, movie). Next, participants completed a snack product choice task in which a certain snack choice scenario was given, and participants listed the snack items they seriously consider, their final choice and the factors/attributes they used in forming their consideration sets. Extent of hunger was also measured as a covariant. Results of analyses showed that participants who generated subordinate exemplars had bigger consideration set than the ones generating superordinate categories (\(M_{\text{concrete}}=7.92, M_{\text{abstract}}=5.44, p<0.01\)). The procedure of Study 2 is similar to Study 1 except for that the Navon task was used for mindset abstraction priming. Participants were presented with a series of global letters made up of local letters, and they were asked to identify either the global or the local letters. After that, they formed consideration set in a dinner decision context. Consistent with Study 1, participants who identified the local letters generated larger consideration sets than the ones who identified the global letters (\(M_{\text{concrete}}=6.96, M_{\text{abstract}}=5, p<0.03\)).

We propose that this mindset abstraction effect on size of consideration sets is due to the differential extent of associations activated in memory in concrete versus abstract mindsets. We conducted Study 3 to examine this hypothesis. The Navon task was used prime abstract versus concrete mindsets. After the Navon task, participants completed a word association task in which they listed as many associated words as they can for each of the target words presented. The selected target words, varying in the frequency of word occurrence and the size of their association set size, were adopted from previous research (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Findings of Study 3, supporting our hypothesis of the underlying mechanism, revealed a main effect of mindset abstraction. Individuals in concrete mindsets listed more word associations than the ones in concrete mindset, and the main effect was independent of word frequency and word association set size (\(M_{\text{concrete}}=9.05, M_{\text{abstract}}=6.97, p<0.03\)).

The current research shed light on a construal level effect on memory in consideration set formation domain. From a memory perspective, concrete, relative to abstract, mental representations result in many more memory cues. For example, Dural Coding Theory (Pavio, 1986) suggests that concrete words (e.g., tree, party) can be represented visually and verbally, thus have more associations and are better remembered. Going beyond that, we found that individuals’ processing mindset (concrete vs. abstract) influence ease of retrieving alternatives from memory, thus affecting the likelihood of certain products being included in the consideration sets.

**REFERENCES**


