Set-Fit Effects in Choice

Ellen Evers, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
Marcel Zeelenberg, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
Yoel Inbar, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

We show how the “fit” of an item with a set of similar items affects choice. People have a notion of a set that fits together—one where the contents are all-similar, or all-different, on salient attributes. This results in choices reflecting “set-fit” and predictable shifts in preferences.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1015530/volumes/v41/NA-41

[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

In five experiments, we show how the “fit” of an item with a set of similar items affects choice. We find that people have a notion of a set that fits together—one where all items are the same, or all items differ, on salient attributes. One consequence of this notion is that in addition to preferences over the set’s individual items, choices take set-fit into account. This leads to predictable shifts in preferences when choosing between different sets as opposed to individual items, sometimes even resulting in people choosing normatively inferior options over superior ones.

Even though many products are manufactured and sold as grouped sets, virtually no research has investigated how the composition of such sets influences choice. Other literature, however, suggests that the composition of a set could have strong effects on preference and choice. Early research by the gestalt psychologists (Wertheimer, 1923) shows that people categorize and group stimuli rapidly and automatically, and that some sets of stimuli are grouped together more easily than others. Furthermore, we know from research on fluency, that things that are processed more easily are liked better (e.g., Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). Therefore, it could be expected that sets that are easier to group, will be liked better. Similar arguments can be found in work by philosophers on aesthetics. For example Klintsch (2012) argues that the lower the complexity of a stimulus, the more it will be liked. Even though these claims have not been tested empirically, cognitive psychologists (e.g., Garner, 1970) have investigated the liking of patterns and found a strong negative relation between the complexity and liking. Taken together, this suggests that sets of products that are low in complexity will be liked better than sets that are more complex. More specifically, we expected that sets in which all products are either all-similar or all-different on every salient attribute, would be liked better than sets which are not. A pre-test in which participants rated sets of geometric shapes confirmed our expectations. Participants consistently rated sets which were all-similar or all-different on shape and color as much more liked than sets which were not.

Knowing that sets are indeed liked better when they are either all-similar or all-different on every attribute, we proceeded to investigate how this affects choice. We first looked at this by having participants make choices between either two individual items, or two logically equivalent sets. For example, we had young children in one condition choose between a striped translucent marble, and a red opaque one. Consistent with a pre-test, we found that an overwhelming majority of the children chose the striped translucent marble. However, in the other condition, we added an opaque green, blue and yellow marble to both sets. Even though in this situation the only difference between the two sets is the striped translucent vs. the red opaque marble, we expected the children to be more likely to choose the set including the red opaque marble because this group formed a better set; all four marbles being opaque. This is what we found, where only 10.4% of the children chose the red marble in the individual-choice condition, this increased to 72.7% when choosing between the two sets. We did not only look at differences in choice proportion between individual and set-choices, but also varied the contents of the set in other experiments. For example, in one study participants always chose between sets of mugs. In each condition the choices were logically equivalent, the only difference between the two sets was always a green vs. an orange mug. Sometimes these mugs were embedded in all-similar sets, created by adding three orange mugs to both options, or three green ones. Consistent with our expectations, participants were more likely to choose four green mugs over three green ones and an orange mug. When adding three orange mugs, participants were more likely to choose the set consisting of four orange mugs. This shows the all-similar effect. In two other conditions we added a pink, blue and either an orange or a green mug to both options. There we found the all-different effect. Adding a pink, blue and green mug to both options increases choice for the set including the orange one, but adding pink, blue and orange increases choice for the set including the green mug.

The experiments reveal a strong effect of the set-fit on consumer-choice. Effects that cannot be explained by well-known accounts of non-normative influences on choice, such as attraction and compromise effects (Simonson, 1989), contrast or assimilation (Wänke, Bless, & Schwarz, 1999), or variety-seeking (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999).

These findings hold direct practical implications. When selling products that are consumed in sets, making sure that the set fits well will make consumers more likely to choose your products. Several interesting questions also arise for consumer research. First of all, even though variety-seeking and set-fit are the result of two different underlying processes, it can be expected that set-fit effects increase variety seeking, because consumers diversifying their first choices for satiation reasons, may be more likely to continue choosing diversified options to keep the set-fit good. Furthermore, the effect being a very intuitive affective response, suggests that people who choose according to set-fit may experience regret about their outcomes later.

REFERENCES


