Reason-Product (In)Compatibility: Cognition and Affect in Consumer Reasoning

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Previous literature argues that reasoning about a decision leads to less satisfying choices. We introduce a distinction between "cognition-based" and "affect-based" reasons, and illustrate that reasoning reduces satisfaction only when it leads to a distortion in choice behavior as a function of an incompatibility between reason types and product categories.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023839/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Previous literature has suggested that consumers who reason about their choices make less satisfying decisions. This effect is a function of consumers making choices based on their reasons rather than based on their preferences (e.g. Wilson & Schooler, 1991; Wilson et al., 1993). We argue that this view is incomplete. While prior work largely characterizes reasons solely as rational and cognitive arguments, we posit that reasons often also take the form of arguments based in affective factors. By introducing this distinction between “cognition-based reasons” (grounded in rational evaluations) and “affect-based reasons” (grounded in feelings and emotions, not to be confused with the mere experience of affect), we illustrate that reasoning is not detrimental as a rule. Instead, post-choice satisfaction depends on whether the reasons being generated are “compatible” with the product category in question. If consumers generate reasons that align with the preference basis of a product category (i.e., cognition-based reasons in hedonic categories or affect-based reasons in utilitarian categories), then consumers will tend to choose products that align well with their preferences. In other words, unlike in previous findings where reasoning leads to the selection of less satisfying options, the use of compatible reasoning will lead consumers to choose the same types of options (and therefore be equally satisfied) as if they had simply chosen on the basis of their preferences. Only when reasoning is “incompatible” with the product category (i.e., cognition-based reasons in hedonic categories or affect-based reasons in utilitarian categories) do consumers’ choices skew toward less satisfying options. We argue that past literature has largely focused on cases of incompatibility to conclude that reasoning leads to lower satisfaction, specifically the case of cognition-based reasoning in hedonic categories, such as strawberry jams (Wilson & Schooler, 1991) or decorative wall posters (Wilson et al., 1993).

Our first goal was to validate the claim that consumers can and do reason on the basis of both cognition and affect. Therefore, 202 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk were asked to identify an actual purchase they had recently made, and then to explain the considerations that informed their choices. Next, they self-coded their responses according to a set of 14 criteria (drawn from the literature) that mapped onto cognition-based reasoning strategies, affect-based reasoning strategies, and distracter decision-making strategies. These self-codes were submitted to a factor analysis resulting in a two factor solution which corresponded with our dichotomy of cognition-based reasons (eigenvalue=1.298) and affect-based reasons (eigenvalue=1.065). The results provide evidence that consumers can and do use both forms of reasoning when making a decision.

To test whether (in)compatibility has consequences for consumer satisfaction, we ran an experimental study using a paradigm similar to Wilson et al. (1993) in which participants chose between four decorative posters. As consumers generally perceive this product category as hedonic, we predicted that the use of cognition-based reasons would replicate past findings that reasoning leads to lower satisfaction, while the use of affect-based reasons would not reduce satisfaction. In order to observe how changes in choice behavior drive this effect, the posters were pretested such that two were seen as having relatively greater utilitarian appeal (e.g., maps of the world) and two were seen as having relatively greater hedonic appeal (e.g., artistic images of the world). We divided 180 Mechanical Turk participants into three conditions: in the “cognition-based reasoning” condition, participants were asked to report their thoughts about choosing or not choosing each of the four posters; in the “affect-based reasoning” condition, they reported their feelings toward choosing or not choosing each poster; and in the “control” condition, they simply examined the products without providing any reasons. Consistent with our hypothesis, cognition-based reasoning lead to lower satisfaction than no reasoning ($b = -0.94, p < .01$), but there was no difference in satisfaction when participants instead reasoned on the basis of affect ($b = -0.53, NS$). This satisfaction result was mirrored in participants’ choice behavior: there was no difference between the affect-based and control conditions ($b = -0.05, NS$), but participants asked to generate cognition-based reasons were significantly more likely to choose the relatively utilitarian posters compared to both the control and affect-based conditions ($b = 0.12, p < .05$).

These findings were then replicated with 150 in-lab participants using a greater variety of hedonic products and a paradigm in which participants could win the items they chose, thus increasing the incentive compatibility of the study.

Whereas the first experimental study and its replication looked only at hedonic products, this next study aimed to test the full Reason-Product (In)compatibility model using a product category that was framed as either utilitarian or hedonic. We presented 298 Mechanical Turk participants with a choice between two smoothies, a “healthy” option and a “tasty” option. These smoothies were then framed as either “healthy snacks” (utilitarian) or “deserts” (hedonic). Participants were divided into the same three reasoning conditions as before. Coding the results to look at compatibility (cognition-based/utilitarian and affect-based/hedonic) versus incompatibility (cognition-based/hedonic and affect-based/utilitarian), we find that satisfaction was no different from control under compatibility across both framing conditions ($b = 0.36, NS$) but significantly reduced under incompatibility ($b = -0.24, p < .05$). As before, these effects were driven by changes in choice behavior: a moderated mediation revealed that, under the utilitarian frame, affect-based reasons increased choice of the tasty option, which drove down satisfaction (bias corrected 95% CI [-0.411, -0.101]); while under the hedonic frame, cognition-based reasons increased choice of the healthy option, which drove down satisfaction (bias corrected 90% CI [0.006, 0.186]).

These results support the claim that reasoning does not lead to lower choice satisfaction as a rule, but as a function of incompatibility between reason types and product categories. The results have implications for literatures that looks at deliberative or reason-based decision processes, as well as for marketers and salespeople aiming to maximize customer satisfaction for products that call for careful pre-purchase consideration.

REFERENCES


