The Drain of Affective Decisions

Ashley Otto, Baylor University, USA
Joshua Clarkson, University of Cincinnati, USA
Ryan Rahinel, University of Cincinnati, USA

It is almost a truism that decisions based on affect are less resource-demanding than decisions based on cognitions. We contend that consumers' perceptions are opposite this reality. Three experiments demonstrate that decision-makers perceive affective (vs. cognitive) decisions as requiring more mental resources and that this misperception disengages consumers from choice.

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Joshua Clarkson, University of Cincinnati, USA
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A fundamental premise in decision making is that decisions based on affect are fast and economical relative to decisions based on cognition. That is, “going with one’s gut” reliably leads to quicker decision making and requires less processing resources to make a decision than does a more cognitive focus such as “thinking things through” (Epstein 1990). This pattern is evident from the robust finding that constraints on processing resources such as cognitive load, time pressure, and distraction increase the reliance on affect in decision making (e.g., Nowlis and Shiv 2005; Pham, Cohen, Pracejus, and Hughes 2001; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). Thus, relative to its cognitive counterpart, decisions based on affect are highly resource-efficient (see Pham 2007).

Despite this robust effect, we ask in this paper whether consumers’ perceptions of the resource efficiency of affect-based decision match reality. In particular, we propose the possibility that consumers’ perceive affect- (v. cognitive-) based decisions to require more—rather the less—resources to arrive at a decision. This proposition is based on research showing that individuals tend to overestimate the impact of future affect (Gilbert et al. 1998; Lowenstein and Schkade 1999; Wilson et al. 2004; Wilson and Gilbert 2003). That is, though individuals accurately predict the valence of their affect and even the specific emotions that they will experience (i.e., joy vs. anger; Robinson and Clore 2001), they are not able to accurately predict the duration and impact of their future affective states, with the specific tendency to overestimate these errors (e.g., Gilbert, Driver-Linn, and Wilson 2002; Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge, and Wilson 2004; Buechel, Zhang, and Morewedge 2014; see also Loewenstein 2005). Just as individuals tend to make overestimation errors regarding the impact of affective responses (see Wilson and Gilbert 2003), we argue for an overestimation error regarding the resource demand associated with affectively-based decisions.

This misperception is critical because, if true, it should directly undermine consumers’ desire to engage in the decision making process. In other words, if consumers perceive an insufficiency or drain of resources when making affect-based decisions, then they should consequently demonstrate a greater propensity to delay these decisions. Importantly, here, choice delay serves not only as an outcome measure but as a specific choice context that should be most sensitive to subtle differences in perceptions—if in fact perceptions do not align with reality. Essentially, the option to engage in choice delay allows for the opportunity for perceptions to override the general properties of affectively-based decisions, which appear most apparent when choice is forced (i.e., absent a no-choice option; see Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). Given that consumers are rarely forced to make choices, this research therefore raises the possibility that marketing tactics emphasizing affect (e.g., advertisements, slogans, storylines) could unintentionally inhibit consumers’ motivation to purchase.

We tested this possibility in three experiments. Importantly, in each experiment, we controlled for decision importance and difficulty, as both variables have been previously shown to impact consumers’ desire to postpone decisions (Dhar 1997; Krijnen, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans 2015; Greenleaf and Lehman 1995). Relatedly, we also rule out alternative explanations related to cognitive laziness and mood. These variables have no impact on the results, which only further strengthen our confidence in role of consumers’ perceptions of resource drain in eliciting delay related to affect- and cognitive-based decisions.

Experiment 1

Using a real-choice paradigm, Experiment 1 sought to test the hypothesis that affectively-based decisions elicit greater choice delay.

Method and Results

Ninety undergraduates (51% Male; M_age = 20.47) were recruited to complete a study on print advertisements. Following the study welcome, all participants were told that a consumer packaged goods company, whose name was ostensibly concealed for privacy purposes, was seeking feedback on print advertisements. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of three granola bar advertisements. Importantly, across all conditions the image on the advertisement remained the same. However, to manipulate the basis of the decision, we altered the slogan printed on the ad. This manipulation is consistent with prior research that has manipulated the affective or cognitive basis of a decision by altering an advertisement’s slogan (see Cian, Krishna, and Schwarz 2015).

Importantly, after viewing the ad, all participants were told that as a thank you for their time, they would be receiving a granola bar. Participants were asked what they would like to do—make a granola bar choice now or make a granola bar choice later. For those who opted to make a choice now, they were presented with the granola bar options on a subsequent screen. For those who opted to make a choice later, they were presented with the granola bar options at the end of the study. Importantly, then, only the timing of the decision varied, as it was clear to participants that the decision would be made.

The choice data were analyzed via a chi-square test to analyze potential differences in delay (0 = make choice, 1 = delay choice) as a function of the basis of the decision (0 = control, 1 = cognitive, 2 = affective). As expected, the analysis revealed a significant difference in delay based on the basis of the decision (chi-sq (2, N = 90) = 7.78, p = .02). Follow up analyses revealed that those in the affectively-based condition were more likely to delay choice (60%) compared to those in the cognitively-based (26.67% [1, N = 60] = 6.79, p = .009) or control (33.33% [1, N = 60] = 4.29, p = .038)) conditions, which did not differ from one another (p > .57).

Discussion

The findings of Experiment 1 offer initial evidence that consumers are more likely to delay affectively-based decisions—here, in an actual consumption experience. Indeed, across conditions, participants responded to the same choice. However, those in the affectively-based condition were significantly more likely to delay the choice than were those in the cognitively-based and control conditions. This latter effect is especially interesting as it provides initial evidence that an affective-basis increases consumers’ likelihood to engage in delay.

Experiment 2

The goal of Experiment 2 was to directly test the possibility that consumers are miscalibrated with regard to their perceptions of affectively-based decisions. That is, while research has repeatedly
demonstrated that affectively-based decisions are less resource demanding (see Pham 2007), we contend that consumers’ perceive affectively-based decisions to be more (not less) resource demanding. Though inconsistent with reality, this prediction is consistent with work demonstrating that individuals tend to overestimate the impact and duration of future affective states (Lowenstein and Schwartz 1999; Wilson and Gilbert 2003).

Method and Results

One hundred and forty (56% Female; \(M_{\text{age}} = 36.14\)) participants were recruited through Mechanical Turk to complete a study on decision making. All participants were told that the study was about tea and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: affective, cognitive, or control. Participants in the affective and cognitive conditions were instructed to focus on either their feelings (affectively-based condition) or thoughts (cognitively-based condition) in relation to tea (adapted from Mikles et al. 2010, 2011), while those in the control condition were given no further instructions.

Participants were then asked to imagine that they were shopping at a grocery store and that they came upon the tea aisle and noticed a few options available for purchase. Prior to making a purchasing decision, participants responded to a series of questions regarding the tea scenario that assessed the perceived resource drain associated with making a decision (\(a = .71\); e.g., How much do you anticipate feeling exhausted of your mental resources after considering this decision?. How mentally exhausted do you anticipate feeling after considering this decision?, How much do you anticipate feeling drained of your mental resources after considering this decision?). Following these questions, participants were asked to make a choice to decide whether or not to purchase tea now or decide whether or not to purchase tea later.

Participants’ choice was coded as 0 = make choice or 1 = delay choice. These data were then submitted to a chi-square test to compare the difference in delay as a function of the basis of the decision (0 = control, 1 = cognitive, and 2 = affective). The analysis revealed a significant difference in choice delay based on the basis (\(\chi^2 (2, N = 140) = 15.28, p < .001\)). Those in the affectively-based condition (28.57%) were much more likely to delay choice than those in the cognitively-based (6.12%); \(\Phi (1, N = 91) = 8.28, p = .004\)) or control (4.08%; \(\Phi (1, N = 91) = 10.42, p = .001\)) conditions, which did not differ from each other (\(p > .64\)). Importantly, mediational analysis confirmed a significant mediating pathway through the perceived resource drain index (95% CI: .027, .72).

Discussion

The findings of Experiment 2 demonstrate that consumers: (i) do in fact perceive affectively-based decisions as more draining of their mental resources than cognitively-based decisions, and (ii) this misperception dictated the desire to engage in the decision-making process.

Experiment 3

Experiment 2 demonstrated that consumers delay affectively-based decisions because they perceive them as being more draining of mental resources. Importantly, if the findings of Experiment 2 hold true, then this effect should only occur for consumers who naturally believe their resources can be drained—that is, those who believe that they have a limited (vs. unlimited) storehouse of available resources (Mukhopadhyay and Gohar 2005; Job, Dweck, and Walton 2010). Thus, in Experiment 3, we offer an alternative test of the mechanism by examining the role of willpower beliefs (i.e., the extent to which individuals believe their ability to regulate behavior is a limited or unlimited resource; see Job et al. 2010).

Method and Results

One hundred participants (51% Male; \(M_{\text{age}} = 37.23\)) were recruited through Mechanical Turk to complete a study on decision making. Following an introduction to the study, participants were told that the study was about coffee. As in Experiment 2, participants were assigned to one of three decision bases conditions: affective, cognitive, or control. Specifically, those in the affectively-based condition were asked to describe their feelings about purchasing coffee, while those in the cognitively-based condition were asked to describe their thoughts about purchasing coffee on a series of items that were intentionally biased to promote agreement with these statements. Importantly, however, participants responded to each of the items on 5-point scales anchored at 1 – Somewhat agree to 5 – Completely agree, which were intentionally biased to promote agreement with the statements (Clarkson, Janiszewski, and Cinelli 2013; Salancik 1974; Salancik and Conway 1975; Tormala and DeSensi 2008; see Petrocelli, Martin, and Li 2010). Those in the control condition did not receive a focus manipulation and were automatically forwarded to the next portion of the study.

All participants were then asked to imagine that they were shopping for coffee and noticed several options available. Participants were then instructed to think about the scenario and asked to make a choice between deciding on whether or not to purchase coffee now or whether or not to purchase coffee later. Finally, following a series of filler questions, participants completed the Implicit Theories about Willpower Scale (Job et al. 2010) to index participants’ willpower theories (\(a = .85\); e.g., Your mental stamina fuels itself. Even after strenuous mental exertion, you can continue doing more of it). The choice data (0 = make choice, 1 = delay choice) were submitted to a hierarchical logistic regression, with the basis of the decision (0 = control, 1 = cognitive, 2 = affective) and willpower theory (continuous, mean-centered) as main effect predictors in the first step and their interaction in the second step (Cohen et al. 2003). Repeating the prior two studies, the analysis revealed a main effect of decision basis (\(\beta = .84\), Wald’s \(\chi^2 = 7.30, p = .007\)) and, as expected, no main effect of willpower theory (\(p > .98\)). Importantly, the results revealed a significant decision basis × willpower theory interaction (\(\beta = -.93,\) Wald’s \(\chi^2 = 5.26, p = .022\); see Figure 1). Consistent with expectations, limited theorists (+1 SD) were significantly more likely to delay choice in the affectively-based condition, compared to both the cognitively-based (\(\beta = 1.85,\) Wald’s \(\chi^2 = 6.05, p = .014\)) or control (\(\beta = 1.70,\) Wald’s \(\chi^2 = 8.56, p = .003\)) conditions, which did not differ from each other (\(p > .30\)). For unlimited theorists (-1 SD), there was no difference in choice delay based on the basis of the decision (\(p > .83\)).

Discussion

The findings of Experiment 3 offer an alternative means by which to test the robustness of the proposed misperception associated with affectively-based decisions. Here, we examined the role of willpower theories and found that the effect of an affective basis on choice delay was bound to those who naturally perceive they have a limited (vs. limited) amount of resources. That is, consumers delayed affectively-based decisions when they implicitly believed they had an insufficiency of resources (i.e., limited theorists). Importantly, these findings only corroborate those of Experiment 2, which demonstrated that perceptions of resource drain underlie the effect of affect on choice delay. Together, then, the findings of Experiments 2 and 3 offer converging means by which to demonstrate a resource-based account for the delay of decisions based on affect.
Conclusion

Though research has reliability demonstrated that affective (vs. cognitive) based decisions require less resources to arrive at a decision, we find that consumers are miscalibrated with regard to the perceived resource drain of affect-based decisions. Three experiments demonstrated that this perceived insufficiency of mental resources altered consumers’ desire to engage in the decision-making process. That is, perceiving a lack of sufficient resources naturally altered a consumer’s desire to make decisions. Moreover, this effect occurred despite controlling for decision difficulty and decision importance and independent of cognitive laziness or mood. Finally, we demonstrated the robustness of this misperception by showing that the effects only occurred for those who perceive they have a limited (vs. unlimited) amount of resources.

Collectively, we believe this work offers critical insight for marketers who all too often seek to invoke an affective-basis in consumers’ decisions. That is, marketers alter images, storylines, and slogans to elicit greater affect. Yet the present findings suggest these strategies propel consumers to disengage from the decision-making process. Indeed, Experiment 1 demonstrated that even subtle advertisement slogans that manipulate decision bases (e.g., “To refuel your dreams” vs. “To refuel your mind”) altered whether or not consumers wanted to engage in actual choice. Furthermore, by studying the effects of this misperception on choice delay (vs. forced choice), we have not only allowed for the opportunity for perceptions to over-ride reality, but also allowed for a more naturalistic test of consumer decision making.

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