

Research Article

The rebound of the forgone alternative ☆

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Abstract

Fifty years of cognitive dissonance research suggests that when consumers make a difficult choice, the alternative they forgo is devalued for an extended period of time, making it less likely to be chosen in the future. In a series of four studies, we show that completely consuming the chosen alternative moderates this effect. After the chosen alternative has been consumed, creating a sense of consumption closure, the attractiveness of forgone alternative rebounds to its original value.

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Making a choice frequently involves choosing one alternative and forgoing another. For example, when ordering from a restaurant menu, two entrees may seem appealing, but consumers typically choose only one. If a consumer struggled to choose between two attractive entrées during her last visit to a restaurant, will she be more or less likely to choose the forgone entrée when she visits the restaurant again?

According to cognitive dissonance theory, the act of forgoing an entrée is inconsistent with evaluating it favorably (Brehm, 1956; Festinger, 1957), suggesting that it is less likely to be selected in the future. Dozens of studies (see Appendix A) have demonstrated that after making a choice the forgone alternative tends to decline in value whereas the chosen alternative tends to increase in value. However, cognitive dissonance research has

focused largely on the consequences of choice rather than on the consequences of consumption. Thus, it is unclear whether this devaluation effect will persist after the chosen alternative has been consumed, such as the next time the consumer visits the restaurant.

Only a few cognitive dissonance studies have examined ratings of the alternatives after the chosen alternative has been consumed, and it is unclear how consuming the chosen alternative affects the valuation of the forgone alternative. Some studies suggest that cognitive dissonance persists after consumption, leaving the forgone alternative devalued. For instance, students were asked to rate the attractiveness of the job offers they received before they had accepted a position, and again after working at their chosen job for some time. The rejected jobs were rated as less attractiveness after the choice than beforehand, even after years of employment (Lawler, Kuleck, Rhode, & Sorensen, 1975; Vroom & Deci, 1971). Other studies, however, suggest that consumption may reduce the effects of cognitive dissonance. Cohen and Goldberg (1970) gave participants a choice between brands of instant coffee to take home as a gift, and then provided them with cups of both brands to drink before collecting ratings and offering them a

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chance to switch brands. The amount of dissonance participants reported feeling during the choice did not predict their ratings for the forgone brand or their likelihood of switching to the forgone brand (Cohen & Goldberg, 1970). Notably, in these studies, it is not clear whether participants felt that their consumption of the alternative they chose was complete, as they might feel after consuming an entrée at dinner and then leaving the restaurant.

In this research, we propose that feeling a sense of closure after consuming the chosen alternative will allow the forgone alternative to rebound back to its initial valuation. Alternatives are evaluated and chosen for particular consumption occasions (Bearden & Woodside, 1978; Wakefield & Inman, 2003). For instance, an entrée is chosen for a particular occasion (tonight's dinner) with a specific set of situational influences (the social setting of the meal; Wakefield & Inman, 2003). Because the next choice in the category may be in response to a different motive or different situational influences, the dissonance created by a choice also may be limited to a particular consumption occasion. We propose that once consumption is complete, a sense of closure will release the forgone alternative from its biased devaluation. If this is the case, the forgone alternative should be devalued *before* the chosen alternative is consumed but rebound in value *after* consumption is perceived to be complete. Returning to our earlier example, we would expect that, consistent with cognitive dissonance, after choosing her entrée, the consumer will devalue her forgone entrée and that this devaluation will continue as she waits to be served and even as she begins to consume her dinner. However, we predict that consumption closure—the perception that the consumption occasion (the meal) is complete—will create a boundary condition for choice-based cognitive dissonance, and the next time she returns to the restaurant, she will no longer devalue the initially attractive but forgone entrée.

Identifying such a boundary condition for the devaluation of the forgone alternative could contribute to both theory and practice. Theoretically, we identify the conditions under which cognitive dissonance effects will persist. Although cognitive dissonance effects may persist over a relatively long period of time (e.g., Lawler et al., 1975; Vroom & Deci, 1971), a perception of consumption closure should attenuate the effect. Managerially, understanding when consumers will be more receptive to forgone alternatives should allow them to be retargeted more effectively. Specifically, consumers should be more receptive to promotions recommending their forgone alternatives after they had consumed their chosen alternative. For example, if online retailers can infer which alternatives consumers have forgone, recommending these alternatives is more likely to be successful after a consumption length delay than immediately after a purchase.

In the next sections, we briefly review cognitive dissonance theory, introduce the construct of consumption closure, and make predictions about how consumers will value a forgone alternative as they choose and consume another alternative. We test our predictions in a series of four studies in which participants actually consume their chosen alternatives.

The effect of choice on the value of the forgone alternative

Over its fifty year history, cognitive dissonance theory has had substantial influence across many domains. A thorough review of the findings and theoretical revisions is beyond the scope of this article, but interested readers can find excellent reviews by Cooper (2007) and Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2007). The seminal work by Festinger (1957) proposed that when individuals face an inconsistency between cognitions—including their actions, attitudes and beliefs—it creates dissonance, an unpleasant state which motivates them to change one of the cognitions to resolve the inconsistency (Festinger, 1957).

One active area of cognitive dissonance research, referred to as the free-choice paradigm, examines how choosing between attractive alternatives affects their relative values. The act of choosing an alternative is inconsistent with the belief that it has undesirable attributes, and the act of forging an alternative is inconsistent with the belief that it has desirable attributes, creating dissonance. Although there are various ways to resolve the dissonance created by choice, one of the most common is to devalue the forgone alternative and increase the value of the chosen alternative (Festinger, 1957), referred to as the “spreading of alternatives.” In the first demonstration of the free-choice paradigm, Brehm (1956) asked participants to rate the value of eight gift items (e.g., an art book, a toaster oven, a painting) and then choose between two of them. After participants chose between two attractive alternatives, the value of the forgone item declined relative to the value of the chosen item, whereas when they chose between an attractive and an unattractive item, the value of the items did not change (Brehm, 1956).

Dozens of studies have replicated Brehm's finding (see Appendix A) and identified other conditions that are necessary to produce this spread of alternatives. First, an active choice is required. Choosing an alternative versus being assigned an option moderates the cognitive dissonance effect (Cottrell, Rajecki, & Smith, 1974; Egan, Santos and Bloom, 2007; Hammock and Brehm, 1966). In one study, students ranked how much they wanted various gift items such as a reading lamp or a scrapbook. Some of the students were offered a choice between the items they had ranked fourth and fifth, whereas other students were given their fourth ranked item without a choice. The spread of alternatives was greater for those who made a choice than those who did not (Cottrell et al., 1974). Likewise, we predict that an alternative that is explicitly forgone in a choice should exhibit a greater devaluation and rebound effect than a comparable alternative that is omitted from a choice.

Second, consumers must care about the choice. Involving decisions are more important to the consumer and require greater deliberation (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Thus, high involvement decisions should lead to greater cognitive dissonance and spreading of alternatives than low involvement decisions (Brehm & Leventhal, 1962; Deutsch, Krauss, & Rosenau, 1962). For instance, Deutsch et al. (1962) had participants choose a gift item and then rate several gift items, including the one they chose. Involvement was manipulated by telling some participants (but not others) that their preferences were an

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