



Reducing the influence of framing on internet consumers' decisions: The role of elaboration



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ABSTRACT

The framing effect is one of the decision biases caused by the manner in which information is presented. However, greater research is required to determine how to eliminate the attribute framing effect. With additional knowledge regarding the factors that cause decision bias, an effective debiasing strategy can be designed. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine the debiasing effect of “elaboration” and “consider the opposite” to eliminate the framing effect using a laboratory experiment. The results suggest that both strategies are useful in debiasing the framing, but “consider the opposite” is more effective compared to “elaboration.”

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, marketers are facing keen competition as more and more product varieties were introduced to the market. For example, there are 42 varieties of Crest toothpaste; Head & Shoulders shampoo provides more than 30 varieties for the consumers to choose (Keller, 2008). In addition, with the proliferation of electronic commerce, consumers are exposed to a large amount of products in which making purchase decision has become a difficult task. Although perfect information may lead to an optimal decision (Edwards, 1954), the limitation of human beings' information processing capacity (Simon, 1956) has negative influence on the decision quality.

Issues related to internet-based purchasing decisions include a wide range of topics. For example, the information sources in social network online communities (Park & Cho, 2012), the influence of promotion strategies on Internet consumers' decision making (Chan, Cheng, & Hsien, 2011), the influence of web personalization on decision making (Ho & Tam, 2005). However, those studied did not address the decision bias problems. Although some previous studies have worked on how to improve online consumers' decision quality by providing decision aids (Breugelmans, Köhler,

Dellaert, & De Ruyter, 2012; Olson & Widing, 2002; Qing-Guo & Kai, 2009; Tan, Tan, & Teo, 2012) or recommendations (Lin, Cassaigne, & Huan, 2010; Schwind & Buder, 2012; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Wang & Benbasat, 2008), they failed to apply effective debiasing strategy to deal with the cognitive decision problems.

A few studies have examined human cognitive biases in a variety of decision problems such as confirmation bias in online recommendations effectiveness (Schwind & Buder, 2012), cognitive bias among online gaming players (Decker & Gay, 2011), team member selection biases (D'souza and Colarelli, 2010) and optimistic bias on privacy and piracy problems (Cho, Lee, & Chung, 2010; Nandedkar & Midha, 2012). However, limited studies addressed specifically on online consumers' purchasing decision problems, which are highly related to the success of e-commerce practitioners.

Among different types of cognitive biases, current study focused on one of the well-known decision bias, the framing effect, which refers to the phenomenon in which decision makers show inconsistent preferences or choices when identical information is presented differently (either positive or negative) (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). The reason is that the manipulation of product information is the most simple way to influence online consumers' purchasing decision and was applied by most of the e-marketers. For example, evidence from previous studies indicated the consumers' preferences toward a product will be more positive if the product was described in positive terms than in negative terms (Krishnamurthy, Carter, & Blair, 2001; Levin, Johnson, Russo, & Deldin, 1985).

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Numerous studies have examined the framing bias in a variety of different decision making problems such as medical treatment (Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012; Garcia-Retamero & Galesic, 2010; Peters, Hart, & Fraenkel, 2011), financial problems (Cassotti et al., 2012), and political election context (Bizer, Larsen, & Petty, 2011). In marketing domain, the framing effect was mainly examined in the context of product evaluation (Johnson & Levin, 1985; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Wu & Cheng, 2011) and promotion message design (Goh & Bockstedt, 2013; Mckechnie, Devlin, Ennew, & Smith, 2012; Raghubir, 2005; Zhang & Han, 2012). Unfortunately, how to reduce people's vulnerability to framing messages by applying debiasing techniques is rarely discussed. The only journal article addressing this issue was published recently (Cheng & Wu, 2010), in which debiasing the framing effect through warnings was discussed. However, additional research is required in determining how to eliminate the attribute framing effect among online shoppers.

Debiasing studies are crucial because additional knowledge regarding the factors that cause decision bias facilitate the design of an effective debiasing strategy, thus improving the decision-making quality and performance. For example, including decision aids in consumers' purchasing decision processes might increase consumer trust or improve the seller-buyer relationship. Further, research had also suggested that decision aids may increase peoples' satisfaction with their decisions (Kmett, Arkes, & Jones, 1999). Thus, this study focuses on the influence of message framing on Internet buyers' decisions and, most importantly, examines the possibility of eliminating the framing effect. The framing effect may occur due to the decision maker's lack of effort. Therefore, this research primarily addresses participants' elaboration (either positively or negatively) on their decisions and examines whether this elaboration process can prevent the framing effect.

To sum up, this study aims to address the following questions: (1) to examine the attribute framing effect in online shopping context; (2) to investigate the debiasing effect of elaboration in attribute framing effect. The attribute framing has been widely applied in marketing message design. Most often, marketers use positive framing to result in more favorable customer responses. In contrast, some marketers use negative framing messages which aim to attract consumers' attention but it might result in negative responses. Thus, marketers may want to know useful strategies to take advantage of negative framing message but at the same time eliminate the negative impact on consumers' preference. In this regard, current study can provide practical contribution to marketers by suggesting strategies to eliminate the framing bias. Thus, the negative framing messages can be used in conjunction with debiasing technique to attract consumers' attention but raise the consumers' preferences at the same time.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The existing work related to attribute framing effect and debiasing technique was discussed in Section 2, the literature review. In Section 3, details regarding the experimental design, manipulation, procedure and data collection were provided. The data analysis and results were illustrated in Section 4. Sections 5 and 6 include the conclusion, contribution and implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Framing effect

Numerous methods for describing decision problems exist. The most common is to describe the decision outcome either positively or negatively in the frame valence. Generally, a positive frame emphasizes the object's virtues and the negative frame emphasizes the object's disadvantages. The main focus of the framing message is one of the important attribute of the object thus the term

"attribute framing effect" was used. The dependent variable in the attribute framing effect is the decision makers' evaluation. For example, Krishnamurthy et al. (2001) investigated the influence of treatment with different effectiveness levels on participants' behavioral intentions regarding discussing treatments with the physician. In their study, the message was framed according to the success or failure of the treatment. The results from their study showed that the subjects in a positive frame condition had a significantly higher preference to therapy than those in a negative condition did. Moreover, Levin, Gaeth, Schreiber, and Lauriola (2002) used the same "80% lean meat" and "20% fat meat" method of describing ground beef, and their finding was consistent to that of Levin and Gaeth (Levin & Gaeth, 1988). Specifically, subjects in a positive frame have a better evaluation of the ground beef than those in a negative frame do. More recently, Van 't Riet et al. (2010) framed the health-promoting information in terms of gains associated with healthy behavior (gain) or unhealthy behavior (loss). The results suggested that gain frame resulted in higher levels of information acceptance and attitude than loss frame. Other studies all suggested similar findings, namely, people in a positive frame possess a better evaluation of the described object (Bizer et al., 2011; Bless, Betsch, & Franzen, 1998; Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012; Gamliel & Herstein, 2012; Goh & Bockstedt, 2013; Peters et al., 2011; Van 't Riet et al., 2010; Yamagishi, 2002; Zhang & Han, 2012).

Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth (1998) highlighted that a positive frame results in a more favorable evaluation compared to a negative frame. This is because subjects can more easily develop a positive association and believe the object is attractive when they are exposed to positive messages compared to negative messages. Janiszewski, Silk, and Cooke (2003) argued that because attribute framing messages frequently evoke decision-related information from the decision maker's unconscious memory, preventing the influence of attribute framing is extremely difficult.

Numerous advertisement messages describe the products' attributes to influence the consumers' evaluation of the product. Additionally, a large number of marketing and consumer behavior studies discuss the influence of attribute framing messages on consumers' decisions (Janiszewski et al., 2003; Kuvaas & Selart, 2004; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Levin et al., 1985; Zhang & Buda, 1999). Results from most of the attribute framing effect studies suggest that a positive frame message can result in more favorable preferences toward the described object compared to a negative message (Dunegan, 1993; Dunegan, Duchon, & Ashmos, 1995; Krishnamurthy et al., 2001; Levin et al., 2002; O'clock and Devine, 1995). A recent meta analysis also confirmed that positive messages are more persuasive than negative messages (Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Participants exposed to positive framing messages will have more favorable attitudes toward the target product than those exposed to negative framing messages.

Hypothesis 2. Participants exposed to positive framing messages will have higher intentions of purchasing the target product compared to those exposed to negative framing messages.

2.2. Debiasing techniques

Kennedy (1993) suggested a framework of debiasing techniques and categorized decision biases into two types: effort related and data related. If the decision maker is able to process the information but invests limited effort in making a decision, effort-related bias occurs. For this bias, appropriate incentives can be provided to the decision maker to encourage them to invest greater effort in decision making to prevent bias occurring.

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