

Research Dialogue

Selective versus comparative processing[☆]

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Abstract

Simonson et al. (forthcoming) propose a new theory of comparison selection that explains which particular alternatives will be considered in a wide variety of judgment and choice tasks. Comparison selection depends on the latitude of acceptance, comparison fluency, and the interaction between these factors. Importantly, these factors integrate a wide variety of seemingly unrelated variables, and the theory is useful for generating novel hypotheses. However, because comparative processing occurs relatively infrequently, it is important to take a step back and specify the conditions under which comparative processing is likely to occur. Comparative processing is likely only when the motivation and the opportunity to process information carefully are high, when consumers lack knowledge about distributional standards, or when stimulus-based judgment is likely. The two types of processes have different antecedents, consequences, and implications for debiasing.
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Simonson, Bettman, Kramer, and Payne (2013) provide a useful new theory of comparison selection, or the specific alternatives that are considered when comparative processing occurs. Comparison selection depends on the task's latitude of acceptance and comparison fluency. Originally, the latitude of acceptance referred to the perceived similarity between a consumer's initial attitude and the attitudinal position advocated in a persuasive message (Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957). Within the range of acceptable attitudinal positions, persuasion increases as similarity decreases (assimilation). Outside of this range, however, persuasion decreases as similarity decreases (contrast). Simonson et al. (2013) broadened this construct to include other types of similarity, including product attribute and product category similarity across alternatives. Simonson et al. (2013) also developed a broad conceptualization of comparison fluency, which is influenced by alignability (Markman &

Loewenstein, 2010; Medin, Goldstone, & Markman, 1995), and by evaluability (Hsee & Zhang, 2010). Evaluability is influenced by mode of evaluation, prior knowledge, and the nature of the attribute. Joint evaluation, high prior knowledge, and attributes that have innate and stable psychophysical values facilitate evaluation.

Comparison selection theory integrates a wide variety of seemingly unrelated variables, and explains many important phenomena — including asymmetric dominance, the compromise effect, variety seeking, and dollar versus percent discounts. Comparative processing is a key prerequisite for comparison selection. However, rather than performing effortful attribute-by-attribute comparisons across alternatives, consumers often engage in less effortful selective processing, in which a single focal alternative is judged in isolation on the basis of its own merits (Sanbonmatsu, Posavac, Kardes, & Mantel, 1998).

In one of the earliest studies of the antecedents of selective vs. comparative processing, Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, and Gibson (1991) manipulated instructions to form a global impression of each alternative (impression set) or to memorize the specific attributes of each alternative (memory set). Selective processing was more likely and the direction-of-comparison effect, or the tendency to weigh the unique features of the subject (or the

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more focal alternative) more heavily than the unique features of the referent, was reduced in impression set than in memory set conditions. Follow-up research demonstrated that the direction-of-comparison effect decreased as the need for cognition, or the preference for effortful information processing, decreased (Mantel & Kardes, 1999).

More recently, it was demonstrated that selective processing was more likely as the motivation or opportunity to process information carefully decreased (Sanbonmatsu, Vanous, Hook, Posavac, & Kardes, 2011). Subjects received information about four candidates who interviewed for a faculty position and were asked to estimate the probability that one randomly selected candidate was hired. The favorability of the information pertaining to the focal candidate and the alternative candidates was manipulated orthogonally. Subjects were also randomly assigned to high or low accountability conditions. The focal candidate was judged as more likely to have been hired when the information about the focal candidate was favorable rather than unfavorable. More importantly, the favorability of the information about the alternative candidates influenced judgments of the focal candidate only when accountability was high. When accountability was low, this information had no effect.

A second experiment measured selective processing more directly by investigating relative reading time for information about a randomly selected focal nominee for a teaching award versus information about three alternative nominees. This information was read under high or low time pressure. In addition, subjects were randomly assigned to high or low standards conditions by asking them to think about the qualities of the best or the worst teachers that they had encountered. Selective processing was more likely and relative reading times about the focal nominee were greater in high than in low time pressure conditions. Furthermore, distributional standards had a greater influence on judgments of the focal nominee in high than in low time pressure conditions. When selective processing was likely, subjects relied more heavily on categorical knowledge stored in memory than on information presented about the alternative nominees.

Wang and Wyer (2002) also found that comparative processing occurs only when consumers are highly motivated to process information carefully. Even though subjects received information about multiple brands, they engaged in comparative processing only when they were explicitly instructed to do so. Otherwise, subjects engaged in selective processing, and cancellation effects (or the tendency to neglect shared attributes) and direction-of-comparison effects were reduced.

Selective processing contributes to several singular judgment biases, such as those listed in the left column of Table 1. When alternatives are evaluated independently, a moderately favorable alternative cues favorable expectations that guide information search and information interpretation in a manner that is likely to support these expectations (Sanbonmatsu et al., 1998). Information that is consistent (vs. inconsistent) with these expectations receives greater attention, memory, and weight. Ambiguous information tends to be interpreted as consistent with expectations. As a result, the first satisfactory alternative that is encountered tends to be selected, even if better alternatives are

Table 1

Biases resulting from selective versus comparative processing.

Selective processing	Comparative processing
Attitude polarization	Asymmetric dominance
Brand positivity effect	Compromise effect
Better-than-average effect	Alignability effects
Omission neglect	Diversification bias/variety seeking
Focusing Illusion	Attribute distortion
Hindsight bias	Direction-of-comparison effect
Change-in-standard effect	Choosing versus rejecting alternatives
Anchoring	Ellsberg paradox/ambiguity aversion
Illusory correlation	
Marketing placebo effects	
Overconfidence	
Compatibility/matching effects	
Unpacking effects	
Noncomplementarity effect	

available. Conversely, when the focal alternative is sufficiently negative, the same selective processes lead to overly negative evaluations, even if worse alternatives exist.

The more one thinks about a single focal alternative, the more extreme one's opinion becomes (attitude polarization; Tesser, 1978). This occurs because people focus selectively on attitude-consistent information, while neglecting attitude-inconsistent information. Attitude-consistent values also tend to be inferred for missing attributes. Research on the brand positivity effect showed that the first satisfactory brand that was encountered was overvalued, even when that brand was randomly selected from a set of multiple satisfactory brands (Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, & Fitzsimons, 2004). Focusing selectively on attitude-consistent evidence drives this phenomenon. Furthermore, although it is impossible for all members of a favorably evaluated group to be above average, all members are judged to be better than average when each member is judged independently (Klar & Giladi, 1997).

Selective processing also contributes to omission neglect, or insensitivity to missing or unknown attributes, alternatives, or properties (Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, Houghton, Ho, & Posavac, 2003; Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, Posavac, & Houghton, 1997). Focusing selectively on readily available information leads consumers to overweigh the judgmental implications of presented information, and to underweigh the judgmental implications of missing information. Similarly, focusing on the weather (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998) or on income (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006) leads people to overestimate the life satisfaction of those living in California or of those enjoying above-average income. The focusing illusion also leads people to overestimate the duration of affect-inducing events (Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2002).

Research on the hindsight bias and on the change-of-standard effect showed that people distort the past to fit the present. Earlier predictions become more consistent with known outcomes after these outcomes occur (Fischhoff, 1975), and memory for earlier standards or reference points become more consistent with current standards (Higgins & Liberman, 1994; Higgins & Lurie, 1983). Research on anchoring showed that high standards led to high judgments, and low standards led to low judgments, and

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