The Comparative Mindset: From Animal Comparisons to Increased Purchase Intentions

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Stimulating people to state a preference for one of two commercial products can increase their willingness to purchase not only one of these products but also other products in a totally unrelated domain (Xu and Wyer 2007). However, the willingness to make a purchase in a given domain (e.g., computers) can also be increased by (a) asking individuals which of two stimuli in a different domain (e.g., vacation packages) they dislike more, (b) comparing the relative attractiveness of wild animals, (c) comparing the animals with respect to physical attributes, and (d) estimating how similar one country is to another. In short, making any type of comparative judgment appears likely to give rise to a “comparative mindset” and, therefore, to influence decisions in subsequent situations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Xu and Wyer (2007) found that when consumers consider their preference for one of a set of products without having decided whether they want to buy anything at all, they develop a “which-to-buy” mind-set that increases their likelihood of ultimately making a purchase both in the present situation and in other, unrelated situations. In one study, for example, more participants reported a willingness to purchase a vacation package if they had previously reported a preference for one of two computers than if they had not. In another experiment, participants who stated preference for five pairs of products or services were significantly more likely to purchase candies that were on sale after the experiment than were participants who had not made preference judgments before. Thus, merely stating a preference for choice alternatives in one product domain not only can increase the willingness to make a purchase in other hypothetical situations but also can have an impact on actual purchase behavior.

Preference judgments are only one type of comparative judgments, however. In the present research, we proposed that a which-to-buy mind-set may be a manifestation of a more general, comparative mind-set that, once activated, persists to influence decisions and behavior in other situations in which comparison processes come into play. Furthermore, this mind-set may be activated by making different kinds of comparative judgments in non-product domains.

Four experiments examined these possibilities. Participants in the first experiment received information about two vacation packages, A and B. One group of participants indicated which vacation they preferred. A second group of participants, however, indicated which vacation they disliked more. Then, both these participants and control participants (who had not been exposed to the vacation packages) received information about two computers and indicated whether they would want to purchase A, to purchase B, or to defer making a choice. Compared with control participants who had not made judgments of vacation packages, participants who either made preference or dislike judgment of vacation packages were more likely to choose one of the computers rather than defer choice.

In experiment 2, some participants were exposed to pairs of animals (e.g., elephants, hippos, etc.) and asked to indicate which animals in each pair they preferred. Other participants were asked to compare the animals with respect to a specific attribute (heaviness, jumping ability, eye sight, etc.). Then, both these participants and control participants who did not make judgments of animals performed the same computer-decision task we employed in Experiment 1. Both groups of participants who made comparative judgments of animals expressed a greater willingness to buy one of the computers than control participants.

Furthermore, a third experiment showed that participants who had made comparative judgments of animals were actually more likely than control participants to purchase one of several products (candy, potato chips, etc.) that were on sale after the experiment.

Experiment 4 manipulated the comparative mind-set by asking participants to make a series of similarity judgments on countries, educational institutions, etc. Making these similarity judgments reflected the nature of making directional comparisons suggested by Tversky (1977). These participants also expressed greater willingness to purchase a computer in the subsequent choice task than were control participants.

REFERENCES