

The Effects of Outcome-Oriented and Process-Oriented Thinking on Consumer Decision Making

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This research investigates the effects of outcome-oriented and process-oriented thinking on consumers' subjective experiences during the decision making process. Outcome-oriented thinking encourages a focus on the end state one wants to achieve, while process-oriented thinking involves elaboration on the step-by-step process that leads to a desired outcome. We show that consumers who use process-oriented thinking are less likely to underweight feasibility characteristics of the alternatives (e.g., a digital camera's ease of use) than consumers who engage in outcome-focused thinking. However, those who use process-oriented thinking also experience more difficulty making the choice, are less confident in their choices, and are less satisfied with the decision process than those who use outcome-oriented thinking.

Research on mental simulation differentiates between two types of elaboration: outcome-oriented thinking and process-oriented thinking (e.g., Pham and Taylor 1999). Outcome-oriented thinking encourages a focus on the end state an individual wants to achieve (e.g., a student envisioning getting a high grade), while process-oriented thinking involves elaboration on the step-by-step process that leads to a desired outcome (e.g., a student envisioning the activities she would perform to achieve a high grade). Previous studies suggest that process-oriented thinking is often more effective than outcome-oriented thinking. Specifically, relative to outcome-oriented thinking, engaging in process-oriented thinking improves performance on cognitive tasks and learning of motor skills (Taylor et al. 1998). In consumer contexts, process-oriented thinking has been shown to elicit several beneficial effects compared to outcome-oriented thinking, such as greater sensitivity to argument quality under low involvement conditions (Escalas and Luce 2004), higher consistency between distant and near future decisions (Zhao, Hoeffler and Zauberma 2005) and higher consistency between pre-usage and post-usage preferences for products (Hamilton and Thompson 2006).

We propose that although process-oriented thinking can improve long-term consistency in consumers' preferences relative to outcome-oriented thinking, it can also have detrimental effects on consumers' subjective experiences during the decision making process. For example, consumers may experience greater perceived choice difficulty, lower decision confidence, and lower satisfaction with the decision process. We examine a cognitive mechanism for this effect. Specifically, we expect that individuals who engage in process thinking tend to form action-outcome links and weigh more factors in their decisions than individuals who engage in outcome thinking (Escalas and Luce 2004), potentially making the choice task more difficult.

In our first study ($N = 102$), participants chose between two models of a digital camera. The two alternatives presented a trade-off between functionality (number of features) and ease of use. Results indicated that when evaluating a digital camera prior to purchase, participants who used process-oriented thinking were more likely to choose the camera that was easier to use but had fewer functions than participants who used outcome-oriented thinking. However, they reported significantly higher choice difficulty and lower decision confidence than participants who used outcome-oriented thinking or participants in a control group. The similarity between

the outcome-oriented thinking group and the control group in both their choices and subjective experiences suggests that consumers naturally tend to adopt outcome-oriented thinking in this setting.

In our second study ($N=95$), we tested this effect in a different choice context and explored an underlying mechanism for the increase in decision making difficulty triggered by process-oriented thinking. We tested whether participants who engage in process-oriented thinking tend to consider more factors in their decisions (Escalas and Luce 2004), incorporating both outcome and process-related information, while participants who engage in outcome-oriented thinking tend to focus on outcome-related information. Participants chose between two apartments that were described in terms of their spaciousness (500 square feet or 900 square feet) and distance from campus (1 mile or 9 miles). As expected, we found that participants using process-oriented thinking were more likely to select the smaller apartment with the shorter commute than participants using outcome-oriented thinking. In addition, we asked participants to rate how much they thought about the apartments' spaciousness and distance from campus. While participants' ratings of how much they thought about square footage did not differ across conditions, they indicated that they thought more about distance from campus in the process condition than in the outcome condition. Replicating study 1's findings, participants in the process-oriented condition reported lower satisfaction with the decision process than participants in outcome-oriented condition.

Finally, in our third study, we will investigate whether changes in the type of tradeoff required by the choice set moderate the effect of process-oriented thinking on subjective experiences during decision making. Research suggests that some tradeoffs are more difficult for consumers than others (Luce 1998). Specifically, we propose that differences between process and outcome-oriented thinking will be attenuated when the choice set does not present a trade-off between desirability characteristics and feasibility characteristics.

In summary, process-oriented mental simulation may be a double-edged sword, helping consumers choose products that are more satisfying during use, but simultaneously decreasing satisfaction with the choice process. The differences in participants' subjective experiences observed in our studies suggest that moving from outcome-oriented thinking to process-oriented thinking may require increased cognitive effort, decreasing confidence and increasing choice difficulty.

References:

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