

Research Article

Preference exploration and learning: the role of intensiveness and extensiveness of experience

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Received 12 August 2011; received in revised 14 October 2012; accepted 15 October 2012

Available online 22 October 2012

Abstract

In this article, the authors partition the construct of experience into intensiveness (i.e., amount) and extensiveness (i.e., breadth) and examine the impact of the two specific types of experience on preference learning. In the first three studies, the authors' theory that experience can be partitioned into intensiveness (i.e., amount) and extensiveness (i.e., breadth) of experience and that extensiveness has a greater impact on preference learning is supported in environments where prior experience is measured. Further, in study 4 they demonstrate that extensiveness or breadth of experience exerts a larger influence on preference learning in an experiment where each unique type of experience is manipulated as well as measured.

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Keywords: Preferences; Learning

Introduction

Nearly every week someone asks me, "How should I begin if I want to learn about wine?" That is why I have put together this simple wine primer, a set of dos and don'ts for the budding wine lover. Do start with simple and inexpensive wines, and work your way up to the powerhouse bottles. Do try a variety of wines. Trying everything is the only way to build your sensory memory and discover your own tastes. You will never make any progress with wine if you stick to the same Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon, no matter how much you like them (Blue, 2002).

People's preferences change dramatically over time. In most cases, the changes are too slow to draw attention, but when

people look back at their past preferences, they sometimes find it shocking to realize how much they have changed. These changes cover the gamut from food to entertainment, and they occur in most consumption domains. In addition, they include aspects for which people both increased and decreased their liking over time. A few examples of such changes include realizing that grilled cheese sandwiches are not the culinary ideal anymore, developing a taste for beer, and looking forward to visiting a modern art museum. Often, such changes occur over a consumer's lifetime. Yet knowing that preferences change is different from understanding how and why they change.

The primary event that influences preference learning is experience. When examining research on this effect, we identify two classes of factors that influence preference learning. One class of factors (e.g., biology and exposure) has a direct influence, whereby preferences respond to lower-order forces such as biological adaptation and sensory feedback. The second class of factors (e.g., informational goals and social learning) has an indirect influence, whereby preferences are subject to higher-

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order forces such as cognitive representations of desirable end states.

We investigate the role of repeated experience with similar options versus the impact of experience with a greater variety of options. Depending on the level of standardization, even repeated experience with the same product includes some variability. Yet the selection and experience of novel options (or preference exploration) should lead to greater variability of experience in a domain. The key question we investigate herein is the relative impact of each type of experience on preference learning. In doing so, we refine the experience construct by partitioning it into intensiveness (i.e., amount) and extensiveness (i.e., breadth) of experience. In addition, we examine the relative ability of each type of experience to impact the amount of preference learning.

Experience and preference learning

There has been a recent call for more research toward the goal of better understanding preference learning (Hutchinson & Eisenstein, 2008). In the sections that follow, we examine the role of simple exposure (i.e., experiencing an option) and repeated experience on preference learning. In addition, we examine prior research on the acquiring of taste for food as well as studies examining the general phenomenon of preference learning over time with experience. Finally, we catalog and predict the impact of both breadth and amount of experience on preference learning.

Role of biology and mere exposure

Notably, there appear to be few biological predispositions that drive preferences. The two main biological primitives are an innate liking of sweet tastes, which, in nature, are normally correlated with calories, and an innate dislike of bitter tastes, which are correlated with the presence of toxins (Lawless, 1985). One aspect of experience that is known to affect preferences is simply exposure to new options. Classic research on mere-exposure effects demonstrates that exposure leads to an increase in liking, even when participants were not aware that they had been previously exposed to the stimuli (Zajonc, 1980). Furthermore, Janiszewski (1993) shows that mere exposure to a brand name or product category leads to a more favorable attitude toward that brand even when participants were not aware of the initial exposure.

Research on the development of food preferences has produced valuable insights into the impact of mere exposure on preference. Torrence (1958) examined mere exposure as the key mechanism leading to enhanced liking for edible substances. An early study examined the use of Pemmican (dried beef and pork mixed with suet) as a staple during survival training for the U.S. Air Force (Torrence, 1958). Prior experience with Pemmican led to more favorable reactions and a more favorable attitude toward future use. More important, those who had tried Pemmican previously and reported not liking it reacted even more favorably than those who had not tried it at all. In the next section, we

examine additional food preference studies that are focused on the impact of repeated exposure.

Role of repeated exposure

Rozin and Schiller (1980) examined the development of a taste for chili peppers. Their goal was to examine the development of affect in the context of acquiring taste for chili peppers and, specifically, the irritation associated with chili peppers, which they dubbed the “chili burn.” Rozin and Schiller studied how people in a rural village in the highlands of Mexico formed preferences for chili peppers versus North American participants. In general, they found that in the Mexico sample, there was a gradual increase in preferences for chili peppers over a period of two to eight years that began at around the age of three to five years. Beginning at about the age of three, mothers would expose their children to chili peppers in the form of salsa. In general, at about the age of 5, children exposed themselves to chili peppers that were available (i.e., salsa).

Rozin and Schiller (1980) examined (and mostly discounted) a host of reasons for the learned preference for chili peppers (e.g., receptor desensitization, associative learning, opponent process, benign masochism). Ultimately, they contend that mere exposure and social factors are the most likely mechanisms leading to favorable attitudes toward chili peppers. Pliner (1982) used unfamiliar tropical fruit juices (e.g., guava, mango) and exposed participants 0, 5, 10, or 20 times (without their knowledge of the specific number of exposures) to the juices. Increased exposure led to increased liking. Birch and Marlin (1982) tested the effect of exposure on food preferences for 2-year-old children. As many parents would predict, children preferred sweeter foods and foods with which they were familiar. In addition, preference was shown to be an increasing function of exposure frequency. Thus, exposure is one of the fundamental factors that impact preference learning. Another important factor is the seeking out of novel experiences or preference exploration.

Factors that promote preference exploration

Within the work on constructive preferences, there is a stream of research that has been termed the “pioneering advantage.” This work is related to the current topic because it deals with systematic and long-term changes to preferences. Carpenter and Nakamoto (1989) examine the psychological changes that take place over time as a function of exposure to new brands. They claim that the early entrant affects the way consumers’ value specific attributes and ultimately their ideal point. According to Carpenter and Nakamoto, this is due to consumers sampling the pioneering brand and attributing successful outcomes to the attribute combination associated with the pioneering product. This positive feedback associated with consumers’ initial experience leads them to shift their ideal point toward the pioneer’s position.

Following this work, Hoeffler and Ariely (1999) examine the process of preference consolidation in a novel environment (aversive sounds) and show that initial experiences in a novel

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