

SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Comparative Processes in Consumer Choice
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The papers in this session explore antecedents of comparative processing and effects of comparison on decision conflict and choice. They investigate the influence of grouping, categorization, and comparability of options on comparative processing and choice and provide several explanations for why product differentiation may either help or hurt a particular product in the marketplace.

Brenner, Rottenstreich, and Sood find that the attractiveness of choice options is often hurt by comparison to other options, because it highlights aspects of each option that are not shared by the other(s), making prominent each option's relative (dis)advantages. Because disadvantages are weighted more heavily than comparable advantages, comparisons make each option less attractive. They also find that when some options within a choice-set are grouped, grouped options are more likely to be compared than isolated options. Given the negative effect of comparison, this implies that options are more likely to be chosen when alone than when part of a group. Thus, grouping hurts.

Van Osselaer and Rottenstreich investigate the impact of categorization on comparative processing in choice. They find subjects place higher weights on numerical features (e.g., price, expected life) relative to other features (e.g., brand name) when options are framed as belonging to the same category than when framed as belonging to different categories. Preliminary findings indicate this occurs because (1) same-category framing encourages comparisons across-options whereas different-category framing encourages subjects to make isolated within-option evaluations and (2) numerical features are weighted relatively more heavily in across-option comparisons than in within-option evaluations.

Soman and Gourville show that increasing assortment size increases brand share when products in the assortment are easily comparable ("ordinal assortments" in which variants differ along a single continuous attribute) but decreases brand share when they are not easily comparable ("nominal assortments" in which variants vary along non-comparable attributes). They show the difficulty of comparing products belonging to nominal assortments necessitates isolated within-option evaluations. This increases the complexity of the process, leading consumers to defer or chose options from simpler assortments. When consumers cannot defer or defect, (i.e., they have to chose from one assortment), increasing the size of nominal assortments leads to increased choice of extreme options through the use of an "all-or-nothing" heuristic favoring "basic" and "fully loaded" products.

Chakravarti summarized the three papers and their implications. In addition, he provided insights into underlying processes and suggested extensions. For example, he suggested that comparisons may provoke conflict, leading to an attractiveness effect similar to Brenner et al.'s. He pointed at the potential role of accuracy-effort tradeoffs in the work by van Osselaer and Rottenstreich. Finally, Chakravarti proposed looking at the locus of complexity in Soman and Gourville's work, which could be in perception, preference construction, or preference application.

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