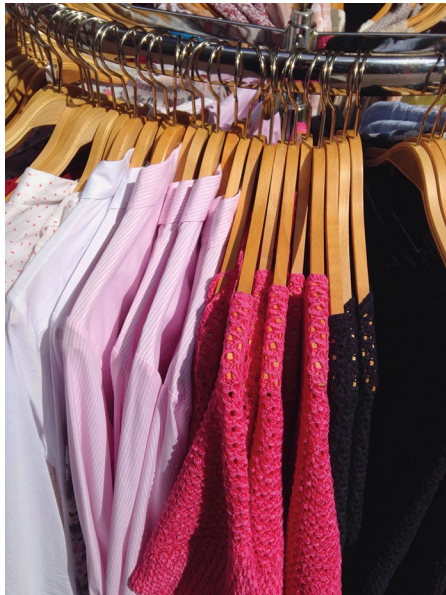


CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Perceiving products

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Credit: Axel Bueckert / EyeEm / EyeEm / Getty

Technological advances increasingly allow consumers to make product choices through a multi-stage decision process, whereby product attributes are selected sequentially. How this decision process shapes a consumer's mental representation and categorization of their chosen option has important implications for consumer behaviour.

Research from Rom Schrift of the University of Pennsylvania and colleagues shows that the order in which attribute-level decisions are made impacts how consumers describe the chosen option, perceive its similarity to other options, categorize it, intend to use it and replace it, even when the final choice is the same. The impact of early attribute choice on perception of the chosen product is demonstrated across 13 studies and persists even when the attributes have no substantive meaning. However, when participants developed a pre-established mental representation by describing stimuli (for example, a coffee mug with a particular colour and design) before making a multi-stage decision to choose coffee mugs, attribute-level choice order had no impact on the subsequent mental representations of the chosen option.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that firms can change the decision process to influence how consumers think about their offerings. From a methodological standpoint, the studies demonstrate a seemingly simple way in which researchers can manipulate participant mental representations of stimuli.

Adam Yeeles

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