



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Association for Consumer Research, University of Minnesota Duluth, 115 Chester Park, 31 West College Street Duluth, MN 55812

The Effect of Empty Space on Choice Deferral

Canice Man Ching Kwan, Open University of Hong Kong, China

Han Gong, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, China

Meng Zhu, Johns Hopkins University, USA

Visual space is a fundamental component in visual communications. In five experiments, we demonstrate that the blank margin of a choice set increases the extent to which consumers defer choices. Our findings show that this effect is driven by the enhanced salience of alternatives instead of processing difficulty and fluency.

[to cite]:

Canice Man Ching Kwan, Han Gong, and Meng Zhu (2019) , "The Effect of Empty Space on Choice Deferral", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 47, eds. Rajesh Bagchi, Lauren Block, and Leonard Lee, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 719-719.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2552101/volumes/v47/NA-47>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

The Effect of Empty Space on Choice Deferral

Canice M C Kwan, The Open University of Hong Kong, China

Han Gong, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, China

Meng Zhu, John Hopkins University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Choice deferral is ubiquitous among consumers. There has been a great deal of research examining factors that influence consumers' choice deferral. Prior work has shown that choice deferral often arises from perceived decisional conflict or difficulty when the trade-off between important attributes is hard to make (e.g., Tversky and Shafir 1992). In the current project, we contend that consumers may defer to make a choice because of the existence of alternatives that are unavailable in the given choice set. Further, the extent to which consumers may think of outside alternatives may be swayed by incidental cues such as the space surrounding a choice set.

Empty space is a fundamental component in visual communications. Findings from different lines of research suggest that empty space has been widely adopted to signal prestige and luxury (Jewler and Drewniansy 2000). Recently, a growing body of work has examined the effect of space on consumer behaviors (e.g., Kwan, Dai and Wyer 2017; Pracejus, O'Guinn and Olsen 2013). Inspired by prior research, we posit that when the space surrounding a choice set is substantial (vs. limited), consumers are more likely to think of other alternatives that are absent from the current choice set, which consequently leads to greater choice deferral.

Study 1 was designed to provide initial evidence for the proposed effect. We recruited undergraduates from a university in Hong Kong to complete a study for a payment of \$5. Once entering the lab, they had a chance to choose a pen from a set of five for \$1 and were told that there would be another chance to choose from a different set by the end of the session if they decided not to choose now. As the space manipulation, we showed them either an A4 (empty) or A5 (full) pasteboard with five pens showcasing on it. We recorded whether they purchased the pen and at which stage they did so. Logistic regression on purchase tendency yielded a significant effect ($B = 1.20$, $SE = .451$, $\chi^2(1) = 7.079$, $p = .008$), suggesting that participants became less likely to forgo their payment in exchange for a pen in the empty space condition. Moreover, participants were more likely to defer in the loose (vs. narrow) margin condition (Mann-Whitney $U = 787.5$, $p = 0.021$).

Study 2 replicated the effect in a more controlled context. We recruited US participants from an online platform Mechanical Turk (MTurk) powered by Amazon. They were first asked to imagine that they were hungry at the moment and wanted to grab something fresh to eat. Then they were randomly presented one of two salad menus (space: empty vs. full) and asked to make a choice. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that participants were more likely to defer their decisions in the empty space condition ($B = .904$, $Wald Z = 5.077$, $p = .024$). Moreover, we also examined a series of potential alternative accounts (e.g., perceived attractiveness, attention allocation, time pressure, etc.) and none of these was influenced by the space manipulation.

Study 3 was designed to assess the consideration of alternatives not included in a given set as the underlying mechanism. Participants recruited from MTurk were exposed to a screen shot of a pizza online ordering website and asked to indicate their choice of pizza. Afterwards, we asked participants to list all the thoughts and feelings that came to their minds when deciding which pizza to order. As predicted, a logistic regression on their choice indicated that more participants indicated to go to another website when the empty

space was substantial ($B = -1.198$, $Wald Z = 7.346$, $p = .007$). Also, the substantial empty space on the webpage enhanced the extent to which participants mentioned other unavailable options ($B = -.904$, $Wald Z = 5.102$, $p = .024$). More importantly, mediation analyses yielded a significant indirect effect of listed thoughts (95% CI: .0253 to 1.0239, $SE = .255$, $Z = 2.059$, $p = .04$).

Study 4 aimed to provide further evidence for the proposed process that empty space prompts consumers to think of outside alternatives rather than look for more information in general. Similar to studies 2 and 3, MTurk workers were asked to imagine that they were thinking of buying a laptop computer with the option to not make a choice. They were then presented a modified screenshot of the shopping cart on Amazon displaying a matrix comparing two laptop computers. They were given four options—two being the candidate options and the other two being “I would like to get more information about these two models” and “I would like to check if there are any other options.” A multinomial logistic regression showed that participants were more likely to look for other models when the space of the webpage was substantial (46.1%) than limited (35.0%; $B = .698$, $Wald Z = 5.85$, $p = .016$). No significant differences were found in terms of getting more information about the two models (29.1% vs. 27.1%; $B = .491$, $Wald Z = 2.46$, $p > .10$).

This research demonstrates in four experiments that when the empty space surrounding a choice set is substantial, consumers tend to realize the existence of other unavailable alternatives, which consequently leads them to defer their choices in various contexts. Our findings support the account based on outside alternatives over those concerning perceived attractiveness, attention allocation, time pressure, and so on. While prior research almost exclusively focuses on the space effects on evaluation, we extend investigation to consumer decision-making and identify a novel inference unique to the decision context. This research also adds to the literature on choice deferral by showing that seemingly irrelevant cues (i.e., the empty space surrounding a given choice set) affect choice deferral without eliciting negative feelings such as difficulty and disfluency. More intriguingly, these cues prompt consumers to think of options that are currently unavailable from a given choice set, thus leading them to restructure their consideration set. We hope this work invites future endeavors on better understanding how various types of incidental cues shape decision making.

REFERENCES

- Jewler, A. Jerome and Bonnie L. Drewniansy (2000). *Creative Strategy in Marketing*, 7th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Kwan, Canice MC, Xianchi Dai, and Robert S. Wyer Jr. (2017), “Contextual Influences on Message Persuasion: The Effect of Empty Space,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(2), 448-64.
- Pracejus, John W., Thomas C. O'Guinn, and G. Douglas Olsen (2013), “When white space is more than “burning money”: Economic signaling meets visual commercial rhetoric,” *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 30(3), 211-18.
- Tversky, Amos, and Eldar Shafir (1992), “Choice Under Conflict: The Dynamics of Deferred Decision,” *Psychological Science*, 3(6), 358-61.