Experience Distortion by Quality and Motivational Signals

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Consumers’ experienced utility is often shaped not only by intrinsic aspects of consumption experiences themselves, but also by extrinsic pre-consumption information about those experiences. For instance, consider critics’ ratings of a film, the price or country-of-origin of a bottle of wine, the brand-name of a cola, whether a meal is made from organic ingredients—in these and countless other scenarios, an individual’s actual consumption experience may be altered by extrinsic cues about that experience.

In this research I define and distinguish between two ways in which such extrinsic signals may distort experiences. First, they can provide informational cues about the quality or nature of the experience, thereby setting expectations that influence subsequent processing of the experience. Second, they can induce motivations regarding whether one “wants to like” (or dislike) the experience, leading to motivated distortion of the experience to align with the desired end. I propose and provide evidence that these two types of extrinsic cues—informational signals setting expected utility and motivational signals setting a desired utility—operate by fundamentally different routes to distort experiences.

As a result of this difference, I show that specific personal and contextual factors can have divergent effects on experience distortion, depending on the nature of the extrinsic signal. For instance, I show that cognitive load enhances the influence of informational signals on experienced utility, but attenuates the effects of motivational signals. This duality is consistent with, for informational signals, greater reliance on such simple external cues regarding quality when the ability to engage in in-depth intrinsic processing of the experience is compromised; and in the motivational case, with a disruption of the ability to actively distort the experience to align with the active motivation when under cognitive load. Such divergences illustrate the importance of characterizing the informational and/or motivational nature of an extrinsic cue, as the effects of specific contextual factors may vary depending on how that cue distorts experienced utility.

I also show that experience distortion need not be a simple either/or between informational and motivational processes. Rather, a single extrinsic cue can embody both types of signals. I explore several cases in which multiple signals having conflicting ultimate effects are sent by a specific extrinsic cue. For example, “Haiti” listed as an experiential good’s country-of-origin was shown to send an informational signal of low quality, consistent with the country’s third-world status; but also induce a motivation to want to like the experience, a sympathetic response to the poor, earthquake-struck nation. I also explore an important real-world case in which the effects of multiple signals are more aligned. Specifically, I provide evidence for informational versus motivational mechanisms respectively underlying merely knowing the price of a product (providing an informational signal about quality) versus actually paying for it (inducing motivations to justify the purchase decision and feel like one has gotten one’s money’s worth). Thus, price-based effects on product experience vary at a fundamental process level depending on whether that price is simply known (“price on the shelf”) or actually paid (“price on the bill”).