

Research Report

Order in Choice

Effects of Serial Position on Preferences

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ABSTRACT—When several choice options are sampled one at a time in a sequence and a single choice of the best option is made at the end of the sequence, which location in the sequence is chosen most often? We report a large-scale experiment that assessed tasting preferences in choice sets of two, three, four, or five wines. We found a large primacy effect—the first wine had a large advantage in the end-of-sequence choice. We also found that participants who were knowledgeable about wines showed a recency effect in the longer sequences. We conclude with a process model that explains our findings.

Lives are lived serially: Experiences seem to follow one another, and when people make choices, they give their attention to one option at a time—even when all the choices are available for inspection simultaneously. Consider a person faced with selecting the best option from several options that are presented one at a time. Each one is sampled, assessed, and evaluated as it is experienced; finally, after all the options in the choice set have been evaluated, the person makes a final decision, aiming to select the best option from the set. In the study reported in this article, our primary purpose was to determine if such choices are biased toward options at particular locations in the temporal sequence—that is, whether there are *order effects on choice*. We assumed that such choices are not wholly memory based, but that on-line evaluation takes place as the options are initially sampled (Hastie & Park, 1986).

The choice task we used should be considered in light of some well-established sequence effects. First, there are serial-position effects on memory. When a person tries to recall events from the past that occurred in a conceptually related sequence—words in a to-be-remembered list, the names of the

U.S. presidents, or events that occurred during the last semester at school—early items and late items have an advantage in recall (i.e., *primacy* and *recency* effects; Glanzer & Cunitz, 1966). Although these effects are different from order effects on choice, a finding of primacy or recency effects in our task might indicate that memorability plays a role in order effects on choice. For example, sensory scientists report a primacy bias in hedonic assessment of food: The first food item sampled is experienced most strongly, so it is likely to be the most memorable and preferred (MacFie, Bratchell, Greehoff, & Vallis, 1989).

Second, there are well-known primacy effects that occur when people are forming a summary impression of a single entity (e.g., a person, product, or event). When information about a single individual is presented sequentially, there is usually a primacy, or “first impression,” effect, whereby the earliest information has a larger impact on the unitary impression than later information does (e.g., Anderson, 1973; Asch, 1946; see Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992, for a comprehensive review). Although the formation of a summary impression of a single option is not the same as separate evaluations of several options, what is known about primacy effects in impression-formation tasks may be relevant to interpreting the results from our sequential-choice task. Factors like biased processing of later information (driven by a confirmatory mind-set induced by the earliest information—e.g., Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Russo, Carlson, & Meloy, 2006) or a simple attention decrement may also be part of a valid theoretical account for sequence effects on choices (for a discussion of boredom effects for items sampled later in a sequence, see Sulmont-Rosse, Chabanet, Issanchou, & Köster, 2008).

Although several prior studies have investigated the effects of location in a sequence on end-of-sequence choices, there is still no clear answer to the question of which location in a sequence is most advantageous. Several researchers have concluded that there are primacy effects in choice (e.g., Carney & Banaji, 2008; Miller & Krosnick, 1998), and many descriptive studies of consumer choice have found such effects (Becker, 1954; Berg, Filipello, Hinreiner, & Sawyer, 1955; Coney, 1977; Dean, 1980). However, some researchers have predicted and observed

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