Knowing What to Enjoy When: Psychological Constraints on Optimal Sampling

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Abstract

The simplest way to know if you enjoy something is to try it. Normative models suggest gaining a first-hand “taste” of experience should uniformly improve one’s understanding of the stimulus overall, assuming the sample is representative. In this talk, I propose a psychological model taking into account competing motivations that complicate this process. People hold relatively high thresholds for preference verification (wanting to appear reasonable) but relatively low thresholds for preference confirmation (wanting to use their time efficiently). On average, this discrepancy leads people to acquire more sampling information than they end up using to form their preference. Thus, people risk over-investing in simple stimuli (for which one’s preferences could have been discerned right away) but under-investing in complex stimuli (for which one’s preferences could have changed upon repeat exposure). I review evidence for this model and discuss implications for change perception more generally (e.g., mismanaging acquired tastes).