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Kallie R. Reiter

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kkreiter@csbsju.edu

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Gender Differences in Decision Making When Faced with Multiple Options

Kallie Reiter

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

Abstract

This study tested the gender differences in decision-making patterns when multiple options were available among college students. The researchers tested this by measuring the amount of time it took students to choose a food line to wait in at the cafeteria, predicting that males would not spend as much time observing all of the different options as females would. 116 male students and 116 female students from two separate cafeterias on two different campuses participated in the study. The researchers found that when males had formed a routine and were in their more natural environment, they were quicker to choose a line than females, but when in a less familiar situation, males and females did not significantly differ in the amount of time it took to choose their food line.

Gender Differences in Decision Making When Faced with Multiple Options

Gender differences are something that has always held an interest in modern research studies (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Something especially intriguing especially within the past few years have been gender differences in making decisions. Recently developed research have been analyzing the differences between how males and females make decisions, whether those decisions are large or small. This study hoped to further look into the decision making process and whether, when faced with many options in one place, genders differed in their decision making process.

An interesting and important example of this is how males and females make decisions while shopping online (Seock & Bailey, 2008). While studying many different shopping habits among college students, Seock and Bailey found that male and female shoppers showed a significant difference in their shopping orientation. It was discovered that females visited more websites and more thoroughly investigated all options while online shopping than males, and if there were online sales or discounts, females were more likely to find and take advantage of them. Males, on the other hand were more efficient in their shopping habits. They made their purchases more quickly and were focused on getting straight to the purchase rather than fussing over the smaller details that drew in the females. These sorts of findings can be especially important to marketers who are trying to sell their products more efficiently, because it lets them target their audience by selling things in a specific way (Seock & Bailey, 2008). Therefore, if learning more about gender difference in decision-making can help marketers sell more efficiently to their customers, there could be helpful knowledge to gain by further studying these

differences as they apply to other situations.

Not only can recognizing gender differences in decision making help marketers sell things to their customers in a more efficient manner, but it can help people to gain a better understanding of the way males and females process information in general. There are many advantages to understanding these differences in males and females processing in every day life. The more knowledge that is revealed about different ways of information processing, the more society can be understood and shaped.

Recognizing gender differences could also be helpful while in the workplace. A recent study done looked at the gender differences in decision making on an editorial board. The study showed that women on the review board tended to take a longer amount of time deciding whether to accept or reject a manuscript than males did (Wing, Benner, Petersen, Newcomb, & Scott, 2010). This may suggest that women consider multiple points of view while making their decision, and study people and things in a more in depth and complicated manner. Knowledge of these sorts of differences can help explain discrepancies in decision-making in the work place. Knowing that recognizing gender differences in decision-making can help build a stronger work place, by further studying these differences, it is possible that other communities could benefit as well.

After learning of these previous studies, I predicted that in situations such as these in which a decision is made given multiple options, women would tend to take a longer amount of time, based on their more selective thought processing and tendency to review all options. To support this, I measured the amount of time it took college students to decide which food line to wait in at the cafeteria. I hypothesized that there would be a

mean difference in the amount of time it took to select a line in the cafeteria across gender among college students, where females would take a longer amount of time to choose a line than males.

Method

Participants

Subjects were male and female undergraduate college students ($N = 232$) from two private, single-sex, liberal arts campuses with a joint academic curriculum that, for all practical purposes, causes the two campuses to function as a single institution.

Participants were unaware of their participation in this study because it was a naturalistic observation design, and they were chosen by convenience.

Materials

A cell phone or other type of timer measured the amount of time it took students to choose a line, and a pen and notebook recorded the data.

Procedure

One observer recorded data at each campus, both of which are frequently occupied by both males and females because of the unique relationship between the two universities, over a course of four week days, Thursday, Friday, Monday and Tuesday, during two different time periods. The researchers collected data during relatively calm hours at the cafeterias, in order to make data collection easier, from 11:25 am-12:25 pm for lunch and from 5:00-5:30 pm for dinner. The observer chose a seat in the cafeteria with a view of the entrance and all of the food options, and then chose the first person to enter the cafeteria as their first subject. Because the observer did not record at specific

time intervals, they used event sampling. At the all-male campus cafeteria, the first female to enter was the first subject, followed by a male, switching off genders for every other person in order to gain equal data from both genders. Therefore, at the all-female campus cafeteria, the first male to enter was the first subject, followed by a female, etc. Any person that did not appear to be a college student (e.g., a professor) was not observed. Once the observer chose a subject and recorded his or her gender, they kept watching that subject choose a seat in the cafeteria. The observer began timing the participant after they crossed a predetermined imaginary line in the cafeteria which represented the beginning of the food selection area. Once the participant chose a line to stand in, the observer wrote down the time (in seconds) on the stopwatch but left them timer running in case the participant changed their mind while standing in line and moved to a different line. If the participant stayed in the line until getting food, the original time written down was their time. If the subject changed lines, the observer wrote down the time that the participant got into the new line, and used that time if he or she then got food in that line. Therefore, the researchers used measures to record the time variable, and used a checklist to record the gender variable. Any subject who stopped walking to talk to someone was not included. The researchers compiled data separately for the two campuses.

Results

The hypothesis stated that males would take a shorter amount of time to make a decision about which food line to stand in than females. Statistical analysis using BG

ANOVA revealed a non-significant mean difference in the time it took to choose a food line in the cafeteria across gender among college students at the all-female campus cafeteria, $F(1, 101) = .922, p > .05$. The research hypothesis was not supported. See Table 1.

However, statistical analysis using BG ANOVA revealed a significant mean difference in the time it took to choose a food line in the cafeteria across gender at the all-male campus cafeteria, $F(1, 127) = 4.403, p < .05$. Females tended to take a longer mean amount of time to choose a line than males did. The research hypothesis was supported in this case. See Table 2.

Discussion

This study was done to observe gender differences in decision making when multiple options were available. Past research has supported the fact that males tend to be less selective and make decision more quickly and efficiently, whereas females take longer to make decisions and prefer to explore all the different outcomes and possibilities in a situation. The current study strived to support this same idea by observing decision-making patterns of college students at two different cafeterias. The researchers predicted that, while choosing a food line, males would make a quick decision whereas females would be more selective and look at all the different food options before choosing a line. Analyzing our data revealed that our hypothesis was partially supported, and also that the situation may be more complex than originally predicted. While dining in the cafeteria at the all-male campus, males took significantly less time to choose a food line than females did. At the cafeteria at the all-female campus, however, there was not a significant

difference in selection times. The variable that seemed to cause this difference was familiarity. While it is very common for males to eat at the all-female campus cafeteria and females to eat at the all-male campus cafeteria, it is usually true that females are more familiar with the cafeteria on their own campus, and males more familiar with the cafeteria on theirs. Since they are already living there, students often find it more convenient to eat at the cafeteria on their own campus, which causes this familiarity. Since males tended to make more quick and efficient selections at the all-male cafeteria (M seconds = 22.37), it is likely that they have created their own mental shortcuts and were familiar enough with the cafeteria to make a fast decision. Since they were not as familiar with the cafeteria on the all-female campus, they had not created these mental shortcuts, and therefore took longer to choose a food line (M second = 31.61). Conversely, females took relatively the same amount of time to make a selection at both of the cafeterias, despite the fact that females were likely more familiar with the cafeteria on her own campus. This is because they tended to look around at their options first no matter which campus they were on. Therefore this study partially supported the research hypothesis.

There are some possible limitations in this study, however. The unique relationship between the two campuses and their students may have had an effect on the data, because the campuses function differently than most others. Because the campuses are gender separated, one's gender actually plays a large roll in where you eat and what you eat on campus. Because students tend to spend more of their time on their own

campus, it is often more convenient to eat at the cafeteria that is near you. Therefore it takes a larger effort to travel to the opposite campus for a meal. Because of this extra effort that students must take, it is likely that they will want to take greater care in choosing their meal at the opposite campus, and will spend more time choosing a line. It is also possible that males took a longer amount of time to choose a line at the female campus because they have a limited number of meal passes. They may want to take advantage of the meal that they get to enjoy at the opposite campus, since their meals are limited, and will take a longer amount of time to pick which food to eat. Therefore, the reason for the mean time difference at the male campus would not be about familiarity, but instead about having a limited amount of meals.

Although partial support was gained for the research hypothesis, this study is only a contribution to the larger hypothesis that males and females differ in their decision-making. This study, along with those mentioned earlier, helped support this hypothesis, but more research must be done in the future in order to gain further support. One interesting study would be to measure how long it takes people to choose a show to watch on television, predicting that males would select a channel right away, while females would search through all of them first before making their decision. This is also related to the way decisions are made, but would look at its implications when it comes to media. Learning about the way genders differ in choosing a television show could possibly help those working in television and the media to better understand their audience, and market to them accordingly. This could also help contribute support for the

broader hypothesis at issue.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Seconds Taken to Choose a Line in the Cafeteria by Each Gender at the All-female Campus

Gender	Mean	SD	n
Female	28.13	16.76	51
Male	31.61	19.83	52

Table 2

Mean Number of Seconds Taken to Choose a Line in the Cafeteria by Each Gender at the All-male Campus

Gender	Mean	SD	n
Female	27.78	16.95	65
Male	22.37	11.86	64
