

EYE-MOVEMENTS, ATTENTION, AND  
UTILITY ACCUMULATION DURING BRAND CHOICE

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*ABSTRACT*

This research tests the idea that the trajectories of attention and the accumulation of utility of the options in complex choice tasks are closely aligned, as implied by rational inattention theory. If supported, trajectories of attention would reflect higher-order preference formation processes, which are otherwise unobservable. To test the idea, we conducted an eye-tracking experiment with a representative sample of 324 consumers who chose one of five brands of smartphones. We estimated a new generalized Sequential Sampling Model to describe how trajectories of the quantity and three specific types of attention to brands (integration, comparison, and other) align with utility accumulation and choice. Model performance was 77% one quarter before choice implementation, with a final hit rate of 85%. Importantly, the model already correctly predicted brand choice of 56% of consumers halfway before choice was actually expressed. This reveals a much earlier attention bias effect for the chosen brand than what has been reported before.

Our findings extend rational inattention theory by revealing how, in particular, integration attention, accounts for brand choice very early during the choice task, and that stickiness in choices arises from attention processes rather than from habits and mere inertia. These findings reveal the tight, potentially neurological, link between attention and utility, and have implications for consumer choice theory and practice.

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