

Trying to make sense of the world: Why do consumers misunderstand causes and effects?

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Consumers often attempt to match causes to consequences to make sense of events that unfold in their lives or in the world, but this strategy leads to erroneous conclusions, according to a new study in the Journal of Consumer Research.

"Why did my [mobile phone](#) stop working? Why did I get this job? Why did the [stock market](#) go down today? People often need to decide which cause, out of a large set of candidate causes, was responsible for an event," write authors Robyn A. LeBoeuf (University of Florida) and Michael I. Norton (Harvard University). "This research shows that people allow arbitrary, unrelated downstream [consequences](#) of an event to [bias](#) their views of what caused the event in the first place."

The authors conducted a series of experiments in which they presented participants with an event and a consequence. Some participants learned that the event had a large consequence, and others learned that the same event had a small consequence.

For example, participants in one experiment read about a student whose computer crashed, causing him to lose a term paper. In one scenario, the professor did not grant the student an extension. The student failed the course, did not graduate, and lost a job offer. Other participants read that the professor granted an extension, which allowed the student to graduate and get the job. When it came to deciding whether the

computer crash had a large cause (a widespread virus) or a small cause (a malfunctioning cooling fan), the participants who read about the student losing his job were more likely to select the "large cause." And they had a more [negative attitude](#) toward the student's anti-virus software. "These effects arose even though the crash itself was identical in both cases and the consequences were uninformative about the causes," the authors write. The authors found similar results when participants matched causes to consequences in geopolitical and public health issues.

"Life in general, and decision-making in particular, is often fraught with uncertainty; matching causes to consequences may be just one small way in which people manage the largely uncertain world they navigate," the authors conclude.

More information: Robyn A. LeBoeuf and Michael I. Norton. "Consequence-Cause Matching: Looking to the Consequences of Events to Infer Their Causes." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2012 (published online September 20, 2011).

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