

Leaps and Tweaks: How a Small Numerical Difference Can Have a Big Impact



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Consumers often encounter numerical information about products, such as attribute ratings and version numbers. In this paper, we show how a smaller (compared to a larger) numerical difference can increase perceptions of product improvement. We find that when the change in a rating or product version is from a decimal number to an integer (e.g., version 2.4 to version 3), the product is seen as more attractive compared to when the change involves two integers (e.g., version 2 to version 3), even though the second change is mathematically greater. This effect occurs when the meaning of the numerical information is unclear, leading consumers to draw their own inferences from it. We argue that they infer a decimal number to be part of a more precise scale, in which decimals are intermediate values and integers are category boundaries. The change from a decimal to an integer is therefore seen as a “leap” over several intermediate values that crosses into the next category. When this happens, consumers conclude that the product has improved in a significant way, making it more appealing to them. A series of studies with hundreds of participants demonstrates this effect and its underlying process.