

Drop-out caused by JavaScript: " I could not have expected this to happen " – A Web experiment on the Reversed Hindsight Bias

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Abstract

With increasing frequency JavaScript is used in web studies, often with a certain naivety regarding compatibility issues. These technical problems might result in methodological artefacts with some types of online research, and ethical questions have to be considered as well. However, for reasons of design and applicability of a number of techniques, Web experiments should generally be less prone to possible biases, and between-subjects Web experiments even more so than within-subjects Web experiments (Reips, 1999, in press). Consequently, we tested whether a JavaScript version of the Web experiment would result in more or less problems than a traditional CGI version. Therefore we conducted an experiment on a meanwhile well-known phenomenon: the hindsight bias. The hindsight bias is the tendency of people to falsely believe that they would have predicted the outcome of an event correctly, once the outcome is known. Mazursky and Ofir (1990) demonstrated that highly surprising outcomes could eliminate or even reverse the hindsight bias: Participants showed a "I could not have expected this to happen" reaction instead of a "I knew it all along" reaction. Stahlberg, Sczesny and Schwarz (1999) found a reversed hindsight bias when participants learned about a self-threatening outcome. Stahlberg et al. hypothesized that motivational factors like self-protection would play a role in moderating the hindsight bias. To test whether the surprise or the threat of the outcome leads to a reversal of the hindsight bias we conducted a Web experiment where we experimentally manipulated both factors. In a 2 by 2 factorial design (with the factors highly and not surprising outcome vs. highly and not self-threatening outcome) we expected a strong reversed hindsight bias when the outcome was highly surprising and highly self-threatening. The comparison of the condition highly surprising but not self-threatening outcome with the condition not surprising but highly self-threatening outcome should show which of the two factors surprise or threat will reverse the hindsight bias. Results will be discussed.

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