

HEURISTIC HACK

FREQUENCY ILLUSION

When you learn something new, do you start noticing it more often? If the answer is yes, you are experiencing Frequency Illusion. After noticing something new, one tends to see or recognize it more and more, which creates a false belief that the event occurs more frequently, even though its frequency has been the same. In short, higher awareness of something new leads to overestimating its frequency.



If you learn a new word, you might notice it in blogs, social media, subtitles, etc., more often than you would've noticed it before becoming aware of it. That could bias you to believe that the word is common, when in fact, it has always been that common - just that you notice it more now. If you are thinking of buying a seemingly rare blue car, this illusion could occur if you frequently spot the same car in many parking lots.

How to hack the Frequency Illusion?

Frequency Illusion has a strong influence on many avenues like advertising, learning, brand awareness, medical diagnoses, etc. If you learn to hack the Frequency Illusion, you can use it to improve your pattern recognition skills.



As a physician, say you are trying to learn something complex, you may want to practice recognizing its elements - say, a syndrome with common signs like headache, stomachache, skin rash, and palpitations. This cluster of information is a pattern. Once you learn a little bit about this syndrome, you will likely see it occur in more and more patients. That creates an opportunity for you to refine your pattern recognition skills. You can apply this highlighted pattern-recognition skill to almost anything - learning musical sequences, chess moves, dating choices, etc.

All you have to do is notice something very deliberately the first time you learn it or identify something new. It will start reoccurring in your awareness and start an automatic process that eventually creates a stronger memory. Plus, an apparent high frequency leads to familiarity, which creates a favorable impression. That could also help to overcome indecision while choosing from many options - we tend to favor familiar options after all!