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Simpson's Paradox as Invisible Manipulation

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Abstract. Simpson's Paradox is a statistical phenomenon in which trends observed within individual subgroups reverse when the data are aggregated. Although often regarded as a mathematical curiosity, it has important implications in media reporting, public communication, and decision-making, where aggregated data may distort reality. This study uses a literature review approach to examine the conditions that generate Simpson's Paradox, focusing on weighted averages, uneven subgroup distributions, and aggregation processes. A structural explanation is developed to show how changes in group weights can produce misleading overall conclusions. The study also incorporates insights from behavioral economics, particularly framing effects and representativeness heuristics, to explain why people are susceptible to such distortions. The findings suggest that Simpson's Paradox is not only a statistical issue but also a cognitive one, arising from the interaction between data aggregation and human judgment. Understanding subgroup structures and improving critical data literacy can help reduce misinterpretation and prevent misleading conclusions.

Keywords: Simpson's Paradox, weighted average, cognitive bias, data manipulation

1. Introduction

In the digital age, people rely heavily on numerical information to make judgments about society, economics, education, medicine, and politics. Statistical results are often regarded as objective and trustworthy because numbers appear neutral and scientific. However, statistical conclusions are not always as transparent as they seem. In some cases, aggregated data may hide important structural differences and produce conclusions that contradict subgroup evidence. One of the most representative examples of this phenomenon is Simpson's Paradox. Simpson formally described the paradox in 1951, showing that a relationship observed in several groups may reverse after the groups are combined [1]. It first drew attention within statistics, but now we can easily find its influence in news media, policy discussions, and everyday business choices.

Researchers from different disciplines have studied Simpson's Paradox from different perspectives. Statistical scholars mainly focus on the mathematical conditions that lead to the reversal of trends. Blyth analyzed the probabilistic foundations of the paradox and emphasized the importance of weighted structures [2]. Good and Mittal further explored the relationship between weighted averages and data aggregation [3]. In behavioral economics, Kahneman and Tversky did not directly study Simpson's Paradox, but their theories of framing effects and heuristics provided an

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explanation for why people are easily misled by aggregated data [4]. Communication scholars have also pointed out that modern media tends to simplify statistical information, often omitting subgroup details in order to create concise narratives. This simplification increases the possibility that the public will misunderstand data.

Despite these achievements, existing studies still have several limitations. Statistical research often focuses on describing the paradox rather than explaining how it can be intentionally strengthened or manipulated. Behavioral studies explain cognitive bias but rarely connect those biases with concrete mathematical structures. Communication studies pay attention to misleading data presentation but usually lack formal analytical models. With these research limitations in mind, this paper tries to combine basic statistical logic and people's cognitive habits to analyze the paradox in a simpler and more practical way. Through literature review and theoretical analysis, the paper investigates how Simpson's Paradox may become a hidden tool of manipulation and discusses possible methods for preventing such misleading effects. The study also provides broader implications for education, public communication, and policy transparency.

2. Literature review

2.1. Statistical studies on Simpson's Paradox

The earliest systematic treatment of Simpson's Paradox can be unambiguously found in Edward H. Simpson's 1951 paper, where he first gave a formal account of how associations between variables can reverse upon aggregation [1]. Henceforth, statisticians have rightly regarded the paradox as a fundamental issue in causal inference and probability theory. Blyth later made a clear and elegant contribution by showing that the paradox is intimately connected to hidden variables and weighted averages, and that unequal group distributions are the actual cause of the reversal effect [2]. Good and Mittal extended this discussion by arguing that weighted aggregation can severely distort intuitive interpretation because large groups overwhelm the final result [3].

More recent statistical research has focused on data visualization and causal analysis. Pearl pointed out that Simpson's Paradox is not simply a mathematical curiosity but also a problem of causal reasoning [5]. According to Pearl, the paradox often appears when important causal variables are ignored during aggregation. Other scholars have suggested that clearer visualization methods and subgroup analysis can reduce misunderstanding in statistical communication [6].

Although statistical studies provide rigorous mathematical explanations, most of them remain descriptive. Existing literature usually explains why the paradox occurs after it appears, but fewer studies investigate how weighting structures may be intentionally adjusted to create misleading conclusions.

2.2. Behavioral and cognitive research

Behavioral economists and psychologists provide a natural framework for understanding why Simpson's Paradox is often difficult to recognize, drawing on Kahneman and Tversky's work on heuristics and biases, which shows that people routinely rely on simplified mental shortcuts rather than careful analytical reasoning [4]. Simpson's Paradox is particularly prone to this type of misinterpretation because aggregated statistics conceal subgroup structures, making the overall average appear sufficient for judgment. As a result, individuals tend to accept summary statistics at face value without examining underlying distributions. An especially relevant concept is the framing effect: the way information is presented strongly influences judgment, so when data are framed in

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terms of overall averages, people are more likely to ignore subgroup differences and rely on intuitive shortcuts [7].

The representativeness heuristic is a clear source of misunderstanding because people tend to judge situations on the basis of superficial patterns rather than statistical structure, and in many real-world situations, people wrongly assume that overall data naturally reflects subgroup reality, even when that assumption is demonstrably false. Hence, Simpson's Paradox is particularly persuasive in media and political communication [8].

Although behavioral research has its limitations, it is quite clear that some psychological studies deal with abstract cognitive processes without relating them to formal mathematical mechanisms. There is currently no adequate account of how statistical structures interact with cognitive bias to produce manipulation.

2.3. Research gap and questions

Although current literature clearly establishes that Simpson's Paradox is a statistical, psychological, and communicative problem, it is also well recognized that the relationship between these dimensions has not been adequately developed: statistical scholars focus on weighting structures, behavioral scholars on cognition, and communication scholars on media presentation. Hence, integrating them remains a challenge.

This paper focuses on several core questions related to Simpson's Paradox. It first explores what statistical conditions cause the paradox to appear, and how people can use grouping and weight adjustment to create misleading results. It also discusses why ordinary people are easily influenced by aggregated data, and what simple methods can reduce such misleading effects.

3. Mathematical conditions and structural model

Simpson's Paradox is the phenomenon in which subgroup trends differ from the overall aggregated trend, so mathematically it is natural to consider two populations, A and B, each partitioned into k subgroups, and for each subgroup i assume appropriate conditions:

$$p_i^A > p_i^B \tag{1}$$

Figure 1 shows the Simpson's Paradox Reversal Diagram.

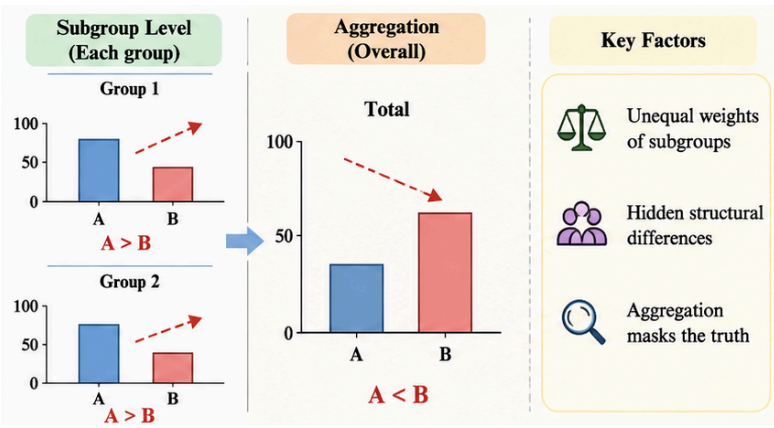

Figure 1. The Simpson's Paradox reversal diagram [1, 2]

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However, after aggregation, the overall result becomes:

$$P^A < P^B \tag{2}$$

The reversal is possible since the overall probability is based on weighted averages rather than direct subgroup comparison. The aggregated probability can be written as follows.

Since P^{A} can naturally be expressed as a weighted sum, we write $\mathrm{P}^{\mathrm{A}} = \sum_{i=1}^{k} \mathrm{w}_i^{\mathrm{A}} \mathrm{p}_i^{\mathrm{A}}$.

Since ($\mathrm{w}_i^{\mathrm{A}}$) denotes the weight of subgroup i in population A, it is natural to write a similar equation for population B. If the subgroup weights are distributed asymmetrically, the overall result can conflict with the subgroup evidence.

Since the fundamental mechanism of the paradox is weight dominance, it is natural and straightforward to say that large subgroups exert disproportionate influence on the final result, so aggregation can reverse the apparent relationship when favorable outcomes are in small groups and unfavorable ones in large groups.

To illustrate this mechanism, consider a simplified university admission example. Assume that Department X has a higher acceptance rate for female applicants than male applicants, and the same is true in Department Y. However, if most female applicants apply to the more competitive department while most male applicants apply to the less competitive department, the overall admission rate for women may become lower than that for men. In this situation, subgroup evidence remains positive, but the weighted structure changes the aggregated conclusion.

We can clearly observe that the more unbalanced the size of each subgroup is, the more likely Simpson's Paradox will occur. Uneven group distribution is the key reason behind the trend reversal. When the proportion of observations concentrated in one subgroup exceeds (T), aggregated results become highly vulnerable to reversal. The greater the imbalance between subgroup weights, the greater the probability that the paradox will emerge. Therefore, Simpson's Paradox should not be understood as a random statistical accident. Instead, it is a structural consequence of asymmetric weighting.

4. Manipulation mechanism

Although Simpson's Paradox may occur naturally, it can also be intentionally strengthened through selective grouping and aggregation. In practice, this creates the possibility of invisible manipulation. Unlike direct falsification, this type of manipulation does not require fabricated data. Instead, it relies on controlling how information is organized and presented.

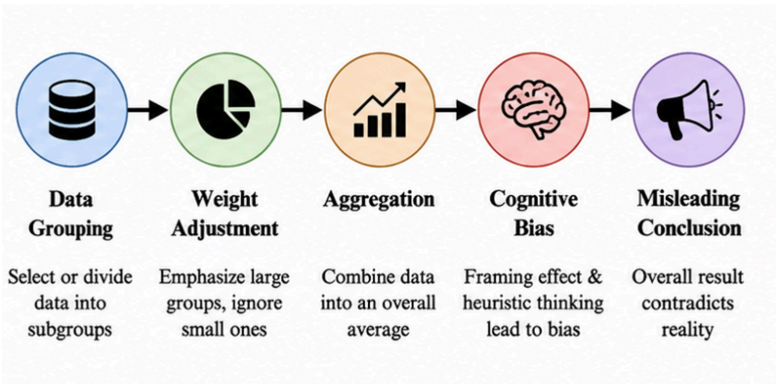

Figure 2. Causal mechanism diagram of Simpson's Paradox [4, 9]

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One common strategy is selective subgroup emphasis. Suppose a company wants to advertise that its product performs better than a competitor's product. By combining data from different customer groups in a specific way, the company may produce a favorable overall conclusion even if the product performs worse in most subgroups. Since the aggregated number appears mathematically correct, audiences may not question its validity.

From Figure 2, one can clearly see the manipulation mechanism framework.

The text presents a clear and effective discussion of unequal weighting: since media organizations and political actors routinely report overall averages while omitting subgroup composition, poll results during election campaigns can look favorable for one candidate when national averages are cited, even if subgroup analysis shows major regional differences. Because audiences generally favor simple conclusions, aggregated statistics thus become powerful rhetorical tools.

Cognitive bias further strengthens the manipulative effect. According to Kahneman, individuals often rely on intuitive "fast thinking" rather than careful analytical reasoning [4]. When people encounter an overall percentage or average, they tend to treat it as representative of the entire situation. This tendency reduces motivation to examine hidden subgroup structures.

Framing effects also play an important role. Different presentations of the same statistical information may lead audiences to opposite conclusions. If communicators present only aggregated outcomes, people are more likely to overlook contradictory subgroup evidence. In this sense, manipulation does not necessarily depend on false data. Instead, it depends on controlling statistical visibility [10].

Since the interaction between structural weighting and cognitive bias constitutes the basis of invisible manipulation, the inherent paradox is especially dangerous in today's digital environment: online platforms encourage rapid information consumption, and therefore most users read headlines and summarized numbers rather than detailed datasets, making statistical reversals particularly effective at influencing public opinion before anyone does careful analysis.

5. Discussion

The discussion thus far makes it very clear that Simpson's Paradox has ramifications well beyond theoretical statistics.

In education, it provides a direct and powerful lesson about statistical literacy: many students learn to compute averages but get insufficient instruction in interpreting weighted structures and subgroup distributions, hence they often naively assume that aggregated data reflects reality. Therefore, educational systems should prioritize teaching critical data interpretation skills alongside computational techniques.

Transparent subgroup reporting is of fundamental importance in public policy because governments routinely publish national averages for employment, healthcare, crime, and economic growth, but such averages often mask large regional or demographic inequalities. Hence, policymakers who rely exclusively on aggregated statistics are prone to making ineffective, even unfair, policy decisions. Therefore, requiring subgroup disclosure leads directly to more accurate policies and greater public trust.

The media have a clear ethical obligation, namely that modern journalism's emphasis on simplicity and speed leads naturally to the use of summarized statistics, but simplified reporting can inadvertently exacerbate the misleading effects of Simpson's Paradox. Therefore, journalists ought to provide relevant context, explain subgroup variation, and make it explicit that averages are not complete or sufficient descriptions of complex realities.

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In the business world, companies increasingly rely on data-driven marketing strategies. While statistical presentation is a legitimate communication tool, selective aggregation may cross ethical boundaries when it intentionally obscures important information. Consumers usually lack the time and expertise to analyze detailed datasets, making them vulnerable to manipulation. Greater transparency standards and clearer visualization methods may reduce this problem

The paradox naturally leads to important, general philosophical reflections on objectivity: numbers are generally regarded as neutral facts, but statistical conclusions are always built on structure, context, and interpretation. Hence, Simpson's Paradox serves as a clear reminder that data itself is not objective, and meaning arises from how data is organized and presented.

6. Conclusion

The present paper seeks to investigate how Simpson's Paradox can be viewed as a form of invisible manipulation; therefore, it begins with a thorough literature review and theoretical analysis of the mathematical conditions of the paradox: weighted averages, asymmetric subgroup distributions, and aggregation methods, and then logically moves on to discuss how intentional grouping and weighting strategies can produce misleading conclusions without altering the data.

From the present analysis, it is clear and convincing that Simpson's Paradox is not just a statistical curiosity, but rather the result of the interaction between structural weighting and human cognitive bias: aggregated data tend to distort reality when subgroup differences are hidden or ignored, and framing effects combined with heuristic thinking make people more receptive to simplified numerical conclusions without proper scrutiny.

By combining statistical rules with people's cognitive habits and real-world communication, this paper offers a clearer way to understand Simpson's Paradox. Instead of only looking at overall averages, paying more attention to subgroup differences and keeping data transparent can effectively prevent people from being misled.

This study has several limitations. It is mainly based on theoretical analysis and literature review, without empirical data to test the proposed model. In addition, the interaction between statistical structures and cognitive biases is not quantitatively modeled. Future research could use real datasets or simulation methods to further verify how different weighting structures influence aggregated results, and develop more systematic approaches to detect and prevent Simpson's Paradox in practical applications.

Overall, Simpson's Paradox reminds us that numbers do not always speak for themselves. The way data is grouped and presented can easily change people's opinions, so we need to maintain critical thinking whenever we read statistical information. Since the paper deals with the hidden power of statistical aggregation, it is natural and appropriate to discuss in it the role of critical thinking in interpreting numerical information.

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