Do I Like It If You Choose For Me? the Influence of Relationship Norms on Consumer Satisfaction

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Prior research has shown that consumers are usually more satisfied with self-chosen than with other-chosen outcomes. This research tests for a potential moderator of this effect: the type of consumer-marketer relationship. Relative to a communal relationship (based on concern for the partner), an exchange relationship (based on quid pro quo) is perceived as a way to further one’s own interests. Results show that when the choice is made by the marketer rather than by consumers, consumers refer to the norms of their relationship with the marketer to make attributions about its motivations, which in turn are used to assess outcome satisfaction.

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nism from the expectation-disconfirmation mechanism we propose. We manipulate assortment size as well as the order of questions assessing satisfaction and overload. An overload account would suggest that asking participants to assess overload prior to rating satisfaction would prompt them to attribute at least parts of their negative state to the experience rather than the outcome, thus attenuating the negative effect of assortment size on choice satisfaction (Schwarz and Clore 1983). Our proposed mechanism, however, would predict no differential effect of question order on satisfaction: whether overload was assessed a priori or not, expectation-disconfirmation should still drive differences in satisfaction.

We test these predictions using a principal-agent task that asked participants to select a camcorder for work. Participants browsed a catalogue of 8 or 32 (between subjects) camcorders and made their selection. Participants either rated their satisfaction with their choice before rating how overwhelmed they felt or vice versa. As before, larger assortments decreased satisfaction with the chosen option, and here also increased feelings of overload. However, there was no interaction of size and question order, suggesting that asking about process dissatisfaction first did not alter outcome satisfaction. Further, assortment size had a significant effect on expectation disconfirmation, which in turn mediated the effect of size on satisfaction.

Recently, researchers have challenged the ideal that more choice is always desirable. Our work contributes to this stream by identifying an additional psychological mechanism triggered by choice abundance. By increasing consumers’ expectations of what should be available and therefore what will be considered acceptable, consumers may grow more demanding and may become frustrated in an environment that seemingly offers a lot of choices, but still does not live up to their expectations.

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Prior research has demonstrated that personally-made, as compared to externally-dictated, choices lead to greater task enjoyment, superior cognitive performances, and more positive affect (Brehm 1966; Festinger 1957; Langer 1975; Taylor and Brown 1988). Recent research, however, has found that cultural and social norms regulating interpersonal exchanges may moderate these beneficial effects of self-choice. The present research hypothesizes that the norms underlying different types of relationships between marketers and consumers moderate consumers’ satisfaction with a self-chosen relative to a marketer-chosen outcome. This hypothesis draws on recent research suggesting that consumers’ responses to the marketer’s actions are a function of the relationship norms between the two (Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998). Two types of consumer-marketer relationships are examined: communal and exchange (Mills and Clark 1982). In a communal relationship, people give benefits to relationship partners due to a concern for their well-being. Thus, if in a communal relationship the marketer makes the choice, it is expected that it would have acted in the best interest of the consumer; consequently, the consumer is likely to be satisfied with this choice. Conversely, an exchange relationship is based on the principle of quid pro quo. People know that benefits are given in order to get something in return. As such, if in an exchange relationship the choice is made by the marketer, consumers will expect the marketer to be motivated by its own interests, and they will be less likely to be satisfied with it. We therefore hypothesize that the consumers’ satisfaction with a marketer-chosen outcome will be lower compared to a self-chosen outcome when they have an exchange relationship than when they have a communal relationship with the marketer.

Study 1 was a 2 (relationship: communal vs. exchange) x 2 (choice: self-made vs. marketer-made) between subject design, and scenario descriptions were used to manipulate the participants’ relationship with a hypothetical bookstore. Participants were told that as part of a promotion the bookstore was giving away one of four novels to its customers. In the self-choice condition, participants selected a novel from this assortment, while in the marketer-choice condition the novel was chosen by the bookstore from the same assortment. Results showed that exchange participants experienced lower satisfaction with the marketer-chosen book than with the self-chosen book, while communal participants perceived no difference in satisfaction across the choice conditions. A thought protocol analysis provided further evidence by showing that when the choice was made by the marketer, exchange participants, relative to communal ones, expected the marketer to act more in its own interest and less in the consumers’ interest.

Study 2 was designed to replicate these results and to rule out a reactance-based alternative explanation according to which participants in an exchange relationship would evaluate the marketer-chosen outcome less positively, not because of different attributions about the marketer’s motivations but because of the greater perceived violation of their freedom to choose. To test this rival explanation, we allowed participants to either choose the novel themselves or let the marketer choose it. If the reactance account were driving the results of study 1, then we should observe a weaker or even a reverse effect in study 2, especially for participants in the exchange condition. However, if the attribution based account were the primary driver, then the results of study 2 should replicate those of study 1. Results yielded an interaction effect mirroring those of study 1 consistent with an attribution rather than a reactance explanation.

It was somewhat surprising that the exchange non-choosers experienced lower satisfaction than choosers in spite of their voluntary decision to relinquish the choice to the marketer. Could they have not foreseen this lower satisfaction, in which case they should not have relinquished their right to choose in the first place? It is likely that by providing the participants information about the four alternatives we gave them the opportunity to form ‘own’ preferences. When these preferences were not consistent with the marketer’s choice, participants may have tried to explain this mismatch by using the relationship norms. Thus, communal consumers may have interpreted the mismatch as evidence of the marketer’s knowledge of another, equally satisfying option, whereas exchange consumers may have interpreted the same mismatch as evidence of its selfish motivation.

Study 3 tests this explanation. Prior work on Deviance Regulation Theory (Blanton and Christie 2003) suggests that when people behave counter-normatively, they put greater weight on the positive features of that behavior. Given that exchange participants who gave up choice behaved counter-normatively, we expect them to evaluate the marketer-chosen alternative more positively if they cannot compare it with their own preferences. Thus, in this study we replicated the design of study 2 except that there was no information given about the four alternatives. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found a reversal of the effect for exchange non-choosers—who evaluated the final outcome more positively than exchange choosers—whereas no significant difference was observed between communal participants in the two relationship conditions. Further, this interaction was mediated by participants’ expectations about the marketer’s motivations, suggesting that these inferred attributions drove the differences.
Overall, consumers’ satisfaction with the outcome of a self-chosen versus a marketer-chosen outcome depends on the norms underlying the consumer-marketer relationship, and the resultant differences in attributions made by the consumers.

REFERENCES


