The Preference For Larger Assortments in Feeling-Based Decisions

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We suggest that consumers’ preference for larger assortments depends on the decision process that they follow. Four studies show that consumers’ relative preference for larger assortments is more pronounced when the decision is likely to be based on feelings. This is driven by consumers’ expansive exploratory mindset in feeling-based decisions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1013885/volumes/v10e/E-10

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Past research suggests that consumers typically prefer larger product assortments over smaller ones, as evidenced by a stronger consumer patronage of retailers with larger assortments (Arnold, Oum, and Tigert 1983; Broniarczyk, Hoyer, and McAlister 1998; Pan and Zinkan 2006; see Chernev 2012, for a review). In this research, we propose that, in fact, this preference depends on the decision process that consumers are likely to follow. Specifically, we predict that consumers’ relative preference for larger assortments is generally more pronounced when the decision is likely to be based on affect and feelings than when the decision is likely to be based on more cognitive processes. The phenomenon is likely to be due to consumers adopting a more exploratory mindset in decisions guided by feelings. This expansive mindset may be linked to consumers derive from the process of reviewing product options when relying on their feelings (Pham 1998; Schwarz and Clore 1988). Hence, one would expect this experience utility to increase with the number of options being assessed, triggering an appetite for exploring more options. The predicted effect of reliance on feelings on consumers’ preference for larger assortments was tested in four studies.

The first three studies test the predicted effect and the underlying mechanism by using different operationalizations of the likelihood of reliance on feelings. Study 1 employed a 2 (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) × 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) between-subjects design, replicated across two independent sets of participants with two pairs of product categories. Participants were asked to review product assortments that contained either 12 items or 36 items and rate how much they liked the selection of products offered in these assortments. We manipulated the reliance on feelings by varying the product category. Half of the participants were shown assortments of hedonic products (ice cream and jams), and the other half were shown assortments of utilitarian products (pens and detergents). Previous research has shown that the reliance feelings to be stronger for hedonic products than for utilitarian products (Adaval 2001; White and McFarland 2009). To test our process explanation, we measured participants’ desire to explore the assortments of products. As predicted, we found that the relative preference for larger product assortments was more pronounced when the product category was hedonic than when the product category was utilitarian. The mediation results further supported that the effect appears to be driven, at least in part, by participants adopting a more exploratory mindset when evaluating assortments of hedonic products.

In Study 2, the product category was held constant, and the likelihood of reliance on feelings was manipulated by varying the motive for product evaluation. The study was a 2 (decision motive: experiential vs. instrumental) × 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to evaluate a hotel selection that contained either 12 options or 36 options under either an experiential motive or under an instrumental motive. The reliance on feelings has been shown to be greater under experiential motives than under instrumental motives (Pham 1998). The results confirmed that when the motive was experiential there was a strong preference for the larger hotel selection compared to the smaller hotel selection. In contrast, when the motive was instrumental evaluations were comparable for the larger and smaller hotel selections. As in Study 1, the effect of decision motive on the preference for larger assortments was mostly mediated by participants with experiential motives adopting a more exploratory mindset when evaluating product assortments.

Study 3 employed a 2 (trust in feelings (TF): high vs. low) × 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) between-subjects design. Participants, either in high-TF or low-TF conditions, were asked to evaluate either a selection of 12 coffees or a selection of 36 coffees. We manipulated participants’ likelihood of reliance on feelings using the trust-in-feelings manipulation (Avnet, Pham, and Stephen 2012). Before the evaluation task, supposedly in an unrelated study, participants were asked to describe either two (high-TF) or 10 (low-TF) situations in which they trusted their feelings to make a decision and it turned out to be the right decision. It has been shown that recalling two (vs. 10) instances of successful reliance on feelings induce higher (vs. lower) reliance on feelings. We found that the relative preference for the larger coffee selection was stronger in the high-TF condition where participants were likely to rely on their feelings, than in the low-TF condition where participants were less likely to rely on their feelings.

Study 4 aimed to demonstrate our phenomenon with a more implicit measure of preference for assortment size and to provide further evidence for the expansive exploratory mindset process. Participants, whose trust in their feelings was manipulated as in Study 3, were asked to draw a sketch of a cereal display found in a supermarket. We measured the total number of options and the number of different options in the depicted display as well as the size of the depicted display drawing. The results supported our hypothesis that the reliance on feelings increases relative preference for larger assortments. Specifically, it was found that when participants had higher trust in their feelings they drew greater number of options and greater number of different options than when participants had lower trust in their feelings. The results further support our conceptualization that the reliance on feelings triggers an expansive mindset. Compared to participants with lower trust in their feelings, participants with higher trust in their feelings drew larger display, occupying more space on the sheet of paper.

In sum, across four studies, we find that a greater reliance on feelings amplifies the preference for larger (as opposed to smaller) assortments. Specifically, this preference is stronger for hedonic rather than utilitarian products, when participants had experiential rather than instrumental motives, and when participants had higher rather than lower trust in their feelings. Our phenomenon transpires even on implicit measures of preference for assortment size and is driven by consumers adopting a more expansive exploratory mindset whenever a decision calls for a reliance on feelings.

REFERENCES


