Choosing How Many Options to Choose From: Does It Depend on Affective Priming?

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When making purchase decisions, how many options do people wish to have available? Does this number depend on people’s affect towards the product? To address this, we combined two research areas, the “tyranny of too much choice” and “affective decision making”. We performed a feeling versus calculation priming manipulation to change people’s sensitivity towards the quantity of options to be chosen. In addition to testing whether this affected the perceived value of the options, we tested whether it similarly affected the size of the set that people preferred to choose from (which has rarely been investigated as a dependent variable).

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joining the retirement plan, they would be asked a question that would allow the researchers to estimate their general knowledge about financial markets. Half of the participants were given a difficult question and half were given an easy question. We hypothesized that those who received the easy question would feel knowledgeable about financial markets and thus more comfortable announcing that they are likely to join a retirement plan they know only little about; in contrast, participants who received the difficult question would feel less knowledgeable about financial markets and thus less comfortable announcing that they are likely to join a plan they know only little about. An analysis of the results revealed that participants who received the easy question indicated that they were more likely to join a retirement saving plan in the future than participants who received the difficult question, although both received the same amount of information about retirement saving (5.5 versus 5, on average, p<.05). The results of the two studies provide preliminary support to the notion that subjective knowledge may impact judgment and consumer choice, and that consumer choice may be altered by manipulating subjective knowledge.

References


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Tyranny of too much choice
Larger choice sets offer advantages: As compared to smaller choice sets, they are likely to contain better options (assuming options are randomly sampled from the population), leading to better decision outcomes. On the other hand, larger choice sets also have disadvantages: More options require more computation, both for screening and comparing the options, leading to a more effortful and time consuming decision process. This trade-off between outcome-satisfaction and process-satisfaction is therefore integral to understanding how people determine the number of options they wish to have available, which we refer to as their desired-set-size (DSS).

Reutskaja and Hogarth (2009) measured satisfaction with a choice made from a set of gift boxes whose size ranged from 5 to 30 options. They observed an inverse U-shaped relationship between satisfaction and the size of the choice set. This suggests that initially the benefits of having a larger choice set are greater than the costs, causing satisfaction to increase. However, as the size of the choice set continues to increase, the additional costs exceed the additional benefits, causing satisfaction to decrease.

Despite recent interest in the tyranny of too much choice, the size of the choice set has nearly always been determined by the experimenter (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; White et al., submitted). In real life, however, people can usually determine the size of their choice set themselves by visiting as many stores as they wish and stop considering more options at any time. Much could be learned by asking participants to determine the size of the choice set themselves, but as far as we are aware, this has only been done in studies reported by Salgado (2005) and Chernov (2006).

Affective decision making
The above cost-benefit analysis ignores affect and emotions even though they play a role in choice situations. It is not only options themselves that evoke affect, rather, what happens prior to a judgment or decision can also cause options to be evaluated in an affective manner. Hsee and Rottenstreich (2004) found that people’s Willingness-to-pay (WTP) for items depended on whether a person is computationally primed (achieved with a questionnaire containing items that required them to perform computations) or affectively primed (achieved with a questionnaire containing items that required them to examine and report their feelings).

Predictions
Similar to Hsee and Rottenstreich (2004), we predicted that people who were computationally-primed would exhibit a constant sensitivity to an increase in the number of items. In contrast, we predicted that people who were affectively-primed would appear to be insensitive to the number of items.

Procedure. First, the 160 participants were told that they could choose 5 (or 10, manipulated between subjects) postcards of their university’s campus. Second, they completed either the affective or computational-priming questionnaire (adapted from Hsee and Rottenstreich 2004). Third, they determined their WTP and their DSS from which they could choose their 5 (or 10) cards. The minimum set size was either 5 postcards (or 10, according to the condition); the maximum was 100 postcards. Fourth, these three steps were repeated with Christmas present tags (order counterbalanced) and with different priming questions. Participants were given the opportunity to take home their chosen items.