We argue that low-variety- compared to high-variety assortments are more effective in stimulating variety seeking in subsequent decisions. This is grounded on reactance theory: Low variety evokes perceptions of limited choice, triggers reactance and entices consumers to seek variety in order to reassure their freedom. Five studies support this prediction.

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The Variety Paradox. Why LESS Evokes MORE
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conceptualization

Nowadays, consumers are used to being spoilt with choice: Most retailers offer an abundance of product variants since they acknowledge that consumers prefer stores that provide large assortments. Some stores, however, (strategically) form an exception. For instance, convenience stores trade fulfilling consumers’ need for convenience against their wish for variety. Accordingly, choice is limited to one or two kinds per product category. In this research we examine whether consumers behave differently when facing low-variety assortments compared to high-variety assortments. In particular, we intend to find out whether they will include more variety in their subsequent choices to make up for the perception of limited choice triggered through low-variety assortments.

Although consumer researchers have extensively studied the effects of assortment breadth on choice making (Chernev 2003; Gourville and Soman, 2005; Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Kahn and Wansink, 2004; Sela et al., 2009), they have focused on choice-specific effects within the assortment. They neglected general motivational effects that are triggered through looking at the assortment, linger on, and influence subsequent decisions from different choice sets. We know from psychological research that providing choices determines consumers’ feelings of autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Being able to choose from various options enables consumers to express themselves as individuals (Kim and Drollet, 2003) and boosts happiness (Patall, 2008). On the contrary, situations perceived as restricting one’s option to choose freely arouse reactance (Brehm, 1966), a motivational state that triggers behavior aimed at reasserting one’s personal freedom (Wicklund, 1974).

Accordingly, we propose that low-variety assortments trigger the perception of limited choice and evoke reactance. Once the motivational state of reactance is aroused consumers are increasingly interested in behavior that functions as a means to regain their freedom. Levav and Zhu (2009) showed that spatially confined consumers engage in more variety seeking in order to reassure their personal freedom. Thereby, they demonstrated that variety seeking behavior constitutes a means to deal with reactance. Hence, we predict that low-variety assortments trigger subsequently more variety seeking than high-variety assortments since they evoke the need to offset the perception of limited choice.

Studies

The validity of this prediction is tested in five studies. In the first study (N=94) we manipulated the variety that participants saw before making a subsequent, seemingly unrelated choice. They saw either three (low variety) or eight (high variety) different chips flavors. Afterwards, they chose five snacks out of a five item choice set as a reward for their participation. We measured variety seeking behavior through the number of different snacks that participants chose. Consistent with our hypothesis participants sought significantly more variety after seeing the low-variety assortment than after seeing the high-variety assortment.

The objective of study 2 (N=68) was to test the robustness of the effect by varying the nature of the stimuli. We used a print advertising depicting chocolate. Second, we kept the overall number of items equal across conditions: both advertisements showed twelve chocolate bars and differed only in the variety of different flavors they showed (3 vs. 12). The results confirmed our previous finding: Participants who saw the low-variety advertising sought significantly more variety.

We use reactance theory to explain the underlying process of our finding. The objective of study 3 (N=67) was to test the effect of reactance directly by measuring participants’ chronic reactance tendencies. As predicted participants’ chronic reactance tendency interacts with the variety manipulation. This suggests that reactance is the underlying psychological factor driving the effect. The effect of the variety manipulation was accentuated for highly reactive individuals and attenuated for weakly reactive individuals.

We claim the perception of limited choice to be responsible for evoking more variety seeking. The objective of study 4 was to test this by deliberately manipulating the perception of limited choice. Hence, this study made use of three conditions: one low-variety condition and two high-variety conditions. One of the high-variety conditions (high-confined) showed some items crossed out indicating that they are no longer available. This evokes the perception of limited choice. The results showed that participants in the low-variety and high-confined condition did not significantly differ from each other in their variety seeking behavior. However, both sought significantly more variety than the high-variety condition. This implies that the perception of limited choice is responsible for evoking a heightened need for variety.

While the previous studies demonstrate the effect in laboratory conditions, study 5 intended to replicate our findings in a real purchase context, i.e. the coffee shop at the university. One day we put up advertisings showing a low-variety of pastries in the while on another day we used advertisings showing a high-variety of pastries. We compared students’ variety seeking behavior on the two days. Thereby, we defined variety seeking not as taking several different products but as trying out something special. Students tried out significantly more special coffees when they saw the low-variety advertising while they chose more normal coffee kinds when they saw the high-variety advertising.

General Discussion

Across five studies we show that facing low-variety assortments compared to high-variety assortments evokes subsequently more variety seeking. This is grounded in reactance theory: Low-variety evokes the perception of limited choice and triggers reactance. Accordingly, consumers experience the heightened need to reassure their threatened freedom and engage in variety seeking behavior.

Our findings hint at a ‘variety paradox’. Although retailers offer high-variety to cater consumers’ needs for variety, less variety is more effective in triggering subsequent variety seeking. Our findings provide some interesting guidelines for retailers and convenience stores: It is important to acknowledge that assortment variety triggers motivational states which prevail and affect consumers’ subsequent behavior. For instance, in stores where the assortment is limited facing the first shelves evokes the perception of limited choice and triggers consumers to seek more variety. These stores could cater this need by providing more variety in the following shelves or offering specialities, new or lesser known brands. Consumers’ desire to express themselves through their
choice will increase the likelihood of choosing several different items or trying out new products.

REFERENCES


