My Heart Longs For More: the Role of Emotions in Assortment Size Preferences

Aylin Aydinli, London Business School, UK
Yangjie Gu, London Business School, UK
Michel T. Pham, Columbia University, USA

It is well accepted that consumers generally prefer larger product assortments over smaller assortments. This paper suggests that this intrinsic preference for larger assortments depends on the decision process that consumers are likely to follow. Results from four studies show that consumers’ relative preference for larger assortments is more pronounced when the decision is likely to be based on feelings. Specifically, the relative preference of larger product assortments is stronger (a) when the product category is hedonic rather than utilitarian, (b) when consumers have experiential motives rather than instrumental motives; and (c) when consumers have higher trust in their feelings rather than lower trust in their feelings. This phenomenon transpires even on implicit measures of preference for assortment size. It appears to be due to consumers adopting a more expansive exploratory mindset in decisions guided by feelings.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research has documented the factors that influence consumer choice among assortments, such as the decision flexibility (McAllister and Pessemier 1982), the probability of a match between consumers’ preferences and the available alternatives (Lancaster 1990), availability of ideal point (Chernev 2003), the anticipated cognitive effort in making a choice (Huffman and Kahn 1998) and the nature of decision process (Chernev 2006). This research has mainly focused on the cognitive processes used in the construction of assortment size preferences.

In this paper, we investigate the role of emotions in influencing consumers’ assortment size preferences. In particular, we investigate how feeling-based (compared with reason-based) decisions may influence preferences for assortment size. Prior research has shown that emotional system is holistic (Epstein 1994). Accordingly, while evaluating the assortment, people who engage in such holistic processing may focus more on judging the global features of the choice set. Research suggests that people who search at a global (vs. local) level tend to have larger consideration sets (Pham and Chang 2010). In addition, it has been shown that global evaluations favour varied sequences (Ratner, Kahn and Kahneman 1997). Therefore, people who perform global evaluations might desire for more variety and compared to small assortments, large assortments provide greater fit to the desire for more variety. Hence, we posit that people who make feeling-based choices would be more satisfied with a large assortment than a small assortment. In contrast, people who rely on their feelings less may experience less fit from the large assortment. As a consequence, the difference in preferences for large and smaller assortments is mitigated. The predicted effect of feeling-based decision on preferences for large assortments versus smaller assortments was tested in four studies.

The first three studies aimed to test the predicted effect by using different approaches to manipulate how much people participated in their feelings. Study 1 was a 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) x 2 (product type: hedonic vs. functional) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to imagine going to a supermarket to purchase either detergent (functional) or jam (hedonic) from a selection of either 12 (small-set) or 36 options (large-set). Research shows that hedonic products elicit greater affective response in consumers than functional ones (Okada 2005). We measured participants’ satisfaction with the selection. Results showed that participants evaluating the jam selection were more satisfied with the large assortment than the small assortment. However, this difference was mitigated when they evaluate the detergent selection.

Study 2 employed a 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) x 2 (trust in feelings: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants, either in high-TF or low-TF conditions, were asked to imagine purchasing a coffee from a menu that either provided a selection of 12 (small-set) or 36 coffees (large-set). Before the choice task, supposedly in an unrelated study, we manipulated participants’ momentary trust in their feelings and thus their reliance on feelings using a procedure called the trust-in-feelings manipulation (Avnet, Pham, and Stephen 2012). Participants were asked to describe either two (high-TF) or 10 (low-TF) situations where 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. Results showed that in the high-TF condition, satisfaction with the large assortment was higher than the small assortment. However, this difference was not significant in the low-TF condition.

Study 3 was a 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) x 2 (cognitive load: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to imagine selecting a coffee from a selection of 12 (small-set) or 36 options (large-set). ROF was operationalized through a cognitive load manipulation (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999), where participants were asked to memorize either a 2-digit code (low-load) or a 10-digit code (high-load) and to reproduce the code at the end of the study. Prior research has demonstrated that choice under cognitive load limits cognitive capacity, thus generating a greater degree of reliance on feelings than choice under low cognitive load (Lieberman et al. 2002). Accordingly, we expected participants who memorized 10-digit (vs. 2-digit) code to rely more on their feelings while making decisions. Results showed that participants in the high-load condition were more satisfied with the large (vs. small) assortment. However, this difference was not significant for low-load participants.

Study 4 aimed to test the process driving the observed effect. Study 4 employed a 2 (assortment size: small vs. large) x 2 (cognitive load: high vs. low) between-subjects design. The procedure of study 4 was similar to study 3, except that this time participants were asked to imagine considering purchasing a snack from a vending machine that contained a selection of 12 (small-set) or 36 snacks (large-set). To test the process, we measured whether participants would like to have had greater variety in the selection they were given. Results showed that in the high-load condition, the desire for more variety was less for participants who were confronted with the large assortment than for those who were faced with the small assortment. Therefore, in the high-load condition, participants liked the large assortment more than the small assortment, because the former provided a better “fit” to their need for variety. However, in the low-load condition, the difference in desire for greater variety was not significant. Consequently, there was no difference in satisfaction with large and small assortments. Mediation analysis further supported that desire for greater variety mediated the observed effect only in the large-set condition.

To summarize, four studies documented the impact of reliance on feelings on consumers’ assortment size preferences. We found that greater reliance on feelings boosts individuals’ preference for larger assortments as opposed to smaller assortments. First three studies have demonstrated the effect of reliance on feelings on satisfaction with the assortment. Study 4 has provided the process evidence: A large assortment provides a better “fit” to the desire for variety that is triggered by the feeling-based process.

REFERENCES


