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Unconscious Information Processing Reduces Information Overload and Increase Product Satisfaction

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Consumers are less satisfied with a product chosen from an extended assortment than one from a limited assortment (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Presumably, information overload is responsible for decreased satisfaction. Decreasing information overload during the decision process should therefore increase satisfaction. One possibility to increase processing capacity is unconscious information processing (Dijksterhuis et al. 2006). We demonstrate that a spontaneous selection from an extended assortment leads to an information overload as well as extensive conscious information processing. However, unconscious information processing is one way to enjoy the advantages of an extended assortment without an information overload.

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Abstract

Consumers are less satisfied with a product chosen from an extended assortment than one from a limited assortment (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Presumably, information overload is responsible for decreased satisfaction. Decreasing information overload during the decision process should therefore increase satisfaction. One possibility to increase processing capacity is unconscious information processing (Dijksterhuis et al. 2006). We demonstrate that a spontaneous selection from an extended assortment leads to an information overload as well as extensive conscious information processing. However, unconscious information processing is one way to enjoy the advantages of an extended assortment without an information overload.

When given the choice between a limited and an extended assortment, consumers tend to prefer the extended assortment. Indeed large assortment sizes have some advantages: consumers experience more fun (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) and the probability that the consumer's needs will be satisfied increases with the assortment size (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982; Kahn, 1995). Nevertheless, surprisingly, consumers are less satisfied with a product chosen from an extended assortment than one from a limited assortment (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Presumably, information overload is responsible for decreased satisfaction. Decreasing information overload during the decision process in a large assortment should therefore increase satisfaction relative to a small assortment size.

One possibility to increase processing capacity is unconscious information processing (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren & van Baaren, 2006). Unconscious information processing is an unconscious rumination, which starts automatically as soon as a consumer is consciously thinking about something other than the target product. Compared with conscious information processing, the capacity of the unconscious is less limited (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006). Previous research has shown that after complex decisions, consumers are more satisfied with their decision when they processed information unconsciously than consciously (Dijksterhuis, 2004; Dijksterhuis & von Olden 2006; Dijksterhuis et al., 2006). Based on these assumptions we expect that unconscious information processing could be one solution for consumers to benefit from an extended choice by reducing the negative effects of information overload. We predict that the negative effect on satisfaction when choosing from a large assortment compared to a small assortment diminishes when consumers base their choice on unconscious information processing.

Method

We conducted a study in which the participants chose a praline in a 3 (selection mode) x 2 (assortment size) between-subject design. A third of the participants saw the assortment once and were asked to write down their thoughts on the pralines before they chose one praline (conscious condition), a third chose one praline spontaneously (spontaneous condition) and a third saw the assortment once and solved anagrams for five minutes before they selected a praline (unconscious condition). Half of the participants selected one praline from a limited assortment (6) and the other half from an extended assortment (24). After the selection, the participants evaluated the taste and hedonic experience of the praline as well as the pleasure and satisfaction with their choice on a seven-point scale. Because of the high intercorrelation, we report the mean of the four variables (Cronbach α=.78).

Results

The results are in line with our predictions. As expected, the interaction between selection mode and assortment size is significant, $F(2, 174)=7.41$, $p=.0008$. Participants in the conscious condition evaluated the praline from an extended assortment less positively ($M=5.26$, $SD=1.12$) than from a limited choice ($M=5.81$, $SD=0.74$), $t(58)=2.24$, $p=.03$, replicating previous findings. Similarly, the participants in the spontaneous condition evaluated the taste of the praline from an extended choice less positively ($M=5.33$, $SD=0.81$) than from a limited choice ($M=5.84$, $SD=0.99$), $t(58)=2.17$, $p=.03$. However, the participants in the unconscious condition evaluated the taste of the praline from an extended choice more positively ($M=6.04$, $SD=0.54$) than from a limited choice ($M=5.50$, $SD=0.96$), $t(58)=2.71$, $p=.009$.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate conditions in which the consumer could profit from an extended choice. Elaborating choices from an extended assortment quickly reaches the limits of conscious information processing. However, unconscious information processing is one way to enjoy the advantages of an extended assortment without an information overload. Retailers may be well advised to provide distraction from choosing when increasing the range of options.

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