

Introduction to the Special Issue on Assortment Structure and Choice

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Humans are adaptive decision makers: We adjust our choice strategies to the particularities of the environment we face, whether it is in front of the wine shelf at our local supermarket or when choosing from mutual fund prospectuses provided by our employer. The way we choose fundamentally depends on the setting in which our choices take place. Therefore, if we want to explain and predict people's choices, we must analyze the structure of the choice environment and determine how it interacts with the cognitive mechanisms of individual choosers. In the specific context of consumer choice, this environment mainly comprises the assortment of options to choose from, the information available about these options, and the way in which they are presented. The articles in this special issue on assortment structure and choice aim to explore these environmental aspects and how their interaction with individual decision processes leads to particular choices.

One key characteristic of assortment structure, focused on by the articles in this special issue, is the size of a given choice set. Having multiple options to choose from is the default expectation in modern consumer markets, underlying competition and the ability of producers to tailor products to different consumer needs and preferences. Thus, marketers have often taken it for granted that if some choice is good, more choice will be even better. As a consequence, in many of today's consumer markets, the number of options to choose from is ever-increasing. This idea that more choice is better is backed up by classic economic choice theory, according to which an increase in the number of attractive options cannot hurt, because those consumers who are not interested in the extra choices can simply ignore them. However, some researchers have recently challenged this notion, arguing

that an overabundance of choice might also lead to negative consequences such as a decreased motivation to make any choice or a decreased satisfaction with the finally chosen option. Such findings have profound implications for marketing and product development, and so they have received considerable attention among scientists and practitioners alike.

But while this idea of choice overload was quickly picked up in the literature, its potential theoretical explanations are still sparse and the empirical evidence for it is mixed. What is needed is a coherent framework that explains when and why a change in the number of options leads to positive or negative consequences for choice. As indicated by the title of this special issue, such a framework will have to incorporate both a better understanding of the decision processes consumers employ, and a better understanding of the assortment structure as a whole beyond just the number of options—including aspects such as the amount of information about the options or the similarities between them.

To approach this goal, the articles in this special issue take different vantage points to explore characteristics of the structure of product assortments and how they influence consumer choice: Reutskaja and Hogarth as well as Haynes explore the relationship between assortment size and choice satisfaction and show empirically that this relationship depends on moderating factors including time pressure and cognitive effort. Fasolo, Carmeci, and Misuraca report evidence that the size of an assortment and the amount of attribute correlation within it influence consumers' subjective time perception and subsequent choice. By exploring potential moderator variables of choice overload, including structural aspects of the environment as well as individual differences between decision makers, Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd show that the effect of choice overload is less robust than previously thought. Fasolo, Hertwig, Huber, and Ludwig provide novel insights into the structure of real-world grocery assortments and show that these structural properties exert an important influence on choice difficulty and quality that has been overlooked so far. Further investigating consumers' choice strategies, White and Hoffrage develop and empirically test a decision model that explains when and why consumers are likely to defer choice. Finally, Jessup, Veinott, Todd, and Busemeyer describe boundary conditions of choice overload based on a unified theoretical framework called Decision Field Theory, which predicts choice probabilities depending on the number of options to choose from and other aspects of the assortment structure.

Taken together, the research presented here offers novel insights and testable theories regarding how consumers may go about making choices from the increasingly wide and often complex range of options they confront. As such, these articles provide further building blocks for the coherent environment-cognition framework that is needed to understand this crucial arena of consumer behavior.

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