

Information overload, choice deferral, and moderating role of need for cognition: Empirical evidence

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RESUMO

Sobrecarga de informação, adiamento de escolha e a função moderadora de *need for cognition*: evidência empírica

Aumento da propensão a evitar a escolha em função da sobrecarga de informações é um tema sujeito a debate intenso. Os modelos de maximização neoclássica prevêm que a propensão a evitar escolha não aumente com a oferta de mais informação ao consumidores. Diferentemente, os modelos com origem na psicologia cognitiva predizem que as características do ambiente de decisão podem provocar efeitos comportamentais que aumentem a propensão a não escolher, em função da sobrecarga de informação. A partir de estímulos gerados experimentalmente, esta pesquisa empírica torna evidente a presença de efeitos comportamentais provocados pela sobrecarga de informação, revela diferenças no efeitos provocados pela variação no número de opções em comparação ao número de atributos e demonstra que a característica de personalidade *need for cognition* modera tais efeitos comportamentais.

Palavras-chave: efeitos comportamentais, adiamento de escolha, sobrecarga de informações, *need for cognition*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The consumers' judgment and decision-making process is an extensively studied theme in several disciplines of social sciences. There are two relevant approaches to the field. First, the normative theories developed in economics set the bases for consumer rationality, represented in axioms describing a process of subjective utility maximization, which implies consumers' decision making supported by stable and well-defined preferences (Fishburn, 1968; This is an open access article under the [CC BY](#) license.

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Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947){Von Neumann, 1947, The theory of games and economic behavior; Fishburn, 1968, Utility theory}. Second, the descriptive theories from cognitive psychology and consumer behavior challenge the normative models assuming that the human brain faces cognitive limits, preventing the development, storage, and recovery of complete and stable preferences. This means that such preferences are made during the decision-making process, emphasizing contextual elements in the formation of preferences (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Payne, 1982; Simon, 1955, 1990).

The number of variables involved in decision making is one of the features of the environment that impacts the final choice (Einhorn, 1970). Information overload is defined as the available amount that makes the information confusing and dysfunctional, given the time restriction involved in decision-making processes (Jacoby, 1977; Jacoby, Speller, & Berning, 1974; Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974).

The debate about this issue is intense, with claims supporting or challenging the increase in the information amount available in the decision environment. The opportunities to study the relationship between information load and choice are still open. Normative and empirical evidence is present in studies favoring the increase in the availability of information and choice in the decision environment (Anderson, 2003; Berger, Draganska, & Simonson, 2007; Bown, Read, & Summers, 2003; Hutchinson, 2005; Malhotra, Jain, & Lagakos, 1982; Oppewal & Koelemeijer, 2005), as well as in those arguing about the dysfunctionality of information overload (Botti & Iyengar, 2006; Fasolo, Herzig, Huber, & Ludwig, 2009; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974; Schwartz, 2004; Zeelenberg, 1999). The divergences in the body of empirical evidence related to the theme can also be explained by conceptual and operational definitions used by researchers for the necessary elements that map the phenomena, such as the (a) antecedents of information overload, specifically how to define the information amount in the decision environment; (b) consequences of information overload; (c) preconditions or situational variables that must be present to trigger the effects of information overload; and (d) underlying processes that would connect the amount of information to its dysfunctional consequences.

Information load is defined as brands or options, information dimensions or attributes, and the value of each information dimension or attribute (Jacoby, 1977). The following operational definitions of the information amount are present in empirical studies: (a) number of options and number of attributes (Jacoby, Speller, & Berning, 1974; Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974; Malhotra, 1982; Malhotra et al., 1982; Russo, 1974; Wilkie, 1974), (b) number of attributes (Hahn, Lawson, & Lee, 1992; Keller & Staelin, 1987; Russo, 1974; Scammon, 1977), and (c) number of options, which is the most frequent definition ((Berger et al., 2007; Gourville & Soman, 2005; Haynes, 2009; Mogilner, Rudnick, & Iyengar, 2008; Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2009; Sela, Berger, & Liu, 2009).

Information load has many consequences, varying in its nature and operational definition. A possible categorization of these effects is to classify them in terms of manifested and observable behaviors, as well as psychological states, which are subjective mental dispositions and nonobservable.

The following behavioral consequences have been used to define the effects of information overload: (a) choice quality that may be assessed by subjective (Hahn et al., 1992; Jacoby, Speller, & Berning, 1974; Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974; Keller & Staelin, 1987; Malhotra, 1982; Malhotra et al., 1982; Russo, 1974; Wilkie, 1974) or objective criteria (Lurie, 2004; Malhotra et al., 1982; Scammon, 1977) and (b) choice avoidance that may be expressed (Scheibehenne et al., 2009) either as the preference for the status quo (Chernev, 2003; Dhar, Nowlis, & Sherman, 1999; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; List, 2004) (Dhar et al., 1999; Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Chernev, 2003; List, 2004; Scheibehenne et al., 2009) or choice deferral (Dhar, 1997a, 1997b; Dhar & Nowlis, 1999; Shah & Wolford, 2007).

The violations of the consumers' rationality perspective might be moderated by the presence of situational or individual variables setting the conditions for the occurrence of the information overload phenomena, such as the lack of familiarity or prior preferences (Chernev, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Mogilner et al., 2008), options arrangement (Broniarczyk, Hoyer, & McAlister, 1998; Mogilner et al., 2008), time pressure (Dhar & Nowlis, 1999; Hahn et al., 1992; Haynes, 2009), personality traits (Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009; Malhotra, 1982), and the order of options evaluation (Li & Epley, 2009).

Finally, mediational elements have been examined, and past studies have explained information overload as the by-product of (a) psychological processes as the necessity to justify choices (Sela et al., 2009), regret anticipation, variety seeking, and variety perception and (b) the information structure or properties such as the quality of available information (Keller & Staelin, 1987), attribute consistency (Berger et al., 2007), attribute alignability (Gourville & Soman, 2005), and the distribution of attribute levels across dimensions (Lurie, 2004).

This article focuses on one of the behavioral consequences of information overload, which is choice deferral or the individual tendency to postpone a decision, expressed as the individual preference for not choosing any option in a specific task decision. Given that the option of not choosing is an actual option in many real decision occasions (Dhar, 1997a), this behavior can be performed either to allow for the consideration of additional information sources or to evaluate more options that will eventually be offered (Dhar, 1997b). The occurrence of choice deferral has been related to the valence of the unique and shared attributes (Dhar & Sherman, 1996), time pressure (Dhar & Nowlis, 1999; Dhar & Sherman, 1996), the perceived similarity of the options and choice difficulty (Kim, Novemsky, & Dhar, 2013), preference uncertainty (Dhar, 1997a) and the options comparison mode (Dhar et al., 1999; Dhar & Sherman,

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