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Illusion of variety: Lower readability enhances perceived variety☆

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has devoted much attention to the direct consequences of an assortment's content (e.g., actual number of different options) and structural features (e.g., organization of an assortment) on perceptions of variety. The present research, however, shows that a superficial feature, i.e., font readability of a menu or catalog, can influence variety perceptions even when the actual content or structure of an assortment remains unchanged. Four studies reveal that perceived variety is higher when the menu or catalog of an assortment is more difficult to read. This readability effect stems from the subjective interpretation of the feeling of difficulty. That is, consumers often endorse a lay belief that it is more difficult to make choices when they face a greater variety of options. For this reason, the readability effect is attenuated when this belief is (chronically or momentarily) less accessible. The increase in perceived variety induced by low readability can boost satisfaction with a store when consumers have a goal of seeking variety. Our research contributes to the understanding of determinants of variety perceptions and the consequences of metacognitive difficulty.

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1. Introduction

Consumers often make choices from an assortment of alternatives. They browse through a restaurant menu to pick the dishes they want to try, use a store list to plan for a shopping trip, and review a university catalog to decide which courses to take. The design of a menu should not be taken lightly. However, what makes a good menu or shopping guide? One factor may be perceptions of the variety of alternatives that are available (Arnold, Oum, & Tigert, 1983; Louviere & Gaeth, 1987; Oppewal & Koelemeijer, 2005). The content and structure of an assortment can certainly influence perceptions of variety (Kahn & Wansink, 2004; Rolls et al., 1981). We argue, however, that superficial and irrelevant factors such as the font readability of a menu or assortment can also shape these perceptions. More importantly, because consumers often have more positive attitudes toward a store that carries a great variety of options (e.g., Broniarczyk, Hoyer, & McAlister, 1998; Louviere & Gaeth, 1987; Oppewal & Koelemeijer, 2005), the readability of a menu or shopping guide can affect satisfaction through its effect on perceptions of variety.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Variety perceptions and processing difficulty

Without a doubt, variety perceptions can be affected by the actual content of a choice set (Hoch, Bradlow, & Wansink, 1999; Kahn & Wansink, 2004) and the structural features of an assortment such as the complexity of the attributes of the options

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(Hoch, Bradlow, & Wansink, 2002; Van Herpen & Pieters, 2002) and the organization of the assortment (Kahn & Wansink, 2004; Young & Wasserman, 2001). These structural aspects of an assortment can influence perceptions of variety because they affect the likelihood of capturing the full range of items in the set (Kahn & Wansink, 2004; Young & Wasserman, 2001). As actual variety increases, assortments become more visually complex and perceptually demanding. The increased perceptual demands make it more difficult for consumers to detect variety unless it is facilitated by the structure of the assortment. For instance, an organized assortment can help consumers to discriminate and process various options (Kahn & Wansink, 2004). That is, by helping consumers to capture the full extent of options in a set, ease of processing can alter perceived variety.

In the current paper, however, we propose that ease of processing can influence variety perceptions for a quite different reason. That is, such ease can affect perceived variety by influencing subjective feelings about the process. People often rely on feelings as information, even when the feelings are incidental or offer little objective information about the judgments at hand (e.g., Kwong, Soman, & Ho, 2011; Novemsky, Dhar, Schwarz, & Simonson, 2007; also see Schwarz, 2004, 2012). Likewise, we find that variety judgments can depend upon subjective feelings of ease or difficulty experienced while reading assortment information, and this effect can occur even when the content of the assortment is held constant.

Specifically, we propose that people would see the same array of items as more varied when its assortment is printed in a difficult-to-read font. This proposition is advanced based on the association between variety and subjective feeling in making choices.

The existing literature has long observed that concerns about variety are especially salient when people make choices from an assortment. For example, when people expect to make choices, they automatically consider the variety offered by assortments (Chernev, 2006). Concerns for variety may even override other considerations such as quality and preferences when people make choices (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999). Hence, a choice context is likely to prompt people to think about variety and may thus sensitize people to the linkage between variety and their feeling in making choices.

Moreover, people often experience choice difficulty when choosing items from a highly varied assortment. Jacoby, Speller, and Kohn (1974) initially demonstrated that a large number of options can pose a challenge to consumers who wish to make a choice that is close to their ideal. Consumer researchers have often replicated this basic finding. For example, people report greater choice difficulty as the assortment size increases (e.g., purchase of jam or choice of optional class assignments; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Similarly, people find it difficult to evaluate potential dating options when faced with a large number of choices (Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). Consumers can even foresee how painstaking a decision will be by merely imagining that an assortment contains a great variety of options (Chernev & Hamilton, 2009). These studies attest to the prevalence of the correlation between sample variety and choice difficulty (for a review on the subjective feeling of choice difficulty caused by proliferating choice options, see Markus & Schwartz, 2010). Because of the escalated concerns about variety in a choice context, the repeated pairing of variety and choice difficulty may lead consumers to acquire a belief that, if there is a large variety of options, making a choice is difficult.

Previous research on mental representation suggests that once a conditional belief is acquired, people may treat it as a biconditional (Wyer, 2004; Wyer & Srull, 1989). For instance, people often believe that “if an event occurs frequently, they can easily recall it.” They may treat this belief as a biconditional such that they believe it is also true that “if an event is easy to recall, it has occurred frequently” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). The tendency to consider conditionals as bidirectional also explains other phenomena such as the price–quality heuristic (a more expensive product should have higher quality, Rao & Monroe, 1989) and the instrumentality heuristic (an effective means to a goal should be effortful, Labroo & Kim, 2009). The relationship between choice difficulty and variety may also be treated as bidirectional. That is, once people have acquired the belief that if an assortment is varied, then choices are difficult, they may infer that if it is difficult to make a choice, the assortment has high variety.

This possibility is of interest when feelings of choice difficulty stem from factors that are irrelevant to actual variety. People often do not distinguish between sources of subjective difficulty (Schwarz, 2004). For this reason, consumers may confuse difficulty in reading information about choice alternatives with the subjective difficulty of making choices (Novemsky et al., 2007). We predict that this feeling of reading difficulty will influence perceptions of variety. That is, as a menu becomes more difficult to read, consumers would feel it more difficult to make choices. This feeling of choice difficulty would then lead to inferences that the set contains a high variety of options. More formally,

H1. Decreasing the readability of a menu or catalog will increase perceptions of the variety of the options contained in it.

H2. The effect of readability on perceived variety is mediated by subjective choice difficulty.

Although we have hypothesized that ease of processing decreases estimates of variety, there are reasons to suppose that the reverse might be true. First, ease in processing elicits positive affect, which could have a positive influence on judgment (Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). Because high variety is considered a positive characteristic for an assortment (Morales, Kahn, McAlister, & Broniarczyk, 2005; Rolls et al., 1981), one might predict that presenting an assortment in an easy-to-read font would increase judgments of variety. Another possibility is that people think more extensively when information is more difficult to process (Simmons & Nelson, 2006; see also Alter, 2013; Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley, & Eyre, 2007; Song & Schwarz, 2008), and this thought might motivate people to consider a greater variety of options. At the same time, this motivation might lead them to perceive the available alternatives to be insufficient and to be less variable than they might otherwise perceive.

In the conditions we investigated, however, we predicted that the primary inference that consumers would make would be the one that is most accessible in mind. We expected that the naive belief based on the inference that choice difficulty is an indication

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