



Too many destinations to visit: Tourists' dilemma?



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ABSTRACT

Despite the common belief that *more is better*, travelers do not prefer having many choices when considering vacation destinations. We investigate why choice overload effects occur and how they can be attenuated through five studies. First, as a solution for mitigating choice overload effects, we introduce “self-confidence” as a boundary condition. Unlike travelers with low self-confidence, travelers with high self-confidence do not experience choice overload effects. Second, we demonstrate that perceived uncertainty mediates the relation between choice-set size and destination evaluations. Finally, we prove that choice overload exists not only in the late stages of the travel decision-making process but also in its early stages. We contribute to the existing literature on tourist behavior, travel decision-making, and choice overload.

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Introduction

Today, traveling is a part of many people's lifestyle and the manner in which travelers make travel decisions has changed. If they do not already have a particular destination in mind, tourists are often motivated to consider numerous options when choosing a vacation destination (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005) to avoid possibly omitting places that might interest them. Most tourists today earn relatively more than those in the past. Moreover, they have access to cheaper travel and accommodation options (Decrop & Snelders, 2004). Furthermore, a large amount of information (e.g., travel promotions or deals) is easily accessible to travelers worldwide owing to advancements in Internet technology (McCabe, Li, & Chen, 2016). Thus, tourists find a significant number of available destination alternatives when they plan their vacations, leading them to potentially feel overwhelmed with choices. Therefore, the choice overload phenomenon in tourism is pertinent and worth investigating. While choice overload has been well established in consumer research, this phenomenon is yet to be investigated in tourism literature (Rodríguez-Molina, Frías-Jamilena, & Castañeda-García, 2015). Park and Jang's (2013) study is an exception that shows some initial evidence that choice overload exists in tourism. Yet several questions still remain to be answered.

This research investigates when and why choice overload effects occur as tourists make destination choices. Tourism and particularly destination related purchases require high consumer involvement (Park & Jang, 2013), and services differ from retail products in several aspects (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005), partly due to their intangibility. As opposed to low involvement products, high involvement products motivate consumers to consider more alternatives (Baltas, 1997). In addition, cognitive and behavioral approaches of tourist behavior research views tourists as utility maximizers (Decrop, 2010, 2014; McCabe et al., 2016). Thus, one may assume that consumers would opt for large choice-sets of tourism products,

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indicating an absence of choice overload. However, the existence of choice overload in tourism products (Park & Jang, 2013) makes it worthwhile to find out why choice overload occurs, given the nature of those products. Therefore, it is essential to establish the mental process, explaining why tourist experience choice overload, which is yet to be investigated in tourism literature. Importantly, as marketers always look for a solution to mitigate choice overload effects, it is valuable to establish conditions under which these negative effects attenuate. Consequently, we aim to introduce a boundary condition that influences choice overload effects. Establishing a new contingency effect will enrich both consumer and tourism literatures.

We propose several contributions to tourism as well as choice overload literatures, and challenge the widespread belief that *more is better* with respect to providing travelers with numerous travel destinations. First, we empirically demonstrate that high self-confidence attenuates the negative effects of large choice-sets on post-choice destination evaluations and thus present a condition that overcome choice overload effects. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first such research to introduce the moderating impact of self-confidence on choice overload effects, contributing to consumer decision-making literature. Second, by establishing the existence of choice overload in destination decision-making, we explain its underlying mechanism as follows: providing travelers with numerous destination options results in uncertainty and thus causes negative destination evaluations. Third, we investigate the probable choice overload effects that occur during a traveler's initial decision (i.e., destination choice). When making travel-related decisions, destination choice is the primary choice that will effect subsequent choices (Fesenmaier & JiannMin, 2000). This is because if choice overload effects occur early in the travel decision-making process, a traveler may not even make the later decisions in the hierarchical process (e.g., flights and accommodation). This complex, multiple-staged decision-making process is unique to tourism and thus may differ from other single-staged decisions (McCabe et al., 2016; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Therefore, investigating destination overload is distinctive and important for tourism literature. Finally, following the call of Dolnicar and Ring (2014), we highlight causal relationships, which are rare but relevant and feasible in tourism marketing literature.

Choice overload effects in destination choices

If choice overload effects exist, travel advisors need to be aware of the stage of travel decision-making at which these negative effects occur so as to prevent them. A travel decision-making process often has two sequential stages (Nicolau & Más, 2008). In the early stages, people decide, for example, on a vacation destination. In subsequent stages, people make a series of decisions relating to accommodation, transportation, airfares, tours, and so forth. Relative to the process of choosing a hotel package, destination choice process is more complicated and risky (Nicolau & Más, 2005, 2008), partly due to its more abstract nature. Within the entire travel decision-making process, destination choice represents an early-staged decision that tourists make. Tourists go through multiple stages in their decisions because their limited analytical capacity forces them to decompose the complex decision into manageable steps (Eymann & Ronning, 1997). This way, tourists follow a hierarchically-staged structure in their decision-making process (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005), in which they cognitively reduce the number of available choices (see McCabe et al., 2016 for a more thorough review of general models of tourist consumer behavior). This choice reduction may ease the decision-making process and thus eliminate choice overload effects.

However, tourism research proves the opposite with a single empirical study, providing evidence of existence of choice overload in tourism. The type of the tourism decision is relatively more concrete, easier and a late decision (hotel package choice; Park & Jang, 2013) than destination choice. The study is about different hotel packages and involves decision making after a destination decision had been finalized. A destination choice is quite different from a hotel choice as to the time of the decision (i.e., at which stage it is made) as well as the complexity and abstractness involved. Further, a hotel has much more tangibility and concreteness with its servicescape elements compared to the abstractness of a scene of a destination. Thus destination choice is special and distinct from later decisions such as a hotel package choice. Building on their study, we propose that it is more important to investigate choice overload effects in the early stages of the process (e.g., the destination choosing stage), because these are primary decisions (Fesenmaier & JiannMin, 2000); unless a destination has been selected, subsequent decisions in later stages will not even occur. The practical contribution of the staged theorem is that when there is an initial choice overload of destinations, tourist may not be even able to go forward to make hotel choices.

We propose that choice overload effects will also occur in a destination-choice context because the number of available choices can be overwhelming (Park & Jang, 2013). While having numerous choices may seem appealing (Greenleaf & Lehmann, 1995), they ironically restrict decision-making (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Moreover, tourists may face some time pressure (Park & Jang, 2013), which is a determining factor in choice overload effect occurrence (Haynes, 2009), as they may be required to quickly complete their bookings to avoid forgoing good deals. Therefore, when making destination choices, travelers may feel that they had inadequate time to consider all the available attractive options. Furthermore, most travelers inherently display a novelty-/variety-seeking attitude (Lee & Crompton, 1992) that motivates them to consider different travel experiences. Thus, their choice-sets often comprise unfamiliar options, which are a precondition of choice overload effects (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000).

Consequences of choice overload

Choice overload is reflected through several indicators (Chernev, Böckenholt, & Goodman, 2015). Causal relationships exist between the number of choices and their influence on people's subjective states, such as satisfaction and regret, or behaviors, such as not choosing or switching to another option (Chernev et al., 2015). For example, Park and Jang (2013) find

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