

Research Report

When perfectionism leads to imperfect consumer choices: The role of dichotomous thinking☆

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Abstract

In four studies, this research investigates the role of perfectionism in consumer decision making and demonstrates that perfectionists often make inferior decisions when facing difficult tasks. Although perfectionists outperform those with low need for perfection at medium levels of decision difficulty, their advantages disappear at high levels of decision difficulty. Driven by dichotomous thinking, perfectionists give up on the task when they realize that a perfect outcome is no longer possible and make inferior decisions. Paradoxically, when given the opportunity to select their own task, perfectionists sometimes avoid tasks over which they have comparative advantage but prefer tasks of high complexity, without realizing the effect of dichotomous thinking on subsequent choices.

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Introduction

It is only natural that people strive for the best and dream of attaining perfection. Perfection is a virtue promoted in today's value system and respected in society at large (Carey, 2007). It is even reflected in popular movies, such as *A Perfect World* (Barron, 1995). After all, what could possibly be wrong with trying to be perfect? This article attempts to answer this question. Although perfectionism can potentially influence a wide range of decisions, little research has addressed its implications in the consumer domain. Two important exceptions in marketing literature include the works of Wooten (2000), who highlighted the role of consumer perfectionism in gift-giving anxiety, and Kopalle and Lehmann (2001), who demonstrated that perfectionism often results in a high level of consumer expectation.

The purpose of this research is to examine systematically the effect of perfectionism on consumer decision making. Across four studies, perfectionists are shown to make imperfect decisions when facing difficult tasks and this boomerang effect of perfectionism is driven by a unique mechanism—dichotomous thinking (Beck, Freeman, & Associates, 1990). Furthermore, this research reveals a dilemma in perfectionists' task selection—they sometimes choose complex tasks although they perform poorly in such tasks.

Perfectionism and consumer decision making

Perfectionism

Hollender (1965, p. 94) described perfectionism as “the practice of demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation.” More recently, Wooten (2000, p. 90) defined perfectionism as people's tendency “to set extremely high standards for themselves and be displeased with anything less.” Given their high standards, it is not surprising that perfectionists are driven to achieve the best performance.

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Hewitt and Flett (1991) argued that perfectionism can be motivational; that is, people with high need for perfection often expend extra effort to prevent mistakes and achieve excellence in tasks. Empirical evidence has linked perfectionism to motivation in academic achievement (Miquelon, Vallerand, Grouzet, & Cardinal, 2005) and to strong commitment to a wide range of goals in both work and life (Flett, Sawatzky, & Hewitt, 1995). More recently, Wigert, Reiter-Palmon, Kaufman, and Silvia (2012) show that perfectionism is positively correlated with decision quality, though at the expense of originality. Overall, these findings suggest that perfectionism often results in positive outcomes through “perfectionist strivings” (Stoeber & Otto, 2006, p. 296). Because of their high standards and motivation to excel, perfectionists are expected to make accurate decisions and superior choices.

Perfectionism is conceptually distinct from other related constructs, such as maximizing (Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002), and has a unique psychological property—dichotomous thinking (Beck, 1976; Beck et al., 1990)—which may ultimately impede quality decision making. This research examines such distinctive ways of thinking and the conditions under which perfectionism may backfire and lead to inferior decisions.

Dichotomous thinking

Dichotomous thinking, also called “black-or-white” thinking, is “the tendency to evaluate experiences in terms of mutually exclusive categories (e.g., good or bad, success or failure, trustworthy or deceitful) rather than seeing experiences as falling along continua” (Beck et al., 1990, p. 187). Such thinking style is reflected in the comments of a female consumer in Wooten’s (2000, p. 90) study: “Unless I’ve found the perfect gift, one that I’m positive they’ll like, then I’d rather not give a gift at all.” Apparently, perfectionists do not measure their performance on a continuous scale. Instead, their assessment is based on a binary choice between two extremes, without any other possibilities in between (Burns, 1980; Shafra, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002). Empirical evidence suggests that perfectionism is correlated with dichotomous and rigid thinking styles (Egan, Piek, Dyck, & Rees, 2007; Riley & Shafra, 2005) as well as categorical thinking (Burns & Fedewa, 2005).

Dichotomous thinking is commonly characterized as suboptimal and maladaptive (Beck, 1999; Beck et al., 1990). Although perfectionists are driven by their high performance standards, dichotomous thinking, ironically, often prevents them from achieving those very standards. In their minds, perfection disappears as soon as they deviate from the rigid standards (Burns, 1980). As a result, they abandon any further effort because perfection is no longer possible. Such task abandonment is consistent with Kopylov’s (2012) model of perfectionism and evidence in education (Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001) that perfectionists display task avoidance behavior when perfection is difficult to achieve. Therefore, perfectionists’ performance depends on the feasibility of achieving perfection. If perfection is within their reach, they are likely to invest additional time and effort in the task. This in turn leads to superior performance. However, if perfection is no longer feasible, perfectionists may

quit the task prematurely because of their dichotomous thinking, which may result in an inferior outcome.

One variable that influences the attainment of perfection is the difficulty of the decision task. For simple tasks, a minimum amount of effort should be sufficient to arrive at an optimal decision. In such cases, consumers with high and low need for perfection may demonstrate similar decision quality because of a potential ceiling effect. For tasks in the middle range of decision difficulty, perfection is still attainable, though additional effort is required. Perfectionists are likely to invest greater effort in these tasks because of their high standards and desire to be perfect. Consequently, they may have higher decision accuracy than consumers with low need for perfection.

The key question is what would happen when the tasks become exceedingly difficult. Due to dichotomous thinking, the positive effect of perfectionism may reverse in such cases. When facing challenging tasks, perfectionists will experience increased difficulty in ensuring a perfect outcome even if they try very hard. Because of dichotomous thinking, perfectionists may abandon their effort when perfection is no longer feasible and quit prematurely. As a result, perfectionism may backfire, and perfectionist consumers may demonstrate lower decision accuracy than those with low need for perfection. More formally,

H1. Decision difficulty moderates the effect of need for perfection on decision accuracy. Specifically, need for perfection reduces decision accuracy at high decision difficulty.

Study 1: the boomerang effect of perfectionism

Method

Participants were 207 undergraduate business students who were presented with an online choice task in the laboratory. In this task, they were looking for a furnished apartment to rent for the next academic year. Participants were randomly assigned to the three levels of decision difficulty manipulated through task complexity (amount of information) (Olshavsky, 1979; Payne, 1976; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). In the high-difficulty condition, participants selected from 12 apartments described in nine attributes (Appendix A). In the medium-difficulty condition, participants chose from six apartments described in six attributes. In the low-difficulty condition, participants saw three apartments described in three attributes. Participants were told that these apartments charged similar monthly rents and were all within their budget.

Decision accuracy is measured as the extent to which the choice maximizes the expected value (Johnson & Payne, 1985; Payne et al., 1993). To measure attribute weight, participants rated the importance of each attribute on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*). The expected value of each alternative was then calculated using a weighted additive model, which is commonly employed as a normative benchmark (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Payne et al., 1993). In line with Johnson and Payne (1985) and Payne, Bettman, and Johnson (1988), decision accuracy is computed as a continuous variable,

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