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## Arranging the assortment to arouse choice: Effects of goal-relevant assortment organization on food choice and variety perceptions

Erica van Herpen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Anick Bosmans<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Wageningen University, Marketing and Consumer Behavior Group, Box 8130, 6700 EW Wageningen, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Tilburg University, Marketing Department, Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

Food retailers can present specific products in a separate category (e.g., separate section for organic products) or integrated into the mainstream shelf. This study investigates how assortment organization influences consumers' variety perceptions and product choice. We argue and show that when an assortment is organized according to an individual's goal (e.g., organics), he or she is more likely to choose a product that is in line with his/her goal (e.g., choose an organic product), compared to when products are presented in a mixed display or when categories are unrelated to this goal. Moreover, the results of three experiments show that when assortments are organized according to a relevant goal, people perceive more variety in the category with goal-consistent products (an in-category heterogeneity effect), but tend to see less variety in the category with products that are not consistent with their goal (an out-category homogeneity effect). This implies that food retailers can direct consumers' choice, as well as consumers' perception of the assortment, through assortment organization. Size of the category is shown to be a boundary condition.

### 1. Introduction: Assortment Organization and Choice

Food assortments include sets of products with special features, such as organic products or fair trade products. Especially when the overall assortment size is large and complex, as is often the case in online retail environments, retailers are faced with the challenge as to where to present these speciality products (Dahm, 2005; Kahn, 2017). Imagine an online retailer introducing a line of organic products in the assortment. The retailer can place the organic product line separately from conventional products, in the hope that consumers will be more likely to notice these products. Alternatively, the retailer may integrate the new organic products with the mainstream products in the hope that consumers will encounter the organic products while browsing the webpage.

Retailers have a substantial influence over the food choices that consumers make, and they consciously attempt to influence buying patterns (Dawson, 2013). The position where individual food products are placed within an assortment influences the choices that consumers make (Bucher et al., 2016; Kongsbak et al., 2016; Missbach & König, 2016; van Herpen, Fischer, & van Trijp, 2015). For instance, the choice for a snack bar with low calorie content increases almost threefold when it is presented in the middle position of three snack bars rather than on the left (Keller, Markert, & Bucher, 2015). Not only the position

of individual products influences product choice, the way in which an assortment is organized matters as well (Simonson, 1999). An assortment partitioned into the categories 'fruit', 'vegetables', and 'cookies and crackers' leads to more healthy choices than an assortment partitioned into 'fruits and vegetables', 'cookies', and 'crackers' (Chernev, 2012). Moreover, placing wines from a specific region in a special point-of-purchase display increases product choice from consumers' preferred regions (Areni, Duhan, & Kiecker, 1999). It thus appears that assortment organization guides product choices, and that consumers are more likely to make product choices that are based on the organizing attribute. Does this mean that simply adding a separate category to the assortment will boost sales of products in this category, say, the organic category when organic products are placed separately? Not necessarily.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, and most apparent, we reason that whether choice in a given category will increase or decrease (e.g., whether consumers will choose an organic product), will crucially depend on whether the category relates to consumers' shopping goals (e.g., whether consumers are inclined to buy organic products). Second, we argue that the interplay between assortment organization and consumers' shopping goals not only influences product choices, but also the amount of variety that consumers perceive in the category of interest, compared to the category not of interest.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Erica.vanHerpen@wur.nl](mailto:Erica.vanHerpen@wur.nl) (E. van Herpen), [A.M.M.Bosmans@uvt.nl](mailto:A.M.M.Bosmans@uvt.nl) (A. Bosmans).

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Perceptions of variety within categories are highly relevant for retailers because consumers are more loyal to stores that are specialized in specific categories (i.e., category-dependent store loyalty) (Bell, Ho, & Tang, 1998). That is, a consumer with a goal to buy organic products will be more likely to visit a store when s/he believes that the store offers a varied assortment of organic products specifically. How much variety consumers perceive to be present in a set of food items can vastly differ from the variety that is indicated through objective variety measures (Haugaard, Brockhoff, & Lähteenmäki, 2016). Moreover, changes in assortment organization, which do not affect variety objectively, may affect perceptions of variety subjectively (Hoch, Bradlow, & Wansink, 1999). Research shows that merely organizing an assortment into categories without changing the products it contains can increase the overall perceived variety of this assortment (Lamberton & Diehl, 2013; Mogilner, Rudnick, & Iyengar, 2008). For example, when the number of different jelly beans is large, people perceive more variety in an assortment of jelly beans, and will consume more of these candies, when they are presented in a separate container for each colour compared to when the colours are scrambled altogether (Kahn & Wansink, 2004). Our study extends this prior research by showing that the effects of assortment organization on variety perceptions should not be examined in isolation, but depend on consumers' shopping goals.

## 2. The interplay between goals and categories

Research suggests that consumers' goals direct attention to information that is relevant or important for the goal (Huffman & Houston, 1993; O'Brien & Meyers, 1987). As a consequence, the organization of products as applied by a food retailer can be consistent or inconsistent with consumers' shopping goals. This may ultimately affect both product choice and variety perceptions.

Consider a consumer with a high interest in organic products. It can be assumed that if the organizing attribute is relevant for one's goal (i.e., being organic), people will increase their focus on the organizing attribute. This is likely to increase product choice from the organic category. Yet, effects on variety perceptions are less clear. On the one hand, communalities between products – especially those that are goal-related – will be highlighted, resulting in a decrease in perceived variety in the category of interest (i.e., “they are all organic”). This prediction is consistent with the idea that organizing products into categories increases the perceived similarity of products inside a category. For example, research on metaphorical thinking suggests that there is a strong association between mental representations related to the concept of similarity and that of closeness, such that objects that are physical close to each other are perceived as more similar than objects that are further away (Boot & Pecher, 2010; Casasanto, 2008). The notion that products that are placed together in categories are perceived to be more similar is also in line with the accentuation theory of Tajfel and Wilkes (1963), which argues that the classification of stimuli into categories influences the perceived similarity between stimuli whereby between-group differences are exaggerated and within-group differences are understated.

On the other hand however, instead of merely increasing consumers' focus on the goal-related organizing attribute, organizing an assortment into categories may also increase the likelihood that consumers examine the goal-consistent products in more detail, at the expense of goal-inconsistent products. Cognitive resources are limited, and people simply cannot attend to all information present in their environment (Todd, Hertwig, & Hoffrage, 2005). Consumers tend to simplify choice tasks (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1990) by focusing on categories that are most in line with their goals (Morales, Kahn,

McAlister, & Broniarczyk, 2005; Simonson & Winer, 1992). Whereas previous literature has shown that such a focus can decrease variety perception of the total assortment (Morales et al., 2005), we argue that this will instead increase variety perceptions of those parts of the assortment that are consistent with one's goal. That is, goal-consistent categories will receive more cognitive resources to inspect, deliberate, and choose among the alternatives. This implies that (1) organizing an assortment into product categories would draw consumers' attention to the organizing attribute, (2) this would increase the chance of choosing a product from the goal-consistent category, (3) the category that is consistent with one's goal (compared to those which are not) is processed in a more individuated and differentiated way, which would lead to a greater perceived variety within the goal-consistent category (an in-category heterogeneity effect), and (4) because less attention is focused on the goal-inconsistent category, variety perceptions for the goal-inconsistent category would decrease, compared to a mixed assortment or goal-unrelated categories (an out-category homogeneity effect).

## 3. Overview of the studies

Three studies test how shopping goals influence the effect of assortment organization on product choice (experiment 1) and perceived variety of products in a goal (in-)consistent category (experiments 1–3). Experiment 1 investigates naturally occurring shopping goals by assessing if people with a high intrinsic interest in organic wines (but not those with a low interest) are more likely to choose an organic wine and to perceive more variety in organic wines when these wines are presented in a separate compared to a mixed display. In this experiment, we also investigate if this effect is mediated by consumers' focused attention on the goal-consistent category, as we would expect. In experiment 2, people are provided an explicit goal to purchase caffeinated tea and effects in a goal-related presentation (i.e., caffeinated category) are compared to a goal-unrelated (i.e., fair-trade category) and mixed (i.e., no categories) displays. Experiment 3 extends these results by showing that category size is a boundary condition of the proposed in-category heterogeneity effect: when goal-consistent categories have too few products, consumers will notice the limited supply, such that less instead of more variety is perceived.

Because online grocery retailing has been rapidly growing over the past decades (Dawes & Nenycz-Thiel, 2014) and assortment organization is highly relevant for online retailers (Kahn, 2017), our experiments will test the hypotheses in the context of online food shopping. Prior research has replicated effects of assortment organization in various settings, including pictorial displays, lab experiments, and real-life stores (e.g., Areni et al., 1999; Mogilner et al., 2008; Simonson & Winer, 1992), and effects of the number of subcategories on assortment variety are comparable across studies in online and offline stores (Chang, 2011; Mogilner et al., 2008). Therefore, we assume that the hypothesized underlying process that we examine will extend to offline contexts as well.

## 4. Experiment 1: Intrinsic interest and perceived variety

The main purpose of experiment 1 was to investigate whether a separated category increases choice of and leads to higher perceived variety in products that are in line with consumers' interests (goal-consistent products), but lower perceived variety in products that are not in line with their interests (goal-inconsistent products), in an assortment with objectively the same amount of variety in both categories. We expected that people with a high interest in organic wines choose more often for an organic wine and perceive more variety in

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