

To Choose or to Reject: The Effect of Decision Frame on Food Customization Decisions

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Abstract

Food retailers increasingly allow consumers to customize their food by either choosing items from available options or rejecting items from a pre-prepared set of options. In this study, we examine the effect of these two decision frames (choose vs. reject) on consumers' food customization decisions. Specifically, we depart from the previous literature's focus on the quantity of items and examine the effect of decision frames on the nature of items included in the customized food. The results of a series of studies show that decision frames influence the relative number of healthy versus unhealthy items included in the customized food, and that this influence is further contingent upon the valence of the food to be customized (e.g., "healthy" salad or "unhealthy" pizza).

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Introduction

Following the popularity and success of customization in the domains of automobiles, telephone plans, television channels, shoes, cosmetics, and computers amongst others, restaurants and food retailers are increasingly allowing consumers to customize their food (e.g., Subway sandwiches; Dominos' pizzas). The task of customizing food typically involves either a selection or rejection decision. For example, Subway allows customers to build a sandwich by *choosing* from a range of healthy (e.g., cucumber, tomato) and unhealthy (e.g., cheese, ham) items. Alternatively, Dominos offers pre-prepared pizzas consisting of healthy (e.g., mushroom, onion) and unhealthy (e.g., pepperoni, bacon) toppings but allows customers to customize it by *rejecting* the items they do not like (Please see Appendix for a sample menu from Dominos). Other examples which offer choosing/rejecting ingredients include seafood platters, finger-food platters, meat platters, etc. which are commonly offered in restaurants and catering services. Despite the wide applications

of such choose versus reject decision frames in food consumption, little is known about the outcomes of each decision frame. For example, in which decision frame are consumers likely to include more items? More interestingly, of the items included, what is the relative number of healthy versus unhealthy ones? Does the choice of healthy and unhealthy items depend upon the decision frame used by the consumer?

Prior research has examined the effect of choose versus reject decision frames on consumer decisions (e.g., Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Nagpal and Krishnamurthy 2008; Park, Jun, and MacInnis 2000; Shafir 1993). It shows a consistent effect of choosing versus rejecting; that is, people are reluctant to move away from their starting point, resulting in a larger number of items included when rejecting than choosing (Huber, Neale, and Northcraft 1987; Levin et al. 2002; Park, Jun, and MacInnis 2000; Yaniv and Schul 1997). Although this effect is robust, the focus has always been on the "quantity" of the items selected. Surprisingly, it fails to shed light on the nature of the items selected, which we term the "quality" of the decision.

This distinction is important, especially in the context of food consumption, where not only the total number of items consumed is important, but the nature of the items consumed (healthy vs. unhealthy) is equally, if not more important. For example, assuming that consumers concerned with weight

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management try to eat fewer items, and at the same time eat healthier items, a choose (reject) frame often leads to fewer (more) items included in total; however, a reject (choose) frame may lead to more healthy (unhealthy) items included. If obesity is ultimately driven by excessive calorie intake (Antonuk and Block 2006; Bray 2011; Wansink 2004), and healthy food usually contains fewer calories (Wertenbroch 1998), then consumers need to consider not only the total number of items included, but also the relative number of healthy versus unhealthy items. Therefore, in this research we add to the previous literature's focus on the quantity of items included by examining the effect of decision frames on the nature of items included in the customized food. Specifically, we examine the relative number of healthy versus unhealthy items included under the choose versus reject decision frame.

Our findings from several experimental studies provide several insights into the understanding of decision frames and consumers' customization decisions. First, we show that consumers' customization decisions are influenced by not only the decision frame, but also the nature of the options (e.g., healthy vs. unhealthy items) presented in the customization task. In the context of food consumption, we show that consumers include more unhealthy (vs. healthy) items in the reject frame, but not so in the choose frame. Second, we show that customization decisions under each frame are also influenced by the overall valence (e.g., "healthy" salad vs. "unhealthy" pizza) of the food to be customized. Theoretically, our research suggests that the decision frame does not affect consumers' customization decisions independently. Instead, it interacts with contextual factors (e.g., healthiness of the food items to be chosen/rejected and overall valence of the food to be customized) to influence consumers' customization decisions. It also suggests that customization decisions need to be evaluated not only on the basis of the quantity of items included, as has been done in previous research, but also on the basis of the nature of items included. This is because an analysis of the quality of the decision (i.e., the nature of options included) can help consumers better evaluate their customization decisions and adjust the way how they make such decisions in the future. For managers, our results provide implications for how retailers can influence customers' preference for products with mixed features (e.g., hedonic-taste vs. utilitarian-nutrition) by strategically employing a choose or reject decision frame and influencing the overall valence of the product to be customized (e.g., by naming the product differently; Irmak, Vallen, and Robinson 2011). For policy-makers, these results imply that consumers need to be made aware of the influence of their own decision frames on the quantity, as well as quality, of their food customization decisions.

In the following sections of the paper, we first predict and then examine consumers' food customization decisions in a series of studies. In Study 1a, we examine the relative number of healthy versus unhealthy items in a (neutral) food platter when consumers choose or reject from a mixed set of healthy and unhealthy options. In Study 1b, we replicate the findings of Study 1a by measuring consumers' actual consumption choices. In Study 2a, we examine the impact of decision frame on the relative number of healthy versus unhealthy items included for

food with either a healthy or unhealthy valence. In particular, we examine consumers' choice of toppings when customizing a pizza (unhealthy) versus salad (healthy). In Study 2b, we provide further support of our hypotheses, by manipulating food valence using the same food category, that is, sandwiches (white-bread sandwich which has an unhealthy valence vs. whole-wheat bread sandwich which has a healthy valence). We end with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our research.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Hedonic Versus Utilitarian Attributes Under Different Decision Frames

Past research on decision making suggests that consumer choices are often influenced by their considerations of the utilitarian and hedonic attributes of the available options (Batra and Ahtola 1990; Mano and Oliver 1993). Further, hedonic attributes are weighted more heavily under a reject frame, whereas utilitarian attributes are weighted more heavily under a choose frame (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) suggest that this effect occurs because a reject decision frame leads to more spontaneous upward pre-factual thinking (see also Carmon and Ariely 2000; Sanna 1996), meaning that consumers tend to elaborate on the future outcomes of rejecting an option prior to the decision. For example, when consumers have to decide which option to forgo, they might think about "what it is like not to have this item." Such elaboration increases the salience of more sensory and easily imaginable attributes (Keller and McGill 1994; Shiv and Huber 2000), and induces negative emotions (Roese 1997; Sanna 1999). Given that hedonic attributes are more sensory, imagery-evoking, and emotionally laden than utilitarian attributes (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; MacInnis and Price 1987; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998), Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) suggest that these attributes are weighted more heavily in a reject frame, and consumers tend to retain options that are superior on hedonic attributes to minimize the anticipated negative emotions. In contrast, under a choose frame, consumers are less likely to engage in hedonic-elaborating pre-factual thinking. Instead, they tend to focus more on utilitarian attributes that provide cognitive and instrumental functions (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky 1993; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). These properties of utilitarian attributes make the choice for a utilitarian-dominant option easier to justify than the choice for a hedonic-dominant option (Okada 2005). Therefore, consumers are likely to focus on utilitarian attributes and choose the option that is superior on such attributes in a choose frame (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000).

These predictions are also in line with the omission bias theory (Baron and Ritov 1994; Spranca, Minsk, and Baron 1991). It states that the consequences of action (e.g., choose) induce greater feelings of responsibility than do consequences of inaction (e.g., retain). Therefore, although there is a sense of guilt associated with hedonic consumption (e.g., Okada 2005), there should be less feeling of guilt to retain hedonic-dominant options than to choose them (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). That said,

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