When Choosing Is Not Deciding: the Effect of Perceived Responsibility on Choice Outcome Satisfaction

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When Choosing Is Not Deciding: The Effect of Perceived Responsibility on Choice Outcome Satisfaction Simona Botti Cornell University Ann L. McGill University of Chicago Prior research has found differences in satisfaction for choosers and non-choosers of the same outcome. Two studies show that differentiability of the choice set options moderates this effect. When options are more differentiated choice enhances satisfaction in positively-valenced choice contexts and dissatisfaction in negatively-valenced choice contexts, but when options are less differentiated choosers experience the same level of satisfaction as non-choosers. We test the hypothesis that the effect of outcome differentiability is due to differences in perceived level of responsibility and subsequent self-credit and self-blame for the decision outcome. A third study separates the effects of differentiability from random choice.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research has demonstrated that when presented with all desirable options consumers are more satisfied with self-chosen alternatives than with alternatives that have been externally dictated, but that the opposite is true when the options are all undesirable. This reversal in satisfaction has been explained through an affective account: Choosers’ greater engagement in the decision task causes their affective experience with the choice outcome to be more extreme than that of non-choosers (Botti and Iyengar 2004).

In the present research we hypothesize that the amplification effect of choice on satisfaction is moderated by choosers’ ability to differentiate among the choice options: If options are less, as compared to more differentiated decision makers would be just as happy with an externally-made as with a self-chosen option.

This prediction is based on a potential confound between the effect of choice and that of responsibility in prior findings. Research has shown that when people feel responsible for an outcome the affective experience with that outcome is magnified by either self-credit for a pleasant or self-blame for an unpleasant experience (Gilovich, Medvec, and Chen 1995; Kahneman and Tversky 1982; Landman 1987; Ritov and Baron 1992; Weiner 1981). Hence, we hypothesize that if perception of responsibility were weakened, choosers would have less of a basis on which to congratulate or blame themselves, resulting in a smaller difference between their satisfaction and that of non-choosers.

Building on prior research suggesting that choice commitment is lower in the absence of a dominating option (Dhar 1997; Shafir, Simonson and Tversky 1993), we manipulate personal responsibility by varying the extent to which decision makers can distinguish among the options and identify the more preferred one: When non-diagnostic information prevents them from identifying each option’s relative quality, choosing contributes less to the ultimate experience than when differences among the alternatives are readily appreciated, influencing choosers’ sense of responsibility for the outcome and reducing the gap between choosers and non-choosers’ satisfaction. However, consistent with prior research showing that preference for choosing is not sensitive to the same factors that influence satisfaction (Botti and Iyengar 2004) we hypothesize that the desire to choose will not vary as a function of option differentiability.

Study 1 and 2 used a 2 (choice condition: choice vs. no-choice) x 2 (option differentiability: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design to test these hypotheses in, respectively, a positively-valenced (coffee) and negatively-valenced (foul odors) context. High-, relative to low-differentiability participants were provided with descriptions that were more diagnostic of the relative quality of the options so that they could more easily identify the most desirable—or least undesirable—one. Choice participants selected an option, whereas no-choice participants were assigned an option at random by the experimenter. In reality, a yoked design was used so to ensure that non-choosers were assigned the same selection of their counterpart choosers; in addition, in spite of the different descriptions, all participants drank the same blend and smelled the same odor. As predicted, in the high-differentiability condition choosers were more satisfied with a pleasant and more dissatisfied with an unpleasant outcome than non-choosers, while in the low-differentiability condition there was no difference in satisfaction. Choosers also experienced greater responsibility and credited or blamed themselves more in the high- than in the low-differentiability condition, while levels of responsibility, self-credit, and self-blame did not vary across the two no-choice conditions. Also as expected, choosers liked their choice condition better and were also less willing to switch to the other choice condition than non-choosers, suggesting that preference for choice is not sensitive to the level of differentiability of the options.

Study 3 tested for the alternative account that choosers in the low-differentiability condition in reality selected an option at random, which would explain the lack of difference in satisfaction between low-differentiability choosers and non-choosers obtained in the previous two studies. In this 2 (choice condition: choice vs. no-choice) x 2 (option differentiability: random vs. low) study involving positively-valenced options (chocolate), choosers and non-choosers in the low- differentiability choice condition were given the usual non-diagnostic information, while those in the random choice condition were given no information at all. We predicted a difference in satisfaction in the random, but not in the low-differentiability condition, a result that would confirm that these two conditions are not equivalent. In addition, we anticipated that random choosers would be less satisfied than random non-choosers. This prediction is based on prior research suggesting that choosers’ responses are usually a mix of self-credit and self-blame (Brenner, Rottenstreich, and Sood 1999; Carmon, Wertebroch, and Zeelenberg 2003; Hsee and Leclerc 1998; Kahneman and Tversky 1982; Luce 1998). Hence, we expected random choosers to not only grant themselves little credit for a positive outcome, given the lack of information on which they could base a choice, but also harbor misgivings that however tasty their chosen chocolate, they may have inadvertently rejected a superior alternative. As a result, random choosers’ self-blame may overcome self-credit, lowering their satisfaction with the chosen option relative to non-choosers. Confirming these predictions, a difference in satisfaction was observed between choosers and non-choosers in the random condition, with choosers being less satisfied with the tasted chocolate than non-choosers, but not in the low-differentiability condition. In addition, the ratio of self-blame to self-credit was found to fully mediate satisfaction with the chocolate.

As opportunities for personal choosing have been growing in modern societies, marketers seem to share with consumers the belief that choice necessarily leads to greater happiness (Schwartz 2004). However, if meaningful differences among the choice options are difficult to discern because of competitive parity in mature markets, heightened product complexity, or consumers’ inability to research the alternatives, the positive effect of choice on satisfaction is nullified.

REFERENCES


