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Choose, Choose, Choose, Choose, Choose, Choose, Choose: Emerging and Prospective Research on the Deleterious Effects of Living in Consumer Hyperchoice

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ABSTRACT. The ideology of consumption and the imperative of consumer choice have washed across the globe. In today's developed economies there is an ever-increasing amount of buying, amidst an ever-increasing amount of purchase options, amidst an ever-increasing amount of stress, amidst an ever-decreasing amount of discretionary time. This brief essay reviews research suggesting, for example, that hyperchoice confuses people and increases regret, that hyperchoice is initially attractive but ultimately unsatisfying, and that hyperchoice is psychologically draining. Future research is then discussed, including how and why hyperchoice may have other toxic effects on people, including the degrading of moral emotions and behavior.

Introduction

Consumption ideology now spans the world, including an imperative of consumer choice. But in

today's developed economies, this ever-increasing amount of buying occurs amidst an ever-increasing amount of new products, brands, and brand extensions, in the midst of an ever-increasing amount of other daily demands and an ever-decreasing amount of discretionary time (Linder, 1971; Schor, 1999; Scitovsky, 1976; Toffler, 1970). Taken together, these conditions make up the context of consumer hyperchoice. Moreover, the consumer activities of ordering an obligatory holiday gift, replacing outdated telecommunication technology, and indulging in a new pair of fashionable shoes, in between a 25-minute stop at the grocery store for \$104 of weekly sustenance, may not contribute as much to quality of life as once thought or hoped for. This proposition might have seemed heretical a few decades ago, but no longer (Loewenstein, 1999; Mick, 1997; Schwartz, 2004).

Although anecdotal and introspective evidence seem to support this proposition, relevant empirical findings from laboratory and field are indirect, partial, and scattered. Much work lies ahead to comprehend the potentially noxious influences of hyperchoice. This brief essay overviews prior research that is germane to hyperchoice conditions, including information overload, time stress, decision elaboration, and sequential choices. It then discusses prospective research for examining whether the effects of hyperchoice extend further, perhaps degrading key aspects of human psychology, including moral character.

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Selected prior literature

One of the earliest streams of consumer research pertinent to hyperchoice was the information overload paradigm of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Jacoby, 1977; Malhotra, 1984; Wilkie, 1974). This stream was laudably concerned with public policy issues of whether, when, and how consumers can be overloaded by product information. Information load was operationalized as a multiplicative function of the amount of product attributes and alternative information available for a single decision. Empirical results showed that increasing the information load above a threshold led to choice processes based on simplifying rules, which produced lower quality choice outcomes relative to a normative standard (i.e., where one or more options were unmistakably superior in terms of the given features and benefits for the price charged). Additionally, information overload had detrimental effects on consumers' psychological states, including increased confusion and cognitive strain, as well as lower decision satisfaction.

Another pertinent and well-developed research stream concerns time-stress, which would likely exacerbate the consequences observed from information overload, as the resources of the decision-maker are further challenged. Indeed, the disadvantageous effects of time-stress during consumer choice are unambiguous and robust. According to prior research (Ariely and Zakay, 2001; Payne et al., 1993), time-stress reduces information search and processing; reduces the range of alternatives and dimensions considered; increases valuation of negative information; bolsters the chosen alternative; provokes information filtration strategies; increases the probability of non-compensatory choice strategies; and encourages poor judgment and evaluation.

New types of research are also on the rise that look more closely at the subjective consequences of information overload. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) compared choices of jams and chocolates in lab and field settings, where the options were as many as 30 or as few as six, holding the number of product attributes constant. They found, for example, that subjects who encountered the extensive-options condition were more attracted to the related product booth set up in a mall, whereas those who encountered the limited-options condition were more likely

to actually select and purchase an option. In a follow-up study, participants encountering extensive options reported that they enjoyed the choice process more than those encountering the limited-options condition, but they also reported that the process was more difficult. Interestingly, those in the extensive-options condition subsequently reported lower satisfaction and more regret over their choices, compared to participants in the limited-options condition. Based on additional data and analyses, the authors argue that these results are due in part to participants in the extensive-options condition feeling more responsible for their choices, apparently because so much freedom of choice was presented to them.

Very recent research by Schwartz et al. (2002) and Carmon et al. (2003) also supports aspects of Iyengar and Lepper's work. These scholars have demonstrated that people who continually or momentarily strive to choose the very best option for themselves and who think elaborately while doing so, report lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, and less comfort and satisfaction with their product choices. These authors note that while the maximizers who are intensely cognitive in their decision making seem to select options that are objectively and normatively superior (due to their high standards and their comprehensive search and choice processes), they are likely nonetheless to subjectively experience the selected options as inferior. A prime underlying cause of these results, according to the authors, is the anticipated and experienced regret over foregone options that might have been superior to the one chosen.

The preceding research, indeed most of consumer research, has focused on the process and outcomes of a single choice. Aspects of consumer hyperchoice can certainly be evoked in a lone decision context, especially when information overload and time-stress are operative. Yet, it is the study of multiple and sequential choices that may be most applicable to consumer hyperchoice, and most needed. In a very recent and informative study, Jason Riis and Norbert Schwarz found that following an initial difficult (easy) decision, a subsequent difficult decision was more (less) likely to result in preferences for status quo and risk-averse options (personal communication). Their results imply that repeated choices can be psychologically strenuous. The most direct evidence of this prospect, however, comes from recent work by Baumeister and Vohs (2003).

They had half of their participants complete a series of binary choices across different product classes (participants in the control conditions of both studies simply reported their usage of the same products). In a follow-up task, with a new experimenter, it was found that the participants who had made numerous choices exhibited a significantly lower ability than the control group to persist at an unsolvable puzzle (study one) or to force themselves to keep drinking a bad-tasting beverage (study two). These results confirm in a more dramatic fashion how the making of multiple and sequential consumer choices drains psychological energy, as seen through decrements in self-regulation and willpower.

The paragraphs above review selected literature that each bear partly upon the topic of consumer hyperchoice. In sum, they suggest that the kinds of choice conditions we see increasingly in everyday life in developed economies are quite capable of enticing consumer attention, but they are also likely to facilitate confusion, stress, simplifying and error-prone decision processes, regret, dissatisfaction, and fatigue. Other aspects of hyperchoice conditions have yet to be incorporated into research designs, such as budget constraints and other complicating facets of daily decision options, including correlated, irrelevant, and trivial attributes. But perhaps more significantly, the carry-over effects of consumer hyperchoice to subsequent non-choice tasks have only just begun to be theorized and explored. Prior writings on the expansion of capitalism, technology, and materialism (e.g., Linder, 1971; Scitovsky, 1976; Tofler, 1970) have variously intimated that hyperchoice likely affects vital realms of human well-being and, perhaps too, moral development. However, while recent writings have developed this general proposition further (e.g., Mick, 1997; Schor, 1999; Schwartz, 2004), empirical research devoted to thoroughly testing it remains to be undertaken.

Prospective research

As illustrated above, consumer hyperchoice can relate to a single choice within a given product category (e.g., flat screen televisions) or multiple choices across categories (e.g., in a super market or department store). At the same time, consumer hyperchoice probably has many more contexts than we have up-

to-now mentioned, including such diverse situations as consumers making financial decisions related to investment purchases and managers making selections among vendors of office supplies and equipment.

One of the most problematic effects of hyperchoice could be a diminishment of mindfulness or attentional control. If hyperchoice is as demanding as prior studies imply, then it is likely to make people lazier, more miserly, sloppier, and more selective in their watching, thinking, and listening during ensuing non-choice tasks (e.g., reading a financial report or bank statement; conversing with a work colleague, friend, or child).

Another acerbic effect could be judgmentalism. If people face repeated situations where they must evaluate and choose products and brands, even when their preference utilities are moderately to well formed, then it is possible in subsequent non-choice situations that people will display less openness overall, and perhaps a quickness for assessment in particular. If so, this is not salutary for social harmony, tolerance for diversity, moral reflection, and so on. Note though, it is plausible to predict the opposite. Repeated choosing that requires effort could conceivably encourage effort and thought in a subsequent non-choice task.

Similarly, hyperchoice may also foment impatience and incivility. When placed in conditions of fast and complicated choices, with uncertainty of outcomes and yet commitments to chosen alternatives, it is not hard to envision that people might act in subsequent non-choice tasks with more self-interest and less courtesy. In parallel, hyperchoice may reduce willingness to engage in altruistic and pro-social behaviors.

Why would any or several of these effects possibly emerge? There is probably more than one reasonable explanation. Two or more casual forces may be operative at a given time and/or these forces may occur in stages before the effects hypothesized above will manifest themselves. As we have hinted at, the mediators may potentially include (a) ego-depletion (fatigue and loss of willpower), (b) negative affect (e.g., irritability), and (c) an elevation of self-focus (how one sees or defines oneself).

Certainly, the energy explanation based on Baumeister's work is highly relevant. People get tired and even exhausted from harried and mentally challenging events. Various research streams (e.g.,

sleep deprivation, chronic fatigue syndrome) have shown that fatigue breeds many negative outcomes in life, including poor listening, more worries, more rigidity, less hope, less creativity, and so forth.

Another explanation for some of the hyperchoice effects posited above relates to feelings of exasperation and grumpiness. Perhaps hyperchoice is just plain distasteful for many people, at least viscerally, if not consciously. If so, there could readily appear negative behavioral outcomes such as judgmentalism, impatience, and rudeness.

Another explanation is self-focus or a “me-me-me effect.” If hyperchoice is about the repeated activation of personal preferences as people sift and winnow through options requiring multiple trade-offs, especially in the context of time-stress, then it would make logical sense that people would be less other-focused or humanitarian in a social interaction following hyperchoice. Obstacles to altruism might include both the flooding of one’s awareness with one’s own concerns, and the reduction in helping behavior that has been observed to result from experimental manipulations of time pressure (Latane and Darley, 1970).

These plausible effects and processes might also be moderated by a number of person-level factors. These include psychological traits such as need for cognition, maximizer/satisficer differences in decision making, tolerance for ambiguity, materialistic values, and personality characteristics such as neuroticism.

A variety of paradigms and methods will be necessary to explore these complex issues and potential implications of consumer hyperchoice. Interviews, surveys, and observations in the field (e.g., within and around retail locations) will be helpful. Experimental designs will also be crucial, varying such factors as the number and nature of the choices, the amount of time available, and the existence of budget constraints. Assessing the experimental effects of hyperchoice might be accomplished, for example, with direct self-report scales (e.g., empathy for other people). However, a variety of implicit measures or supposedly unrelated tasks (post experiment) could prove more insightful and reliable (e.g., willingness to volunteer for a worthy community cause (altruism), how long an experimental participant will wait before interrupting a subsequent conversation (impatience and incivility)).

It is possible that the deleterious effects of hyperchoice are individually temporary or short-lived, and that people readily return to more positive states of moral character. However, social scientists are increasingly theorizing and demonstrating how patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on a daily basis shape the mind in enduring ways. For example, media studies researchers such as Shrum et al. (1998) have found compelling evidence for cumulative and negative long-term effects from heavy exposure to television. Equally relevant but even more fundamental, the anthropologist Brad Shore (1996) argues that cultural differences are due to the fact that brains develop within pools of metaphors and models that are used to approach a broad range of situations. For modern American culture he proposes a foundational metaphor of modularity, which indicates an approach to all situations wherein one is expected to choose the specific items one wants, e.g., toppings on a hamburger, courses in a college education, or features of a spouse on a computer dating service. From Shore’s insights, it is a short step to realizing how modularity in the extreme, in the form of consumer hyperchoice, has become the elemental and inescapable condition of contemporary American life.

If ongoing and prospective research reveals effects of hyperchoice as we have suggested above, what might the implications be? Many philosophers and social scientists – and perhaps a few intrepid economists – would contend that the results underscore how the freedom, profusion, and imperative of consumer choice can eventually reach a structural systemic height that casts an ominous shadow over the psychological and moral landscape of millions of lives.

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