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ARE MANY CHOICES REALLY DEMOTIVATING? WHEN MORE CHOICES ARE BETTER IN MARKETING COURSES

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Literature Review

Choice is generally viewed as desirable (Schwartz, 2004a). In a consumer context, the ability to choose between options has been linked to self-determination and empowerment (Dholakia, 2006; Schwartz, 2004a; Wathieu, et al., 2002). However, evidence also exists that extensive choice, even when all choices are good, may lead to confusion, stress and discomfort, regret for alternatives not chosen, deferred decisions, and indifference (Carmon, Wertenbroch, & Zeelenberg, 2003; Cristol & Sealey, 1996; Dhar, 1997; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004a,b; Settle & Golden, 1974).

In an educational context, Schwartz (2004b) discussed how the world of the modern college student is so laden with choice that it can become overwhelming. Ackerman and Gross (2006) studied the impact of choice on perceptions of and satisfaction with curriculum for a minor in marketing. While students wanted choice, they also valued the provision of guidance and direction. Students' perceptions of choice may depend on how interested they are and how familiar they are with the choices. When familiarity exists, students may prefer to have some (limited) choice rather than having either many choices or no choice at all. This provides some degree of freedom, but not so much choice that it is demotivating (Iyengar, 2010). Further, there may be excitement about choices because of interest. Such positive feelings elicited help the chooser overlook potential stress from the process of deliberation and regret over alternatives not chosen.

The desirability of students having choices within a class has been less explored. Marketing courses can be structured to include varying levels of choice. Courses offering no choice are structured so that all students are assigned the same material, are responsible for the same assignments, and are assessed in the same ways. Choice can be introduced into a course, for example, by allowing students to choose from among alternative assignments and activities.

Hypotheses and Method

Based on the literature, we developed and tested the following hypotheses: H1: Students who are interested in marketing will find a marketing class most desirable that provides many choices over one that only provides a few or no choices; H2: Students who are interested in marketing will view an instructor who offers many choices in a marketing class to be a better instructor than an instructor who offers few or no choices; H3: Students who are interested in marketing will perceive a marketing course that offers many choices to be more valuable to their careers than one that offers few or no choices; H4 (and H5): Students who are interested in marketing will experience more positive emotions (negative emotions) about a marketing class when presented with an assignment that offers many choices than when presented with one that offers few or no choices.

A 1 X 3 (no choice, low choice, high choice) between-subjects design was used to examine the effects of a within-course choice of hypothetical companies for an assignment in a hypothetical Retailing course. Data were collected from 302 students enrolled in sections of an introductory marketing course who were randomly assigned to high choice, low choice, and no choice conditions. Student subjects read that an instructor in a Retailing course would give an assignment to develop a business plan for a client retailing firm. In the high choice condition, students were shown a list of 20 hypothetical firms and told, as students in this course, to choose one from among these 20 firms to be their client. In the low choice condition, students were told to choose their client from a list of five hypothetical firms they were shown. Students in the no choice condition were told they would develop a business plan for a randomly-chosen named client assigned to them.

All student subjects were then asked to complete a survey about their perceptions of this hypothetical Retailing course. Measures used were: (1) course measures – satisfaction with the hypothetical course, desire for the course, perceived value to student's future career, and perceived value to employers; (2) choice process measures – student's perceived ability to make choices, and student's perceived freedom of choice; (3) perception of Instructor – how good and how fair the instructor was perceived to be; (4) fifteen emotion items from Burke and Edell (1989); and (5) how interested the student was in marketing.

Results and Discussion

ANOVA found that students interested in marketing clearly preferred the high choice condition over both the low choice and no choice conditions. The means of all four course measures were significant, providing support for hypotheses 1 and 3. Perceptions that the instructor was good and was fair were highest in the high choice condition, providing support for hypothesis 2. Emotion measures showed a mixed reaction. Stress was greatest in the low choice condition, but happiness and anticipation were greatest in the high choice condition. Support was provided for hypothesis 4 and partial support was provided for hypothesis 5.

Regression analysis revealed that perceived freedom of choice was the most important single factor contributing to satisfaction with the hypothetical course, followed closely by perceived value to employers and how good students perceived the instructor to be. The students' perceived ability to make choices was also significant. Regression analysis found too that satisfaction was the result not of positive emotions elicited but rather resulted from the absence of negative emotions such as loss.

Findings suggest that students interested in the topic perceive more choice as better. Choice increased the overall perceived desirability of the hypothetical course as well as students' sense of freedom, and led to increased confidence that the course would be valuable for the student's future career. It also increased the degree to which students felt they would like the course instructor.

Interestingly, low choice was considered less desirable and less valuable for the future than either much choice or no choice at all. This seems to contradict research findings that promote limited choice. Perhaps limited choice focuses attention on the choice task, making it more of a burden. The emotions findings support this explanation. Positive emotions evoked were strongest for the hypothetical course that offered high choice. Because these were unfamiliar choices and students were interested in the topic, it appears the anticipation of much choice made them happy. On the other hand, some negative emotions also were present; the hypothetical course that offered many choices elicited more negative emotions than the one that offered no choices, suggesting that the choice process had a negative impact but it was compensated by positive emotions. The hypothetical course with low choice elicited the highest levels of negative emotions and this negative reaction was not compensated by positive emotions. Within this context, limiting choice was clearly a negative.

A post-test on a small sub-sample of students who were not interested in marketing reversed the above findings, bringing them in closer alignment with previous findings about the benefits of more limited choice. This suggests that in contexts where marketing students are not as interested in a course (such as for general requirements), instructors should provide students with more guidance to lower the levels of frustration and stress elicited by choice.

References Available upon Request