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The perception of variety

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CUHK research shows that superficial features such as readability can influence variety perceptions

Dining out can be fun but when you encounter a menu full of choices, it can be overwhelming especially when you don't know what to pick while standing next to an impatient waitress. In fact, we encounter all sorts of choices in our daily lives. Some of us may prefer having a great variety of choices while others may want life to be simple and have fewer choices. A recent research study by The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Business School shows that the number of choices you have may just be a perception that can be affected by superficial features.

In the research study entitled Illusion of variety: Lower readability enhances perceived variety, Associate Professor **Jessica Kwong** in the Department of Marketing at CUHK Business School and her collaborator at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University explored how superficial and irrelevant features of menu design can influence customers' perception on variety.

"Consumers often make choices from an assortment of alternatives. They browse through a restaurant menu to pick the dishes they want to try, use a store list to plan for a shopping trip, and review a university catalogue to decide which courses to take. The design of a menu should not be taken lightly. However, what makes a good menu or shopping guide?" Prof. Kwong asks.

CHOICE DIFFICULTY AND VARIETY

Previous studies have established that consumers often feel more positively towards stores that have a variety of goods than those carrying fewer options. However, constant updates of menus or options can be costly for businesses. Frankly speaking, there may not be that many options to provide to the consumers constantly. How can business keep their customers interested while being able to control the cost? According to Prof. Kwong, the trick lies in the lay belief of making a choice from a variety of options.

"The repeated pairing of variety and choice difficulty may lead consumers to acquire a belief that, if there is a large variety of options, making a choice is difficult," explains Prof. Kwong. "Once people have acquired the belief that if an assortment is varied, then choices are difficult, they may infer that if it is difficult to make a choice, the assortment has high variety."

Other than increasing the actual variety, one interesting way to make people feel it is difficult to make a choice is by printing the information in a font that is difficult to read.

Based on this argument, Prof. Kwong and her collaborator predicted that the more difficult the menu in terms of readability, the more likely the customers would infer the menu contains a high variety of options. They conducted four studies to test this theory.

THE STUDIES

The first study was designed to prove the reading difficulty effect on perceived variety. A group of university students were told to pick out as many flavours as they like from a list of 15 flavours for a candy company. One group was assigned to read the list of flavours in an easy-to-read font (Comic Sans) and the other group was presented with the list in a font that is difficult to read (Gigi).

The results showed that when presented with a difficult-to-read font, participants thought they had a greater variety of flavours. However, they did not consider the perceived greater variety to

be more novel. "This argues against the possibility that lower readability leads an assortment to be judged more varied because it appears more novel," Prof. Kwong says.

The second and third studies further explored the effect of readability in relation to linking choice difficulty to variety.

In study two, over one hundred students were asked about their lay beliefs in the difficulty level in making choices from a set of more or fewer options as well as to make choices from a more varied or a less varied selection. According to the researchers, the effect would be stronger when the participants believed that it was more difficult to choose from a more varied selection. In other words, if the participants did not associate variety with choice difficulty, a difficult-to-read menu might not lead them to infer variety. This was indeed the case.

"One may argue that choice difficulty could cue other inferences such as low options' quality rather than the inference that the assortment is more varied," says Prof. Kwong. "We believe that choice difficulty and variety inference should prevail because the act of choosing would heighten concerns about variety and, hence, would activate the node of variety concept and other concepts connected to it."

In Study three, over 150 students were recruited to process a movie catalogue. They were told that a cinema would like to know consumers' movie preferences. Again, the movie catalogue was presented in either an easy-to-read font or a difficult-to-read font. The participants were asked to answer some questions by recalling the options on the catalogue. And the results showed that the effect existed only when participants had to make choices. In addition, low readability did not influence their memory or perceived difficulty in recalling the options from the catalogue.

The last study was designed to examine the relationship between the readability effect and satisfaction with a store through its effect on perceived variety. This time, 140 students were asked to make choices from a list of sushi. The results showed that participants reported higher choice difficulty in the difficult-to-read condition than in the easy-to-read condition. However, this perceived higher variety only increased satisfaction when variety was a major concern among participants.

"Consumers often like variety, but increases in actual variety (e.g., developing new flavours or new models) are often associated with higher cost for companies. Our findings show that varying readability of menus or catalogues could be leveraged as a cost-effective means to manage customers' variety perceptions," says Prof. Kwong.

DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS IN DIFFERENT PRODUCTS

However, Prof. Kwong warns difficult-to-read menus or catalogues may have both positive and negative consequences and whether they would boost business depend on several factors.

"First, the desirability of variety may differ across different product domains. For instance, consumers often value variety of options when they dine in all-you-can-eat buffet restaurants. However, consumers may prefer to see a smaller variety of ingredients in skincare products because they are concerned with the presence of chemical additives. Thus, a less readable menu or catalogue would be more beneficial in the former situation," explains Prof. Kwong.

"Second, marketing goals should also be considered. A company such as a luxury brand may strive to highlight its signature product and avoid delivering an image of losing focus in its product line. In this case, an increase in variety perceptions caused by lower readability may not fit the goal. However, a confectionery company aiming to showcase the diversity of its products may consider adopting less-readable catalogues or menus," Prof. Kwong says.

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