

Choice Overload

WHEN MORE OPTIONS MAKE DECIDING HARDER

Popularised by psychologist Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice* (2004), building on research by Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper.

Choice overload is the finding that, past a certain point, adding more options can reduce both the likelihood we choose at all, and our satisfaction with whatever we pick. More choice tends to help — until it doesn't.

SATISFACTION vs. NUMBER OF OPTIONS



Satisfaction and likelihood of choosing tend to rise as options increase from very few — then decline again once the number of comparable options exceeds what feels manageable.

THE ORIGINAL "JAM STUDY" (IYENGAR & LEPPER, 2000)

24 jams

60% STOPPED TO TASTE — 3% PURCHASED

VS

6 jams

40% STOPPED TO TASTE — 30% PURCHASED

Later meta-analyses (e.g. Scheibehenne et al., 2010) found the effect is real but smaller and more context-dependent than the original study suggested — strongest when options are similarly attractive, stakes feel high, and the chooser has less expertise.

WHY IT HAPPENS

More options mean more comparisons, more potential regret over paths not taken, and higher expectations — which can make even a good choice feel disappointing.

HOW IT SHOWS UP

Endlessly scrolling a menu without deciding. Avoiding a decision altogether. Feeling less satisfied with a choice, even when it was objectively a good one.

BEYOND SHOPPING

Applies well beyond products — to careers, relationships, where to live, and daily micro-decisions that quietly add up over a day.

WHEN CHOICE OVERLOAD TENDS TO BE STRONGEST

Options are similarly attractive

The decision feels high-stakes

Limited time to decide

Low familiarity with the category

No clear preference to start with

Already mentally fatigued

WAYS TO REDUCE IT FOR YOURSELF

- Set criteria before browsing options
- Limit yourself to comparing 3–5 options at a time
- Decide on "good enough," not "the best possible"
- Use a timer to cap decision time on low-stakes choices

WAYS TO SIMPLIFY OTHERS' CHOICES

- Offer 3–5 well-curated options, not everything available
- Provide a sensible default
- Group or categorise large option sets
- Highlight the most relevant few options first

Reflection

Use the questions below to consider how this applies to you.

1 · WHERE DO I MOST OFTEN FEEL OVERWHELMED BY OPTIONS?**2 · WHAT CRITERIA COULD HELP ME NARROW CHOICES FASTER?****3 · WHERE COULD I AIM FOR "GOOD ENOUGH" INSTEAD OF "THE BEST"?**

SOURCES

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. Ecco. · Iyengar, S. S. & Lepper, M. R. (2000). When choice is demotivating. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(6), 995–1006.
Scheibehenne, B., Greifeneder, R., & Todd, P. M. (2010). Can there ever be too many options? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(3), 409–425.

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