

Why making our own choices is more satisfying when pleasure is the goal

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When it comes to our own pleasure, we like having a choice, but when it comes to utilitarian goals, we're just as happy being told what to do, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Imagine a patron at a fixed-menu restaurant who is dining either for the sheer pleasure of tasting the food or to achieve some higher-level goal—for example, a better understanding of the local culture," write authors Simona Botti (London Business School) and Ann L. McGill (University of Chicago). "In these two cases, would the diner's satisfaction with the restaurant's pre-determined choices differ from the satisfaction she would experience with her own menu choices?"

The authors conducted four experiments in which they presented participants the same choice-set options but varied the process (how the item was chosen) and the choice goal. In all the studies, the participants could either personally choose one of the options or they were assigned one of the options by a third party. The participants were told either that the goal was simply to enjoy the outcome of the choice (hedonic goal) or to reach a higher-end consequence (utilitarian goal).

In the first study, participants were exposed to a selection of different virtual museum visits after being assigned to be either tourists visiting the museum for fun or art students visiting to research their theses. In subsequent studies, participants chose (or were assigned) massages, gourmet food, and workout regimens.

"Results consistently show that the outcome of a self-made choice is more satisfying than the outcome of an externally made choice when the goal is hedonic, but when the goal is utilitarian there is no difference in satisfaction between choosers and non-choosers," the authors write. "A lack of choice feels less like a deprivation of the capacity to determine one's own fate when the [goal](#) choice is utilitarian than when it is hedonic."

Companies like airlines or restaurants that cater to business customers and retailers that offer necessities should take heed. "In these contexts, rather than being dissatisfied by the lack of [choice](#), consumers may end up just as happy," the authors conclude.

More information: Simona Botti and Ann L. McGill. "The Locus of Choice: Personal Causality and Satisfaction with Hedonic and Utilitarian Decisions." Journal of Consumer Research: April 2011.
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