

Categories help us make happier choices

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Most of us have stood in a supermarket aisle, overwhelmed with the array of choices. Making those choices is easier if the options are categorized, according to new research in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Cassie Mogilner (Stanford University), Tamar Rudnick, and Sheena S. Iyengar (both Columbia University) demonstrate a surprising phenomenon called the "mere categorization effect," where consumers are happier with their choices if their options are categorized, even if the categories are meaningless.

"People confronted with highly categorized large selections are happier with their decisions because they experience a sense of self-determination as a result of perceiving differences among the available options," write the authors.

In one study, participants chose magazines from different displays, some that were categorized and some that were not. Those who were asked to choose a magazine they weren't familiar with tended to be more satisfied with their choices if they came from categorized selections.

In another study, people at a food court were randomly selected to choose coffee from several menus. The coffee options were either categorized or uncategorized. "Consumers who chose a coffee flavor from a menu divided into seemingly meaningless categories such as Categories A, B, and C were just as happy as those who chose from meaningful categories such as 'Mild,' 'Dark Roast,' and 'Nutty,'" write the authors.

When participants were already quite familiar with the items they were selecting, they didn't need to rely on categories to pick what they wanted, and were less susceptible to the mere categorization effect, the authors found.

Source: University of Chicago

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