

Theory-Based Meta-Analysis: Understanding the Impact of Product Assortment on Choice Overload

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Meta-analysis has its origin in summarizing medical research that focuses on measuring how individual difference variables vary across simple treatments. Much of this work can be categorized as conceptual replications because the goal is to strengthen the external validity of a finding by examining how a treatment effect varies across population characteristics. In comparison, research in the behavioral sciences is theoretically more complex. Individual studies in a given domain can vary considerably in terms of their dependent measures and moderators; examine multiple conditions that result from the experimental manipulation of those moderators and give rise to multiple dependent effects of interest (e.g., simple effects and interaction effects); employ a mix of study designs (e.g., unmoderated versus moderated, between-subjects versus within-subjects, univariate versus multivariate); and feature different contexts, treatment manipulations, and measurement scales. Furthermore, individual papers feature multiple studies that although varied can be quite similar to studies featured in other papers. Thus, in contrast to medical research a more theory-driven approach is needed for summarizing a research domain that takes into account conceptual variations across studies.

Our research illustrates the use of a theory-driven meta-analytic approach by contrasting it to the traditional meta-analysis to examine the impact of assortment size on choice overload. To this end, we identify four key factors that reliably moderate the impact of assortment size on choice overload. More important, we generalize these factors into a cohesive conceptual framework, quantify their impact, and compare their effect sizes to show that they can sufficiently predict choice overload. Our research is the first to offer a theory-based meta-analysis of choice overload that not only identifies its key drivers but also quantifies and allows comparison of their impact on choice overload.