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Ettie Greenwood and Tauheed Ramjaun

Exploring Choice Overload in Online Travel Booking

When searching for their holidays online, consumers are frequently presented with thousands of options that require a large amount of cognitive effort to digest. This often results in consumers feeling overwhelmed, causing them to experience choice overload. This study explored and identified the moderators and outcomes of choice overload that could be specific to an online travel booking experience. A qualitative methodology was adopted to tap deeper into the experiential aspect of the online booking process from the perspective of the consumer. In-depth interviews were carried out with eleven participants who had prior experience in making online holiday bookings. Findings suggested that there were both intrinsic and extrinsic moderators that affected choice overload in an online travel booking context. There also seemed to be different forms of outcomes of choice overload in the online environment. In light of these findings, marketing implications for online travel booking operators are discussed.

Keywords: choice overload, online travel, tourism, online marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Online travel booking is a phenomenon that has been rapidly on the rise over the past decade (Mintel 2017) especially with the increased choice of online travel aggregators (sites that place costless hyperlinks to third-party content) which are growing exponentially (Anderson 2009). As a result, 30.2 million UK consumers reportedly booked a holiday using online methods in 2017, compared with only 9.7 million who booked their holiday in person or over the phone (Mintel 2018b). It is expected that the online travel booking market is to reach a market size of \$1,143.6 billion by 2023 (Moreno de la Santa 2018) creating huge opportunities for both online travel retailers, but also consumers who will be exposed to a huge amount of free information to assist them in their holiday choices (Anderson 2009; Barbosa 2009). However, more choice may also bring more complexity; risk and information overload (Mintel 2018c). Market research conducted in the UK context has already observed that 21% of holidaymakers find researching and planning a holiday 'a hassle' (Mintel 2018a) due to the sheer amount of fragmented information online (McCabe et al. 2016).

This study explores the occurrence of choice overload within the online travel booking sector as well as its impact on the consumer's online booking experience. How and why

consumers make choices has been a significant area of study for decades. On the one hand, it has been argued that increased choice empowers consumers (Reibstein et al. 1975; Boyd and Bahn 2009) whereas, on the other hand, some have argued that increased choice could have a negative effect on consumer decision-making (Simon 1955; Toffler 1971; Schwartz 2004) especially when it is experienced as choice overload (Settle and Golden 1974; Gourville and Soman 2005), choice difficulty (Gerard 1967); too-much-choice (Scheibehenne et al. 2009) or decision difficulty (Broniarczyk and Griffin 2014; Zhang et al. 2016). The notion of choice overload and its related concepts have been examined in a variety of disciplines but not yet in an online travel booking context. Therefore this study aims at filling this gap by exploring choice overload during an online travel booking experience from the perspective of the consumer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Choice Overload?

In 1971, futurist Alvin Toffler coined the term 'information overload' in his predictions about the emergence of a new 'information society' where people would be suffering not from an absence of choice, but from an excessive abundance of choice (Toffler, 1971). Building on his works, Settle and Golden (1974) investigated whether choice overload or 'overchoice' actually existed in the marketplace and concluded that both perceived and actual overchoice existed from a consumer perspective. The presence of choice overload not only implied a cost for the consumer in terms of time and effort (Settle and Golden 1974) but more recent experiments showed that it can also hinder the decision-making process causing the consumer to revert back to a default position (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). More recently, there have been attempts to refine the definition of choice overload where there seems to be an agreement that it is a mental construct that cannot be directly observed (Chernev et al. 2015) but could occur when consumers are attempting to make rational decisions using different types of decision strategies (Kahneman 2013; McCabe et al. 2016). However, there is some discrepancy in the cause of choice overload. Some scholars have recognised that choice overload could occur when there is decision complexity from large choice assortments (Toffler 1971; Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Schwartz 2004). Others have postulated that choice overload could arise when choice comparison becomes difficult, due to the lack of information (Keller and Staelin 1987; Broniarczyk and Griffin 2014). One definition that seemed to capture the different perspectives in that area is that proposed by Thai and Yuksel (2017a) who described choice overload as "a phenomenon whereby choosing from large assortments results in negative consequences and perceptions" (p.2).

Moderators of Choice Overload

As the choice overload literature grew, research moved on from documenting the phenomenon and its outcomes, and instead began to distinguish its moderators which "include factors that explain when choice overload effects occur, increase, decrease, or are reversed" (Thai and Yuksel 2017b, p.3). Scholars categorised these as either extrinsic, which were characteristics of the choice set, or intrinsic, which encompassed characteristics of the chooser (Inbar et al. 2011; Thai and Yuksel 2017b). Concerning the intrinsic moderators caused by the chooser's attributes (Inbar et al. 2011), studies concluded that a consumer's motivation moderated choice overload (Oppewal and Koelemeijer 2005; Chernev 2006; Iyengar et al. 2006; Novemsky et al. 2007). Alvarez et

al. (2014) disclosed how choice overload was greater for “consumers that search[ed] exhaustively for the best option of a market product — known as maximizers — than consumers who just look[ed] for something good enough — called satisficers” (p.1) . Although on the other hand, some have argued that choice overload forced consumers to become satisficers (Schwartz et al. 2002; Schwartz 2004). Moreover, Hans et al.’s (1996) research conflicted with previous studies as it suggested that those that hold ‘variety-seeking behaviour’ did not experience choice overload. This is when consumers have intrinsic motivations to search for a new product or the need to try something else, just for a change. Moreover, research suggested that the level expertise on a product area moderated choice overload (Mogilner et al. 2008) because as consumers “become skilled in a task, its demand for energy diminishes” (Kahneman 2013, p.35). Relatively, Chernev (2003, p.171) recognised that a consumer’s availability of an ‘ideal point’ - a “combination of attributes and attribute values describing [a consumer’s] ideal choice” - can lead to simplified choice and stronger preferences when choosing. Regarding time as a moderator of choice overload, the lesser the time given to make a decision, the greater the impact (Haynes 2009; Scheibehenne et al. 2010; Sanchis et al. 2014). Likewise, Shankar and Wright (2006) suggested that ‘downshifter’ - consumers who allow themselves more time when making decisions - experienced less stress and choice overload.

On the other hand, the extrinsic moderators of the choice set (Inbar et al. 2011) can be identified to further understand the parameters of choice overload. ‘Attribute alignability’ (Gourville and Soman 2005) concerns whether the options in the choice set are comparable by being structured coherently, organised or categorised; if so, choice overload effects are limited (Kahn and Wansink 2004; Mogilner et al. 2008; Greifeneder et al. 2010; Besedeš et al. 2015). Additionally, visuals have proven to help consumers distinguish differences and reduce choice overload (Townsend and Kahn 2014). Although, on the other hand, “consumer preference for retailers offering larger assortments tends to decrease as the attractiveness of the options in their assortments increases”; due to the perceived consumer benefits becoming less distinguishable (Chernev and Hamilton 2009, p.410). Some studies have also found that choice overload is not moderated by demographic factors (Settle and Golden 1974; Chernev et al. 2015) though Misuraca et al. (2016) suggested that adolescents and adults - compared to seniors and children - are most affected by choice overload as they are most likely to hold maximising behaviour. Additionally, choice overload is more likely observed when decisions are considered high-involvement (Mittal 1989; McCabe et al. 2016). For instance, Sthapit (2018) argued that in a low-involvement souvenir shopping context, choice overload was not manifested.

Technological Impact on Choice Overload

Throughout literature, it has been widely accepted that technology and the online environment have contributed towards choice overload becoming more prevalent (Sharif 2007; Anderson 2009; Bawden and Robinson 2009; Chia-Ying 2017). This is because technology increases uncertainties in choice and decreases the effectiveness of search processes (McCabe et al. 2016). Online aggregators have also been a significant contributor to choice overload’s increase, due to the extremely large choice sets shown to consumers (Anderson 2009). In the interest of reducing technological-caused choice overload, scholars suggest that online assortments should be organised effectively (Soto-

Acosta et al. 2014), with filtering tools being utilised to limit the effects of choice overload (Haubl and Trifts 2000; Chen et al. 2009). Additionally, Anderson (2009) notes that item descriptions, such as 'most popular choice' also relieve choice overload, as well as recommendations and reviews of products.

Outcomes of Choice Overload

Several studies have already explored the outcomes of choice overload in different contexts. There seems to be an agreement that when choice overload occurs; consumers experience a change in their subjective state causing a change their behaviour (Chernev et al. 2015). Consumer subjective state changes comprise of reduced choice satisfaction (Botti and Iyengar 2004), reduced decision confidence (Haynes 2009) and post-decision regret (Lipowski 1970; Inbar et al. 2011). Some scholars have also noted other forms of behavioural changes as an outcome of choice overload. For instance, choice overload could cause consumers to defer their choice (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Jessup et al. 2009; Noguchi and Hills 2016; Pilli and Mazzon 2016), to switch to their initial choice (Chernev 2003) or develop a preference for smaller assortment sets (Chernev 2006; Chernev and Hamilton 2009).

In contrast, other research suggested that choice overload results in 'coping-strategies' because humans are naturally cognitive misers (Schwartz 2004; Wang and Benbasat 2016; André and Depauw 2017). This is where consumers "continually seek to optimise the accuracy of [their] choices with minimal cognitive effort" (André and Depauw 2017, p.601). Kahneman (2013, p.35) adds to this with the 'law of least effort' which synthesises that during cognitive exertion, "if there are several ways of achieving the same goal, people will eventually gravitate to the least demanding course of action" because "laziness is built deep into our nature".

Choice Overload in the Travel Industry

Rising numbers of travel destinations and expanding marketing efforts have contributed to a growth of alternatives in tourist destination choices (Crompton and Ankomah 1993). Intensified competition has resulted in potential tourists being "confronted with vast amount information that exceeds their information conceiving and processing capability" (Karl and Reintinger 2016, p.74). Travel offers have also become fragmented and overlapped (McCabe et al. 2016) which has created an environment where choice overload is likely to occur; where the high-involvement nature of a holiday purchase seems to intensify choice overload (Mittal 1989; Murray and Schlacter 1990; Karl 2018). This contradicted previous studies that argued that choice overload did not exist in situations regarding complex services that involved high levels of financial or emotional risks (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005); which are characteristics of travel booking decisions (Morgan et al. 2011).

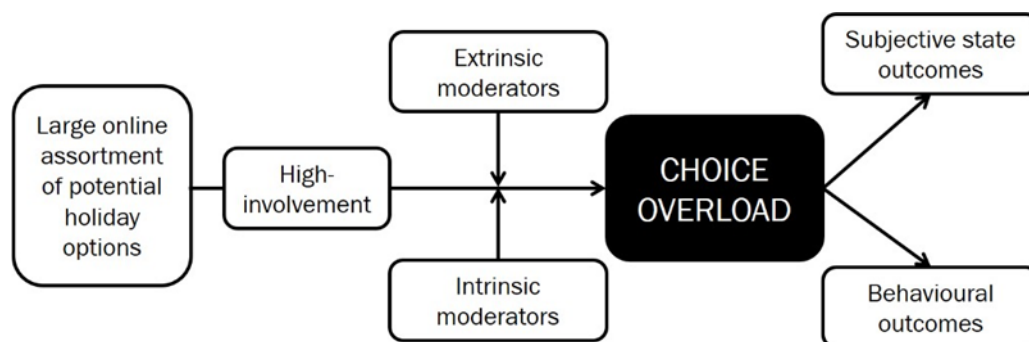
Within an online travel booking environment, scholars have also proposed that large assortment sizes discourage consumers from booking holidays online (Lang 2000; Fesenmaier et al. 2006). Whereas, travel agents in brick-and-mortar stores contrastingly "help consumers abate the burden of product information screening and processing" (Chen et al. 2009, p.48). Although, more recently, filtering systems and data analytics have been used by online travel retailers, allowing consumers to exclusively see the best choices suited to them. By facilitating this, tourist destinations can expect "a more positive effect on destination image if the number of alternatives on offer is limited"

(Rodríguez-Molina et al. 2015). Choice overload still seems to prevail in an online travel booking context where Park and Yang (2013) observed that participants who experienced choice overload abandoned their search and made no choice at all. They also concurred that consumers perceived more regret after choosing their travel destination if the assortment size was twenty-two or higher. However, limitations of this study were that it did not research the whole travel booking process and instead focused purely on the destination choice. In their study relating to choice overload in holiday destination choices, Thai and Yuksel (2017a) found that participants had higher levels of confusion as the search for a holiday destination exceeded their cognitive resources. However, their study was performed in a laboratory environment and did not accurately represent real-life experiences effectively.

Conceptual Framework

The literature related to the topic of choice overload seems to suggest that it can be manifested in different situations where consumers were faced with too many options and which exceeded their cognitive resources (Hansen 1976; Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Schwartz 2004; Jobber and Lancaster 2009; Greifeneder et al. 2010; Chernev et al. 2015). More recent research has also explored choice overload moderators and has attempted to determine the outcomes consumers faced. The literature review also revealed sparsity in exploratory qualitative research performed in real-life settings but abundance of research using laboratory-based experiments (Eppler and Mengis 2004). It was also noted that many studies have explored choice overload in an FMCG context and there were few studies in other complex high involvement service environments. This study aims at exploring the manifestation of choice overload within consumers’ high-involvement online travel booking experiences. A conceptual framework was developed to guide this current study drawing principally from the previous works identified in the literature as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



The above framework was mainly adapted from Chernev et al.’s (2015) meta-analysis that delineated the outcomes and consequences of choice overload. It also combines elements from prior research that suggested that choice overload was only prevalent in high-involvement decisions (Mittal 1989; McCabe et al. 2016) and also includes the moderator labelling from the works of Thai and Yuksel (2017b). Based on this framework, research objectives were formulated to reflect the main parameters and areas of study as follows: (1) To gain insights on how choice overload moderators affect

consumers when booking holidays online; (2) To explore the outcomes of choice overload when consumers book holidays online.

METHOD

This study was interpretivist in nature and aimed at understanding the unique behaviour of individuals (Levy 1981; Schwandt 2000) by entering their social worlds and engaging with their points of view (Saunders et al. 2016). Moreover, the study took an abductive approach as it aimed to build on existing choice overload research, whilst adding new explanations and insights (Suddaby 2006). Interpretivist research is usually associated with qualitative design, complementing the exploratory nature of the study (Levy 1981; Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Saunders et al. 2012). Therefore, the research took a non-standardised approach as a semi-structured interview guide was created to fulfil the mono-method qualitative design (Daymon and Holloway 2011). The interview guide consisted of scripted questions themes related to the aim and objectives, with the aim to uncover findings and emotions. Although, the guide was not followed strictly as the interviews were led by the participants; meaning that the researcher used probing questions and projective techniques to uncover deeper emotions and thoughts on the themes mentioned (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). On the other hand, the research time horizon was exploratory retrospective as it allowed the participants to look back in time to a specific experience (Johnson 2001).

The sample consisted of consumers who had booked a holiday online within the last three months to ensure that all participants could recall their experiences adequately. Moreover, due to the exploratory nature of the study, there were no demographic limitations on participant recruitment (Saunders et al. 2012) since the literature suggested that choice overload was not moderated by demographic factors (Settle and Golden 1974). Participants were recruited in several ways. At first, volunteered self-selection sampling was used (Saunders et al. 2016). Participants were recruited via a participant recruitment survey which was distributed using social media. From this, eight participants were recruited. Subsequently, to recruit additional participants, convenience sampling was used. This involved inviting participants to take part in the study, as the researcher needed to recruit those that fitted the certain criterion (Adams et al. 2007). Therefore, the overall sample selection was purposive, as the researcher approached potential participants who would be willing to participate, even though this could have bought up bias (Collier and Mahoney 1996; Sofaer 1999). In total, the study involved eleven participants (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Participant	Age	Gender	Destination Search	Mode
A	18-24	Female	Edinburgh, Scotland	Face-to-face
B	18-24	Female	Rome, Italy	Face-to-face
C	50-54	Female	St Anton, Austria	Face-to-face

D	18-24	Female	Southeast Asia	Face-to-face
E	18-24	Male	Naples, Italy	Face-to-face
F	30-34	Female	Prague, Czech Republic	Face-to-face
G	18-24	Male	New York, USA	Face-to-face
H	50-54	Female	West Virginia, USA	Telephone
I	55-59	Male	Venice, Italy	Face-to-face
J	25-39	Female	Goa, India	Face-to-face
K	35-39	Female	Antigua, Caribbean	Telephone

Eleven interviews were completed over the course of three weeks, which lasted between 35 and 57 minutes. Some interviews were shorter than desired, although these were still used in the analysis as valuable insights were captured. Interviews were completed in a quiet space convenient to the participant, as the best interview quality can be achieved if the time and place are suited to the participant (Herzog 2005). Though, in two instances, telephone interviews were conducted due to geographical limitations. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to gain the fullest and richest data possible to aid analysis (Daymon and Holloway 2011). A thematic analysis was conducted using the step-by-step guide suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the coding process, codes originating from the conceptual framework were used though new codes also emerged. The themes and codes were then formed into thematic maps which acted as a “visual representations to help [researchers] sort the different codes into themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.89).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the main themes emerging from the thematic analysis are presented and discussed. Findings are structured according to the three research objectives that were laid out for this study. For the first objective related to capturing insights on how choice overload moderators affect consumers when booking online, the three main themes that are presented and discussed in this section are: (1) Motivation and variety-seeking behaviour, (2) Decision parameters, (3) Time factor. For the second objective of exploring the outcomes of choice overload when consumers book their holidays online, the analysis resulted in four main themes as follows: (1) Help from offline stores (2) Justifiable option selection (3) Cognitive miser and satisficing behaviour (4) Choice deferral (5) Lack of confidence.

Choice Overload Moderators in Online Travel booking *Motivation and Variety-Seeking Behaviour*

This study found that a participant’s intrinsic motivation seemed to moderate choice overload in line with existing studies (Hans et al. 1996; Oppewal and Koelemeijer 2005; Novemsky et al. 2007). When “variation is sought out for the sake of variety and the stimulation it brings to the situation” (Hans et al. 1996, p.282), consumers hold variety-

seeking behaviour which limits choice overload. Participant D indicated that “it is quite fun looking at holidays and looking at where you could go”. They did this because they “like doing it, I like exploring and [get] excited that I could go somewhere nice just for a short break”. Additionally, when participant K was asked how they felt after indicating that they used several different sites, they stated: “No, it's absolutely fine. I enjoy doing it, so for me it was absolutely, it was absolutely fine.” These participants found the amount of choice was overwhelming at first but admitted that they were not troubled by it because they enjoyed the process, and therefore held variety-seeking behaviour (Hans et al. 1996). Contrastingly, other participants who did not demonstrate this sort of behavioural style suggested that they experienced choice overload:

“It does feel like a chore doing it and it's annoying because it kind of takes the excitement out of the actual holiday, because it's just so overwhelming and confusing to like navigate these websites”. (Participant B).

These findings seem to concur with previous studies that argued that motivation and variety-seeking behaviour moderated choice overload (Hans et al. 1996; Oppewal and Koelemeijer 2005; Novemsky et al. 2007). Whereas, they also seem to contradict studies that argued that consumers with high motivation experienced choice overload greater (Alvarez et al. 2014).

Decision Parameters

Another emerging theme from the study was that the holiday product type or the number of aspects to consider moderated choice overload. With the type of holiday product, it appeared that participants found deciding on travel arrangements “fairly easy” (participant D) and experienced less overload. This is because participants acknowledged that there were often fewer options available to them, therefore, less to consider. Whereas, for the accommodation, an overall awareness of confusion was present, causing participants to feel overwhelmed. These findings seem to concur with Beldona et al.'s (2005) study which found contrary to other authors (Riley et al. 2009), flight searches were low-complex (easy to decide). Whereas, accommodation searches were high-complex (harder to decide). However, Beldona et al.'s (2005) research did not acknowledge choice overload explicitly - but the overall online information search - meaning that this study builds on the existing research. It also delivered its applicability to the phenomenon by suggesting that the type of holiday product moderated choice overload. Additionally, the analysis noted that the more aspects to consider during the booking experience, the greater choice overload participants experienced. This was conveyed by one participant when asked about confusion during their skiing holiday booking experience:

“there is a pressure to get the correct resort [...] I think there's lots of equations that have to come in, like obviously price, the resort, whether it is ski in ski out. Lots of different things to consider”. (Participant C).

Moreover, this was also surfaced when one participant spoke about the number of people in the decision:

“When I have been booking a big family trip before I have felt overwhelmed because there's lots of different aspects that everybody wants to have in their holiday”.

(Participant F).

These findings, therefore, concur with McCabe et al.'s (2016) discovery conveying that the number of aspects to consider moderated choice overload.

Time Factor

Findings also concurred with previous studies which suggested that the less time consumers have to make decisions, the greater choice overload they experience (Haynes 2009; Sanchis et al. 2014). This is reflected in our study illustrated by the following statement by one participant:

“I think noticing that some of the holidays that I had originally looked for were now becoming unavailable on site [...] So I do feel that you have to be quite quick on it.” (Participant C).

Here, the participant perceived themselves to have less time because they didn't want to miss a deal, which caused them to experience choice overload. Participants also revealed that pressure-selling techniques conducted by the online travel retailers made the situation worse as they tried “to pressure [them] into buying it right there and then” (Participant G). Therefore, the study coheres with existing studies as perceived and actual time seemed to moderate choice overload.

Outcomes of Choice Overload in Online Travel booking Help From Offline Sources

Over the course of the research, a reoccurring theme emerged that indicated participant's preference to use offline sources to aid the decision process and help whittle down choices. Offline sources included using guidebooks, travel agents, magazines, newspapers, making telephone calls to online agents and speaking to friends. Here, one participant spoke about why they used a guidebook to help them choose their Washington itinerary:

“I think the Internet is good for a certain amount of things. But I think you need you need to back it up with insider knowledge [from a guidebook]”. (Participant H).

Another participant described how they decided to physically go to a travel agency after experiencing choice overload online:

“I was becoming overwhelmed online [...] So I thought by going to a travel agent they might be able to work out the prices cheaper for me, or find [me] a route to knowing exactly what I wanted. (Participant C).

These findings seem to concur with Jun et al.'s (2010) study which acknowledged that consumers use online and offline sources interchangeably when booking holidays. However, as Jun et al.'s (2010) research only focused on consumers' search processes, this study's findings add new insight into choice overload research by suggesting that a preference for offline sources are an outcome of choice overload.

Justifiable option selection

It was also observed that participants seemed to make travel decisions based on what

they could easily justify (Sela et al. 2009). Participant J described how they justified their destination choice:

“I think speaking to family friends about where they've been before is really helpful because if you've got good reviews from people you know [...] it makes you want to go more. So, you just directly look at that place instead of looking at all the options.”

Similarly, participants readily mentioned that they used review systems to help justify their choice. Although interestingly, participant C admitted that they were “relying too much on reviews”. This again rings true with research which explained that review systems help to reduce choice overload (Zhang et al. 2016). Hence, it seems that this study agreed with previous research which suggested that a behavioural outcome of choice overload was a preference for options that could be easily justified.

Cognitive Miser and Satisficing Behavior

When describing their experience, participants seemed to form cognitive miser behaviour as an outcome of choice overload (Schwartz et al. 2002; Schwartz 2004; André and Depauw 2017). This is where consumers “continually seek to optimise the accuracy of [their] choices with minimal cognitive effort” (André and Depauw 2017, p.601). This theme was reflected in participant I's interview who used the metaphor of online dating sites to explain their experience:

“If you don't like something or you don't like the star system [...] it's a bit like swiping left or right on a dating site I suppose. So, if you're not happy just, it's just easy to move on.”

It was also apparent that participant A formed cognitive miser behaviour as they decided to “skim read” the information on potential accommodation choices because there “were quite a few [to look at] and it did make it a little confusing”. Likewise, these findings additionally correlated with Kahneman's (2013) ‘law of least effort’, as the participants became lazy with their search and thus started to whittle down options quickly to deal with the overload. On the other hand, participants appeared to develop satisficing behaviour as an outcome of choice overload; agreeing with previous studies (Schwartz et al. 2002; Schwartz 2004). Participant G conveyed this when discussing how they spent a long period of time researching:

“It was quite hard to decide, we had lots of tabs open [...] but for us it was just the case of making a choice instead of spending ages and getting caught up over making a choice”.

Additionally, this was also implied when participant B accounted for their experience:

“At that point we already had looked at about like 50 to 60 places, so we'd already found places that would suit us. So, we didn't really see the point in carrying on and I think the more options you then have the more confusing it gets so we wanted to cut off at some point.”

Overall, these findings mirror those of previous scholars (Schwartz et al. 2002; Schwartz

2004; Kahneman 2013) and demonstrate their applicability to the travel booking experience.

Choice Deferral

When exploring choice deferral as an outcome of choice overload, the study added significantly to literature, as participants spoke freely about why they deferred their choice selection. Prior experimental research confirmed that choice overload caused consumers to defer their choice selection (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Jessup et al. 2009; Scheibehenne et al. 2010; Pilli and Mazzon 2016). This was also manifested in this study where participants seemed to experience choice overload to an extent that they would abort or defer the process: “you get to the point where you just reach saturation point. You say you can’t do this anymore” (Participant H). Participant F also admitted that they deferred their choice as a result of feeling overwhelmed as they “tend[ed] to just put it off”. Whereas, participant J deferred their choice because “it’s just too much sometimes to have to think about”. These findings all reiterate that choice deferral is a significant outcome of choice overload, even when researched in a real-life online travel booking context. However, when probing more into the reasons why choice deferral occurred, participants seem to imply that deferral was part of the process of evaluating the choice set. Participant D explained that this was because “sometimes there is so much information there, that sometimes you need to go away and think about it”. Moreover, they did this because they “like to take [their] time and think about all [their] options first”. Participant E additionally explained that they deferred their decision “to make sure it was the right decision”. Whereas, other participants explained that deferring their choice ensured that they could return to their search with “fresh eyes”, which enabled better decision-making. Additionally, in these situations, many of the participants also explained that they often felt pressured by travel websites who used ‘pressure-selling’ tactics such as ‘booked 3 times in the last 12 hours’ or ‘In high demand!’. Participant G highlighted this during their interview:

“What I don't like is that [...] they always say that so many people are looking at this deal or that it is in really high demand so it is trying to pressure you into buying it right there and then. [...] I don't like it when I am pressured, I like to take my time and think about all my options.”

Therefore, in some cases, the pressure-selling techniques were unsuccessful at avoiding choice deferral, and instead impacted the participant’s emotional states negatively. This study seem to indicate that choice deferral was a significant outcome of choice overload but also provided further insights into why participants deferred their choice in that context.

Lack of Confidence

The final theme relating to the outcomes of choice overload was a lack of confidence. This was previously acknowledged by Haynes (2009) who found that consumers who experienced choice overload had less confidence in their choice. Participant J admitted this during their interview: “I’m still searching it now, to see if the price has gone down and stuff and I don't think that's necessarily great.” Additionally, when participant D recommended that travel websites use better personalisation, they said that this would ensure that they felt “more confidence that [their] choice would be a good one”, suggesting that they lacked confidence beforehand. Therefore, the study determined that

a lack of confidence was an outcome of choice overload. However, some participants felt that they did not lack any confidence as denoted by participant F: "I don't think we could have found a better option. Umm no I don't think we could." Interestingly, this participant appeared to hold variety-seeking behaviour (Hans et al. 1996), potentially linking to the notion that the moderator had the greatest impact on whether choice overload effects were experienced.

CONCLUSION

Based on these exploratory findings, it can be argued that choice overload does manifest itself in the decision-making process of online travel booking. It was also observed that the main moderators for choice overload in this particular context were motivation, variety-seeking behaviour, decision parameters and time factor. This study also explored potential outcomes of choice overload in an online travel booking context and findings seemed to suggest that consumers can have different ways to cope with choice overload. Outcomes identified included the consultation of offline sources during the booking process, opting for a selection that could be easily justified, developing a cognitive miser and satisficing behaviour, deferring choice or developing lack of confidence. Even though the study began to suggest that some moderators had a greater impact than others, the small scale and exploratory nature meant that this was unable to be determined within the parameters of the investigation. Therefore, future research could further investigate whether certain moderators have a greater influence on choice overload than others. Another key limitation of this particular research was the reliance on the memory of the participant to recall his/her experiences of past online bookings. Future studies to adopt a real-time mixed method approach to capture experiences as they happened. Moreover, additional studies could also explore reasons why consumers defer their choice when presented with a large assortment. Such investigations would complement and expand on some of the findings of this current study. Lastly, more research exploring choice overload from an interpretivist perspective is desirable using a combination of different data collection methods such as a combination of participation observation and in-depth interviews. Whilst this study has supported certain areas of choice overload already identified in the extant literature, it has also provided some new insights specific to the online travel booking environment. For instance, it has been observed that pressure-selling techniques seemed to contribute negatively to the consumer decision-making process causing some participants to resort to choice deferral. Therefore, online travel booking operators could be more mindful of the pressure-selling tactics used. Lack of confidence was also an emerging theme for this study suggesting that online travel booking service providers could take measures to increase post-purchase confidence. There also seems to be an appetite for 'all-in-one' experiences which could potentially help in reducing consumers' choice overload. Online travel booking operators could also consider providing more information or additional options to help consumers justify their choices. Lastly, there seems to be a demand for greater personalisation which could be tackled by

introducing filtering tools that includes social-psychological variables.

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