

CHOOSING THE FOREST OR THE TREES: CONSUMER SATISFACTION WHEN CHOOSING BUNDLED VS. A LA CARTE OPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In some decision-making contexts, consumers must choose from pre-bundled options; in others, consumers can create their own “bundle” from individual options. This research proposes that choosing from among pre-bundled options vs. choosing from among individual options to form a bundle triggers different decision processes and, in turn, affects decision satisfaction. In three experimental studies, we find that consumers choosing among pre-bundled options will be more likely to approach the decision holistically and engage in abstract thinking, which will increase their focus on choosing the best or the most desirable options. In turn, choosing among pre-bundled options leads to increased decision satisfaction. The paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications of choosing between pre-bundled vs. individual options and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine two consumers, John and Jane, are considering what to have for lunch. John is at a restaurant that features lunch specials. Each lunch special contains one main and one side dish, and customers choose a special from among several specials. Jane is at a restaurant that also features “lunch specials” comprised of one main and one side dish. At this restaurant, however, customers create their “lunch special” by choosing a main and a side they would like from an assortment of several main and side dishes. Who is more likely to be more satisfied with their decision? Is it John who chose a lunch special from among existing lunch specials set by the restaurant, or is it Jane who created her “lunch special” by selecting a main and a side? And why would John or Jane feel more satisfied with their decision? In this research, we examine these questions. More broadly, we examine how the type of choice set that consumers choose affects the decision process and the resulting satisfaction with the decision. We expect that, even if John and Jane were to end up choosing identical lunch specials (i.e., the same main + side combination), because the type of choice set they were presented with is different, their decision process and decision satisfaction will be different as well.

Consumers regularly encounter decisions involving pre-bundled alternatives in a variety of product categories. Aside from food and dining scenarios, as the John and Jane example illustrates, pre-bundled choices involve computers, travel and vacation packages, wine subscriptions, video streaming services, even car purchases, and so many more. In some contexts, such as wine subscriptions, consumers can only choose from pre-bundled alternatives (e.g., box of red wines, box of white wines, box of red + white wines), while in others, such as vacation packages, consumers may choose from either pre-bundled alternatives (e.g., the water activity fun package, the fine dining package, the guided tours package, etc.) or create their own “bundle” or package from a list of available activities.

Although prior research has examined the influence of choice sets that vary on factors such as assortment size (e.g. Iyengar & Lepper, 2000), the presence vs. absence of categories (Mogilner et al. 2008), the uniqueness of alternatives (Dhar et al., 1999; Houston & Sherman, 1995), and the alignability of alternatives (Kim et al., 2013; Zhang & Fitzsimons, 2001), on decision satisfaction, there is little work on the effect of choosing from among pre-bundled alternatives.

We propose that choosing among pre-bundled alternatives vs. choosing among individual alternatives to form a bundle triggers a different decision process and, in turn, produces differences in decision satisfaction. More specifically, we propose that the type of choice set, pre-bundled alternatives vs. individual alternatives, evokes different modes of thinking, which will influence which aspects of the decision will receive more consideration. That is, when choosing among bundles, consumers are more likely to evaluate each bundle as a whole and adopt more holistic or abstract thinking. In contrast, when choosing among individual alternatives, consumers are more likely to evaluate each alternative independently and adopt more concrete thinking. Our proposition is based on the notion that seeing the sum of the individual parts—the forest created by the individual trees—is likely to promote holistic processing and prime abstract thinking while seeing the individual parts that comprise the whole—the individual trees that create the forest—is likely to promote concrete processing and prime less abstract thinking (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Furthermore, to the extent that choosing from among bundles evokes more abstract thinking than choosing among individual alternatives, we propose that the former choice set will increase consumer focus on choosing the most desirable or the best options. This is consistent with construal level theory that abstract thinking increases focus on desirability concerns (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope et al., 2007). Consequently, we expect that consumers will be more satisfied with their decision when choosing among bundles than when choosing among alternatives. Our research provides a novel theorizing and demonstration of how the type of choice set, bundles vs. independent alternatives, can result in differences in decision satisfaction by evoking different modes of thinking and influencing which aspects of a decision receive more consideration.

The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant research in choice set types, bundles, and processing styles, leading to several hypotheses tested across three studies. In closing, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this research and offer suggestions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The influence of the type of choice set consumers choose from, sometimes called choice architecture, is well-documented in prior research. The nature of the influence has also been studied, and the findings cover a broad spectrum. It ranges from pre-decision experiences of choice difficulty to post-decision experiences of satisfaction. For example, choice sets that consist of noncomparable options are generally associated with greater decision difficulty than sets that consist of comparable options (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Johnson, 1984; Zhang & Markman, 2001). This is because noncomparable options, by definition, do not possess common features or attributes that can be readily compared. Rather, consumers must first exert additional cognitive effort to create a decision criterion (e.g., the overall level of enjoyment derived from the product) prior to making a decision (Kim Cho et al., 2013). The type of options in a given choice set also affects decision satisfaction. Consumers experience greater choice satisfaction when choosing from a choice set that consists of options possessing unique-good attributes compared to choosing from a set of options possessing unique-bad attributes (Dhar et al., 1999; Houston & Sherman, 1995). Another factor that affects satisfaction is the number of options in the choice set. While

larger choice sets can seem more attractive than smaller choice sets pre-decision, actually choosing from larger sets results in choice overload and lower decision satisfaction than choosing from smaller ones (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Related to the size of choice sets, consumers perceive more variety in choice sets whose options are organized into categories vs. not and derive more satisfaction when choosing from categorized choice sets (Mogilner et al., 2008). We build on the notion that the organization of a choice set affects decision satisfaction; and we examine whether the choice set is organized into pre-determined bundles that consumers choose from can influence satisfaction.

Bundled Offerings

Bundling, typically the practice of selling two or more products or services in a single package, usually for a lower price (Guiltinan, 1987), is a widespread marketing practice (Stremersch & Tellis, 2002). The availability of a bundle does not mean that the individual items are not offered separately at their regular prices (Guiltinan, 1987). For example, a newly released movie in a trilogy will initially be sold as a single Blu-Ray, but as time passes, it may be bundled with the other movies of that trilogy. Another example is the common practice of fast-food restaurants like McDonald's and Subway to offer "value meals," which are essentially two or more food items bundled into a single alternative, while simultaneously offering the same food items a la carte.

Prior research on bundling has mainly examined the value of bundles to marketers and consumers. From the marketer's perspective, questions such as what is the optimal strategy with regard to pricing or the type of bundling that should be utilized for profit maximization have been examined (e.g., Prasad et al. 2010; Subramaniam & Venkatesh, 2009). From the consumer's perspective, questions such as how the framing of bundles influences perceived attractiveness have been examined. For example, Yadav (1994) suggests that for bundles of complementary or related products (e.g., a computer and a printer), consumers find the bundle more attractive when the discount is offered on the more central or preferred item. Other research suggests that for bundles comprised of heterogeneous items, that is, containing both hedonic and utilitarian items, consumers are more likely to purchase the bundle when the discount is framed as savings on the hedonic component rather than as savings on the utilitarian component or on the total bundle (Khan & Dhar, 2010).

Another stream of research has identified an asymmetry in the way in which a marketer versus a consumer would evaluate the attractiveness and value of a bundled offering. As a result, marketers will offer bundles that they believe are attractive, but oftentimes, consumers do not find those same bundles attractive. Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz (2012) posit that this asymmetry is because how a marketer typically frames a bundle is different from how a consumer frames the bundle. They argue that the primary task of a consumer is to evaluate the bundle and form an overall, coherent, and unified impression of the presented package of items. They suggest that the consumer's goal induces a focus on the whole or the "big picture" rather than on the individual components or parts and promotes holistic processing. On the other hand, the primary task of a marketer is to create the bundle and evaluate each individual component of the bundle as a discrete entity, independent from the other components (Weaver et al., 2012). Thus, the marketer's goal induces a focus on individual components that will comprise the bundle and promote "piecemeal" or "analytic" information processing (Mantel & Kardes, 1999; Nisbett et al., 2001). Thus, the marketer and the consumer tend to frame bundles differently—the marketer approaches it from a

“piecemeal” perspective, while the consumer approaches it from a holistic perspective. We build on the idea that the same bundle can be framed and thus evaluated differently.

Choosing Bundles versus Choosing Individual Alternatives

While the prior research focused on the role of the individual—marketer versus consumer—as the determinant of whether a bundle would be processed holistically as a whole or “piecemeal” as individual components, we note that the way in which a bundle is considered is not limited to the distinction between marketer and consumer. In fact, the consumer often plays both roles. That is, the same consumer can evaluate a given bundle holistically as well as piecemeal. At times, the consumer is presented with a choice set of pre-bundled alternatives and must decide which bundle to choose from among several bundles (e.g., choosing among pre-set wine subscription boxes). At other times, the consumer is presented with a choice set of individual alternatives and must decide which alternatives will form the bundle (e.g., choosing individual chocolates to fill a chocolate box). This idea that consumers can participate in and work towards creating an option that fits their preferences is well-established, and many companies provide those opportunities to consumers. This research uniquely outlines both theoretical and empirical juxtaposition of selecting a pre-determined bundle with selecting individual options to create a bundle.

We propose that whether consumers choose among pre-determined bundles or are choosing among individual options that comprise a bundle will influence how the bundle is framed in the consumer’s mind. More specifically, we propose that choosing among pre-determined bundles will cause consumers to frame the bundles as wholes rather than as individual components and engage in more abstract processing while making their decision. On the other hand, forming a bundle by choosing among individual alternatives will cause consumers to frame the bundles as individual components and engage in less abstract processing while making their decision.

Our proposition rests upon and brings together two streams of research: evaluation of bundles and construal level theory. The notion that the same bundle is evaluated differently by consumers and marketers because of differences in how the bundle is framed (Weaver et al., 2012) aligns with construal level theory. Construal level theory states that the same stimulus can be mentally represented at a high, abstract level according to its overall essence or at a low, concrete level according to its details (Trope & Liberman, 2010). And depending on the level of mental representation, the same stimulus can result in differences in evaluation (e.g. Eyal et al., 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Malkoc et al., 2005; Trope & Liberman, 2000), which influences choice likelihood (e.g. Fujita et al. 2006), and post-choice satisfaction (e.g. Kim et al. 2013). Thus, combining construal level theory with the different evaluations of bundles, we see that the same bundled options can be represented abstractly as a single offering or concretely as multiple individual offerings. In other words, the same set of options can be mentally represented as two types of choice sets: (1) a choice set of multiple pre-bundled options or (2) a choice set of multiple individual options that will be put into a bundle. For example, suppose a restaurant has six items on its lunch menu: three types of sandwiches and three types of sides. Imagine that this restaurant has bundled those items into lunch meals so that each lunch meal contains one sandwich and one side. The restaurant can present or frame their bundled lunch offerings in two ways: Frame 1) consumers choose a lunch meal among the available lunch meals or Frame 2) consumers choose a lunch meal by selecting a sandwich and a side that will comprise the meal. In other words, in Frame 1, the consumer focuses on buying the forest, which is comprised of individual trees; in Frame 2, he focuses on buying the individual trees, which will comprise the forest. We propose

that Frame 1 will focus the consumer on the bundle as a whole and promote abstract thinking, while Frame 2 will focus the consumer on the individual alternatives that comprise the bundle and promote concrete, or less abstract, thinking. That is:

H1a: *Consumers choosing among pre-bundled options will engage in more abstract thinking and processing compared to consumers choosing individual alternatives to create a bundle.*

Furthermore, we expect that framing the choice set by eliciting more vs. less abstract thinking will influence the decision-making process and post-decision satisfaction. Research shows that abstract thinking and forming a high-level construal of a given stimulus, relative to concrete thinking and forming a low-level construal, increases the consideration of desirability over feasibility (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thus, we expect that to the extent that the framing of choosing among bundles elicits more abstract thinking than does the framing of choosing among individual options, consumers will focus more on desirability when making their decision. That is,

H1b: *Consumers choosing among pre-bundled options will be more likely to focus on choosing the most desirable or the best option (i.e., the best bundle) compared to those choosing among individual alternatives.*

In turn, we expect that a focus on choosing the most desirable options will influence consumers' satisfaction with their decisions. Thus, even if the chosen bundle is identical to the self-created bundle, we predict:

H2: *Consumers choosing among pre-bundled options will experience greater decision satisfaction compared to consumers choosing individual alternatives to create a bundle.*

The Current Research

In sum, we posit that consumers choosing among pre-bundled options, compared to those choosing among individual alternatives that comprise a bundle, will be more likely to approach the decision holistically and engage in abstract thinking, increasing their focus on choosing the best or the most desirable options. In turn, choosing among pre-bundled options will lead to increased decision satisfaction. Since we are comparing the choosing of a pre-bundled option, which, by definition, contains multiple items, with the choosing of multiple individual alternatives that will form a self-created bundle, we hold constant both the choice ratio and the total number of items selected to ensure a viable comparison between the two types of choice sets. By choice ratio, we are referring to the number of alternatives chosen from the number of alternatives available in the choice set. For example, choosing one alternative from a set of four alternatives would be a choice ratio of 1/4. Then, to hold the choice ratio and the total number of items purchased constant, we would have to compare the choice of one pre-bundled option (that contains two individual items) from among four pre-bundled options with the choice of two individual items (that will comprise a bundle) from among eight individual items. However, we note that such a comparison differs on the number of decisions a consumer will make: the pre-bundled choice set involves one decision (i.e., selecting one bundle), whereas the individual options choice set involves two decisions (i.e., selecting two individual items). Therefore, in our studies, we use the same choice

set and the same number of decisions but manipulate the framing of the choice set. For example, all participants are presented with a choice set containing two of each of the eight unique kinds of items for sixteen items. In the pre-bundled options choice set, the sixteen options are arranged into eight unique pairs, each containing two of the same items. Participants are instructed to choose one of the eight unique pairs for a total of two (of the same kind of) items. In the individual items choice set, the sixteen options are independent; however, participants are instructed to choose two of the same (kind of) items from the sixteen total items. In this way, while everyone is facing the same choice ratio of 1/8, the same total number of items consumed, and the same number of decisions made (i.e. one decision), the focus is on the whole bundles or on the individual options that will comprise each bundle.

We test our hypotheses in a series of three studies. The first study examines consumers' lay beliefs and a priori expectations in a within participants design about how the two choice types, choosing from pre-bundled options vs. choosing individual items, influence focus on desirability and decision satisfaction. Study Two tests H1 and H2 and demonstrates that choosing among bundles, relative to choosing among individual alternatives, leads to a greater focus on choosing the most desirable options and results in greater decision satisfaction. In addition, it provides evidence of the underlying process that choosing among pre-bundled options evokes more abstract thinking, which drives the increase in decision satisfaction. Lastly, Study Three shows that among individuals who are choosing a gift for a distant friend and are likely to already be thinking abstractly, the effect of choice type on decision satisfaction is attenuated. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

STUDY ONE: CONSUMERS BELIEVE CHOOSING INDIVIDUAL ALTERNATIVES IS BETTER

In Study One, we investigate people's lay belief regarding whether choosing between pre-bundled alternatives or among individual alternatives affects the likelihood of choosing the best ones (i.e. most desirable ones) and decision satisfaction. For example, do people believe that choosing three pairs of tapa plates out of twelve available pairs will lead to more or less focus on choosing the best ones compared to choosing six individual tapa plates out of twenty-four available plates? In which choice scenario will consumers feel more satisfied? Though the ratio of alternatives to be chosen from those available is constant ($1/4^{\text{th}}$), as is the actual amount of food chosen, the former choice set highlights the pairs, whereas the latter choice highlights the individual options. We predict that people's naïve theory is that choosing from among individual alternatives leads to a greater focus on choosing the best ones compared to choosing from among pre-bundled alternatives. As such, we also predict that people will expect to be more satisfied with their decision when choosing from among individual options compared to choosing from among pre-bundled options.

Method

Ninety-eight individuals were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk) to participate in this study in exchange for a small monetary payment. All participants were asked to imagine that a friend was visiting for two days. On both days, they went to tapas restaurants featuring small food plates. On the first day, they visited Restaurant A, which featured a menu where they could choose three pairs of plates from twelve available pairs (that were predetermined by the chef). On the second day, they visited Restaurant B, which featured a menu where they could choose six plates from twenty-four available plates. The ratio of the number of options

chosen to the number of options available and the overall amount of food that would be ordered was the same for both restaurants. Then, for each restaurant, participants rated its overall attractiveness, the expected difficulty of the decision, the extent to which they expect to focus on choosing the best options, expected satisfaction with the decision, and expected regret with the decision (1—not at all; 9—very).

Results

In line with the idea that people prefer larger assortments to smaller ones pre-decision (e.g., Broniarczyk et al., 1998; Chernev, 2006; Huffman & Kahn, 1998), participants rated Restaurant A as being less attractive than Restaurant B ($M_{\text{Restaurant A}} = 5.89$, $SD = 1.95$ vs. $M_{\text{Restaurant B}} = 7.21$, $SD = 1.82$; $t(97) = 6.44$, $p < .0001$). Furthermore, participants believed that they would be more likely to focus on trying to choose the best options when choosing individual options at Restaurant B compared to when choosing from pre-determined pairs of options at Restaurant A ($M_{\text{Restaurant A}} = 7.17$, $SD = 1.64$ vs. $M_{\text{Restaurant B}} = 7.43$, $SD = 1.62$; $t(97) = 2.46$, $p = .02$). Participants also believed that they would be more satisfied ($M_{\text{Restaurant A}} = 6.51$, $SD = 1.71$ vs. $M_{\text{Restaurant B}} = 7.22$, $SD = 1.63$; $t(97) = 4.05$, $p < .0001$) and feel less regret with their decision ($M_{\text{Restaurant A}} = 3.36$, $SD = 2.03$ vs. $M_{\text{Restaurant B}} = 2.72$, $SD = 1.69$; $t(97) = 4.29$, $p < .0001$) when choosing individual options than when choosing pairs of options (i.e., pre-bundled options). There was no difference in the anticipated difficulty of the decision ($M_{\text{Restaurant A}} = 5.40$, $SD = 2.04$ vs. $M_{\text{Restaurant B}} = 5.35$, $SD = 2.18$; $t(97) = .26$, $p > .79$).

DISCUSSION

The results of Study One indicate that people believe that being able to choose individual options, compared to having to choose from pre-determined pairings or bundles, is more appealing. We find that people believe that choosing individual options would increase their focus on trying to choose the best ones. In turn, it follows that people believe they would be more satisfied with and experience less regret with their decisions when choosing from individual options rather than pre-determined pairings or bundles. We note that these beliefs exist even in a participant design where the ratio of the number of options chosen to the number of objects available, as well as the actual amount of food chosen, can readily be compared and is noticeably the same across restaurants.

Presumably, having the ability or freedom to choose individual options provides the perception of being able to better select the ones that are most desirable to them and, therefore, be more satisfied with the decision. But in actuality, is choosing individual options from a set of individual alternatives more likely to increase focus on choosing the best, the most desirable options compared to choosing pre-determined pairings or bundles from a set of bundles? Which choice set is actually associated with more satisfaction after consumers have made a choice? Do consumer's beliefs align with their actual experiences? Indeed, Taylor and Burns (1999) show that consumers' criteria for and determination of satisfaction differ from pre-decision vs. post-decision. In the same way, while consumers may anticipate pre-decision and how individual vs. pre-bundled options might influence satisfaction, it is likely that actual satisfaction, post-decision, will be quite different.

We posit that choosing among pre-bundled options can evoke a more holistic perspective of looking at the whole bundle (comprised of the individual items), compared to choosing individual items and focusing on each item independently, leading to more abstract thinking. We build on prior research in construal theory, showing that abstract thinking (vs. concrete thinking)

is likely to increase focus on desirability more than feasibility (Trope & Liberman, 2000; 2010). We predict, therefore, that choosing bundles of options, compared to choosing individual options, will cause consumers to engage in abstract thinking and focus on choosing the best, most desirable options. Furthermore, we expect that decisions based on such considerations would lead to increased post-decision satisfaction. We test these hypotheses in Study Two.

STUDY TWO: CHOOSING AMONG PRE-BUNDLED OPTIONS INCREASES SATISFACTION

Method

One hundred sixty-seven mTurk workers completed this study in exchange for a small monetary payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: pre-bundled options versus individual items. All participants imagined that they were at a booth selling Girl Scout cookies. Those assigned to the pre-bundled options condition were presented with 8 different bundles, with each bundle containing two boxes of the same type of cookie. Participants were instructed that they would be purchasing two bundles. For example, if a participant chose to purchase one bundle of Thin Mints and one bundle of Caramel deLites, they would purchase two boxes of Thin Mints and two boxes of Caramel deLites—four boxes of cookies. Those assigned to the individual options condition were instructed to purchase four boxes of cookies but could only select two different types of cookies. For example, a participant could choose to purchase two boxes of Thin Mints and two boxes of Caramel deLites as his four boxes of cookies. Thus, participants in both conditions would purchase four boxes of cookies: two boxes each of two types of cookies. The only difference across the two conditions was whether they focused on choosing two pre-determined bundles (where each bundle contained two boxes of the same type of cookie) or on choosing individual cookie boxes (even though one would have to have purchased at least two boxes of each cookie type).

After reading the scenario, all participants indicated their perception of the overall assortment (good selection, attractive, high quality, tasty; 1—not at all, 9—very). Then, participants made their first selection. Those in the bundles condition chose one bundle from the eight available bundles. Those in the individual options condition chose two boxes (of the same cookie type) from the sixteen available boxes. Participants then rated how difficult the choice felt, the extent to which they focused on choosing the best options, and how constrained they felt while making their decision (1—not at all, 9—very). As a measure of decision satisfaction, they indicated how satisfied, how happy, and how confident they were with their decision. Participants then repeated this choice procedure for their second selection and reported choice difficulty, focusing on choosing the best and satisfaction with their decision (i.e. how satisfied, how happy, how confident). Lastly, all participants completed the Behavioral Identification Form (BIF), which is a widely used measure of a person's information processing level: high or abstract vs. low or concrete (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987).

Results

Control Measures. We combined participants' perceptions of the assortment (selection, attractiveness, quality, taste) into one measure of the overall evaluation of the assortment ($\alpha = .83$). The choice set type had no effect on assortment evaluation ($p > .21$). There were also no

differences across choice set type on how difficult each decision felt (p 's > .14) and how constrained participants felt while making each decision (p 's > .26).

Desirability Focus and Choosing the Best. Since we did not expect participants to change their focus on choosing the best between their first and second selections, we combined the rating of having focused on choosing the best for the first selection with the rating for the second selection ($r = .54$; $p < .0001$). Consistent with H1b, choosing from among pre-bundled boxes of cookies versus choosing from among individual boxes of cookies led to significant differences in choosing the best or the most desirable options. Results show that participants in the bundles condition focused more on choosing the best than did participants in the individual options condition ($M_{\text{choose bundle}} = 7.47$, $SD = 1.61$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 7.01$, $SD = 1.55$; $t(165) = 1.87$, $p = .06$). The results for each of the first and second selection decisions, when examined separately, are consistent with this overall pattern.

Decision Satisfaction. To assess decision satisfaction, we combined the ratings of decision satisfaction, decision happiness, and decision confidence into a single measure, one for the first selection ($\alpha = .92$) and one for the second selection ($\alpha = .94$). And following the logic of continuity of participant's approach across the first and second selections, the decision satisfaction across the two decisions was combined ($r = .66$; $p < .0001$) into a single measure of overall decision satisfaction. Consistent with our prediction in H2, participants choosing bundles reported higher decision satisfaction than those choosing individual options ($M_{\text{choose bundle}} = 7.89$, $SD = 1.10$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 7.40$, $SD = 1.49$; $t(165) = 2.41$, $p = .02$). The results for each of the first and second selection decisions, when examined separately, are consistent with this overall pattern.

Abstract Processing. To test our proposition in H1a about whether choosing bundles promotes more abstract thinking compared to choosing individual options, we counted the number of times participants chose the higher-level description of a given set of behaviors on the BIF¹. Thus, the higher the score, the more abstract the participant's processing style. Consistent with our proposition, participants choosing bundles were more likely to be thinking abstractly compared to those choosing individual options ($M_{\text{choose bundle}} = 10.91$, $SD = 3.29$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 9.93$, $SD = 3.51$; $t(165) = 1.87$, $p = .06$).

Mediation. Lastly, we conducted a mediation analysis to test our proposed process. We predicted that choosing bundles, compared to choosing individual options, would activate more abstract thinking, and lead to a greater focus on choosing the best and the most desirable options, which in turn would increase decision satisfaction. We performed a multistep mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 6; Hayes, 2013). The dependent variable was decision satisfaction. The potential mediators were the BIF score (the measure of abstract thinking) and the focus on choosing the best or the most desirable options. The independent variable was a dummy variable representing the two types of choice sets—choosing bundles = 0 and choosing individual options = 1. First, the type of choice set had a significant effect on decision satisfaction ($B = -.49$, $t = 2.41$; $p = .02$). Further, the results confirmed the proposed chain of mediators, namely, abstract processing and focus on choosing the best and the most desirable options, in sequence, mediated

¹ The BIF (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) presents a series of behaviors that can be understood according to a higher, more abstract level of processing or a lower, more concrete level of processing. For example, one of the behaviors in the BIF is "locking the house." Individuals are then presented with two descriptions of the behavior. One is a higher-level description corresponding to the question why, "to secure personal belongings," and the other is a lower-level description corresponding to the question how "turn a key in the lock." Individuals then choose which description feels more appropriate. The total number of higher-level descriptions chosen by each individual is the reported score.

the effect of choice set type on decision satisfaction. Choosing from bundles led to more abstract thinking ($B = -.99$, $t = 1.87$; $p = .06$). Abstract thinking increased focus on choosing the best and the most desirable options ($B = .08$, $t = 2.16$; $p = .03$). And we found that this increased focus on choosing the best options had a significant effect on decision satisfaction ($B = .56$, $t = 11.69$; $p < .0001$). The 95% CI for the indirect effect was obtained with 1000 bootstrap resamples and supported the suggested multistep mediation ($B = -.04$; 95% CI $[-.144, -.001]$). No other indirect effects were significant.

DISCUSSION

Study Two shows that contrary to consumers' pre-decision beliefs that they would be more satisfied with their decision when choosing individual options rather than bundled options, consumers are more satisfied post-decision when choosing from among pre-bundled options. We also provide evidence in support of H1a, H1b, and H2 that participants choosing bundles, compared to those choosing individual options, are more likely to think abstractly, which increases focus on choosing the best or the most desirable options and, in turn, increases decision satisfaction. Thus, we demonstrate that the choice set type, that is, whether the choice is framed as deciding among pre-determined bundles or pairings or is framed as deciding among individual options, influences the way in which consumer think about their decision and, in turn, affects their satisfaction with the decision.

The purpose of Study Three was two-fold. First, we seek to replicate the findings from Study Two and provide additional evidence of our hypotheses using a different product category and choice context. Second, we demonstrate how everyday situational and contextual cues can naturally prompt abstract (vs. concrete) thinking and thereby attenuate the effect of choice set type on decision satisfaction. We expect that when a contextual cue primes consumers with a concrete mindset, which prior research suggests is the default mindset for many individuals (e.g., Khan et al., 2011; Kim Cho et al., 2013), the proposed effect of choice type will emerge. However, when a contextual cue primes consumers with an abstract mindset, we expect the effect to be attenuated. That is, there will be no difference in focus on desirability across the two choice types because those choosing from among individual options, like those choosing from among bundled options, will already have been primed to focus on aspects of desirability. In turn, there will be no difference in decision satisfaction between the two choice types.

STUDY THREE: MODERATING SATISFACTION THROUGH A CONTEXTUAL CUE

In Study Three, we use a naturalistic situational cue to prime abstract (vs. concrete) thinking and demonstrate that the effect of choice set type on decision satisfaction is attenuated when abstract thinking is prompted. We employ a gift-giving scenario where an individual makes a purchase decision for another individual. Based on the notion that (psychological) distance leads to abstract processing (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010), we manipulate the perceived social distance between the chooser (i.e., the gift giver) and the recipient to prime abstract vs. concrete thinking. We expect that increasing social distance between the chooser and the recipient will attenuate the effect of choice set type on decision satisfaction.

Method

Two hundred seventy-five mTurk workers completed this study in exchange for a small monetary payment. The study followed a 2 (Distance: friend lives in same town vs. friend lives in

a town hundreds of miles away) x 2 (Choice set type: pre-bundled options vs. individual options) between-participants design with a focus on the desirability or choosing the best and decision satisfaction as the main dependent variables. First, to manipulate abstract vs. concrete thinking, participants were asked to think of a friend. Half of the participants thought about a friend who currently lives in the same town and wrote down that friend's initials; the other half thought about and wrote down the initials of a friend who lives in a town hundreds of miles away. This manipulation is based on prior research suggesting that those who live farther away are more socially distant (Baskin et al., 2014; Festinger et al., 1950), and thinking about such individuals would induce a more abstract mindset (Fujita et al., 2006; Liviatan et al., 2008).

Next, participants imagined walking into a new chocolate shop that had just opened. The store was offering a special price on sampler boxes of chocolates. Participants imagined that they had decided to purchase a sampler box to send to the friend they had just thought about in the previous task. They were told that the store would handle all of the packaging and the shipping of the chocolates and that the participants only needed to choose which chocolates they would purchase. Half of the participants were assigned to the pre-bundled condition, while the other half was assigned to the individual options condition. Those in the pre-bundled condition saw that the store had sixteen different chocolate pieces grouped into eight unique pairs, each containing two pieces of the same type of chocolate. For example, one of the eight pairs was a pair of round milk chocolates, which contained two individual pieces of round-shaped milk chocolate candies. They were told that they could choose two pairs of chocolates from among the eight available pairs. Those in the individual options condition saw that the store had two pieces of eight different types of chocolates or a total of sixteen individual chocolate pieces. They were told that they could choose four pieces of chocolate from among the sixteen available pieces but that they could only select two different types of chocolate. Note that all participants received the same 1/4 choice ratio, the same choice variety (two different types of chocolate), and the same total of four chocolates.

Prior to choosing, all participants evaluated the chocolate assortment in terms of how good the selection was, how attractive it was, the perceived quality, and the perceived taste (1=not at all/very low; 9=very/very high). Then, participants chose which chocolates they would purchase. Next, they rated the extent to which they focused on choosing the most positive and the most desirable options, how constrained they felt while making their decision, and how difficult it was to choose the ones they wanted (1=not at all; 9=very). As measures of decision satisfaction, they rated how certain, happy, and confident they were with their decision (1=not at all; 9=very). Lastly, as controls, they indicated how hungry they currently felt (1=very; 2=somewhat; 3=not at all) and their general liking of chocolates (1=not at all; 9=very much).

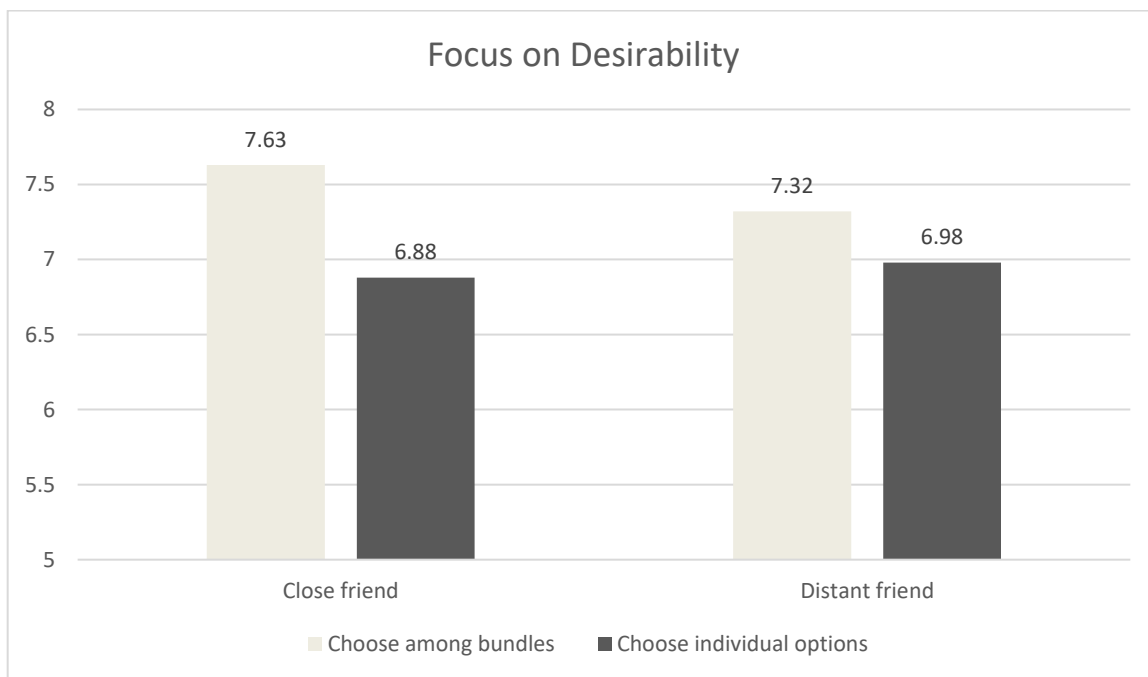
Results

Control Measures. We combined participants' perceptions of the assortment (selection, attractiveness, quality, taste) into one measure of the overall evaluation of the assortment ($\alpha = .89$). There were no main effects of distance ($p > .67$), choice set type ($p > .52$), or their interaction ($p > .72$) on assortment perception. There were also no main effects of distance ($p > .95$), choice set type ($p > .68$), or their interaction ($p > .39$) on how constrained participants felt while making their decision. In terms of decision difficulty, there was an incidental marginal effect of distance ($p = .08$) such that participants felt it was harder to decide for a distant other than for a near other; there was no effect of choice set type on difficulty ($p > .35$) and no interaction ($p > .44$). Lastly, there were no effects of distance (all p 's $> .44$), choice set type (all p 's $> .33$), or their interaction (all p 's $> .16$) on participants' hunger levels or general liking of chocolates.

Desirability Focus and Choosing the Best. We combined the ratings of focusing on the most positive and desirable options to form a single measure of desirability and focus on the best ($r = .70$). We used those measures as covariates in the analysis to control for the potential positive effect that participants' current hunger levels and general liking of chocolates might have on their tendency to focus on choosing the best options. Data patterns are similar without these covariates.

We examined the effect of the distance between the participant and the gift recipient and choice set type on the extent to which participants focused on the desirability of the options. As expected, there was a main effect of choice set type such that participants choosing from among pre-bundled options reported greater focus on the desirability of the options compared to those choosing from among individual options, $F(1, 274) = 8.92, p = .003$. There was no main effect of distance ($p > .40$). Also, as expected, there was a Distance \times Choice set type interactive effect on the extent to which participants focused on the desirability of the options while choosing, $F(1, 274) = 2.49, p = .10$ (see Figure 1A). More importantly, planned contrasts revealed that among participants choosing chocolates for a close friend, those choosing from among bundles were more likely to focus on desirability (or choosing the best) compared to those choosing from among individual options ($M_{\text{choose bundles}} = 7.63, SD = 1.42$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 6.88, SD = 1.69$; $t(133) = 2.78, p = .006$). Among participants choosing chocolates for a distant friend, however, there was no difference ($M_{\text{choose bundles}} = 7.32, SD = 1.51$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 6.98, SD = 1.62$; $t(138) = 1.26, p > .21$).

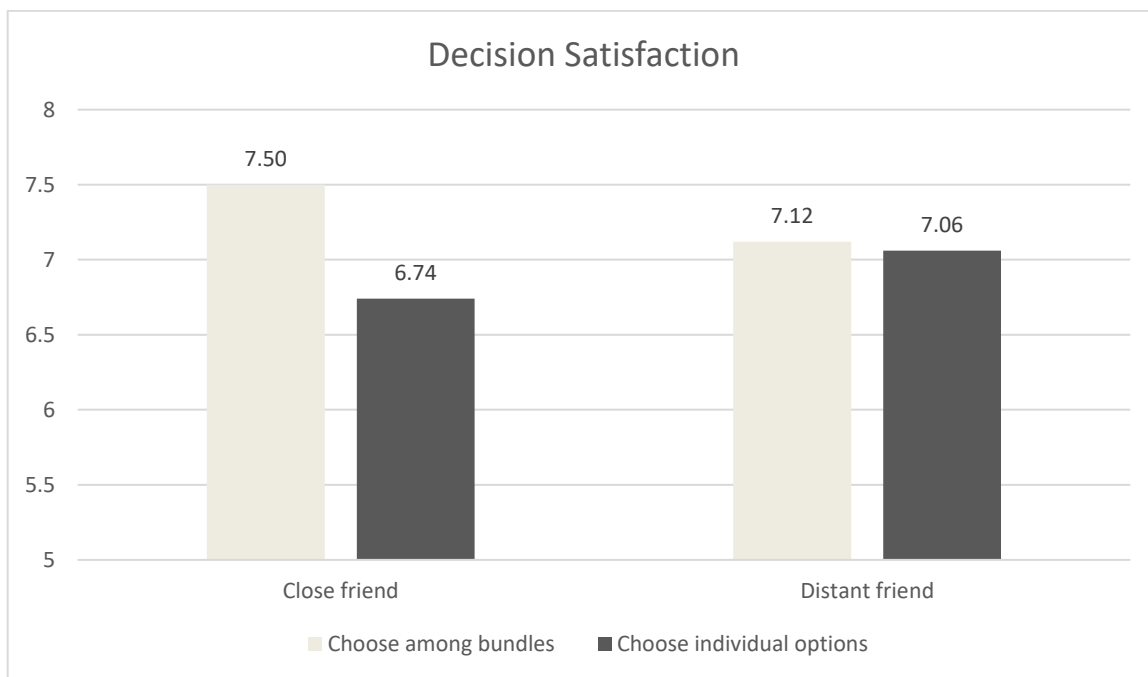
FIGURE 1A



Decision Satisfaction. Next, we examined the influence of distance and choice set type on decision satisfaction. We combined the ratings of decision certainty, happiness, and confidence to form a single measure of decision satisfaction ($\alpha = .94$). There was a main effect of choice set type such that those choosing from among pre-bundled options were more likely to be satisfied with their decision than those choosing from among individual options, $F(1, 274) = 4.63, p = .03$.

There was no main effect of distance ($p > .70$). As predicted, there was a Distance x Choice set type interactive effect on decision satisfaction, $F(1, 274) = 5.10$, $p = .03$ (see Figure 1B). More importantly, planned contrasts revealed that among participants choosing chocolates for a close friend, those choosing among pre-bundled options were more satisfied with their decision compared to those choosing among individual options ($M_{\text{choose bundles}} = 7.50$, $SD = 1.40$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 6.74$, $SD = 1.70$; $t(133) = 2.83$, $p = .005$). Among participants choosing for a distant friend, however, there was no difference in decision satisfaction ($M_{\text{choose bundles}} = 7.12$, $SD = 1.78$ vs. $M_{\text{choose individual options}} = 7.06$, $SD = 1.50$; $t(138) = .22$, $p > .83$).

FIGURE 1B



Mediation. Lastly, we conducted a mediation analysis. We predicted that the effect of choice set type on focusing on choosing the most desirable options, and in turn, decision satisfaction would be moderated by the distance of the friend for whom the choice was being made. More specifically, we predicted that for participants choosing for a close friend, choosing among pre-bundled options, compared to choosing among individual options, would lead to a greater focus on choosing the best or most desirable options, which in turn would increase satisfaction with the decision; among participants choosing for a distant friend, however, we did not expect choice set type to have any effect. We performed the analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 8; Hayes, 2013). The dependent variable was decision satisfaction. The mediator was the focus on choosing the most desirable options. The independent variable was a dummy variable representing the two types of choice sets—choosing bundles = 0 and choosing individual options = 1. The moderator was a dummy variable representing the two social distances—close friend = 0, distant friend = 1. Among participants who were chosen a close friend, there was a conditional indirect effect of choice set type on decision satisfaction through a focus on the most desirable options ($B = -.66$; 95% CI [-1.11, -.25]; 5,000 samples). However, there was no indirect effect among

participants choosing a distant friend ($B = -.20$; 95% CI $[-.58, .21]$; 5,000 samples). Thus, these results support our predictions.

DISCUSSION

Study Three examines a different choice context and provides further evidence of our proposed hypotheses that choosing from among pre-bundled options (vs. individual options) increases consumer focus on choosing the best options and increases decision satisfaction. In addition, the results show that this effect can be attenuated by naturally occurring contextual cues that prompt individuals to think more abstractly vs. concretely. When participants were choosing chocolates for a close friend, they approached the decision with a concrete mindset, and choosing from pre-bundled options increased satisfaction. However, when participants were choosing chocolates for a more (physically) distant friend, they approached the decision with an abstract mindset, and the effect of choice set type was attenuated, such that there was no difference in decision satisfaction between choosing from pre-bundled options and choosing from individual options. This attenuation of the effect of choice set type further suggests that decisions involving pre-bundled options do indeed evoke a more abstract processing style.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers often have the opportunity to choose from among various pre-bundled alternatives. Restaurants offer lunch specials that feature combinations of various small plates, tour companies offer packages including multiple destinations or sights, and many companies offer bundles of their products, such as candles, soaps, and wines, just to name a few. This research examines whether those products or services are offered pre-bundled or those products or services can be chosen a la carte to create consumer-designed bundles that affect consumer satisfaction. Across three studies, we compare and contrast the decision-making process and the consumers' satisfaction with their decisions. Study One shows that consumers intuit that choosing the individual options that will comprise their bundle (vs. choosing from among pre-bundled options) will allow them to focus on choosing the best options, resulting in greater satisfaction. However, Studies Two and Three show that consumers' pre-decision intuitions do not accurately predict their actual post-decision satisfaction. Study Two demonstrates that consumers choosing individual options to create their own bundle (vs. choosing from among pre-bundled alternatives) are less likely to focus on choosing the most desirable options and, as a result, are less satisfied with their decision. Furthermore, these patterns are observed even though the chosen bundle, whether it was pre-bundled or created, contains the same individual items. We show that this effect is driven by the adoption of an abstract mindset. Study Three shows that this effect is robust across various product categories and provides further evidence of the role of an abstract mindset in the increased focus on desirability and subsequent decision satisfaction. Study Three also demonstrates how natural shifts in mindset, such as when buying a gift for a friend who lives far away, can moderate the effect of selecting a pre-bundled offering vs. forming one's own bundle.

These findings are important for several reasons. From a theoretical point of view, existing research does not offer a clear prediction as to whether products or services should be offered pre-bundled or as individual options that a consumer can bundle. This paper is unique in its examination and documentation of how, despite people's common lay intuition that they would prefer to form their own bundles, this is consistent with prior research on self-customization and people participating in the creation of their own products and services, choosing from among pre-bundled options can increase satisfaction because of the shift to a more abstract mindset.

The current paper also contributes to the growing literature on how a consumer's mindset or cognitive processing style, abstract vs. concrete, can influence the decision-making process as well as downstream consequences such as satisfaction and regret. Our findings that choosing among pre-bundled options evokes holistic, abstract processing and increases satisfaction is consistent with other research examining decision satisfaction as a function of abstract vs. concrete processing mindsets. For instance, we build on prior research that adopting an abstract mindset leads consumers to focus more heavily on particular aspects of a decision. While we focus on aspects of desirability and choosing the best (vs. feasibility) as a result of this abstract mindset, related research examines how an abstract mindset can bring about an increased focus on primary and central attributes (vs. secondary or peripheral attributes), which, in turn, influences consumer choice (Trope & Liberman, 2010). For instance, Tom et al. (1991) show that students' expectations for courses are higher when chosen based on primary attributes (e.g., instructor) vs. secondary and situational attributes (e.g., time of class). The overall satisfaction at the end of the course did not differ.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We identify various questions and new avenues for future research that are raised based on these current findings. The first is the question of how the nature of the items might differentially affect whether pre-bundled options (vs. individual a la carte options) increase satisfaction. One potential way to consider the nature of the items is the price. The current research focuses on items that are low in price. Our findings suggest that strategically offering more product bundles could increase consumer satisfaction for retailers of lower-priced goods, such as Walmart, whose consumers do not typically derive satisfaction from the low prices alone (Powers et al., 2018). Our research could also examine luxury and premium products. As prior research has shown, the same factor that increases satisfaction for a given product or service category in one price tier can increase dissatisfaction for the same product or service category in a different price tier (Woodham et al., 2016). Thus, whether the current findings are generalizable to product bundles that occupy higher price tiers, such as premium, deluxe, and luxury, is an interesting area for future research to explore.

Another way to consider the nature of the items is to look at the primary function of the items: pleasure vs. function. The current research primarily examines choices involving pleasure-oriented or hedonic products (e.g., tapas, cookies, chocolates). It is possible, however, that for products that are more function-oriented or utilitarian in nature, where desirability is less likely to matter to consumers, these effects of bundled choices may be attenuated. Indeed, it appears that many pre-bundled offerings we see in the market today tend to be hedonic in nature rather than utilitarian. Furthermore, future research can examine how mixed bundles that contain both hedonic and utilitarian products are perceived and what the resulting satisfaction might be. Here, whether the main item (vs. the smaller add-on item) in the bundle is hedonic or utilitarian may affect the extent to which consumers focus on choosing the best and ultimately determine whether satisfaction increases or decreases. Related to that idea, Keinan et al. (2016) have shown that adding a "functional alibi", a small utilitarian feature to a luxury product, causes consumers to inflate the value of the feature and thereby reduce their guilt and justify their indulgent purchase.

The second question is related to the notion that natural, context-based cues can prompt consumers to engage in more abstract vs. concrete thinking. As we show in Study 3, when the decision context naturally evoked more abstract thinking, the effect of pre-bundled options on

satisfaction attenuated. Future research can identify and more systematically examine more naturally occurring cues for abstract thinking. One possibility is how a consumer's cultural lens influences the way pre-bundled products are perceived. For instance, consumers in collectivist societies are likely to think more holistically naturally than those in individualist societies. And these naturally occurring culture-based mindsets and tendencies have been shown to influence a range of consumer decisions and behaviors (e.g., Cardenas, 2012; de Mooji & Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede, 1984; Nisbett, 2004; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Thus, it is possible that differences in satisfaction based on choice set type are more readily observed in individualist cultures, such as the U.S., where the current studies were conducted, and less observed in collectivist ones.

Lastly, from a managerial point of view, these findings offer suggestions for firms and service providers about how to frame and position their various products and services to increase consumers' satisfaction. Often, companies will offer both types of choice sets: pre-bundled offerings and the ability to order a la carte and create your own bundle. But should companies offer both? Is there a potential downside to offering both? For example, the availability of both a la carte and create your own could encourage consumers to engage in price calculations, thereby detracting from consumers' enjoyment and satisfaction. In addition, prior research could be interpreted as implying that the mere presence of both could elicit counterfactual thinking, which has been shown to increase regret and decrease satisfaction (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese, 1994; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). On the other hand, if only bundled options were available or if only a la carte options were available, could consumers' perception of the degree of customization vary and, in turn, affect a consumer's satisfaction level? Future research could examine these ideas and potentially identify pre-decision factors that companies could leverage to nudge consumers toward choosing a pre-bundled option over a la carte options, enhancing satisfaction at the time of choice. This decision satisfaction could contribute positively to loyalty and repurchase intentions, especially as product satisfaction alone is insufficient to form loyalty (Curtis, et al. 2011). Additional research could follow the implications of enhanced decision satisfaction for downstream consequences of long-term satisfaction and loyalty.

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