Concept

Choice overload

When there are many options, deciding can take so much effort that people put off the choice, don't choose, or end up less satisfied. It doesn't always happen: it depends on options and chooser.



In Spanish
Sobrecarga de opciones

Origin
Iyengar and Lepper (2000)

What problem it addresses

It questions the idea that more options are always better. It reminds design that how many options it shows, and how, is also part of the decision.

An example

An illustrative example: the plans page of a music service.

Twelve plans



Very similar to each other, with small differences in price and features. **Many leave it for later.**

Three plans



Few, with clear differences between them. **It's easier to decide.**

Cutting options doesn't always help. Overload shows up mostly when options are hard to compare and the person isn't sure what they want (Chernev, Böckenholt and Goodman, 2015).

Why it happens

1

Each extra option is one more thing to compare and rule out.

2

If they are hard to compare or you don't know what you want, deciding becomes a burden.

3

So you put off the decision, or you choose and are left with doubts.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

If there are many options, help people compare them: group them, sort them and make their differences clear.

✗ Avoid

Cutting options as a rule: people who already know what they want usually benefit from a wide range.

Don't fall for it

If you can't decide among many, rule some out with a criterion you care about and compare only the ones left.

30% → 3%



What the research says

People who bought jam after stopping to taste, with 6 flavors on the table and with 24 (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** A meta-analysis of 50 experiments found an average effect close to zero, with a lot of variation between studies (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder and Todd, 2010). Another showed under which conditions it does appear (Chernev, Böckenholt and Goodman, 2015).

Connections

Related to

- Cognitive load
- Hick's law
- Default effect

Authors and works

2000	**Sheena S. Iyengar and Mark R. Lepper**	Showed with jams, essay topics and chocolates that having many options could reduce purchases, participation and satisfaction.
2010	**Benjamin Scheibehenne, Rainer Greifeneder and Peter M. Todd**	Pooled 50 experiments and found an average effect close to zero; with prior preferences, more options tended to help.
2015	**Alexander Chernev, Ulf Böckenholt and Joseph Goodman**	Identified four conditions that make it more likely: complex options, a difficult task, unclear preferences and wanting to decide with little effort.

Sources

Original sources

- Iyengar, S. S., & Lepper, M. R. (2000). When choice is demotivating: Can one desire too much of a good thing? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79(6), 995–1006. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.79.6.995)

Academic reviews

- Scheibehenne, B., Greifeneder, R., & Todd, P. M. (2010). Can there ever be too many options? A meta-analytic review of choice overload. Journal of Consumer Research, 37(3), 409–425. View source (https://doi.org/10.1086/651235)
- Chernev, A., Böckenholt, U., & Goodman, J. (2015). Choice overload: A conceptual review and meta-analysis. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 25(2), 333–358.

Last reviewed: October 30, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.