

# The virtue of variety: More options can lead to healthier choices

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Could longer menus lead people to choose salads over French fries? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, people who choose from a large variety of menu items are more likely to make healthy choices than people who choose from shorter lists.

In a study that looked at the impact of assortment size on consumer selections, authors Aner Sela (Stanford University), Jonah Berger (University of Pennsylvania), and Wendy Liu (UCLA) examined the way consumers justify their choices.

"Because choosing from larger assortments is often more difficult, it leads people to select options that are easier to justify. Virtuous and utilitarian necessities are generally easier to justify than indulgences. Consequently, people faced with a larger menu might be more likely to take the garden salad over the pepperoni pizza or the reduced-fat strawberry ice cream over the double chocolate mocha crunch," write the authors.

In the first experiment, the researchers asked participants to choose from pictures of ice cream flavors, some low-fat and others regular. The group that chose from a larger assortment chose low-fat ice cream more often. Likewise, when participants could help themselves to trays of cookies and fruit, more people took fruit from a larger assortment than from a smaller assortment (76 percent vs. 55 percent). The results held firm when the choice was between a computer printer or an mp3 player.

Interestingly, the results of the experiments changed when participants found ways to justify their indulgences. "While healthier or more virtuous options tend to be easier to justify in general, situational factors can provide accessible justifications to indulge," write the authors.

"For example, exerting a great deal of effort on a math test can provide people with an accessible 'excuse' to reward themselves. Similarly, people who commit to a volunteering activity may feel they have 'earned' the right to indulge... Thus, assortment size influences option choice, but the specific type of option people will choose will depend on accessible justifications."

More info: Aner Sela, Jonah Berger, and Wendy Liu. "Variety, Vice, and Virtue: How Assortment Size Influences Option Choice." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2009.

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