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Why We Decide Not to Decide? Decision Avoidance As a Means of Cognitive Closure.

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We propose decision avoidance is a collection of choice strategies motivated by the need for cognitive closure. This need, driven by the bothersome nature of a decision, offers a novel mechanism for decision avoidance effects and novel hypotheses regarding individuals' reliance on decision avoidance as a choice strategy.

[to cite]:

Ashley Otto, Frank Kardes, and Joshua Clarkson (2014) , "Why We Decide Not to Decide? Decision Avoidance As a Means of Cognitive Closure.", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 42, eds. June Cotte and Stacy Wood, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 629-630.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017577/volumes/v42/NA-42>

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Why We Decide Not To Decide: Decision Avoidance As A Means Of Cognitive Closure

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Decision avoidance is a choice strategy whereby decision-makers fail to make a decision, postpone a decision, or make a decision that does not involve action or change (Beattie et al. 1994; Luce 1998; see Anderson 2003). Importantly, however, decision avoidance is still a choice strategy despite this tendency to *decide by not deciding*. For instance, relying on the default option (Baron and Ritov 1994; Johnson and Goldstein 2003), engaging in inaction inertia (Tykocinski, Pittman, and Tuttle 1995), and electing to defer the choice (Dhar 1996, 1997) all reflect this broader choice strategy of avoidance.

Though considerable research has focused on the unique aspects of each choice strategy, our interest, is on their commonalities—specifically, the manner in which these strategies provide decision-makers an opportunity to resolve a decision by, essentially, avoiding it. Thus, the purpose of the present research is to offer a shared mechanism for individuals' desire to avoid decisions across these seemingly disparate phenomena—specifically, the desire to resolve or achieve closure with a decision (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). In brief, we contend that individuals are more prone to avoid decisions when highly motivated to achieve closure with a decision.

Experiment 1 tested our primary hypothesis that individuals high rather than low in need for cognitive closure show greater decision avoidance. To index decision avoidance, we focused on individuals' reliance on the *default option* (i.e., omission bias). The default option is defined as the choice individuals' receive unless otherwise specified (Baron and Ritov 2009; Johnson and Goldstein 2003, 2004). Upon completing an opinion survey, participants were given the opportunity to choose their own candy or accept the default choice. Analysis revealed a main effect of closure ($\beta = -1.31$, Wald's $X^2 = 6.57$, $p = .010$). Consistent with expectations, participants' likelihood to rely on the default option increased with their need for closure. The findings of experiment 1, then, offer initial evidence that desiring closure promotes greater decision avoidance in the form of greater reliance on a default option.

The purpose of experiment 2 was to test the possibility that individuals may engage in decision avoidance to achieve closure, even at the expense of more optimal options. Here we relied on an alternative index of decision avoidance—specifically, *inaction inertia*. Inaction inertia is a decision bias whereby individuals who initially reject an option are more likely to reject a subsequent, similar option (Tykocinski et al. 1995). Participants were asked to consider purchasing a smartphone at a 12% discount. Prior to this decision, however, participants were informed they had previously rejected a similar deal offering either a 14% discount (*attenuation* condition) or a 10% discount (*enhancement* condition). In the *control* condition, participants were not informed of any prior deals. Analysis revealed a significant experimental condition \times need for closure interaction ($\beta = -.626$, Wald's $X^2 = 4.44$, $p = .035$). For those high in need for closure (+1 SD), there was a significant effect of experimental condition ($\beta = -.89$, Wald's $X^2 = 5.13$, $p = .023$); consistent with expectations, participants were significantly more likely to reject the second offer relative to the *control* condition in both the *attenuation* ($\beta = -1.73$, Wald's $X^2 = 4.52$, $p = .034$) and *enhancement* ($\beta = -1.01$, Wald's $X^2 =$

5.85, $p = .016$) conditions, which did not differ. For those low in need for closure (-1 SD), there was no effect of experimental condition on choices. Thus, the findings of experiment 2 offer further evidence that those high (vs. low) in need for closure are more prone to decision avoidance. Most importantly, this heightened inaction inertia occurred even when the subsequent offer improved upon the initial offer.

Importantly, the need for cognitive closure is characterized as a desire for a decision that reduces the extent to which individuals are *bothered* by a decision (Kruglanski and Chun 2008). We thus sought to provide evidence that individuals seeking closure actively avoid decisions as a means of reducing their bothersome nature. Experiment 3 tested this hypothesis using another documented decision avoidance strategy—choice deferral (Dhar and Nowlis 1999). Choice deferral can be defined as the extent to which individuals desire to make a choice now or at a later point in time. Here, participants were presented with a favorable advertisement for a new brand of organic produce, *Nacion Natural*. After viewing the advertisement, participants were exposed to a series of unfavorable reviews—varying the valence of the information. To manipulate the bothersome nature of the decision, participants were presented with a time delay between viewing the advertisement and reading the reviews (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). Participants also indicate how bothered they were by the decision. Analysis revealed a significant choice \times delay \times need for closure interaction ($Z = 1.98$, $p = .048$). For those high in need for closure, follow-up analysis revealed a significant choice \times delay interaction ($Z = -1.98$, $p = .048$), such that those high in need for closure were more likely to defer the choice following the 15 second (vs. no) delay. For those low in need for closure, the choice \times delay interaction was not significant. Analysis of the bothersome index revealed a significant delay \times need for closure interaction ($F(1,80) = 7.20$, $p = .009$) in a pattern consistent with the choice deferral data, and a formal test of mediation revealed a significant mediating pathway through the bothersome index (95% CI: -2.09, -.10). These findings suggest the reliance of those seeking closure on decision avoidance is restricted to contexts that are perceived to be bothersome.

These findings offer a novel framework to clarify our understanding of decision avoidance. Specifically, we propose decision avoidance is a collection of choice strategies motivated by the need for cognitive closure. This need, driven by the bothersome nature of the decision, offers not only a novel mechanism to account for decision avoidance effects but also novel hypotheses regarding when and how individuals should rely on decision avoidance as a choice strategy and novel insight into why consumers' intentionally decide to not decide.

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