

# 5

## MYTH 4

The more, the merrier – the road to freedom and well-being is paved with endless choices

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### 5.1 The paradox of choice myth

*The more, the merrier – or is it?*

The idea of limitless choice has become a defining feature of modern consumerism. Historically, choices were constrained by material scarcity, geographic limitations and cultural norms. With industrialisation and globalisation, this shifted towards an era where consumers are presented with abundant options, hoping this will encourage them to consume more. This notion underpins the belief that increasing choices leads to greater freedom and satisfaction. Yet, often, this abundance of choice fuels dissatisfaction rather than contentment, as the fulfilment of one desire frequently leads to the emergence of another. The so-called Paradox of Choice, introduced by Barry Schwartz (2004), argues that too many options can result in decision fatigue, anxiety and reduced satisfaction.

The myth of excessive choice is particularly problematic in the context of sustainable consumption as it encourages overconsumption, waste and unsustainable resource use. Dispelling the myth of limitless choice is crucial for shifting towards strong sustainable consumption and sufficiency-based models, where quality, durability and meaningful consumption take precedence over quantity of stuff and the ‘throw-away’ ideology. This tension highlights the need to rethink the cultural and economic emphasis on more choices, particularly in light of environmental sustainability challenges caused by extractivism and resource overconsumption<sup>1</sup> and a simultaneous attempt to improve human well-being.

## 5.2 Origins

From the earliest days of human existence, the drive to acquire more has been a matter of survival by increasing available options in uncertain environments. Those who gathered extra food, secured stable shelter and accumulated resources beyond immediate needs were better equipped to withstand scarcity and unpredictability (Darwin, 1871; Buss, 2019). Over millennia, this survival advantage cemented a deep-seated preference for having multiple alternatives, reinforcing the idea that more options equate to greater security and control (Wilson, 2007). However, what once ensured adaptability in harsh conditions now plays a different role in modern consumer behaviour. The instinct that once motivated humans to seek out diverse food sources or protective materials now manifests in the constant pursuit of product variety and market choices.

At the neurological level, the dopamine system reinforces this drive, making the pursuit of more not just a habit but a deeply ingrained mechanism of reward. When individuals acquire new resources, wealth or social status, their brain releases dopamine, creating a sense of pleasure and reward (Lembke, 2021). However, this system does not generate lasting satisfaction. Instead, it creates the tendency to constantly seek greater rewards as people quickly adapt to what they already have. In this way, the evolutionary tendency to accumulate and maximise options now fuels the belief that more choice leads to greater happiness – driving consumers to crave novelty as existing options cannot excite us anymore.

While these biological tendencies laid the groundwork, the idea that more choice is inherently good evolved significantly after the Enlightenment, as ideas about individual freedom and autonomy gained prominence. Before this period, the concept of choice was constrained mainly by feudal and religious institutions. Philosophers like Thomas Aquinas discussed free will, but choices were primarily framed around moral and spiritual decisions rather than material abundance. The Renaissance saw a gradual shift, with the rise of merchant economies and humanism encouraging greater personal achievement. During the 17th and 18th centuries, philosophers like John Locke argued that personal autonomy was central to societal progress. His *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) positioned freedom of choice as a natural right, reinforcing the notion that expanding individual options was inherently positive.

The Industrial Revolution transformed both production and consumption. For the first time in human history, products that used to be expensive, scarce and handcrafted became mass-produced and cheaper, accessible to a broader segment of the population. As Frank Trentmann explores in *Empire of Things* (2016), Victorian Britain's mechanisation of spinning and weaving in the textile industry drastically lowered production costs, making diverse

fabrics available across social classes. Similarly, innovations in ceramics, such as those pioneered by Josiah Wedgwood, created aesthetically appealing yet affordable tableware, enabling middle-class families to engage in new forms of domestic self-expression. The choice was no longer restricted by local availability or personal skills. Waged employment in production facilities also allowed more people to earn and spend money in a market economy.

This transformation laid the foundation for modern retail, culminating in the emergence of department stores in the late 19th century in the United States and Europe. These establishments did not merely provide a wider selection of goods; they redefined shopping by making choices central to the consumer experience. Now, consumers could compare, select and differentiate between goods in ways that were previously unimaginable. More than just retail spaces, department stores quickly became arenas where societal norms and modern identities were shaped and negotiated. Personal consumption was no longer purely functional – it became a means of self-expression and social distinction.

In the 20th century, the Mont Pelerin Society promoted the idea that economic freedom and consumer choice were central to individual autonomy. Expanding market options was seen as key for political and social liberty, with minimal government intervention. Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) positioned marketplace choice as a cornerstone of personal liberty, while Becker's rational choice theory (1976) reinforced the assumption that more choices lead to better outcomes. This emphasis on expanding consumer options was reinforced by advertising and marketing, which framed variety as a symbol of freedom, individuality and social status. As deregulated markets encouraged competition, advertising evolved into a powerful force that shaped consumer expectations, promoting the belief that endless choice was not just beneficial but a beacon of modern life. In this way, Friedman and Becker's theories extended beyond policy, embedding the ideology of choice into consumer culture.

The digital revolution of the 21st century has taken this logic to new extremes, transforming not just the availability of choices but the way they are provided. Online platforms like Amazon, Netflix and Spotify offer vast selections of products and media, but choice is no longer neutral or entirely free. Algorithms now structure and filter decisions, shaping what consumers see, engage with and ultimately select. Nick Srnicek's *Platform Capitalism* (2017) explores how these digital platforms operate not just as marketplaces but as economic systems designed to maximise engagement and extract data rather than empower consumer choice. The once-celebrated freedom of choice has thus become increasingly curated and optimised for profit, raising the question of whether digital abundance truly enhances autonomy or simply reinforces a new form of controlled consumption.

### 5.3 Consequences

Choice is essential as it helps individuals meet their unique needs in a personalised way, which can be empowering. A wide range of options enables *personal autonomy* and *freedom*, allowing individuals to select products that reflect their preferences, values and lifestyles. This empowerment supports a sense of identity and self-expression, as people in societies shaped by the ideology of consumerism use their consumption choices to communicate who they are. Beyond personal identity, choice enables societal, business and personal *resilience* by encouraging adaptation to change. Consumers who incorporate second-hand purchases, rental services, or subscription-based options in their consumption can better adjust to shifting market conditions. Similarly, individuals who explore alternative consumption patterns, such as minimalism or mindful consumption, often develop greater financial security and psychological well-being, making them less vulnerable to economic downturns. Digital platforms that offer a variety of purchasing options, from in-store to online shopping and flexible payment plans, have also enabled consumers to navigate crises, such as lockdowns or inflation spikes, with greater ease. However, an excess of consumption choices may also have adverse consequences.

#### 5.3.1 Choice overload

Modern consumerism places individuals in a constant state of decision-making, where identity *per se* becomes a product of consumption (Bauman, 2001). However, this endless pursuit of self-definition through market choices can lead to instability and anxiety rather than empowerment.

Excessive choices also reduce *decision-making efficiency*, as individuals spend considerable time deliberating, leading to delays and avoidance. The more options available, the greater the cognitive burden, making it harder to commit to and be content with a choice. This phenomenon, known as choice paralysis, occurs when individuals struggle to navigate an overwhelming number of alternatives (Schwartz, 2004). As a result, they may delay decisions or avoid making them altogether. Indeed, studies indicate that individuals faced with complex decision-making processes feel less in control of their lives, a factor closely tied to subjective well-being (Iyengar, 2010). Repeated choices can also deplete cognitive resources, weakening self-control in subsequent tasks (Vohs et al., 2018). In addition, excessive choice overburdens the brain's deliberate reasoning system, known as System 2 thinking (Kahneman, 2011). As cognitive load increases, individuals rely more on System 1 heuristics – mental shortcuts that simplify decision-making but often lead to suboptimal choices. This effect is particularly evident in high-choice environments, such as online retail, where overwhelming selection often causes consumers to default to the familiar option or rely on algorithm-driven

recommendations that further shape their decisions. In addition to slowing decision-making, an abundance of options creates a psychological attachment to multiple alternatives, increasing the difficulty of finalising a choice (Carmon et al., 2003). This concept, known as option attachment, explains why an extensive set of options can prolong the selection process rather than shorten it, delaying necessary purchases or important life choices.

Furthermore, an overabundance of choices *raises consumer expectations*, increasing the likelihood of *disappointment* when the final choice falls short of the imagined ideal (Carmon et al., 2003). Consumers often assume that a perfect choice must exist among numerous options, leading to *post-decision regret* even when they make objectively good choices (Iyengar, 2010). For instance, studies show that individuals choosing between many health insurance plans report higher regret levels, feeling they could have made a better decision (Botti & Iyengar, 2006).

*When the options are few we can be happy with what we choose since we are confident that it is the best possible choice for us. When the options are practically infinite, though, we believe that the perfect choice for us must be out there somewhere and that it's our responsibility to find it.*

Cognitive and neuroscientific research supports these findings, showing that the brain's ability to process information deteriorates under high-choice conditions (Hu et al., 2024). Individuals selecting from many options exhibit heightened stress responses, including cardiovascular patterns associated with perceived threats, indicating that choice overload places both a psychological and physiological strain on individuals (Saltsman et al., 2019).

### 5.3.2 Overproduction and environmental harm

Modern consumer culture's emphasis on limitless choice has fuelled overproduction and overconsumption, leading to waste and environmental degradation. The belief that more options lead to better outcomes and more satisfied consumers pushes businesses to flood the market with excessive product variations, catering to perceived consumer demand rather than actual need. The cycle begins in supply chains, where nearly 8% of stock across sectors such as food, beauty, apparel, pharmaceuticals, healthcare and automotive industries goes to waste each year due to expiry or overproduction, amounting to \$163 billion worth of lost inventory (Avery Dennison, 2022). In fashion, this problem is particularly pronounced. Fast-changing trends and an overwhelming number of product lines encourage constant purchasing yet lead to stock inefficiencies. An estimated 4% to 9% of all textiles produced for the European market are discarded before ever reaching consumers, amounting to 264,000 to 594,000 tonnes of wasted textiles annually (EEA, 2024).

These figures highlight the scale of structural overproduction, where companies continuously provide consumers more choices than they can realistically process.

New, *ultra*-fast fashion brands, such as Shein and Temu, have further accelerated this trend by flooding the market with cheap, short-lived garments. For instance, over six months in 2021, Shein uploaded 2,000 and 10,000 new items to its app daily (Deighton, 2023). These e-commerce platforms ship approximately 9,000 tonnes of goods daily from China to Western consumers – the equivalent of 88 fully loaded Boeing 777s (Farivar, 2024). This relentless supply chain not only encourages excessive consumption but also results in significant carbon emissions from transportation, exacerbating the environmental impact of overproduction. The fashion industry alone is responsible for an estimated 2% to 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, a direct consequence of mass production driven by ever-expanding consumer choices. By 2030, its annual carbon dioxide emissions are expected to reach approximately 2.7 billion tonnes, comparable to the emissions produced by around 230 million passenger vehicles in a year (UNEP, 2023).

At the same time, the rise of e-commerce further intensifies the problem, reshaping consumer expectations around availability and convenience (see Chapter 3). The ability to browse thousands of options 24/7 has led to more impulsive purchasing and higher return rates, reinforcing unsustainable consumption cycles. Many unsold or returned items are discarded rather than resold or recycled as retailers prioritise efficiency over sustainability (Roberts et al., 2023). This paradoxical outcome, where excessive choice fuels unnecessary production and waste, highlights the environmental cost of a system designed to maximise variety rather than longevity.

One key driver of these waste-generating practices is planned obsolescence, where manufacturers intentionally design products with short lifespans, encouraging frequent replacements (see Chapter 7). Nowhere is this more evident than in the fashion industry, where clothing lifespans have declined dramatically in recent decades. On average, in the United Kingdom, a garment is worn only seven to ten times before being thrown away (WRAP, 2017).

The scale of this waste is staggering. For instance, the value of products destroyed in the European Union from just textiles and electronics sectors was projected to reach €21.74 billion by 2022, surpassing the entire GDP of Cyprus in 2020 (Ökopol & EEB, 2021). Similarly, in the United States, Americans discard an estimated 300 million pairs of shoes each year, with most ending up in landfills, where they can take 30–40 years to decompose. Meanwhile, approximately 300 million children worldwide have never owned a pair of shoes (Kirk, 2010). On the other hand, more than 18 million children (some as young as 5) work in informal e-waste recycling, which often is detrimental to their health (WHO, 2024). Thus, overproduction is an environmental issue and a reflection of deep social inequalities (see Chapter 8 for a more in-depth discussion on justice).

## 5.4 Dispelling the myth

The idea that ‘more choice is always better’ is a pervasive myth. Research across diverse disciplines suggests that an overabundance of choices can lead to adverse outcomes for individuals and societal actors. Below, we present key arguments for when less choice leads to more sustainable and rewarding outcomes.

### 5.4.1 *The illusion of choice as freedom*

In contemporary consumer societies, choice is often equated with personal freedom and autonomy. However, this freedom can be illusory, as decision-making is frequently shaped and constrained by external influences. Electronics brands offer slight variations of similar products, and streaming platforms filter content through algorithms that reinforce previous preferences rather than broadening perspectives. The culture industry showcases how mass production creates an illusion of endless possibilities while ultimately serving ‘sameness’ (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2017), thereby exercising a form of social control in the capitalist system.

This dynamic extends beyond the material goods and culture industry. In service industries and public sectors, choice is increasingly constrained by standardisation. Ritzer’s concept of *McDonaldization* illustrates how efficiency, control and predictability now shape not just fast food but also consumer experiences (Ritzer, 1993). From education to healthcare, uniform systems have been designed to prioritise optimisation over personalisation, streamlining processes but reducing individual agency. Although consumers may seem to be choosing between different services or providers, these choices are frequently pre-determined and standardised, leaving them with limited control over their decisions, that is, with little genuine autonomy.

The role of artificial intelligence in shaping consumer decisions enhances this illusion. *Recommender systems* embedded in social media, e-commerce and entertainment platforms claim to personalise user experience, but in practice, they restrict rather than expand choice. These algorithms prioritise content based on past interactions, reinforcing existing habits and filtering out unfamiliar alternatives. AI-generated suggestions thus shift agency away from individuals and towards corporations and digital intermediaries. While users may perceive tailored recommendations as helpful, legitimate concerns emerge that recommender systems may deceive or manipulate consumers and adversely affect their critical thinking (Bonicalzi et al., 2023). The result is not greater freedom but a form of soft manipulation that subtly directs choices while maintaining the appearance of individual control.

As consumers navigate an increasingly complex marketplace, their browsing and purchasing behaviours are continuously monitored. Data on their preferences, past choices and interactions are collected, enabling corporations to refine and tailor (and thus control) the options they present (Salecl,

2019). Faced with an overwhelming array of choices, individuals often turn to external sources for guidance on what to select. This strategy gives power to the source of that advice – whether it be celebrities, popular media, or the growing number of social media ‘influencers’ (Misuraca et al., 2024). Hence, rather than being able to choose among a number of options autonomously, consumers are guided by actors or corporations that have the power to control decision-making in their own vested interests.

The persistent illusion of choice not only constrains individual autonomy but also shapes consumer motivations in ways that reinforce extrinsic rather than intrinsic drivers. *Self-determination theory* highlights the psychological conditions necessary for genuine flourishing and well-being, emphasising the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness in decision-making (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, in consumer environments saturated with targeted marketing, algorithmic nudging and social influence, these psychological needs are systematically undermined. Instead of fostering self-directed choices based on intrinsic values – such as well-being, social connection or ethical commitments – market structures encourage extrinsically motivated consumption tied to status, validation or habit (Moller et al., 2006).

This manufactured dependence on external validation is reinforced by strategic product design and marketing techniques that manipulate perceptions of choice. Studies show that when consumers feel competent and informed, they are more likely to make decisions aligned with their long-term interests (Gilal et al., 2018). However, the complexity of modern consumer environments, that is, the overwhelming number of options, combined with complex pricing strategies and persuasive advertising, often makes decision-making confusing, increasing individuals’ reliance on external cues. Relatedness, or the need to feel connected to others, also plays a major role in consumer behaviour. Companies take advantage of this by linking their brands to social identity and belonging, shaping not only what consumers buy but also why they buy it (Pelletier & Sharp, 2008). Kasser (2009) further highlights that when people make choices based on their values rather than external pressures, they experience greater well-being and are more likely to make decisions that support environmental sustainability. Similarly, research has shown that companies, by aligning marketing practices with consumer values and motivations, can promote both long-term satisfaction and brand loyalty (Elf et al., 2021). However, the way consumption is structured often discourages this, leading people to follow patterns that serve corporate interests rather than their own values and motivations.

#### 5.4.2 *Less choice – better decisions*

Although modern consumer culture promotes the idea that more choice leads to better decisions and lasting satisfaction, research suggests the opposite:

when individuals face fewer options, they make quicker, more confident decisions and report higher levels of satisfaction with their selections. Limiting choice reduces cognitive effort, minimises post-decision regret and improves overall well-being (Schwartz, 2004). Rather than restricting autonomy, simplifying choices can enhance decision-making by allowing individuals to focus on meaningful alternatives rather than being overwhelmed by trivial distinctions.

One of the most cited studies on choice overload, conducted by Iyengar and Lepper (2000), demonstrates how reducing the number of available options improves consumer decision-making. There were two groups of people – one group was to choose among 6 varieties and the second one – among 24 jars of jam. Those offered only six options were ten times more likely to make a purchase (30% vs. 3%) and reported greater satisfaction with their selection. This suggests that too many choices can discourage action and reduce confidence in decision-making.

Similar findings apply to complex financial decisions. Iyengar and Kamenica (2010) examined retirement plan participation and found that when employees were given too many investment options, they were less likely to enrol in any plan. However, when companies simplified choices and provided a curated selection, enrolment rates increased significantly, and participants expressed greater confidence in their decisions. These findings highlight how reducing complexity improves outcomes, particularly in high-stakes decision-making.

In the healthcare sector, Reutskaja and Hogarth (2009) found that patients presented with a limited number of clear treatment options made more confident and informed choices than those confronted with a long list of alternatives. When faced with too much information, patients struggled with indecision and were more likely to delay or avoid making crucial health decisions. This reinforces the idea that well-structured, limited choices support more effective decision-making in essential areas of life.

A compelling real-world illustration of the benefits of fewer choices comes from Gordon Ramsay's programme *Kitchen Nightmares*. In this television series, Chef Ramsay visits struggling restaurants. Many of them offer an excessive number of dishes, overwhelming both customers and kitchen staff. As a result, chefs struggle with quality because an extensive menu stretches resources, making it impossible to perfect each dish. Ingredients go to waste, preparation is inconsistent and execution suffers. Customers face decision fatigue, as a menu with dozens of choices makes it harder for diners to decide, increasing dissatisfaction with their final selection. Slower service and inefficiency arise because a bloated menu complicates kitchen operations, leading to longer waiting times, frequent mistakes and declining customer loyalty. Ramsay's solution is almost always the same: simplify the menu, focus on fewer dishes and master their execution. Restaurants that adopt this

approach typically experience higher customer satisfaction, as diners appreciate a curated selection of well-prepared dishes over an overwhelming variety of mediocre ones. Increased profitability follows as streamlining ingredients and preparation reduces waste, improves margins and attracts repeat customers. This example mirrors what research shows across different domains: when choice is carefully curated, individuals and businesses alike benefit from greater focus, efficiency and quality.

The idea of ‘less choice – better decisions’ is increasingly recognised in business strategy as *choice editing*. Companies that reduce unnecessary complexity in their offerings often see improved customer engagement and financial performance. Research by Gourville and Soman (2005) shows that companies offering fewer product variations experience higher customer satisfaction and stronger sales. Consumers prefer clearer, well-differentiated choices over overwhelming product lines. Besides, choice editing is also a powerful tool for driving sustainability and ethical responsibility. By deliberately limiting product options to more sustainable and ethical choices, businesses can not only enhance decision-making for consumers but also ensure stronger supply chain oversight, enforce ethical standards and minimise reputational risks. This approach supports compliance with evolving regulations on environmental and social responsibility, helping businesses stay ahead of legal requirements. At the same time, it meets growing consumer demand for ethical and sustainable products by ensuring that only responsible options are available while improving efficiency and competitive advantage (Gunn & Mont, 2014).

### 5.4.3 *The scarcity paradox*

The idea that more choice leads to greater happiness is deeply embedded in consumer culture. However, the scarcity paradox – the increased appeal of goods when they are perceived as scarce – challenges this assumption. Scarcity does not diminish value but often enhances it, influencing consumer desire, business strategies and broader economic structures. Historically, scarcity was a condition to be endured; today, in some sectors, it is deliberately engineered to increase or maintain demand.

This section examines how scarcity shapes the perception of value, particularly in the luxury industry and sufficiency-oriented businesses, offering a counter-argument against the paradox of choice. Two types of businesses present distinct types of scarcity in business practices: one designed to enhance exclusivity and another aimed at long-term sustainability and sufficiency.

Luxury brands rely on *artificial scarcity* to enhance desirability. By restricting product availability, limiting production volumes and maintaining high prices, these brands cultivate a sense of exclusivity (Kapferer, 2012, 2015). This scarcity is not due to resource limitations but is a strategic tool to

maintain social distinction and signal status, as well as exclude certain social groups from accessing the offers. For instance, high-end fashion brands like Hermès limit the availability of their handbags, such as the Birkin bag, by requiring customers to join waiting lists. Similarly, luxury watchmakers release limited-edition timepieces to increase their perceived value. These strategies ensure that ownership remains exclusive, reinforcing the idea that rarity equates to worth. This carefully managed scarcity draws in consumers who seek differentiation, feeding into the aspirational nature of luxury consumption.

While luxury brands create scarcity to uphold exclusivity, *sufficiency-oriented companies* (organisations further discussed in Chapter 8) embrace scarcity for sustainability and long-term resilience. These businesses intentionally limit production to maintain ethical labour practices, environmental responsibility and financial independence (Gossen & Niessen, 2024). Unlike traditional business models that rely on rapid growth and external investment, sufficiency-driven businesses prioritise stability over expansion. Companies employing sufficiency strategies produce goods according to their actual capacity rather than aiming for mass production and stockpiling (Werner et al., 2025). For instance, some small-scale fashion brands operate on a made-to-order basis, ensuring they do not overproduce or waste resources. Others, like artisanal workshops or cooperatives, focus on localised, slow production, which fosters long-term consumer engagement and strengthens brand authenticity.

Luxury scarcity-based business models and sufficiency-oriented businesses share common features in leveraging scarcity to create value, albeit with different objectives. Both models reject mass production and opt for curated, controlled growth, whether to maintain brand prestige or to uphold sustainability principles. Additionally, both focus on qualitative rarity, for example, craftsmanship and durability. In both cases, excessive availability dilutes value, whether in terms of social distinction or environmental and social integrity. Ultimately, these models challenge the assumption that maximisation of choice – whether of offers, production, or market reach – equates to success or well-being.

#### 5.4.4 *More choice is not universally desirable*

Cultural context also shapes how people perceive and handle the abundance of choice. Douglas (1986) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) have explored how cultural structures impose boundaries on choice. Often, these boundaries serve to maintain social order and cohesion or the fragile balance of the existing natural ecosystem, as seen in the case of indigenous tribes (e.g. Elf et al., 2025). For example, among the Inuit, elders often guide traditional decision-making, and individual choices are informed by communal wisdom rather than personal preference alone.

The distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures has been highlighted as particularly relevant for understanding how the abundance of choice is treated (Iyengar, 2010). As previously discussed, in individualistic cultures (e.g. much of North America and Western Europe), autonomy and personal freedom are highly valued. As a result, people in these societies often believe that having numerous options is beneficial and empowering. Yet, for some, the clash between the desire for freedom of choice and the overwhelming nature of large assortments can intensify stress. In these cultures, choice overload might manifest as a conflict between the culturally ingrained drive to seek maximum choice and the emotional burden of sifting through excessive information. Indeed, more recent research exploring discrepancies between the perceived ideal and actual number of choices in different life domains across countries has found that respondents in North America were less likely to report having fewer choices than their ideal number (Reutskaja et al., 2022).

Conversely, collectivistic cultures (e.g. parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America) often emphasise group harmony, shared decision-making and guidance from trusted authorities or community elders. People in collectivistic societies may experience fewer personal pressures to evaluate every possible choice individually because decisions are frequently made within close-knit social circles. Fewer choices are preferred, and people are inclined to defer to experts or family members to make decisions. In Japan, for instance, the concept of ‘*amae*’ (mutual dependence) plays a role in how individuals navigate choices, often relying on family and workplace hierarchies to structure decisions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These differences in cross-cultural preferences are seen at an early age. Iyengar and Lepper (1999) found that Anglo-American children preferred more choices, while Asian-American children were happier and performed better when their choices were made for them by trusted figures. This reduced individual burden of navigating excessive options can permit people to have more capacity to invest in social relationships and shared activities. Putnam (2000), in his book *Bowling Alone*, observed that societies with a stronger focus on individualised consumerism experienced declining levels of community participation and social capital.

## 5.5 Implications

The evidence dispelling the myth of ‘the more, the merrier’ has implications not only for consumers but also for policy and businesses. Recognising that excessive choice can lead to decision paralysis, dissatisfaction and environmental impact highlights the need for targeted interventions. Stakeholders can take steps to promote sustainable consumption levels by curating options, fostering informed decision-making and designing policies that prioritise well-being over the sheer abundance of consumer choice.

### 5.5.1 For policymakers

Governments and policymakers play a crucial role in mitigating the negative consequences of choice overload. A growing body of research points to the need for *choice architecture* strategies, such as ‘nudges’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), which provide products and services for consumers to facilitate easier and more sustainable consumption patterns and levels. *Choice editing*, where harmful or unsustainable products are removed from the market, is a potent tool to manage unsustainable abundance while steering consumption towards sustainability.

France has taken a leading role in choice editing through two key policies: the French Bill on Ultra-Fast Fashion and the Ban on Fossil Fuel Advertising. The *Ultra-Fast Fashion Bill* aims to curb the environmental and social harms of rapid, high-turnover fashion by limiting excessive production and overconsumption. It does so by restricting the number of new collections companies can introduce each year and mandating stricter sustainability requirements (Holland, 2024). By reducing the sheer volume of disposable clothing, the policy curtails unsustainable consumption opportunities and encourages longer product lifespans.

Similarly, France’s *Ban on Fossil Fuel Advertising*, which came into force on 22 August 2022, targets the roots of demand creation by restricting the promotion of products that drive climate change (Frost, 2022). The law prohibits advertisements for fossil fuel-related products, including petrol and diesel vehicles, while controversially exempting gas.<sup>2</sup> By removing market signals that normalise fossil fuel dependency, this measure limits consumer exposure to unsustainable and high-emission goods.

Simplifying sustainable choices through transparent, standardised ecolabels can help consumers navigate markets without being overwhelmed. While *ecolabels* are meant to guide decision-making, their effectiveness depends on design and presentation (Sunstein, 2020). Research shows that too many or poorly structured labels can complicate rather than simplify choices, leading to decision fatigue or disengagement (Sunstein, 2021). Thus, policymakers should ensure that ecolabels are not only clear and standardised but also designed to maximise accessibility and actual behavioural change, for example, by enforcing stricter labelling regulations, limiting the number of competing certifications and ensuring labels use simple, recognisable formats that help consumers make informed decisions without being overwhelmed.

### 5.5.2 For business

Businesses can address choice overload through three main strategies: curating a more streamlined product offering, providing filtering tools and reducing time pressure.

The first way businesses can manage choice overload is by curating their product offerings rather than providing excessive variety. Many companies assume that offering more choices increases customer satisfaction, but in

reality, too many options often lead to frustration and indecision (Dar & Gul, 2025), as well as overconsumption. By focusing on a smaller, high-quality selection, businesses can improve both consumer experience and operational efficiency (Werner et al., 2025). A reduced product range also enhances supply chain transparency and quality control, making it easier for companies to ensure ethical sourcing, minimise environmental impact and avoid reputational risks associated with unsustainable practices in their supply chains. This approach aligns with emerging consumer preferences for durability, repairability and sustainability over excessive consumption. By streamlining their offerings and embracing a sufficiency-oriented approach, businesses can foster more sustainable consumption levels while differentiating themselves in an increasingly crowded marketplace (Mont et al., 2025).

When providing many options is unavoidable, businesses can minimise choice overload by enhancing how options are presented and making decision-making more intuitive. For example, in online shopping environments, filtering features enable consumers to narrow down their selections based on price, sustainability or customer reviews and ratings, reducing the cognitive effort required to evaluate numerous alternatives (Turri & Watson, 2023). These interactive decision aids improve consumer satisfaction by simplifying product comparisons. In physical stores, similar mechanisms can be implemented through store layouts and displays that highlight the most relevant or high-quality options for a given category (Mantrala et al., 2009). With the rise of AI-driven technologies, businesses increasingly use personalised recommender systems that tailor product suggestions based on past consumer behaviour. They can help simplify decision-making for consumers by reducing cognitive effort. However, businesses and consumers should recognise that recommended options are not neutral, as algorithms prioritise certain choices over others. It is, therefore, essential to consider the risks of bias, misinformation and privacy concerns when implementing and relying on these technologies (Paul et al., 2023).

The third way to reduce choice overload is by addressing time pressure, which significantly impacts consumer decision-making. When faced with many options, consumers often experience greater stress when they feel they must make a decision quickly (Misuraca et al., 2024). Businesses frequently exacerbate this pressure through marketing techniques such as flash sales, countdown timers and limited-edition product releases, which create urgency but also contribute to poor decision-making and post-purchase regret. Instead, companies can reduce time pressure by allowing consumers more space to evaluate their options. Extending return periods or trial-based purchasing models can help alleviate decision anxiety and encourage more thoughtful purchases. Subscription models and pre-order systems can also remove the burden of repeated decisions by offering consumers a predictable and stress-free way to access products.

### 5.5.3 For consumers

Consumers play a crucial role in challenging the assumption that more choice leads to lasting happiness by shifting towards conscious, intentional and sufficiency-oriented consumption. The belief that more options lead to better outcomes has driven excessive consumption, yet research suggests that an abundance of choice often decreases satisfaction and increases stress. Drawing on Iyengar's (2010) strategies – developing expertise in choice elimination, categorising options to make them more manageable and leveraging crowd-based recommendations – consumers can take practical steps to shift from overwhelming decision-making to more satisfying and meaningful consumption. Below, we describe these strategies in more detail.

One way to break free from the illusion that more choice equals more happiness is to develop expertise in choice elimination. The most effective consumers are not those who chase endless options but those who know what truly matters to them and filter out distractions. Rather than feeling obligated to explore every available alternative, consumers can set clear criteria – such as prioritising durability, sustainability or ethical production – before making a purchase. Deliberately limiting choices reduces decision fatigue while fostering a deeper sense of control and long-term satisfaction. The *#deinfluencing* movement, which emerged in early 2023, highlights this shift. Deinfluencers challenge overconsumption by encouraging followers to resist impulse buying, question marketing narratives and invest in fewer, higher-quality products. Instead of being seduced by the novelty of choice, consumers who embrace fewer but better purchases report greater post-purchase satisfaction and reduced stress (Isham et al., 2022).

A second strategy is to organise choices into meaningful categories, reducing cognitive overload while reinforcing a sense of control. More choices do not necessarily mean better choices. Instead, they often create confusion. This is, for example, evident in areas like sustainable food consumption, where an increasing number of ecolabels and ethical certifications can overwhelm rather than empower consumers. Focusing on a few trusted certification schemes, such as organic, fair trade, or regenerative agriculture labels, helps simplify decision-making. Similarly, in fashion, consumers struggling with fast-changing trends can adopt capsule wardrobe principles, building a small, versatile collection of timeless, high-quality clothing instead of continuously chasing new styles. The Swedish concept of *lagom*, meaning moderation and balance, aligns with this mindset by encouraging people to find satisfaction in just enough rather than endless variety (Elf, 2020). Categorising and limiting options help restore a sense of sufficiency (further explored in Chapter 8), replacing the false security of endless choice with the confidence of well-informed decision-making and contentment.

Finally, crowd-based recommendations can counteract the false promise of infinite choice by redirecting attention towards community-driven knowledge rather than marketing-driven consumption. Seeking peer recommendations, ethical shopping guides and sustainability-focused consumer platforms allows consumers to make informed choices while reducing decision fatigue. Studies show that collaborative decision-making and collective wisdom lead to higher satisfaction and less regret, as consumers base their decisions on shared experiences rather than manipulative marketing tactics (Iyengar, 2010). Digital tools and AI-powered recommendation systems provide another layer of support, tailoring choices based on actual preferences rather than arbitrary trends. However, consumers must remain critical of algorithm-driven suggestions, which can reinforce consumption patterns based on convenience rather than sustainability. Engaging with community-driven networks, such as repair collectives, second-hand marketplaces and ethical brand directories, enables consumers to shift away from the mindset that more choice equals more happiness and towards an approach that values meaning, quality and sufficiency.

## 5.6 Main message

The myth that more choice equals more happiness has led to unsustainable consumption patterns, environmental degradation, consumer dissatisfaction and decreased levels of well-being. The phenomenon dubbed the Paradox of Choice shows that instead of increasing satisfaction, a surplus of options may also lead to stress and anxiety. In contrast, having fewer, well-curated choices can simplify decision-making and lead to more fulfilling outcomes. By understanding the paradox of choice, policymakers, businesses and consumers can work towards creating systems where fewer, more sustainable choices lead to better outcomes for individuals and society.

## Notes

- 1 By overconsumption, we mean material accumulation, which no longer contributes to well-being but is driven by social norms, advertising, and economic structures geared towards perpetual growth (Jackson, 2009). At the individual level, overconsumption is driven by status-seeking behaviours and the pursuit of an idealised lifestyle, while structurally, it is reinforced by economic systems that prioritise continuous expansion and profit maximisation (Schor, 1998).
- 2 Despite the proactive nature of the ban, critics argue that the exemption for natural gas allows companies to continue promoting fossil fuels and, in general, leaves much leeway for companies to bypass the restrictions.

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#### **84** Myths about Sustainable Consumption: Dispelled

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