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Choice Overload and Partial Season Ticket Sales

Clinton J. Warren

Joshua M. Lupinek

Abstract

This study utilizes a consumer choice experiment to assess if choice overload exists with partial season ticket packages of a Major League Soccer (MLS) team. Individuals were randomly assigned to one of three conditions with an increasing number of partial season ticket options. Study results indicate as the number of options available increases, buyers are more likely to feel the decision-making process was difficult and regret the decision they made. However, participants were generally satisfied to be afforded so many options, and increasing the number of ticket plan options did not appear to affect purchase intent or potential purchase satisfaction.

Keywords: *Choice overload, consumer choice, experimental design, marketing, ticket sales*

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Introduction

The aim of this research is to examine the potential existence of choice overload in the market for partial season ticket plans. The rising price of tickets and overall cost to attend games has arguably begun to price out many fans and small business ticket buyers. One common strategy sport organizations use to combat this trend is the sale of partial season ticket options. Partial season ticket packages allow ticket sales staffs to fit prospective buyers with a ticket service that has a reduced overall cost and time commitment than season tickets. Selling partial season tickets is not a new phenomenon, but the manner by which teams develop these ticket services and their ancillary benefits is a continually evolving area of ticket sales strategy.

The emergence of multiple partial season flexible ticket options or “flex packs” allow buyers to purchase a set number of tickets in advance that may be allocated at the buyer’s discretion throughout the season. While it is possible a wide variety of options is something that could draw consumers to a specific business’s offerings over a competitor, research suggests an excessive number of options can have negative consequences. Specifically, an overabundance of consumer options has been found to decrease purchase motivation, decrease satisfaction with a given choice, and lead to increased feelings of disappointment and regret (Chernev, 2003; Iyengar, Huberman, & Jiang, 2004; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Researchers often refer to this paradoxical situation as the “choice overload” phenomenon (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Mogilner, Rudick, & Iyengar, 2008). As ticket sales has mirrored consumer industry in innovation and development, with respect to the number of options available to prospective buyers, it is important to consider the potential negative consequences of creating such a wide range of purchase options. Importantly, ticket sales executives should consider if the creation of flexible ticket options and a multitude of partial season ticket offerings could decrease purchase motivation. Further, it is possible that consumers who purchase one of these ticket offerings find themselves feeling unsatisfied, disappointed, or regretful of their decision. This study seeks to understand if more complex ticket product and service options lead to increases in these negative feelings among potential buyers.

This study is designed to test this choice overload phenomenon by using a Major League Soccer (MLS) team as the focal point of a ticket buying experiment that uses the range of choice options typically provided by clubs in the league. Not all MLS teams offer the same ticket services; however, most teams do offer partial season ticket plans ranging from as few as three games to as many as ten of the 18 home games on the schedule. As such, study participants were assigned to one of three partial season ticket buying scenarios for a MLS team derived from the team’s actual partial ticket offerings for the 2017 season. Upon completion of their hypothetical buying activity, participants responded to a survey that measured their attitudes toward the decision-making process and the ultimate choice they made during the activity.

Literature Review

The theory of choice overload is a contentious topic within the marketing and strategic management literature. It is theorized that offering consumers a large variety of options can have a two-pronged impact on consumer decision making. The initial impact, supported by economics literature, suggests providing consumers with a greater number of options in a set of choices will increase the likelihood that a consumer will find an option that appeals to them, and that person will make a purchase accordingly (Baumol & Ide, 1956). However, more recent literature suggests the benefits of offering a wider range of purchase options is offset by the cognitive costs associated with increasing the number of options from which a consumer must choose (Chernev, Böckenholt, & Goodman, 2015). These cognitive costs include feelings of increased effort and difficulty in decision-making, potential feelings of regret, and concerns about overall satisfaction (Diehl & Poynor, 2010; Gourville & Soman, 2005). Consumer choice literature indicates the increased presence of these emotions during a purchase decision represent a paradoxical phenomenon called choice overload. Choice overload has been defined as a phenomenon that occurs with an increasing number of purchase alternatives, resulting in a reduction in an individual's motivation to make a choice (Jilke, Van Ryzin, & Van de Walle, 2016). While early economic theory suggests increasing consumer options is positive for the marketplace, Chernev et al. (2015) provide an extensive review of the literature and meta-analysis marketing research that concludes choice overload, as a result of increasing assortment size and variety among purchase options, is significant and does negatively impact satisfaction while increasing levels of regret following a purchase. However, the findings of Chernev et al. (2015) has not silenced the debate as to whether there may be certain conditions and consumer situations in which greater choice selection will be perceived as generally desirable by the consumer rather than stressful and paralyzing with regard to purchase decision-making (Dowding & John, 2009; Hutchinson, 2005; Nagar, 2016). Further, Schwartz (2009) argues the more freedom people have, the better off they are, and increasing choice inherently increases freedom. This argument is in line with economic theory; however, it is unclear how this may manifest regarding individual consumer psychology. At present, there are no generally agreed upon conditions in which choice overload is certain to occur (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010). As a result of this ongoing conversation, this study seeks to be the first to examine the existence of choice overload in a sport ticket buying context.

Ticket Buying Experiment

This study sought to examine the existence of choice overload among prospective buyers of tickets for teams that offer a flexible ticket plan option by conducting a consumer behavior experiment. Participants in this experiment were randomly assigned to one of three conditions that represented an increasing number of ticket plan options that were derived from an MLS team's partial ticket

inventory. Specifically, the teams actual partial plan offerings were broken down to create three groups with a range of game options and price points. Additionally, this approach allowed the researchers to utilize actual team marketing materials and true price points avoiding any confusion to participants who may have had prior knowledge of the team's ticket offerings. A controlled laboratory environment was used to ensure participants did not use the internet to access the team's actual ticket product and service offerings.

Method

Thirty-nine individuals were recruited via email and word-of-mouth from a co-ed, adult recreational soccer league within the MLS team's media market. Participants were not offered compensation to participate in the experiment which took approximately 30 minutes for each group to complete. The group of participants was comprised of 33.3% females, 59.0% males, and 7.7% unreported who ranged in age from 18 to 44 years old ($M = 26.8$). In an effort to better describe the sample participants and assess the potential influence of fan attachment to the team in this experiment, participants completed a questionnaire measuring their brand awareness of and fan identification with the MLS team used in this study. Brand awareness was measured using Washburn and Plank's (2002) three-item scale and social identification to the team was measured using the three-item Team Identification Scale (Kwon & Armstrong, 2004).

All scales were measured on a seven-point Likert scale. Overall, participants could be classified as moderately aware of the team brand ($M = 3.07$) and low to moderately identified with the team as fans ($M = 2.77$). Table 1 includes a more complete description of the study participants categorized by the group to which they were randomly assigned.

Table 1

Experimental Group Demographics

Group	Gender	Age (M)	Fan ID (M)	Brand Awareness (M)
Group 1	F (5), M (7), U(1)	26.4	3.13	3.29
Group 2	F (4), M (7), U(2)	24.2	3.67	3.32
Group 3	F (4), M (9), U(0)	29.8	3.10	2.59

All groups began the experiment by being given the same set of instructions. Participants were provided a hypothetical scenario in which they had won a \$400 gift card from the MLS team that could only be used to purchase tickets, merchandise, and/or concessions at the stadium. Next, participants were instructed that they were to use the information provided to determine which ticket plan they would like buy with their gift card with the understanding that the remaining amount would be available to them for in-stadium spending. Participants were then provided one of three different partial season ticket menus from which they

made their selections. If the ticket option they chose did not utilize the entire \$400, they were told the remaining amount would be available for use on merchandise or concessions in the stadium.

The three conditions to which participants were assigned represents a series of options with an increasing number of choices. Each group received a set of marketing materials that included a promotional ticket flyer, a season ticket buyer benefit flyer, a seating map of the venue, and a 2017 season schedule. Group 1 was assigned the condition of choosing either a three-game ticket plan or a four-game ticket plan that each included fixed games on the team's schedule. Group 2 was assigned the condition of a flexible ticket plan that allowed the buyer to allocate a total of 10 tickets across the entire season. This group was asked to select the games they would most likely attend and allocate their tickets accordingly. Group 3 was assigned the condition of having the fixed 3-game plan, fixed 4-game plan, or the 10-ticket flex pack. This group was also instructed to select games and allocate their tickets based on what they would most likely do in the event they chose the flexible ticket plan.

Each group was able to choose their ticket plan options within one of two seating zones that included differing price points based on the team's pricing structure. Participants were given 20 minutes to review their options and make their preferred ticket plan selection. After making their ticket plan selection, participants were provided a survey to assess their hypothetical buying experience. The survey measured choice difficulty, choice satisfaction, choice regret, and purchase intention.

The survey instrument was developed from previous literature on choice overload theory. Specifically, choice difficulty was measured using Iyengar et al.'s (2004) 3-item scale, choice satisfaction and choice regret were measured using a 3-item scales developed by Chernev (2003), and purchase intentions were measured using the 3-item scale developed by Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991) that was previously used in a sport marketing study (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007). Consistent with Scheibehenne et al. (2009), participants were also asked if they would rather receive the \$400 brand gift card toward tickets, merchandise, and/or concessions (that they were asked to spend in the previous scenario) or a \$100 Visa gift card that could be spent on anything. This question was asked to determine to what degree participants would simply prefer avoiding making these ticket purchase choices altogether.

Results

Data from this experiment were analyzed by conducting a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) that utilized the participant's assigned condition as a grouping variable and the five variables representing choice overload as dependent variables. Results of the MANOVA indicated differing hypothetical purchase experiences for each experimental group. Overall, the results lend support to the hypothesis that choice overload exists among prospective partial season

ticket buyers. Specifically, the main effect from the multivariate null hypothesis of equality across the three experimental groups with respect to the five choice overload dependent variables indicated statistically significant differences (Wilks' $L = .524$, $F(10, 64) = 2.440$, $p = .016$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.276$, power = .912).

Table 2

Univariate Results for Experimental Group on Choice Overload Variables

Group	DV	df	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Experimental Group	Choice difficulty	2	7.227	.002	.286
	Choice satisfaction	2	.984	.384	.052
	Choice regret	2	5.101	.011	.221
	Purchase intention	2	.033	.968	.002
	Choice preference	2	.700	.503	.037

These results indicate the participants' randomly assigned group accounted for approximately 27.6% of the variance in the differences across each dependent variable.

According to Cohen (1988), this represents a large amount of variance among these three groups. Further, the results of the corresponding univariate tests lend additional support to the differing hypothetical purchase decision experiences presented to participants. Specifically, choice difficulty ($p = .002$) and choice regret ($p = .011$) indicated significant differences when compared across the three groups. Post hoc analyses revealed participants in Group 3 experienced significantly greater feelings of choice difficulty than those in Group 1 or Group 2, and participants in Group 1 felt significantly less choice regret than participants in Group 2 and Group 3. Table 2 includes the univariate *F*-tests from the MANOVA.

Discussion

The findings in this study supported the general theory of choice overload for partial season ticket sales in MLS. However, a deeper exploration of these results yields a series of interesting findings for each dependent variable. Figure 1 shows a graph of the group differences for choice difficulty and choice regret. First, the group members that were provided the most ticket product options experienced the greatest difficulty in making their choice when compared to the other two groups. While the difference in choice difficulty between Group 1 and Group 2 was not statistically significant, it appears a linear relationship between increasing number of choices and choice difficulty may exist. However, the magnitude of change when combining the offerings in Groups 1 and Group 2 is important. The ticket product options provided to Group 3 represented the actual partial ticket plan offerings for that MLS team at the time of data collection. As such, these results suggest 2017 partial plan buyers likely experienced high levels of difficulty

in making purchase decisions. This poses a challenge for ticket sales and marketing staffs as it relates to helping prospective buyers see the value in one of the options as it relates to an individual buyer.

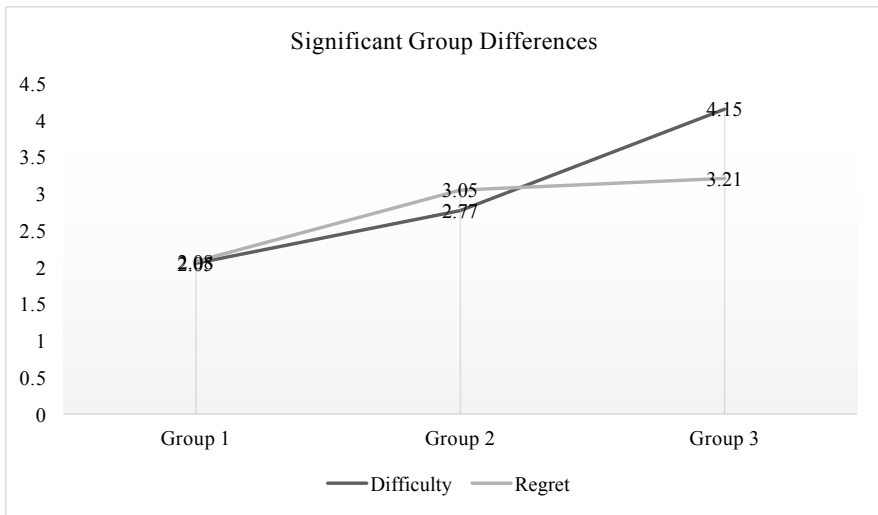


Figure 1. Post Hoc Significant Differences across Experimental Groups

Secondly, Group 1, the group with the fewest options, experienced significantly less choice regret than the other two groups. Figure 1 again shows that while Group 1 was significantly different than Group 2 and Group 3, there is a somewhat linear and increasing relationship between the number of options and feelings of buyer's remorse. Importantly, Group 2 and Group 3 include the team's flexible ticket plan option. In the experiment, participants were asked to allocate their tickets across the season schedule if they chose the flexible ticket plan. While in a real buying scenario plan holders would not need to do this upon purchase, this instruction was given to ensure the participant did think about how they would use the flexible plan if they did in fact purchase one. It is possible that this increased potential feelings of regret. In sum, it appears that the likelihood of feeling buyer's remorse is increased with larger assortments of ticket plan options.

Third, there were no statistically significant differences across the groups on intent to purchase or the hypothetical option of receiving a Visa gift card instead of a team gift card. However, an examination of the mean scores of intent to purchase shows another linear, increasing relationship between the number options available and purchase intent. Group 1 indicated a mean intent to purchase of 3.08, Group 2 had a mean of 3.15, and Group 3 a mean of 3.23 all when measured on a 7-point Likert scale. While this finding was not statistically significant, future research should address this potential difference. It is possible that while more options may increase feelings of regret and difficulty in making a decision, it may not lead to a corresponding decrease in purchase intent.

Additionally, the frequency statistics of the hypothetical option of receiving a \$100 Visa gift card rather than \$400 from the MLS team was split somewhat evenly. In total, 17 of the 39 participants preferred the \$400 from the team, and 22 of the 39 participants preferred the Visa gift card. It is not surprising to find participants somewhat more interested in the non-team option given the overall level of fan identification ($M = 2.77$) and brand awareness ($M = 3.07$) of the sample when measured on 7-point Likert scales. When taken collectively, these two results indicate increasing number of choices may not negatively impact overall intent to purchase the MLS team's ticket products.

Limitations

This study was limited regarding several factors. First, it must be noted the total sample size of this study limits the ability with which these results can be generalized back to a larger population of potential partial ticket plan buyers. Second, the usage of adult, co-ed, recreational soccer players as a sample may not truly reflect the typical make-up of a MLS team's partial ticket plan target market. This also affects the study's generalizability. Finally, this study created a hypothetical scenario in which individuals were asked to make a ticket-buying decision for a team they had not previously indicated an affinity for. Further, the team had endured a long stretch of poor on-field performance and significant negative publicity regarding the team's interactions with its primary supporter groups. All of these factors serve as limitations of this study.

Conclusion

The ability to sell season ticket plans is vital to the success of many professional and collegiate sport properties (McDonald, Karg, & Leckie, 2014). Rising ticket prices, greater competition for the consumer's entertainment dollar, and better at-home viewing options has led to many teams pursuing the sale of partial season ticket plans as a way to sustain their season ticket base when full season ticket plans are not an ideal consumer product. While the creation of partial season ticket plans provides a wider array of options for prospective ticket buyers, it is possible that this varying collection of games, seat locations, price points, competition, value-added benefits, and game dates and times could yield too many options.

Study participants found the decision-making process to be more difficult as the number of options presented increased, and a significant and increasing relationship between the number of options and feelings of choice difficulty was found as well. Since many MLS teams market and sell similar ticket offerings as those in this study, team ticket sales staffs should ensure they are available to help buyers through this difficult decision-making process. This is especially important in light of this study's findings related to choice satisfaction and purchase intent. In general, participants in both phases of this study did not indicate the number of purchase options available had an effect on their likelihood of satisfaction or purchase intent. It is not surprising to find that participants in this study found the

decision-making process difficult while experiencing no corresponding drop in satisfaction or purchase intent. In a study comparing large and small assortments of chocolates, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) found that larger assortments led to increased difficulty in decision-making, but those participants found greater enjoyment and satisfaction in having been provided the larger assortment when compared to the small assortment group. This appears to be the case for participants in the present study.

Another important practical finding of this study is participants reported a degree of choice regret that increased with greater purchase options. Group 1, the group with the fewest options, indicated significantly less choice regret than Group 2 and Group 3. Interestingly, Groups 2 and Group 3 were the experimental groups that included the flexible ticket plan.

Overall, these findings yield two primary considerations for MLS ticket sales staffs. First, it appears that prospective buyers do feel satisfied with the range of options MLS teams are typically presenting. However, it is clear that when facing the number of partial plan options typically available through MLS teams, buyers view the decision-making process as difficult. This provides a clear opportunity for sales professionals to assume the role of educator and buying consultant. Successful sales staff should be adept at describing the options available to consumers and assist them in weighing the pros and cons of each ticket plan. Second, it appears as though prospective buyers have a legitimate interest in flexible ticket options, but there is an equally legitimate concern that they would regret buying this plan. It is possible this is related to an apprehension that they may not utilize all of their tickets throughout the season. This represents another opportunity for skilled sales professionals to assist buyers in choosing the best games for them and their schedules.

Study results indicate it would be beneficial to continually communicate with flex plan buyers with regard to how many seats they have used and promote games at which they should consider attending. This focus on building value and ensuring buyers maximize their investment is an important consideration for cultivating long-term relationships. These types of strategies would allow sales professionals to work with their clients beyond the initial transaction.

In conclusion, this study has sought to extend the theory of choice overload to better understand prospective partial season ticket plan buyers. This study's findings are largely consistent with existing market research in the area of choice overload. Future research should utilize quantitative and qualitative techniques in continuing to study this area of sport marketing. In particular, a large-scale survey of single-game ticket buyers would be relevant to assess their perceptions of partial season ticket plans, and focus groups of more engaged ticket buyers could provide further insight into the value of partial ticket plan ownership. Continuing to study this area will allow ticket sales and marketing staffs to better develop their ticket services to meet the needs and wants of the widest range of prospective buyers.

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