



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

THE PARADOX OF CHOICE: WHY MORE IS LESS

A

In affluent societies, choice is often treated as a synonym for freedom. Yet psychologists and behavioural economists have long noted a counterintuitive pattern: when options multiply beyond what people can realistically evaluate, decision-making may become aversive. Barry Schwartz popularised this tension as the “paradox of choice”, arguing that the modern marketplace can convert autonomy into anxiety. Rather than feeling empowered, consumers may experience a diffuse sense of burden—an awareness that any selection implies missing out, being judged, or later regretting a “wrong” choice. The paradox is not a claim that choice is harmful in general, but that its benefits can show diminishing returns once cognitive limits and emotional consequences are taken seriously.

B

The most cited early evidence came from Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper’s field experiment often described as the “jam study”. In one condition, shoppers encountered a large assortment; in another, a smaller, curated set. The larger display drew more attention, suggesting that variety functions as an attractive signal of abundance. However, the crucial difference emerged at the point of commitment: a smaller selection produced a higher rate of purchase. Laboratory replications and related studies have produced nuanced results, but the basic idea is robust enough to shape theory: large assortments increase the work of comparing attributes, and that work is experienced as cognitive load. The problem is not laziness; it is that attention, working memory, and patience are finite resources, and each additional option expands the mental search space.

C

A second explanation emphasises opportunity cost. Choosing is not merely picking what is best; it is also rejecting alternatives that might have been. With few options, rejected possibilities are easy to forget. With many, what is sacrificed becomes more salient, because the mind can easily imagine the advantages of the options left behind. This counterfactual thinking—simulating “what if I had chosen differently?”—can reduce enjoyment even after a decision is made. The experience resembles a loss: the consumer receives the chosen product, but the rejected products remain psychologically active as unrealised benefits. In this view, dissatisfaction is not produced by the item itself but by the shadow of foregone opportunities.



D

A third mechanism involves expectation inflation. When a market offers countless variations, consumers infer that a perfect fit must exist somewhere. This produces “paralysis by analysis”: the fear that settling quickly is irrational because a marginally better match could be found with further searching. Even after choosing, the standard against which the product is judged is no longer “good”; it is “ideal”. If the chosen option is merely adequate, disappointment follows—especially in categories marketed as identity-defining, such as fashion, music, or lifestyle services. Advertising amplifies this by promising personalisation and suggesting that consumers deserve a selection tailored to their unique preferences, thereby raising standards for what a purchase should deliver emotionally.

E

Not everyone responds to abundant choice in the same way, and individual differences help explain mixed findings across studies. Schwartz distinguished “maximisers”, who search for the best possible option, from “satisficers”, who stop once an option meets a “good enough” threshold. Maximisers tend to engage in broader searches, compare more attributes, and revisit decisions, which makes them more vulnerable to regret and rumination. Satisficers, by contrast, protect satisfaction by limiting comparison and accepting trade-offs. Importantly, maximising is not always irrational. In high-stakes decisions—choosing a medical treatment, selecting a university, or hiring an employee—thorough search can improve outcomes. The paradox therefore depends on both the stakes and the costs of continued search.

F

Digital environments intensify these dynamics. Online platforms remove many of the natural stopping cues that exist in physical settings, such as a shop closing time, a queue, or the inconvenience of travelling to another store. Infinite scroll, autoplay, and rapid comparison tools can sustain a perpetual search state: the user feels that something better is one click away. Recommendation algorithms do reduce some effort by narrowing what is shown, yet they can also extend browsing by constantly offering “next best” alternatives. In effect, technology lowers the friction of searching while raising the temptation to keep searching, creating a cycle in which decision time expands even when the immediate choice is low-stakes.

G

One response is to redesign the environment using “choice architecture”, an approach associated with behavioural economics and sometimes framed as libertarian paternalism. Defaults, filters, curated lists, and simplified menus can reduce overload while preserving



formal freedom. A pension plan that automatically enrolls employees, for example, can increase participation; a streaming service that offers genre filters can reduce search time. However, these tools introduce power: whoever sets the default or defines the filter shapes outcomes. If a platform quietly ranks options to maximise profit rather than user benefit, simplification becomes manipulation. For this reason, critics argue that any curation strategy should be paired with transparency about how options are selected, ordered, and presented.

H

The paradox of choice does not imply that more options are always worse. Evidence suggests the effect varies with context: the number of alternatives, the consumer's expertise, the importance of the decision, and the ease of switching later all matter. Too little choice can also reduce satisfaction by limiting fit, especially when preferences are diverse. The practical aim is balance—organising options so they are comparable, searchable, and aligned with users' goals. This is particularly relevant in digital markets, where many platforms optimise for engagement. When success is measured by time spent browsing, designs may maximise exploration while minimising decision quality, encouraging users to keep searching rather than commit. The most useful lesson, therefore, is not to abolish choice, but to make it meaningful rather than exhausting.

Questions 14–18

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

List of Headings

- i** Contrasting maximisers with satisficers
- ii** When high expectations lead to disappointment
- iii** How rejected options can feel like a loss
- iv** The benefits and risks of using defaults and filters
- v** Why large assortments can reduce commitment
- vi** Why the paradox of choice depends on context
- vii** How digital choice can make it hard to stop searching

14 Paragraph B

15 Paragraph C

16 Paragraph D



17 Paragraph E

18 Paragraph F

Questions 19–22

The text has eight paragraphs, **A–H**. Which paragraph contains the following information?
Choose the correct letter, **A–H**.

You may use any letter more than once.

19 The suggestion that having too many alternatives may feel more like a burden than a freedom.

20 The warning that tools designed to simplify choice can shift power to whoever designs them.

21 The point that having too few options may also reduce satisfaction.

22 The idea that some markets and platforms prioritise engagement over decision quality.

Questions 23–26

Complete the sentences below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

23 Selecting from many options requires comparison, and comparison carries a cognitive

24 With many alternatives, the value of what is rejected becomes more

25 Advertising can raise for what a purchase is expected to provide emotionally.

26 Critics argue that curation should be accompanied by about how it is done.

Answer Key

14. v

15. iii

16. ii

17. i

18. vii

19. A

20. G



21. H

22. H

23. load

24. salient

25. standards

26. transparency