Choice Overload in the Market for Major League Soccer Partial Season Ticket Plans

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The sale of partial season ticket plans has become commonplace for professional and collegiate athletic departments in North America. The continued rise of ticket prices and overall cost to attend sporting events has arguably priced out many typical sport fans and small business ticket buyers from considering the purchase of full season ticket plans. Partial season ticket options are designed to diversify the team’s product and service offerings in an effort to appeal to a wider range of prospective buyers. A cursory examination of most sport organizations will yield a breakdown of partial ticket offerings that will typically take the form of offering approximately 50% of a team’s home games or approximately 25% of a team’s home games in addition to the more standard full season ticket option. However, more recently team sales and marketing staffs have gotten more creative and afforded prospective buyers with more choice in their purchase decision. The emergence of flexible ticket options allows buyers to customize their partial season ticket plan by allocating a set number of tickets across a range of games that suits the buyer. For example, the Minnesota Timberwolves offered a “Flex Pack” for the 2017-2018 National Basketball Association season that boasts, “10 Games. No Exceptions.” This partial season ticket plan allows the buyer to choose the ten games they would like to attend rather than locking them into a set schedule of games which has been more typical historically. Overall, ticket sales and marketing staffs are working to combat sales objections by providing the buyer with more choice and decision-making power.

While transferring the decision-making power from the organization to the consumer may have benefits for the team, research suggests a paradoxical situation known as “choice overload” may occur when buyers are presented with too many options (Diehl & Poynor, 2007; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Mogilner, Rudick, and Iyengar, 2008). An overabundance of buying options has been found to have negative consequences. Specifically, too many purchase options has been linked to decreased purchase motivation, decreased satisfaction with a purchase decision, feelings of disappointment among buyers, and overall purchase regret (Chernev, 2003; Iyengar, Huberman, & Jiang, 2004; and Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). This study utilized an experimental design to test the choice overload hypothesis in the market for partial season ticket plans.

Thirty-nine individuals were recruited via email and word-of-mouth from a co-ed, adult, recreational soccer league in a MLS team’s marketing territory. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions that represented an increasing number of ticket plan options. Group 1 was presented with two partial ticket plan options and two seating zones, Group 2 was presented with a flexible ticket plan, for which they were asked to select their games in one of two seating zones, and Group 3 was presented with the combined options from Group 1 and Group 2. Each group was presented with a hypothetical scenario in which they had won a $400 MLS team gift card that could be used to purchase tickets, merchandise, and/or concessions. Following the scenario, participants were asked to review the ticket marketing materials that corresponded with their group assignment and make a selection as to which option they would like to purchase with their gift card. After making their hypothetical purchase selection, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire that used a series of subscales to measure their feelings of choice difficulty (Iyengar, Huberman, and Jiang, 2004), choice satisfaction (Chernev, 2003), choice regret, and behavioral intent (Schwartz, 2000) to purchase a ticket plan in reality. Participants were also given an additional hypothetical question that asked if they had actually won a gift card if they would rather have a $400 MLS team gift card or a $100 Visa gift card that could be used on anything.

Data were analyzed by conducting a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) that utilized the participant’s assigned group as an independent variable and choice difficulty, choice satisfaction, choice regret, behavioral intent, and the participant’s choice of gift card as dependent variables. 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
E2 = 0.276, power = .912). These results indicate that group membership explained a large (27.6%) amount of the variance in participant differences on the dependent variables collectively (Cohen, 1988). Additionally, the univariate F-tests indicated choice difficulty (p = .002) and choice regret (p = .011) showed significant differences among the three groups. Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni correction showed 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.

Results of this study indicate the potential that choice overload is a potential outcome for prospective buyers of partial season ticket plans. Specifically, this study confirms Iyenger, et al. (2004) and Iyengar and Lepper’s (2000) findings that choice difficulty does increase as the number of purchase options presented increases. Furthermore, this study found that greater purchase options may have an influence on consumer feelings of regret. This experiment indicated that the group with the fewest purchase options (Group 1) felt the least amount of choice regret; however, those feelings did not increase in a linear manner as purchase options continued to increase. In sum, these results do indicate the potential for choice overload, but they do not overwhelmingly support the choice overload hypothesis. This study did not find any relationship between the increasing number of purchase options and consumer dissatisfaction or reduced intent to purchase. Ticket sales and marketing staffs should be aware of the decision-making challenges created when offering consumers myriad purchase options, and those staffs should be prepared to proactively provide the appropriate level of service and education to assist buyers in making their decision. This study was limited in that its focus was solely on one MLS team and its partial season ticket offerings. Future research should continue to explore the choice overload hypothesis in other leagues as well as among prospective full season ticket buyers and corporate partners.