

Autonomy Deprivation, Villain Appeal, and Aspirational Brand Identification in Overchoice Environments

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether autonomy deprivation resulting from overchoice environments predicts individuals' attraction to morally decisive fictional antagonists and unconventional brand personalities. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, the Paradox of Choice, media psychology, and consumer behaviour literature, the study proposes that excessive choice reduces individuals' sense of autonomy, increasing their preference for characters and brands that project certainty and decisiveness. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining a thematic review of peer-reviewed literature with a small-scale anonymous survey conducted through Google Forms. The findings indicate that respondents who experienced greater choice overload also reported stronger attraction toward decisive fictional villains and brands with bold, distinctive identities. The results suggest that decisiveness may serve as a psychological substitute for diminished autonomy in environments characterised by excessive choice. The study contributes to the literature by integrating three previously disconnected research areas and proposes a unified framework linking decision environments, psychological needs, media preferences, and consumer behaviour. Although limited by a small sample size and self-reported data, the findings provide a foundation for future empirical research examining how autonomy influences both entertainment preferences and marketplace behaviour.

Keywords: Overchoice, Autonomy Deprivation, Self-Determination Theory, Paradox of Choice, Consumer Behaviour, Brand Personality, Fictional Villains, Media Psychology, Decision Fatigue, Aspirational Identification

AIM

To what extent does autonomy deprivation in overchoice environments, as described by Self-Determination Theory, predict aspirational identification with morally decisive fictional antagonists and unconventional brand personalities?

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of consumer choice is one of the defining features of contemporary life. In domains ranging from retail and entertainment to relationships, education, and career paths, individuals today are presented with more options than at any previous point in human history. A single supermarket may stock hundreds of variations of a single product, while streaming platforms and social media offer a near-limitless supply of content competing for attention. Traditionally, the availability of choice has been understood as a marker of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. However, a substantial body of psychological research suggests that an overabundance of options does not reliably improve wellbeing and may in fact undermine it. Schwartz and Ward (2004) describe this phenomenon as the paradox of choice, in which the expansion of freedom produces anxiety, regret, and decision paralysis rather than satisfaction. This area of study has gained increasing attention because overchoice now characterises not only consumer behaviour but also the way modern audiences engage with media and culture. Understanding the psychological consequences of overchoice is therefore significant across multiple disciplines, including psychology, marketing, and media

studies, as it shapes how individuals make decisions, form preferences, and attach themselves to the products, brands, and characters around them.

Several studies have explored the psychological consequences of choice and the role of autonomy in human wellbeing. Reutskaja et al. (2022) found that both choice deprivation and choice overload reduce satisfaction across six different nations, suggesting that the human need for an appropriate amount of autonomy is relatively universal rather than culturally specific. Shang et al. (2016) reported that when individuals are primed to experience autonomy deprivation, they place less value on their own chosen objects, indicating that a sense of autonomy is central to how people evaluate their decisions. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs whose frustration undermines wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Beyond consumer contexts, research in media psychology has examined why audiences engage so strongly with certain characters. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2020), in a study of over 1,800 participants, found that individuals may identify with fictional villains not in spite of their moral certainty but because they share that decisive outlook to some degree. Similarly, research into film-induced tourism suggests that charismatic, morally complex antagonists can attract audiences more powerfully than conventionally heroic characters (Yang et al., 2024). In the field of marketing, Dodoo (2018) reported that brand personalities aligned with a consumer's ideal self-image drive aspirational identification and loyalty. Taken together, these studies reveal a recurring pattern: when autonomy feels constrained or unfulfilled, individuals are drawn toward figures — whether fictional characters or commercial brands — that appear to have resolved that tension through decisiveness and a clear sense of identity.

Despite these findings, there is limited research connecting these otherwise separate areas of study. The psychology of choice, the appeal of morally decisive characters in media, and aspirational identification with brands have largely been examined in isolation from one another. In particular, the relationship between autonomy deprivation and identification with decisively positioned characters and brands remains underexplored. Few studies have considered whether a single underlying psychological mechanism — the unmet need for autonomy described in Self-Determination Theory — might operate across both fictional and commercial contexts simultaneously. As a result, it remains unclear whether the appeal of decisive figures in film and literature and the appeal of bold, unconventional brand personalities are in fact two expressions of the same psychological need. This gap is significant because both phenomena are increasingly prominent in an age of overchoice, and understanding their shared basis could offer a more unified explanation of contemporary audience and consumer behaviour.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between autonomy deprivation in overchoice environments and aspirational identification with decisively positioned characters and brands. It combines a synthesis of existing literature with a small-scale primary survey designed to test whether the predicted relationship appears in a sample of respondents. By bringing these fields into dialogue, the study seeks to clarify why, in an era defined by overwhelming and often meaningless choice, audiences and consumers are increasingly drawn toward characters and brands that appear to have already, decisively, made their peace with what they are.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the psychological effects of choice and autonomy has increased in recent years due to the expansion of options available to individuals in consumer, media, and everyday decision-making contexts. Understanding this topic is important because the way people respond to abundant choice influences not only their wellbeing but also the products, brands, and fictional characters they are drawn to. This review groups existing research into three connected themes: the paradox of choice and autonomy deprivation, engagement with morally decisive characters in media, and aspirational identification with brands.

The Paradox of Choice and Autonomy Deprivation

Several studies have examined the impact of choice abundance on psychological wellbeing. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) provided foundational evidence, finding that consumers were more likely to purchase when offered a limited set of options than an extensive one, and reported greater satisfaction with their selection.

Schwartz and Ward (2004) built on this, arguing that an excess of options produces anxiety and dissatisfaction rather than freedom, a phenomenon they termed the paradox of choice. Chernev et al. (2015), in a meta-analysis of over fifty studies, identified the specific conditions under which choice overload occurs, including decision difficulty and preference uncertainty. Reutskaja et al. (2022) extended these findings across six nations, showing that both too little and too much choice reduce satisfaction, suggesting the need for autonomy is relatively universal. Similarly, Shang et al. (2016) reported that autonomy deprivation reduces the value individuals place on their own choices, which aligns with Self-Determination Theory's identification of autonomy as a basic psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, Dean et al. (2024) offered a contrasting perspective, arguing that the overall effect of choice overload may have been overstated in earlier research due to weak statistical methods. Together, these studies suggest that while unfulfilled autonomy is a consistent source of psychological discomfort, the strength of the effect remains debated.

Engagement with Morally Decisive Characters

A growing body of research has explored why audiences engage with morally complex or decisive characters. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2020) found that individuals may identify with fictional villains because they share, rather than overlook, those characters' decisive moral outlook. Similarly, Yang et al. (2024) reported that charismatic antagonists can attract audiences more powerfully than conventionally heroic figures, drawing them even to physical locations associated with those characters. These findings suggest that decisiveness itself, independent of morality, contributes to character appeal. However, Kneer (2025) noted that audience response varies with individual traits, indicating that engagement with decisive characters is not uniform across all viewers. This body of work implies that the appeal of decisive characters is a structured psychological response rather than a simple preference for good or evil.

Aspirational Identification with Brands

Research in consumer psychology has examined how individuals attach themselves to brands. Dodoo (2018) found that brands whose personalities align with a consumer's ideal self drive stronger identification and loyalty. In contrast, Raimondo (2022) emphasised that identification is also shaped by the desire to dissociate from certain groups, suggesting brand attachment is driven by both aspiration and avoidance. These findings indicate that consumers gravitate toward brands that express a clear and decisive identity reflecting who they wish to become, mirroring the same pull toward certainty observed in media engagement.

Despite existing research, there is limited focus on how these three areas connect. In particular, few studies have explored whether autonomy deprivation might be a shared mechanism underlying both engagement with decisive characters and identification with decisive brands. Each field has largely developed in isolation, leaving the potential common psychological basis unexamined. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining whether autonomy deprivation in overchoice environments predicts identification with decisively positioned characters and brands, drawing together Self-Determination Theory, media psychology, and consumer behaviour research.

METHODOLOGY

This study combined secondary and primary data collection. The secondary component consisted of a thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed literature obtained through Google Scholar, using search terms including "paradox of choice," "autonomy deprivation," "villain identification," "aspirational brand identification," and "self-determination theory." Sources were included if they were peer-reviewed, published from 2000 onward, and directly relevant to the themes of choice, autonomy, or identification. Findings were grouped into three themes rather than summarised individually, using Self-Determination Theory as the connecting framework.

The primary component consisted of a short anonymous survey of respondents, administered through Google Forms. The survey contained twelve multiple-choice questions divided into two sections. The first section measured the degree of choice overload and autonomy deprivation a respondent experiences in everyday life, while the second measured preference for decisive characters and bold brands relative to conflicted or conventional alternatives. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and consent was obtained through a

statement at the start of the form. Responses were then examined for a relationship between reported autonomy deprivation and preference for decisive figures.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine how experiencing an abundance of choices, or overchoice, influences people's sense of autonomy and their preference for decisive characters and bold brands. By combining a synthesis of existing literature with a small primary survey, it sought to test whether a shared psychological mechanism connects choice overload to the appeal of decisive figures.

The findings revealed several consistent patterns. Many participants reported feeling overwhelmed when faced with a large number of options, and a notable proportion described delaying or avoiding decisions as a result. Some indicated a reduced sense of control over their own choices. At the same time, respondents tended to express greater attraction to characters who acted decisively and to brands with a clear, confident identity, rather than to conflicted figures or neutral brands.

The discomfort associated with overchoice can be understood through the concept of decision fatigue. When individuals are presented with too many options, the cognitive effort required to compare them increases, producing confusion and pressure rather than satisfaction. This supports the paradox of choice, which holds that excessive options can reduce satisfaction and increase stress (Schwartz & Ward, 2004). The pattern observed here is consistent with that idea, suggesting that the problem lies not in choice itself but in its overabundance.

The reduced sense of control reported by some participants can be interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy as a basic psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When overwhelmed, individuals may feel less able to act on their own preferences and more inclined to avoid decisions or defer them to others. This suggests that overchoice does not simply make decisions harder; it can undermine the underlying sense of agency that autonomy depends on.

The preference for decisive characters and bold brands may represent a psychological response to this uncertainty rather than a random aesthetic preference. When people feel uncertain or overwhelmed, they appear to be drawn to figures who project clarity and certainty. This aligns with research on the appeal of confidence and decisiveness, where decisive traits are perceived as reassuring in ambiguous conditions. The key insight is that this attraction seems to be driven by an internal need for clarity, not merely by the qualities of the character or brand itself.

Taken together, these variables form a coherent chain. Too many choices generate stress; that stress reduces an individual's sense of control; and a reduced sense of control produces a desire for clarity and certainty, which is satisfied by decisive characters and bold brands. This sequence — overchoice leading to reduced autonomy leading to attraction to decisiveness — represents the core argument of the study, linking an everyday psychological experience to observable preferences in media and consumer behaviour.

Critically, it is worth questioning whether people are aware of this effect. Most respondents are unlikely to recognise that their preferences may be shaped by decision environments rather than independent taste. This raises the possibility that consumers experiencing decision fatigue could be more susceptible to influence by confident branding, which has both practical and ethical implications.

These findings support the paradox of choice and extend Self-Determination Theory by applying it beyond traditional decision-making contexts to media and brand preferences. However, unlike research that treats choice overload as a purely consumer phenomenon, this study suggests the same mechanism may shape engagement with fictional characters. It also acknowledges that the effect of choice overload is debated; some research argues its impact has been overstated (Chernev et al., 2015), indicating the relationship may depend on specific conditions.

The study has several limitations. The sample size was small and drawn from a limited age group, reducing how far the findings can be generalised. The data was self-reported, introducing potential response bias, and the survey design captured preference rather than behaviour.

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research across psychology, marketing, and media studies. Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples to determine whether the observed relationship between autonomy deprivation and attraction to decisiveness remains consistent across cultures, age groups, and different consumer environments. Cross-cultural research would be particularly valuable because perceptions of autonomy and individual choice vary considerably across societies.

Experimental research could strengthen the theoretical model by manipulating levels of perceived choice and measuring subsequent changes in attraction toward decisive fictional characters and brand personalities. Such designs would help establish causal relationships that cannot be inferred from survey data alone.

Future research may also investigate whether individual differences, such as personality traits, tolerance for ambiguity, need for cognitive closure, or self-esteem, moderate the relationship between autonomy deprivation and aspirational identification. Understanding these moderating variables would provide a more comprehensive explanation of why some individuals are more strongly influenced by overchoice than others.

The increasing use of artificial intelligence and personalised recommendation systems also presents an important direction for future research. AI-driven algorithms increasingly reduce the number of choices consumers actively evaluate while simultaneously shaping the options presented to them. Future studies could examine whether algorithmic curation alleviates feelings of autonomy deprivation or instead creates new forms of perceived loss of control over decision-making.

Finally, future research could extend this framework beyond fictional villains and commercial brands to investigate whether autonomy deprivation similarly influences preferences for political leaders, social media influencers, organisational leaders, or public figures who project confidence, certainty, and decisiveness. Such work would broaden understanding of how psychological responses to overchoice influence social attitudes and decision-making across multiple domains.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Businesses and marketers should recognise that consumers experiencing decision fatigue may respond more positively to brands that communicate a clear, authentic, and consistent identity. However, such strategies should prioritise transparency and ethical marketing practices rather than exploiting consumers' psychological vulnerabilities.

Media creators may benefit from understanding that audience engagement with morally complex or decisive fictional characters is influenced not only by narrative quality but also by broader psychological needs for certainty and autonomy. Developing nuanced characters with clear motivations may therefore strengthen audience identification.

Consumers should be encouraged to become more aware of the effects of choice overload and decision fatigue. Strategies such as limiting unnecessary options, establishing personal decision criteria, and taking time before making important decisions may help preserve feelings of autonomy and improve decision quality.

Organisations and digital platforms should consider simplifying decision environments where appropriate. Reducing excessive options, improving information presentation, and designing user-friendly interfaces may enhance user satisfaction while maintaining consumers' sense of control.

Researchers should continue examining autonomy deprivation as a potential unifying psychological mechanism connecting consumer behaviour, media engagement, and decision-making. Future studies should

utilise larger samples, validated psychological scales, experimental methodologies, and longitudinal designs to strengthen empirical evidence and expand theoretical understanding.

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