Satisficing

I realized there was a problem when an app tracking my online activity alerted me that I had spent 2 hours on online shopping in one day. Buying basic consumables such as shampoo, shaving cream or razor blades from Amazon should have taken only a few minutes, but somehow it had stolen 2 hours from my day. The large number of product choices with inane differences and slightly varying price points had created confusion and decision paralysis. Surely choosing a shaving cream with "Protect & Care Extra Moisture" over "Deep Impact Smooth Shave" wouldn't have made too much difference on my beard battered by 25+ years of daily shaving, or browsing through scores of customer reviews to choose a moisturizing lotion with extra 'peach' or 'aloe vera' over one with 'original body lotion with almond oil' wouldn't matter too much to my 45 year old skin. Any shaving cream from a recognized brand sold by a reliable merchant would be good enough, but somehow our minds have become trained to think there is a lot to lose or gain in simple product or service choices. I face the same problem even while buying relatively expensive products such as shirts or shoes or even mobile phones. Try buying a Samsung phone on Amazon or even in a Brick and Mortar retail outlet

and you will know what I am talking about. A simple search by 'Samsung Phone' on Amazon returns 20+ pages of results, with at least 4 models (On5 pro, M10, Galaxy A10, J2 Core) around the same price point in the first page. So, how do I choose? They all work the same, at least for an unsophisticated user like me. Is there really discernible difference between 'HD+Infinity V Display with 90% screen ratio' and 'TFT capacitive touchscreen with 720 x 1280 pixels HD display?' Is it worth fretting about the difference in the camera between an iPhone, Samsung S10 and the Google Pixel?

Product companies want us to believe that the improvements in their products would change our lives. They want to create a fear of missing out to increase sales. But does too many products which look the same help their sales? I know Samsung products are good, but I could never buy a Samsung phone because of decision paralysis arising from too many choices. Years ago, when I started a blog on Tumblr, the blog was up and running in 10 minutes because of standardized templates with few avenues for customization. Tumblr's service was heaven for busy person like me with neither the patience nor the ability to tinker with minute aspects of the blog's look and feel. The result was good enough for the purpose of the activity - which was to create a good looking blog to publish my thoughts. A more complicated service with additional customizable options would have needlessly hassled me for very little improvements and might have driven me to ditch the service altogether. Apple Inc. adopted the same philosophy, at least till Steve Jobs was alive, where they offered only one product in every category.

Barry Schwartz in his brilliant TED Talk [The Paradox of Choice](#) and [Book](#)talks about how the abundance of choices robs us of satisfaction as it produces decision paralysis rather than liberation. He gives several funny examples examples of this problem, like how his friendly neighborhood supermarket now stocks 175 types of salad dressings, and 10 types of extra-virgin olive oils and 12 balsamic vinegars that one can buy to make a very large number of their own salad dressings, and how this creates a barrier to actual purchase of products and produces dissatisfaction. He also gives a very dramatic example of how people in the US don't invest in their retirement funds (when their employers would match their investment as part

of employee benefits) just because they are not able to choose from the numerous investment options that are offered. The decision paralysis is so severe that people don't mind losing money and jeopardizing their financial security just to avoid making a decision.

So, what's the solution? One approach can be - 'Satisficing,' which as per [Wikipedia](#) is "a decision-making strategy or cognitive heuristic that entails searching through the available alternatives until an acceptability threshold is met." We don't have to find the best products or services, as 'best' is a relative quality and not an absolute. We just have to find things which would meet our basic minimum standards, and remember that adopting such a product or service is often better than not adopting at all or spending precious time in endless evaluation of similar products that rarely leaves us better off than where we started.