

Trust your heart: Emotions may be more reliable when making choices

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When choosing a flavor of ice cream, an item of clothing, or even a home, you might be better off letting your emotions guide you, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Our current research supports theories in evolutionary psychology that propose that our emotions can be conceived as a set of 'programs' that have evolved over time to help us solve important recurrent problems with speed and accuracy, whether it is to fall in love or to escape from a predator," write authors Leonard Lee (Columbia Business School), On Amir (University of California, San Diego), and Dan Ariely (Duke University).

"We investigated the following question: To what extent does relying on one's feelings versus deliberative thinking affect the consistency of one's preferences?" write the authors. To get at the question, the authors designed experiments where participants studied and chose among 8-10 products, sometimes relying upon their emotional reactions and sometimes calling upon cognitive skills. Their conclusion: "Emotional processing leads to greater preference consistency than cognitive processing."

The researchers made some additional discoveries about eliciting consistent choices from participants. The study participants tended to make more consistent choices when products were represented by pictures instead of names; when pictures were in color (rather than black and white); when participants were encouraged to trust their feelings

when making their choices; when the participants had greater cognitive constraints (i.e., when they were asked to memorize a ten-digit number as opposed to a two-digit one); and when the products tended to be more exciting (a pen with a built-in FM radio receiver) rather than functional (an LED book light).

It seems the old adage "trust your heart" is true for consumers. "If one buys a house and relies on very cognitive attributes such as resale value, one may not be as happy actually purchasing it," write the authors. "Indeed, our results suggest that the heart can very well serve as a more reliable compass to greater long-term happiness than pure reason."

More information: Leonard Lee, On Amir, and Dan Ariely. "In Search of Homo Economicus: Cognitive Noise and the Role of Emotion in Preference Consistency." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2009.

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