

UF researcher: Certain consumer preferences may be inborn

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Genes that might lead to the purchase of designer jeans? Or DNA that helps to create chocoholics? People's consumer preferences are often influenced by their genetic inheritance, according to a study by a University of Florida researcher.

“Whether we like science fiction, hybrid cars, jazz, mustard, opera and dark chocolate all seem to have a genetic component,” said Aner Sela, an assistant professor of marketing whose study of twins is forthcoming in the April 2011 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*. “On the other hand, we didn't find such an effect for abstract art, body piercing and cilantro, which people seem to either love or hate.”

While previous research has shown a heritable effect for intelligence, personality and even for divorce, drug addiction and voting patterns, this is the first study to show genetics play a role in consumer choices, Sela said.

“It's interesting to know that a lot of what we want and what we do is determined by our ancestors,” he said.

Sela and Itamar Simonson, a Stanford University marketing professor, surveyed 110 identical twins and 70 same-sex fraternal twins about their product preferences and buying patterns, such as whether they would spend \$100 on necessary groceries or a pampering massage. Similar choices were more common in identical twins, whose genetic coding is identical, than among fraternal twins, who share the same household

environment but only half of their [DNA](#), the study found.

The finding that [consumer preferences](#) are often determined by inherent factors could suggest that companies might sometimes be better advised to let consumers take the lead in expressive preferences and then react with certain products, rather than relying on marketing tactics to sway customers' buying behavior, Sela said.

“Consumer researchers have often demonstrated that consumers behave irrationally and choose inconsistently,” he said. “While this is sometimes true, we show that people are not just sheep in terms of being subject to manipulative influences, but actually bring with them to the decision-making process their personalities, inherent tendencies and innate preferences.”

Most interestingly, the findings suggest that even certain “irrational” choice tendencies may be inherent. Beyond specific product likes and dislikes, the study found a genetic basis for selecting a compromise or middle option, choosing between a sure gain and a risky gamble and favoring “vice” over “virtue” in the form of a utilitarian or hedonistic option.

These different styles of decision-making reveal themselves in a various ways when making consumer choices, Sela said. The tendency to select “vice” over “virtue,” for example, might show up in using a \$4 gift card for Godiva chocolates instead of a package of batteries, he said.

“While these preliminary results can be interpreted in more than one way, we hypothesize that a predisposition for prudent behavior might be at the heart of these kinds of behavioral patterns, Sela said.

“The inclination to choose a compromise option – selecting the middle option, going for the safe as opposed to the extreme choice, being risk-

averse, preferring virtue over vice – seem to relate to an underlying tendency to be prudent,” he said.

Prudence can encompass cautiousness, discretion, moderation, being mindful and getting prepared, Sela said. “In some respects, it might be represented by the distinction between ‘living on the edge’ versus ‘living in the mainstream,’” he said.

A genetic component had not been established before in identifying a pattern for these individual differences that affect consumer behavior, Sela said.

The research was done by Simonson and Sela while he has been at UF and previously as a graduate student at Stanford.

“Our research is groundbreaking with choice tendencies in general – do I tend to be risk seeking, do I tend to be compromising, do I tend to be variety seeking – making us really the first to show that those behaviors have a genetic basis,” he said.

Shane Frederick, a marketing professor at Yale University, praised the research. “Simonson and Sela’s exploratory research with identical twins represents a small, but important, first attempt to identify the types of preferences or intellectual dispositions that have a [genetic basis](#),” he said. “Their research should foster interest in this fascinating topic and motivate further exploration among those who study judgment and decision making.”

Provided by University of Florida

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