

Finding it difficult to make a purchase? Try creating some distance from the problem

February 14 2012

Consumers who are having trouble making decisions can benefit from creating some psychological—or physical—distance, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Except for habitual purchases, [consumers](#) do not always have an easy time deciding, for example, what cereal to buy, where to send their children to school, or where to take their family for vacation," write authors Manoj Thomas (Cornell University) and Claire I. Tsai (University of Toronto). "Cognitive difficulty" is a common issue for consumers, and it affects their judgments, decisions, and behavior. Confused consumers are less satisfied with their choices and often defer selections and prolong searches.

The authors examined whether psychological distance reduces the difficulty and anxiety in [choice](#) situations. They conducted four experiments where they altered the psychological distance from a given task by using subtle manipulations—varying the abstractness of thinking and having participants assume different body postures.

In one study, for example, the researchers presented participants with two products. They were asked to choose one of the items or defer the choice until later. Half the participants were told to lean toward the computer screen and the other half were instructed to lean away. "This simple manipulation of psychological distance influenced participants' choice," the authors write. "Those who leaned toward the screen found the choice to be more difficult and were more likely to defer the choice

than those who leaned away from the screen."

The authors found similar results in an experiment where they encouraged participants to think more abstractly, creating more psychological distance.

"These findings offer a novel account explaining why a bystander, friend, or spouse might not experience the same feeling of difficulty as a perceiver," the authors write. "The results also suggest that when task difficulty is a relevant variable in decision-making, leaning away or toward the screen can unintentionally influence perceived difficulty of online tasks."

More information: Manoj Thomas and Claire I. Tsai. "Psychological Distance and Subjective Experience: How Distancing Reduces the Feeling of Difficulty." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2012 (published online December 13, 2011). ejcr.org/

Provided by University of Chicago

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