

Decision quicksand: Why do consumers get mired in trivial choices?

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Does it matter which toothbrush or breakfast cereal you buy? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* explains why consumers get stuck in store aisles contemplating the dizzying array of options.

"Why do people get mired in seemingly trivial decisions? Why do we agonize over what toothbrush to buy, struggle with what sandwich to pick, and labor over which shade of white to paint the kitchen?" ask authors Aner Sela (University of Florida) and Jonah Berger (University of Pennsylvania).

The authors say this "decision quicksand" results from people assuming that a difficult decision is an important one. Then they increase the amount of time and effort they spend. "For example, instead of realizing that picking a [toothbrush](#) is a trivial decision, we confuse the array of options and excess of information with decision importance, which then leads our brain to conclude that this decision is worth more time and attention," the authors write. Ironically, this is more likely to happen when decisions initially seem unimportant, because people expect them to be easier.

In one experiment, the researchers gave participants a selection of [airline flight](#) options. One group chose their options in small, low-contrast font (difficult condition), while another group chose the same options in a larger, high-contrast font (easy condition). Not surprisingly, the hard-to-read font led to increased deliberation time because people were forced to decipher their options. "What was more interesting is that this extra

effort led to perceptions of increased importance: The flight options now seemed like a weighty decision," the authors write. "Moreover, this effect was strongest when people were initially led to believe that the choice of flights was actually unimportant!"

The authors also found that unexpected difficulty caused people to voluntarily seek more [options](#), which increased decision difficulty even more.

"Our findings suggest that people sometimes fall into a recursive loop between deliberation time, difficulty, and perceived importance," the authors write. "Inferences from difficulty may not only impact immediate [deliberation](#), but may kick off a quicksand cycle that leads people to spend more and more time on a decision that initially seemed rather unimportant. [Decision](#) quicksand sucks people in, but the worse it seems, the more we struggle."

More information: Aner Sela and Jonah Berger. "Decision Quicksand: How Trivial Choices Suck Us In." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2012.

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