

# 'You must have a preference': How does lack of preference affect joint decision-making?

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According to a new study by Dr. Yonat Zwebner of Reichman University's Arison School of Business and her colleagues, when someone says that they have "no preference," it has an effect on the

consumption experience.

For example, when you and your [friend](#) are debating where to eat lunch, and your friend says "I don't care, you choose," he actually makes it more difficult for you to make a decision and even leads you to choose your less preferred option, despite the fact that he believes he is making it easier for you.

In a series of six experiments conducted by Dr. Zwebner and her partners, which included an examination of the [consumption](#) of shared experiences, it was found that the party who receives a signal from his friend that he does not have a particular preference concludes that his friend does indeed have preferences, but is simply not revealing them.

Whether it's your colleague asking where you would like to have lunch, or your friend wondering which movie you would like to see together, people will often deliberately not share their preferences with the other party, out of a desire to appear easygoing and cooperative. They choose, rather, to signal to the other party that they do not have a preference (by saying, for example, "I don't have a preference," or "I'm fine with all options").

Despite their prevalence, little is known about how communications of "I have no preference" impact joint decision making and the consumption experience. Do we take the other party's indifference at face value or do we find it hard to believe that they really don't have a preference? Does the decision become easier to make when one party signals that they don't mind either way? How will such communication ultimately impact consumption and what will its social utility be?

The researchers concluded that undisclosed preferences increase the decision makers' difficulty and cause them to like the other party less. Moreover, the [decision maker](#) feels that the other party's (undisclosed)

preferences are probably dissimilar to their own, which leads them to choose an option they like less and ultimately decreases the enjoyment they derive from the joint consumption. Another interesting point is that these negative effects are not anticipated by the party who claims to have no preference.

Dr. Yonat Zwebner, from the Arison School of Business, Reichman University, says, "When someone asks for your preference, do you go ahead and say what it is, or do you prefer to be 'easygoing' and say 'I have no preference, whatever you decide'? Many of us keep our preferences to ourselves in an attempt to appear laidback and pleasant to the other party. We believe that being impartial can help us make a good impression on the other party, on friends, or at work. In our study, we found that the opposite is true: choosing not to communicate your preference can actually damage the shared experience and even the relationship."

The findings are published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

**More information:** Nicole You Jeung Kim et al, You Must Have a Preference: The Impact of No-Preference Communication on Joint Decision Making, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222437221107593](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437221107593)

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