

Why consumers forgo front-row seats: Sacrificing experience quality for togetherness

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Researchers from Texas A&M University's Mays Business School, Harvard University's Harvard Business School and University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business have published a new paper in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* that provides novel insights about how consumers make trade-offs between experience quality and togetherness.

The paper offers sheds new light on the choices people make when presented with the option of improving an activity separately (with first-class airline tickets, for example) or sharing that experience in nearby physical proximity with a "close other" such as a [romantic partner](#), dear friend, or family member.

The article, "A desire to create shared memories increases consumers' willingness to sacrifice experience quality for togetherness," is authored by Ximena Garcia-Rada, Michael I. Norton, and Rebecca K. Ratner.

The research team found that consumers prioritize physical togetherness with relationship partners over opportunities that would improve an experience in real time. For instance, a couple in a movie theater would choose to sit together in the front row, craning their necks, rather than take two non-adjacent seats in rows with better views for both.

A desire to "create shared memories" drives this behavior, according to a pilot study and five experiments conducted by the team. This dynamic is more pronounced when a consumer and their partner are offered "asymmetrical" or different experience qualities—with one person receiving a better quality option than the other. In contrast, the authors found that people are less likely to sacrifice experience quality when they are with someone to whom they do not feel close.

In one experiment conducted in a university behavioral lab, the authors discovered that students chose to eat two chocolates together with a

friend rather than four chocolates they each could consume apart. In another study, more participants chose two adjacent seats very far from the stage over two non-adjacent seats close to the stage when asked to imagine attending a Cirque du Soleil performance with a close friend as opposed to a casual acquaintance.

In marketing-based experiment, the team found that framing an activity as functional rather than pleasurable increased the likelihood that close partners would choose a higher-quality experience over togetherness. Specifically, to some participants, researchers described a train ride as a fun part of an excursion. To others, they positioned it as a utilitarian part of an excursion that would get them to their destination.

"More participants accepted a free upgrade—even though it would require sitting apart from their companion—when they perceived the activity as utilitarian, because they cared less about creating shared memories during the train ride," the authors said.

These findings convey important insights for marketers seeking to fill airplanes, [concert halls](#), amusement parks and other consumer experiences.

Additionally, the authors suggest "marketers can increase uptake by reassuring [consumers](#) that they can create shared memories even if apart."

More information: Ximena Garcia-Rada et al, A desire to create shared memories increases consumers' willingness to sacrifice experience quality for togetherness, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1352](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1352)

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