

People more likely to defer making decisions the longer they wait

May 27 2016, by Michele Berger

Would you rather eat an apple or a banana? Read *Moby Dick* or *A Tale of Two Cities*? Is a cup or a mug holding that coffee?

How quickly the decision gets made matters. That's because the longer someone takes to draw a conclusion, the more likely that person will disengage from the process altogether and simply never decide.

This [phenomenon](#) is called choice deferral, and it's the topic of a new paper published in *Cognitive Psychology* from University of Pennsylvania psychologist Sudeep Bhatia in collaboration with Timothy Mullett of the University of Warwick. They found that, on average, if more than 3.5 seconds passes without a decision happening, none will likely occur for the choice at hand.

"You can imagine that, if you're going to buy a car, you're going to spend more than three and a half seconds," said Bhatia, an associate professor in Penn's School of Arts & Sciences. "This parameter would vary based on the importance of the choice or even based on the setting. A person who only had a single choice would probably spend a little more time on it."

Bhatia and Mullett specified their theory by using a sequential sampling model Bhatia had published several years ago. It's essentially a computer-facilitated mathematical model. For this experiment, they asked study participants to select Movie A or Movie B as many as 200 times in rapid succession. Test 1 might pair two action flicks, one of lesser quality. Test

2 would then put together an action film and a documentary. Sometimes, a third option appeared: the person could defer the decision altogether and wait for a more preferable film.

The researchers then analyzed the results, looking at factors like how much evidence someone needed to make a decision and whether a choice changed with the added deferral option. Though this phenomenon is well known, particularly in marketing, the researchers learned that, from a cognitive perspective, it's complicated.

"Decisions are more likely to be deferred when the choice has conflicting alternatives or large trade-offs," Bhatia said. The same goes for equally preferable options, he added. "In a setting where one option is much better than the other, people are less likely to defer, likewise in the setting in which two options don't really involve trade-offs."

As an example, Bhatia described a vacation scenario in which Option A is a seven-day Alaskan cruise, Option B is a seven-day Caribbean cruise and Option C is a six-day Caribbean cruise. They all cost the same. Without the six-day Caribbean option, the decider is most likely indifferent about both cruises; throw in the shorter tropical one, however, and its longer counterpart gets picked the majority of the time.

"There is a pretty standard understanding of what it means to defer a decision, to disengage from that choice. But there is a lot of debate about what causes this," Bhatia said. "How do you explain these findings? They fall out of a simple model that assumes that, if a choice isn't made by a certain time, it ends up being deferred."

More information: Sudeep Bhatia et al. The dynamics of deferred decision, *Cognitive Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cogpsych.2016.02.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2016.02.002)

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