

Study: Many choices seems promising until you actually have to choose

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People faced with more options than they can effectively consider want to make a good decision, but feel they're unable to do so, according to the results of a novel study from the University at Buffalo that used cardiovascular measures and fictional dating profiles to reach its conclusions.

Despite the apparent opportunities presented by a lot of options, the need to choose creates a "paralyzing paradox," according to Thomas Saltsman, a graduate student in the UB Department of Psychology and co-author of the study with Mark Seery, an associate professor of psychology at UB.

"You want to make a good choice, but feel like you can't," says Saltsman. "This combination of perceiving high stakes and low ability may contribute to a deep-seated fear that one will inevitably make the wrong choice, which could stifle the decision-making process."

To manage the seemingly unmanageable, Saltsman says to consider the relative importance of the choice at hand.

"Choosing the wrong menu item for dinner or what to binge-watch is not going to define you as a person," he says. "It may also be helpful to enter high-choice situations with a few clear guidelines of what you want from your desired option. Doing so may not only help scale down the number of possible choices, by eliminating options that do not meet your guidelines, but may also bolster confidence and trust in your ability to find a choice that meets your needs."

The findings are published in the journal *Biological Psychology*.

Previous research clearly establishes how choice overload is associated with negative outcomes, but this research looks specifically at two understudied motivational factors of decision-making: how valuable is the decision to someone and to what extent do people view themselves as capable of making a good choice.

Having choices seems like an appealing situation that speaks to freedom and autonomy. But the emerging digital realities manifest in forums like [online shopping](#) and entertainment can be overwhelming.

Searching online for a spring jacket can return thousands of hits. One streaming service claims to offer more than 7,000 titles, while online dating services can enroll millions of subscribers.

All of those choices seems like a great idea, according to Seery. Until you're actually the one having to choose.

"We love having these choices, but when we're actually faced with having to choose from among those countless options, the whole process goes south," says Seery. "Research shows that, after the fact, people often regret their decision in these cases, but what our research suggests is that this kind of turn—the inherent paradox of liking choices and then being troubled by choices—happens almost immediately.

"That transition is fascinating."

For the research, the team had nearly 500 participants across three different experiments, two of which used psychophysiological measures.

"We had participants reading through what were fictional dating profiles and asked them to consider their ideal partner," says Saltsman. "Because we used psychophysiological measures, we wanted people faced with a choice that demanded consideration and had them actively engaged."

Those measures include [heart rate](#) and how hard the heart is pumping. When people care more about a decision, Seery says, their heart rate increases and beats harder. Other measures, like how much blood the heart is pumping and the degree to which [blood vessels](#) dilate, indicate levels of confidence.

The results showed that when faced with a large number of profiles to choose from rather than a small number, participants' hearts and blood vessels revealed that they experienced making their choice as being both

more important and more overwhelming. This occurred during the deliberation process.

Although additional work is needed, this study can help us understand the relationship between choice overload and negative outcomes.

"Examining people's experiences in the moment may ultimately help us better understand those negative downstream [choice](#) overload outcomes and how to prevent them," says Saltsman.

More information: Thomas L. Saltsman et al, Too many fish in the sea: A motivational examination of the choice overload experience, *Biological Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biopsycho.2019.03.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2019.03.010)

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