

IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE A DECISION

WE DON'T ALWAYS MAKE DECISIONS IN ISOLATION; PEOPLE ARE INFLUENCED BY THOSE THEY LOVE, WHICH HAS REPERCUSSIONS WHEN RESEARCHING HOW CHOICES ARE MADE. BY **JANE BAINBRIDGE**

To make a decision – even on an individual level – can be a complicated process. But what about all those decisions and choices that are made in relationships? How much do the opinions and preferences of a partner affect an individual's choice: should I buy that dress; do I like it; can I afford it; will my husband like it; can I wear it going out with him?

Several papers have been written on the role of relationships on consumer choices, and – in a recent theoretical one – Margaret Gorlin, from Yale University, pointed to the two stages that need to be considered: the decision stage and the consumption stage.

Gorlin believes the type and degree of influence that a partner's preferences have on the decision-maker's choice will depend on how much – at each of the two stages – decisions are made jointly.

"We proposed four different cases to consider: making decisions together for one outcome (consume together); making decisions together, but consuming separately; making decisions separately, but consuming together; and making decisions separately and consuming separately," says Gorlin.

The degree to which a partner affects a decision depends on the situation, and the choice of product involved.

"Marketers could do more to take account of the idea that people are often not just guided by their own preferences and attitudes, but by relationship partners – especially domains that involve self-control, such as exercise and healthy eating," Gorlin says.

So why is self-control such a factor in joint decision-making? "In most cases, one relationship partner has higher-order goals and aspirations that apply to both partners. So one might hold a strong goal to eat more healthily, and hold it for the other partner too – and influence them in that way," she says.

Gorlin says that – although there's no empirical evidence for this – it is consistent with other research on health behaviours.

As relationships evolve and develop, the way in which partners affect decision-making can also change. "Over time, the influence might be more unconscious. So, when one partner is making decisions, the other will act in accordance with those goals – they might start to hold those attitudes as well, unconsciously," she says.

This is an area ripe for further research, but Gorlin concedes such research is very difficult – not least because people have a tendency to overestimate the extent to which others share their views. "They're most likely to choose something they'd prefer, while thinking it's also the other's preference," she says.

"It's a cognitive bias – people are wired to think others are more like them, especially those near to them – but also a motivational bias. You may know your partner would prefer something different, but you really want to get what you want."

The article *Bridging the gap between joint and individual decisions: Deconstructing preferences in relationships* is published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. ■



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