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Journals Division

## **What Are You Getting? Consumer Behavior in Restaurants**

Consumers follow a predictable pattern when it comes to ordering food and drinks, according new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#). It seems people in groups tend to seek variety when making initial orders, then gravitate toward similar choices, and then, as the group consensus grows, to move away from popular choices.

“Our study shows empirically that consumers are susceptible to both conformist and variety-seeking tendencies,” write authors Pascale Quester (University of Adelaide, Australia) and Alexandre Steyer (Sorbonne-Assas, Paris, France). “They like to differentiate themselves from a growing minority or an overwhelming majority, but tend to conform in between.”

The authors conducted a study on candy bars in a lab, and then moved on to a real-life setting of a restaurant called Flam’s in Paris. They sought out a situation where a drink was included in a package (Flam’s Plus) that included an appetizer, a main course, and a dessert. In this situation, price would not be a factor, since the drinks were included, and people were unlikely to share drinks, as they might share food in a Chinese restaurant.

“We decided that consumers’ choice of pre-meal drinks within a Flam’s Plus order would provide the best and most reliable context for determining whether and how individuals’ choices were influenced by other’s choices, in a condition when individual orders would be made public by the order process.”

They analyzed the data from 70 tables with two or more patrons where everyone ordered the Flam’s Plus. The tables ranged from two to 18 customers. The results of the restaurant study showed people sought variety as long as others’ choice of the same item did not achieve a threshold level of group unanimity. “However, when others’ choice of an alternative reaches 30 percent or so, variety seeking weakens,” the authors explain. “Beyond 60 or 70 percent, variety-seeking has been reversed and becomes conformism...When an alternative becomes very dominant (with over 80 to 90 percent of other selecting it), variety-seeking reappears.”

Pascale Quester (University of Adelaide, Australia) and Alexandre Steyer. “Revisiting Individual Choices in Group Settings: The Long and Winding (Less-Traveled) Road.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2010 (will be published online soon).

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