

Jonathan and I repeated this procedure with 49 more tables. Then we continued, but for the next 50 tables we changed the procedure. This time, after we read the descriptions of the beers, we handed the participants a small menu with the names of the four beers and asked each of them to write down their preferred beer, rather than simply say it out loud. In so doing, we transformed ordering from a public event into a private one. This meant that each participant would not hear what the others—including, perhaps, someone they were trying hard to impress—ordered and so could not be influenced by it.

What happened? We found that when people order out loud in sequence, they choose differently from when they order in private. When ordering sequentially (publicly), they order more types of beer per table—in essence opting for variety. A basic way to understand this is by thinking about the Summer Wheat Ale. This brew was not very attractive to most people. But when the other beers were “taken,” our participants felt that they had to choose something different—perhaps to show that they had a mind of their own and weren’t trying to copy the others—and so they chose a different beer, one that they may not have initially wanted, but one that conveyed their individuality.

What about their enjoyment of the beer? It stands to reason that if people choose beer that nobody has chosen just to convey uniqueness, they will probably end up with a beer that they don’t really want or like. And indeed this was the case. Overall, those who made their choices out loud, in the standard way that food is ordered at restaurants, were not as happy with their selections as those who made their choices privately, without taking others’ opinions into consideration. There was, however, one very important exception: the first