

considered a positive trait—people who ordered aloud in public would try to portray a sense of belonging to the group and express more conformity in their choices. In a study we conducted in Hong Kong, we found that this was indeed the case. In Hong Kong, individuals also selected food that they did not like as much when they selected it in public rather than in private, but these participants were more likely to select the same item as the people ordering before them—again making a regrettable mistake, though a different type of mistake, when ordering food.

FROM WHAT I have told you so far about this experiment, you can see that a bit of simple life advice—a free lunch—comes out of this research. First, when you go to a restaurant, it's a good idea to plan your order before the waiter approaches you, and stick to it. Being swayed by what other people choose might lead you to choose a worse alternative. If you're afraid that you might be swayed anyway, a useful strategy is to announce your order to the table before the waiter comes. This way, you have staked a claim to your order, and it's less likely that the other people around the table will think you are not unique, even if someone else orders the same dish before you get your chance. But of course the best option is to order first.

Perhaps restaurant owners should ask their customers to write out orders privately (or quietly give their orders to the waiters), so that no customer will be influenced by the orders of his or her companions. We pay a lot of money for the pleasure of dining out. Getting people to order anonymously is most likely the cheapest and simplest way to increase the enjoyment derived from these experiences.