

## **Inside the Facebook group where strangers make decisions for you**

*From getting laser-eye surgery to picking a pair of shoes, why are people compelled to crowdsource their decisions online?*

How much time do you spend agonising over an outfit? Deciding what to watch next on Netflix? Choosing which dish to serve up for dinner? Though these daily decisions can be irritating, most of us prize them: we know our preferences and can cater to them better than anyone. Then there are the bigger, scarier choices that crop up every now and then, those that are more taxing. Is it a good idea to pursue a drastic career change? Which neighbourhood might you move to? Should you go through with a risky but potentially life-changing operation?

That last one consumed Ellie Winard, a recent graduate from the University of Leeds. After discovering her vision was too poor to pass the medical test for her dream job, a firefighter, she was considering laser eye surgery. But rather than simply turning it over in her mind, perhaps seeking the advice of a trusted confidant or two, she passed the burden to a Facebook group of 145,000 strangers from all over the world.

This is where the indecisive come to relinquish their choices. They can simply pose their dilemma (“What colour shall I dye my hair?”) with a list of options, and a verdict is delivered via the number of corresponding reactions (‘like’ for pink, ‘love’ for blue, ‘wow’ for green). Hundreds of users typically weigh in, taking to the comment section if they want to justify their opinion. After 200 people reacted to Winard’s post, almost unanimously voting ‘yes’, she was able to overcome her doubts and book the surgery.

Named ‘a group that makes small decisions for you’, it was created in May 2019. Of course, Winard’s decision was not ‘small’—the appeal of the group is such that it has strayed from the initial premise, attracting questions that span the trivial to the life-defining. It averages 10 to 15 posts an hour. But why has it attracted such a large community? What does its growing popularity say about decision overload in modern life?

“It’s just an added reassurance that you’re making a good choice,” Winard says. Asking the group is better than just sticking to advice from friends and family, she argues, because “people tend to be really truthful in a way that people close to you might not be”.

Rachel Lunn, another group member from West Yorkshire, agrees: “You get a wide range of non-biased opinions, which can help make an option you are unsure about seem more valid.” Her most recent post aimed to settle an argument with her partner, asking which last name they

should take ahead of their marriage at the end of the year. “Mine is Lunn, hers is Lynch,” she wrote, listing the pros and cons of each option. (“Edit: Guys, we CANNOT be called Lunn.”) Despite the judgement delivered in a stream of notifications, the couple haven’t been able to settle. “My name is winning but my partner is stubborn,” she says.

In an article published last month in *Psychology Today*, psychologist Doreen Dodgen-Magee suggests a potential factor in the group’s growing popularity. She discusses the prevalence of ‘decision fatigue’ at this stage in the pandemic. “Decision fatigue sets in when the number of choices in a day outweighs the brainpower we have to make them,” she writes. “The pandemic has added myriads of decisions to everyone’s lives. Whether these have been major (Do I stay in a secure job but cost my well-being? Do I cancel the non-refundable trip I’ve been planning/saving for years?) or relatively minor (Should I go to the outing or not?), they have been constant.”

Her advice? “To relieve some of the psychological weight of decision fatigue, reduce the choices to be made in a day.” While she does not suggest, say, delegating a portion of them to an online team of thousands, a rise in decision fatigue may partially explain this urge, as reflected in the group’s climbing numbers. In the last week alone, there have been 108 new members.

Regular poster Sammie Parks, from Indiana, regularly struggles with even the smallest of decisions. “What colour Crocs do I want?” asked her latest post, offering up a selection of hot pink, mint, pastel yellow or teal. As she wants them for work—a vet clinic—she stressed they must go well with her navy scrubs. 800 votes later and the results are in: mint is the firm favourite.

“I have a really hard time making decisions, so just being able to settle it with a light-hearted poll is nice,” she says. “It takes the pressure off small decisions that can feel like big decisions when my anxiety is switched on.” Why does she find decision-making so difficult? “It might be fear of making the wrong decision,” she suggests. “I hate feeling like I’ve failed, and not liking a decision I’ve made counts.”

Perhaps she is suffering from a phenomenon coined by writer Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book *Future Shock*: overchoice. “The people of the future may not suffer from an absence of choice, but from a paralysing surfeit of it,” he predicted. His vision has since been realised. When shoe shopping, there is not only an extensive list of brands to navigate, but an extensive list of models and colours under each one. And when it comes to entertainment, most people in the US

take over seven minutes to decide what to watch on Netflix, according to a 2019 report by Nielsen. Twenty-one per cent of adults using streaming services simply gave up if they were unable to make up their minds. As Toffler wrote: “There comes a time when choice, rather than freeing the individual, becomes so complex, difficult and costly, that it turns into the opposite.”

American psychologist Barry Schwartz has suggested that online recommendation engines were born out of necessity, helping consumers navigate this surplus of options. “The internet hath created a problem that it is now trying to solve,” he said. The Facebook group seems to be another development in this trend. With an endless catalogue of products, entertainment options and more at our fingertips, it is no wonder many are overwhelmed and seeking relief. As we face a wealth of options that continues to swell, it seems the group’s popularity is symptomatic of a decision overload that will only intensify.