Nutrition Claims, Anticipated Guilt, and Consumption Quantity

Brian Wansink, Cornell University, USA
Pierre Chandon, INSEAD, France

We develop and test a framework that contends that “low fat” nutrition labels increase food intake by 1) increasing perceptions of the appropriate serving size, and 2) decreasing anticipated consumption guilt. Three studies show that “low fat” labels lead all consumers—particularly those who are overweight—to overeat hedonic and utilitarian snack foods. Furthermore, salient objective serving size information (e.g., “servings per container: 2”) only reduces overeating among guilt-prone normal weight consumers, not among overweight consumers. This helps explain why the influence of relative nutrition claims differ according to the factors associated with guilt, such as whether an individual has a normal weight or whether the food is hedonic.

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According to Vohs and Baumeister (2004) “Eating is one of the most commonplace, yet least well understood, self-regulation domains.” Indeed, how can one reconcile the rising obesity rates with the increasing availability of healthy foods and the increasing number of Americans who are on a diet and exercise regularly?

The objective of this special session is to examine how anticipated and experienced consumption pleasures and guilt can explain why we are a nation of low-fat foods and high-fat people. Specifically, the three presentations show that the guilt caused by the perceived healthiness of food influences the anticipated and experienced pleasure of consuming it, which in turns affects whether people choose healthy or unhealthy food and how much of it they consume. These papers also offer different insights for leading consumers toward healthier food consumption decisions.

In the first presentation, Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer show that one of the reasons why consumers steer away from unfamiliar healthy food is that they expect that it tastes worse than unhealthy regular food. For example, they find that people expect that a new brand of crackers tastes better when it is high in “bad” saturated fat than when it is high in “good” unsaturated fat. They also find that people enjoy Mango Lassi more when it is described as “generally considered unhealthy”. Their results hold regardless of whether consumers believe that unhealthy food is generally tastier than healthy food or not. This suggests that education programs and even taste tests aimed at convincing consumers that healthy food is tasty may be of limited impact.

In the second presentation, Wansink and Chandon show that, even if consumers have already chosen a healthy food alternative, even a familiar one, they are likely to overeat it and may therefore end up with a higher calorie intake than if they had chosen the less healthy food. For example, they show that labeling M&M’s as “low fat” increases food intake during a single consumption occasion of people by up to 50%. They show that this occurs 1) because people erroneously infer that “low fat” means “low calories” and that a larger serving size is therefore appropriate for low-fat foods and 2) because “low fat” labels decrease anticipated consumption guilt.

From a public policy perspective, they find that providing objective serving size information (e.g., “contains 2 servings”) only reduces overeating among normal weight consumers, not among overweight consumers, who typically experience low levels of guilt.

The third presentation, by Goldsmith, Kim, and Dhar, integrates the findings of the first two presentations. They show that feelings of guilt caused by the perceived unhealthiness of food reduce anticipated and experienced consumption pleasure for unambiguous food but increase anticipated and experienced consumption pleasure for ambiguous food. They find that priming guilt reduces the anticipated enjoyment from eating a favorite dish and reduces the actual enjoyment from consuming ice cream. For novel food however, they find that priming guilt increases the expected and experienced consumption pleasure. These findings explain why Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer, who focused on ambiguous food, found higher likelihood of choosing guilt-inducing unhealthy foods whereas Wansink and Chandon, who focused on well-known snacks, found a lower consumption quantity for guilt-inducing unhealthy foods.
SESSION SUMMARY

Consumers’ everyday choice of action is often based on future-oriented thinking. For example, consumers may decide to forgo a delicious dessert in anticipation of achieving their ideal weight by a certain date, or they may decide to open a college saving account with the hope to go to college in the future. Although a great deal of research has been directed toward the dynamics of self-regulation in consumer choice (e.g., Fishbach and Dhar, 2005; Kivetz and Simonson 2002), relatively less attention has been given to how thoughts about future goal attainment may influence consumers’ current goal pursuit. Given the motivational power of future expectations or fantasies, this session seeks to explore the key principles of how future-oriented thinking may impact consumers’ current goal pursuit.

When contemplating about future, consumers may think about what they would do (i.e., actions), predict how they would feel (i.e., emotions), and plan when they would take actions to pursue their goals (i.e., temporal frames). In this session we plan to address these different aspects of thinking about future. In terms of future actions, we explore how expecting obstacles in future goal pursuit influence people’s optimistic predictions and how these predictions may then impact their actual goal pursuit. In terms of expected emotions, we are interested in how thinking about future emotional experience enhances one’s motivation for ongoing goal pursuit. In terms of temporal frames associates with goal-setting, we present research exploring whether thinking about limited (vs. unlimited) self-regulatory resources make people focus more on goals set for the proximal, compared with for the distant future.

The three papers in this session are organized around the theme of impact of future-oriented thinking on self-regulation in the present, and they each addresses one specific aspect of thinking about future: planning actions, anticipating emotions and considering available ego resources. Specifically, the first paper (by Zhang and Fishbach) suggests that when consumers expect obstacles in future goal pursuit, they come up with more optimistic predictions to motivate themselves, and these optimistic predictions in turn elicit higher motivation for their goal pursuit. However, when consumers strive to be accurate in their predictions, they become more conservative when considering the effect of future obstacles, and their actual motivation for goal pursuit decreases as a result. For example, consumers who hold a saving-money goal would predict to save more in face a big end-of-holiday sale, and they would subsequently end up saving more compared with those who try to be accurate in making such predictions, and who may report less saving when facing a big end-of-holiday sale, and actually save less.

The second paper (by Keinan and Kivetz) builds on previous literature attesting that consumers often suffer from a reverse self-control problem, i.e., exercising too much self-control and forgoing short-term pleasures. This paper examines whether consumers can foresee the future detrimental consequences of excessive self-control at present. It demonstrates that anticipating future regret relaxes consumers’ self-control efforts at present and motivates choice of indulgence. For example, thinking about the regret one might feel in the distant future for missing out on an indulgence may encourage the person to choose more temptation-related options in an immediate choice.

The third paper (by Mukhopadhyay and Agrawal) indicates that individuals’ future-oriented goal setting interacts with their lay theory on whether self-control is a limited or unlimited resource, suggesting that consumers who believe their self-regulatory resources are limited are more likely to act on goals that are temporally closer, whereas those who hold the belief that self-regulation is unlimited are more influenced by distally framed goals. For example, consumers who believe that self-control resources are limited may be willing to pay more for a gym membership when the keep-in-shape goal is framed for the near future, whereas those who believe self-control is unlimited may be willing to pay more when the same goal is framed for the distant future.

Each of the three papers in this session explores one aspect of future-oriented thinking—expected actions, expected emotions, and expected temporal frames. Collectively, they provide new insights on the understanding of self-regulation by studying how individuals’ future-oriented thoughts may impact their ongoing actions. The set of papers will lead to an interesting discussion about the effect of such psychological factors as temporal distance on consumer choice. These papers further contribute to an emerging research area that is relevant to the diverse interests of many ACR members: those interested in self-control, motivated cognition, construal level, optimism and emotions.

“To Be Optimistic or To Be Accurate: How Self-Control and Accuracy Motives Influence Predictions of Goal Pursuit”

Ying Zhang, University of Chicago
Ayelet Fishbach, University of Chicago

Consumers’ forward-looking predictions, such as how long it will take to complete certain tasks and how much one can save next year, consistently suffer from the optimism bias. Both cognitive (Buehler, Griffin, and Ross 1994) and motivational explanations (Kunda 1990; Taylor and Brown 1988) are offered to account for the optimism bias in predicting one’s goal pursuit, arguing that insufficient attention given to obstacles and motivation to see oneself in positive lights are reasons behind the optimistic predictions. More generally, it is believed that when people intend to arrive in a particular and directional conclusion, they rely on some biased cognitive processes, such that the desired outcome can be attained through reasoning.

Whereas all existent accounts emphasize the impact of the desirability of outcome in causing the prediction biases, we propose that consumers come up with optimistic predictions in order to motivate themselves when anticipating obstacles to their future goal attainment. Specifically, we propose that the predictions of future goal pursuit involve two competing motives: an accuracy motive, by which people try not to overestimate or underestimate their future goal pursuit, and a self-control motive, by which people seek to motivate themselves by making an optimistic prediction.

These two competing motives (accuracy vs. self-control) may lead to opposite predictions when people face obstacles for goal pursuit: while the accuracy motive points to a more conservative prediction, the self-control motive may push for a more optimistic prediction to motivate more goal pursuit. Which of the two competing motives takes the upper hand in predictions would then depend on whether the situation calls for greater accuracy or more self-control.

When people exercise self-control, anticipation of obstacles to the attainment of important long-term goals activates counteractive evaluations (Fishbach and Trope 2005; Trope and Fishbach 2000).