Hedonistic Rationality: the Duality of Food Consumption

Angela Hausman, University of TexasBPan American

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Why do consumers sacrifice long-term goals, and face possible ridicule, rather than control their hedonistic inclinations? For instance, they eat too much of the Awrong@ foods, spend money too freely, pile on too much credit card debt, would rather visit with friends than work or study, and prefer watching mindless television to reading, attending cultural events, or exercising. In these cases, consumers satisfy short-term hedonic goals, at the expense of long-term benefits, such as more money and a leaner, healthier body and mind. Situating this study within the context of food consumption clarifies consumer choice surrounding these behaviors.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9108/volumes/v32/NA-32

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why do consumers sacrifice long-term goals, and face possible ridicule, rather than control their hedonistic inclinations? For instance, they eat too much of the “wrong” foods, spend money too freely, pile on too much credit card debt, would rather visit with friends than work or study, and prefer watching mindless television to reading, attending cultural events, or exercising. In these cases, consumers satisfy short-term hedonic goals, at the expense of long-term benefits, such as more money and a leaner, healthier body and mind. Situating this study within the context of food consumption clarifies consumer choice surrounding these behaviors.

Americans are fat, and getting fatter (Martin, Robinson, and Moore 2000). But then, so are people in every other developed country (Martin, Robinson, and Moore 2000). Despite this overconsumption, people are not eating healthier (Kim, Nayga, and Capps 2001). Consumers are not happy about this trend—that is why they spend billions of dollars trying to correct the defects caused by overeating (Thompson and Hirschman 1995) and 120,000 each year will die prematurely due to nutrition related ailments (Frazao 1995). Governments are not happy about it either—that is why they spend billions of dollars promoting healthier food consumption, like the 5 a day program (Foerster, et al. 1998; Wansink 2002). Taxpayers and insurance carriers are not happy—since medical costs associated with obesity account for 5 percent of direct and 10 percent of indirect costs, much of it paid by government medical programs like Medicare. The food industry was happy, but that is changing as customers line up to file lawsuits blaming restaurants for their excess weight (Higgins 2003) and states introduce legislation requiring food labeling of restaurant meals (Higgins 2004).

Nothing seems to help. Consumers take off weight through expensive diet programs, pills, surgery, and exercise only to put it back on again—obesity is 74 percent more prevalent today than a decade ago (Higgins 2003). Promotional advertising and educational programs fall on deaf ears (Wansink 2002). Nutritional labeling, once thought to be the panacea for enabling consumers’ desires to eat healthier, does not appear to be having the desired effect (Hill, et al. 2002).

Marketing studies contribute to a more nuanced understanding of why consumers engage in behaviors that thwart long-term goals, like poor food choice, building on existing behavioral theories of consumption. Most of these efforts rely heavily on the image of consumers as rational individuals engaged in cognitive decisions, while ignoring the experiential factors that might impact food consumption. This ignores the basic duality of food consumption as both a utilitarian product for support of the body and a hedonic product for support and social construction of the soul.

For instance, Bagozzi and various colleagues have developed the theory of trying and more recently the theory of goal directed behavior, which explain more of the variance in observed behaviors by incorporating past efforts, behavioral control, and desires as antecedents of food consumption (cf. Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990; Bagozzi and Edwards 2000). Recently, Wansink (2002) contributed to this understanding by reviewing research related to World War II efforts to modify food consumption. His study underscored the importance of food availability and familiarity in evaluations of food acceptability. Others, such as Huston and Finke (2003), Khare and Inman (2003), and Verplanken and Faes (2000), focus on a relatively narrow range of factors impacting food consumption, such as implementation plans and habits, resulting in relatively low explanatory ability (R^2<.20). Unfortunately, most of these studies also suffer from narrow sampling—mainly employing students.

This study attempts to create a more comprehensive understanding of factors affecting food consumption behaviors by employing non-student samples using a grounded theory approach to develop theoretical linkages rather than test hypothetical ones. This study uncovers some of the multiple meanings consumers attach to food and how food performs both a utilitarian and self-defining function. Building on previous studies of body image (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), construction of self (Belk 1988), and homeliness (McCracken 1989), data highlight the bifurcation between rational and experiential influence on food consumption.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 56 informants between the ages of 11 and 60 to elicit not only cognitive elements of food consumption, but experiential ones as well. This study seeks an understanding of the myriad of forces—informational, social, personal, and cultural—acting on the consumption process. Recognizing that understanding these behaviors involves not only understanding the proto-typical consumer, but embraces differences across consumers, this study is more nuanced than previous ones since it uses informants comprising much of the human life span, from children to the elderly and ethnic groups, including Hispanics, Caucasians, and Asians.

Toward that end, themes developed through the iterative interpretation of depth interviews result in a more textured understanding of food consumption, especially with respect to the multitude of meanings associated with food, such as using food as a definition of self and social influences on consumption. The resulting themes, while developed in the context of food consumption, might be equally valuable in understanding similar purposive behaviors, including other health behaviors such as smoking cessation and exercise, dark-side consumption such as eating disorders (Hirschman 1991), and other process behaviors, like studying (Bagozzi and Edwards 2000).

REFERENCES


Hedonistic Rationality: The Duality of Food Consumption

Angela Hausman, University of Texas–Pan American

404 Advances in Consumer Research Volume 32, © 2005
Fishbein, Martin and Ickek Ajzen (1975), Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.