Abstract Goal and External Reference-Point Interaction in Food Decision Making

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Predictions made by goal theories or reference-dependent preference theory do not always align. This research addresses the question whether the disclosure of reference information has the same consequence for consumers with different consumption goals. A choice-based conjoint experiment in the food domain serves to test our propositions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine Jill and Jane shop cereals. Jill is looking after her figure, Jane has a sweet tooth. Further imagine they find two products, one of which contains 100 calories per serving, while the other contains 150 calories per serving. Goal related theories suggest that their food choices will be different (Fishbach and Dhar 2005): Jill shall choose the product with rather low calorie content as that product helps her best pursuing her dieting goal, while Jane might choose a higher caloric (but more tasty) product (Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer 2006) that helps pursuing her indulgence goal. Now imagine they learn that the average cereal product contains 120 calories.

Reference point related research suggests that the disclosure of that nutrition reference information stimulates healthier choices (Barone et al. 1996) as consumers tend to choose options that are easier to justify (Okada 2005). Thus, the reference information makes the 100-calorie option look like a relative virtue which makes it easier to justify (Wertenbroch 1998). Thus, Jill but also Jane should go for that product. As the hypothetical scenarios show, goal theories and reference-dependent preference theory (Tversky and Kahneman 1991) do not always align. A question arising is whether the disclosure of the reference information has the same consequence for indulgence-seeking Jane as it has for weight-juggling Jill.

Consumers’ preferences are represented by their individual value functions (van Ittersum and Pennings 2012) and, according to the reference-dependent model (Tversky and Kahneman 1991), value functions may be shifted by reference points. The effect depends on the provision of a comparison framework and the subsequent framing as loss or gain (Krishnamurthy and Prokopce 2010; Tversky and Kahneman 1991). In addition, there is an emerging stream of literature pointing to the role goals play in preference construction (Fishbach and Dhar 2005; van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2012). In their review of food decision making, Bublitz, Peracchio, and Block (2010) list three types of abstract eating goals: functional, symbolic, and hedonic. Functional goal pursuit means balancing one’s diet, symbolic goal pursuit stands for the goal of being part of a group by fulfilling norms like being skinny, while hedonic goal pursuit means aiming for indulgence (Bublitz, Peracchio, and Block 2010). These types of goals have been shown to affect preferences for healthy, nutritious or tasty food (Belei et al. 2012; Dhar and Simonson 1999; Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003).

In spite of the relevance of both reference points and goals for preference construction, research is only beginning to explore their relationship. For example, it has been shown that goals can serve as reference points when they are specific (Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999). That is, the same outcome (e.g., doing 35 sit-ups) can be experienced differently by two persons who had the goal to do 31 versus 39 sit-ups (Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999). Likewise, a person with the specific health goal of eating only food that contains less than 10% sugar would set 10g sugar per 100g as a reference point to assist choosing among food options. It has to be noted, though, that people typically rather have abstract eating goals (Bublitz, Peracchio, and Block 2010). Such abstract goals only refer to eating healthy, low-calorie, or tasty food in general. A consequence of pursuing abstract goals is that they cannot serve as reference points anymore. At the same time, abstract goals still animate general goal-directed behavior (van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2012). This implies that there may be a different relationship between reference points and goal pursuit than has been subject to existing research.

We propose that for consumers with a symbolic goal reference point provision increases preferences for products with low nutrient levels, but does not affect preferences for products with high nutrient levels. In addition, we propose that for consumers with a hedonic goal reference point provision decreases preferences for products with high nutrient levels, but does not affect preferences for products with low nutrient levels. We further propose that for consumers with a functional goal reference point disclosure increases preferences for products with low nutrient levels but does not affect preferences for products with high nutrient levels. We conducted a choice-based conjoint experiment to examine whether provision of a relatively low or high reference point decreases or increases the average amount of sugar chosen when a number of breakfast cereals is presented. In addition to sugar content, we included price, packaging, and organic labeling as relevant product attributes. In this experiment, each respondent was presented a sequence of 12 choice sets. Each choice set consisted of four hypothetical cereals, comprised of one level of each of the four attributes as well as a “no choice” option. In addition to the choice task, respondents answered survey questions regarding their symbolic weight goal, functional nutrition goal and hedonic taste goal. The final data set consists of 659 participants who completed all tasks. Sixty-one percent of the participants were female, and most were between 20 and 30 years of age.

The most important finding of the present research is that depending on goal pursuit reference points exert differential effects. Notably, reference point disclosure affected consumers’ evaluations of cereal alternatives at different sugar regions. Specifically, reference point disclosure increased preferences for low-sugar options among those consumers with a functional goal. These consumers’ preferences for high-sugar products remained unchanged, though. Conversely, reference point disclosure affected taste-seeking consumers’ preferences towards high-sugar options, but not low-sugar ones. Another striking finding is that reference point disclosure did not affect consumers with a symbolic goal at all. One explanation might be that consumers with an abstract symbolic goal are likely to avoid bad nutrients even when a reference point is not present (Shine, O’Reilly, and O’Sullivan 1997). The analyses further showed that it is worthwhile distinguishing between symbolic and functional eating goals. Though similar regarding their general preference for low-caloric food and aversion towards high-caloric food, only consumers with a functional goal seemed to change their preferences upon reference point disclosure.

REFERENCES


