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Understanding on-the-go consumption: Identifying and quantifying its determinants

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ABSTRACT

Although the amount of food and beverages consumed on-the-go has been increasing, existing research has not sufficiently examined this behavior. This study uses a mixed methods design with a qualitative study to identify four determinants of on-the-go consumption: time pressure, price consciousness, health orientation, and enjoyment. Combining the qualitative results with Behavioral Decision Theory, eight hypotheses are derived about the influence of the four determinants as well as their interrelations. Hypotheses testing and predictive validity assessment are based on two large-scale consumer samples, one main study and one validation study. The results confirm a significant influence of utilitarian determinants (time pressure and price consciousness), though they are less important than the hedonic determinant. Implications for retail managers are presented, as these results challenge conventional practices. Moreover, existing theory is extended beyond a distinction between utilitarian and hedonic motives by regarding health orientation as a hybrid determinant of on-the-go consumption.

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1. Introduction

The amount of food and drinks consumed on-the-go has increased enormously worldwide (Blisard et al., 2002; Heider and Moeller, 2012; Odesser-Torpey, 2013). This trend is generally ascribed to increasing desire for quick and easy consumption. On-the-go consumption involves the purchase and consumption of food and beverages while in transit from one place to another, such as grabbing a sandwich at a train station and eating it on the train, drinking coffee on the walk to work, or stopping at a drive-through window at a fast-food restaurant during car travel. The common characteristic is that purchase and consumption occur while consumers are in transit.

Despite the spread and ubiquity of this phenomenon, research into *on-the-go consumption* is sparse (with a few exceptions e.g. Binkley, 2006; Heider and Moeller, 2012) and often fails to distinguish it from two similar patterns, namely *consumption of convenience food* and *away-from-home consumption* (see Fig. 1). Although both consumption of convenience food and on-the-go consumption refer to similar types of food (i.e., ready-made; Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006), convenience food consumption can take

place in virtually any location (e.g., at home, in an office, in a restaurant), as the term does not involve a spatial specification. *Away-from-home consumption*, in contrast, defines the place of consumption but not the type of food; it therefore comprises the consumption of any food or beverage outside consumers' homes (USDA, 2013). Thus, it includes on-the-go consumption as well as more time-intensive and usually more social consumption in full-service restaurants (e.g. Ekinci, 2008). Because on-the-go consumption represents a particular type of away-from-home consumption and involves distinct consumption patterns, we argue that it requires separate investigation. While most existing research considers away-from-home consumption in general (e.g., Richards et al., 2012), we intend to enhance existing literature by clearly defining the scope of these interlinked phenomena.

In an effort to understand what influences the decision to consume on-the-go, we seek to identify and validate determinants of on-the-go consumption by adopting a mixed methods design. Based on a qualitative study and drawing from Behavioral Decision Theory (Khan et al., 2005), we identify *time pressure* and *price consciousness* as two utilitarian determinants of on-the-go consumption, *enjoyment* as a hedonic determinant, and *health orientation* as a hybrid determinant. While prior research predominantly takes a utilitarian perspective and cites time scarcity as the main driver of away-from-home consumption (e.g., Fan et al., 2007; Gofton, 1995; Narine and Badrie, 2007), the results of our qualitative study suggest a more nuanced perspective.

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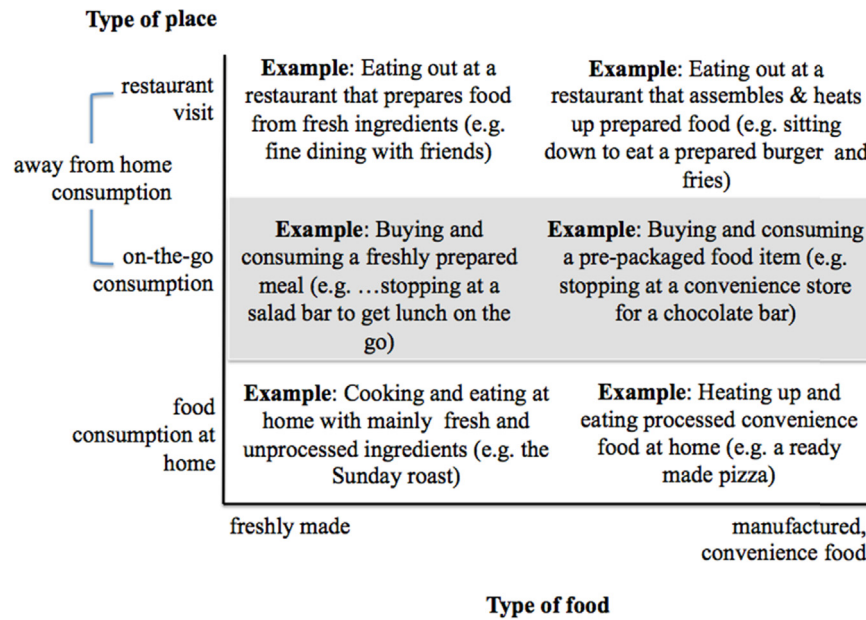


Fig. 1. Defining on-the-go consumption and related concepts.

To test the influences of the four determinants, we use quantitative data from a consumer sample ($n=805$) for analyzing a structural equation model. In addition to the direct effects on the consumption of food and drinks on-the-go, the model also accounts for interdependencies between the four determinants. Thereby, consumptive behavior in general and food consumption in particular relate to different, sometimes contradicting goals (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000; Ryu et al., 2010; Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2011). For instance, prior studies found health orientation among consumers led to lower price consciousness (Laroche et al., 2001). Our model thus offers a more comprehensive investigation by determining whether time pressure, health orientation, and enjoyment influence price consciousness, and whether time pressure influences health orientation. Finally, we validate the quantitative results with a second consumer sample ($n_2=393$), thereby providing evidence for the generalizability of our findings.

Overall, our research contributes to the existing literature by identifying determinants of on-the-go consumption and by testing their relevance and interrelations. We thus provide a more comprehensive view of on-the-go consumption that offers valuable information for retailers seeking to benefit from this growing market.

After laying a conceptual foundation for the terminology of on-the-go consumption and related constructs, we describe the theoretical background of Behavioral Decision Theory as well as the related concepts of utilitarian and hedonic motives for consumption. We then present our qualitative study, which we conducted to identify relevant determinants of on-the-go consumption. Building on these qualitative insights and drawing from related literature, we deduce eight hypotheses that we test in two quantitative studies. Finally, we discuss the results and avenues for further research.

2. Conceptual background

Investigations into the consumption of food away from home (FAFH) usually involve comparisons of consumption at home versus outside the home (e.g., Nayga, 1996) or address the impact of FAFH on diets and obesity (e.g., Burton et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2012). Both of these streams of research reflect the

enormous growth rates in expenditures for FAFH, while also reflecting substantial decreases in expenditures for food consumed at home (USDA, 2013), and the increasing rates of obesity in many Western cultures (e.g., Stein and Colditz, 2004). However, the USDA statistics combine data from a range of retail channels and subsume diverse sites for consumption under the FAFH label, such as eating and drinking establishments, hotels and motels, retail stores and direct sales outlets, recreational sites, as well as schools and colleges. Although these situations differ substantially, researchers—with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Binkley, 2006; Heider and Moeller, 2012)—have not differentiated FAFH from related concepts.

As we noted in the Introduction, on-the-go consumption occurs when consumers are in transit and consume food and/or beverages along the way. The objective of their trip is thus not the act of eating; consumption occurs, but primarily as a side activity. This differs from both consumption at consumers' homes and situations in which the objective of the trip is to consume food and beverages, so that transit is a means to the end of consuming at a specific place (e.g., a restaurant). On-the-go consumption thus represents a special form of FAFH consumption. The latter encompasses a much wider range that also includes the time-intensive consumption of meals at full-service restaurants. Furthermore, unlike on-the-go consumption, examinations of convenience food consumption focus solely on the products being consumed, regardless of the situation. Although consumers often purchase convenience food to be consumed on the go, such food can also be purchased for consumption at home, which would not be classified as on-the-go consumption. Fig. 1 provides examples of these different situations in on-the-go consumption and related concepts.

3. Theoretical background

How individuals decide to consume specific products in specific contexts is described by the models and concepts known as Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT) (Khan et al., 2005; Takemura, 2014). The descriptive facets of BDT consider that consumers do not only decide rationally, but also make emotional decisions based on experiential desires. The two concepts commonly used to

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