



# Functional or constructive attitudes: Which type drives consumers' evaluation of meat products?



Robert Hamlin

Department of Marketing, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9001, New Zealand

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 February 2015  
Received in revised form 18 February 2016  
Accepted 23 February 2016  
Available online 2 March 2016

### Keywords:

Meat  
Consumer  
Functional  
Constructive  
Attitude  
Point of sale  
Package  
Low involvement

## ABSTRACT

Consumer attitudes towards meat can be divided up into two types: Functional attitudes which are stable and exist over long periods of time, and constructive attitudes which are ephemeral and usually constructed at the point of sale. This research investigated the temporal and situational stability of meat consumers' attitudes by using the same established functional, multidimensional attitude instrument to generate attitude profiles for the four meat types: chicken/beef/lamb/poultry both as an abstracted construct and as a cue on a range of meat and meat-based products. The results showed that strong attitude profile was generated by the meat types as abstracted constructs, but that this profile broke down completely when the food products carrying the same meat types were evaluated. This result indicates that consumer attitudes may not be temporally or situationally stable, which in turn suggests that consumers' evaluation and choice of meat products may be driven to a greater or lesser extent by constructive rather than functional attitudes.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumer attitude has been an active research field in consumer marketing for over eighty years (Allport, 1935; Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). Attitude is the means by which a consumer personally relates to any individual 'attitude object' (Vogel, Bohner, & Wanke, 2014). This attitude object may be a product such as a meat pie, a service such as a restaurant, a non-commercial activity such as a charity or even an abstracted idea or philosophy such as vegetarianism. A consumer attitude contains three major components: Cognition – what the consumer believes they know about the object; affect – their emotional evaluation of the object, and conation – their intended future behaviour towards the object (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). Thus a consumer may know that vegetarians oppose the killing of animals (cognition). They strongly agree with this philosophical position (affect/evaluation). As a consequence their future intention is to only purchase and consume food products that they know are vegetarian (conation).

Consumer attitudes may be divided into two types: Functional attitudes – which are structured and which persist in a stable form within the consumer's memory for long periods of time, and constructive attitudes – which are unstable, ephemeral and are constructed in situ to drive a single decision. For most consumer purchase decisions this construction occurs at the point of sale. These two attitude types

are profoundly different, and as a consequence require profoundly different approaches to researching and managing them within any particular consumer market (Argyriou & Melewar, 2011).

As consumers have discretion as to the type and quantity of meat that they buy, a good understanding of consumer attitudes towards meat, when, where and how they develop, and how they influence product evaluation and choice is of great importance to the meat industry (Verbeke et al., 2015; Font-i-Furnols & Guerrero, 2014). A considerable body of consumer attitude research has already been published in Meat Science and other food science journals (Miranda-de la Lama, Sepúlveda, Villarreal, & Maria, 2013; Pouta, Heikkilä, Forsman-Hugg, Isoniemi, & Mäkelä, 2010; Trifiletti, Crovato, Capozza, Visintin, & Ravarotto, 2012; Verbeke, Pérez-Cueto, Barcellos, Krystallis, & Grunert, 2010; Liu, Hoefkens, & Verbeke, 2015). This article contributes to this body of literature by reporting the results of research that specifically investigated whether meat consumers' product evaluations are primarily driven by functional or constructive attitudes.

## 2. Functional and constructive attitudes

### 2.1. Functional attitudes

Of the two attitude types, functional attitudes have the longer history and remain the dominant paradigm in consumer research (Pratkanis, Breckler, & Greenwald, 2014; Assael, 2003; Grewal, Mehta, & Kardes, 2004). A functional attitude is actively acquired, and consists of a

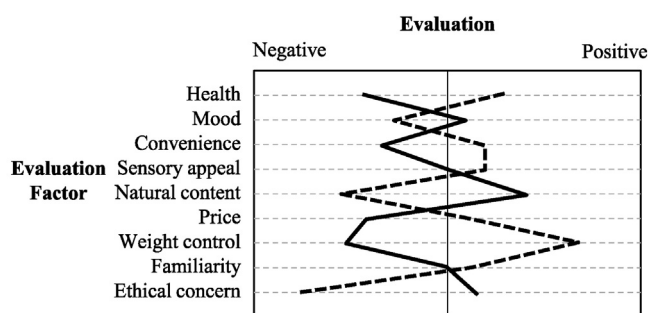
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number of stable associations within the individual's memory that are retrieved as a single coherent unit when required for use in a behavioural response towards the relevant attitude object. Functional attitudes are strongly associated with the paradigm of cognitive consumer choice. This paradigm finds its widest expression in the theories of reasoned action (TRA) and planned behaviour (TPB), which enjoy a similar level of dominance within the field of consumer behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011; Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988).

To demonstrate how functional consumer attitudes are understood and applied by the food industry, we will use the widely cited article by Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle (1995) (Cite<sup>n</sup> = 886 at 18/2/2016) as an example. These researchers developed a food choice questionnaire by factor analysis, which identified nine stable and universal factors upon which consumers evaluate food products. These factors are shown on the 'Y' axis of Fig. 1, with positive/negative consumer evaluations along the 'X' axis. Januszewska, Pieniak, and Verbeke (2011) have recently reviewed this specific instrument. Questionnaires based upon it have been used to create functional attitude profiles for individual products or inputs such as meat type (Hoek et al., 2011; Hersleth, Næs, Rødbotten, Lind, & Monteleone, 2012; Brunner, Van der Horst, & Siegrist, 2010; Forestell, Spaeth, & Kane, 2012). It has also been used to identify groups that respond differentially to the same attitude objects, thus forming a basis for consumer cluster analysis and market segmentation (Krystallis, Arvanitoyannis, & Kapirtis, 2003; Onwezen & Bartels, 2011; Ares & Gámbaro, 2007).

In Fig. 1, two hypothetical profiles for a single consumer group's response to 'pork' and 'chicken' are presented using Steptoe et al.'s (1995) framework. In this case, if the hypothetical consumer group in Fig. 1 were selecting food products cognitively, they would select the chicken – just, because if all factors are equally weighted, and shortcomings in one factor can be compensated for by strengths in others, chicken's overall evaluation scores marginally higher. If their consumer research had generated such a profile, an equally cognitive member of the pork industry would plan to modify this situation by addressing the specific shortcomings of pork revealed by the consumer attitude profile via a mix of marketing and technical development aimed at the specific factors where pork was perceived to be deficient.

If the consumers' reactions for each factor are considered to be evaluations, then these two profiles are exactly analogous to differential, functional consumer attitudes towards the two meat types. If these factor evaluations are also taken to be analogous to factors of utility, then these attitudes are fully compatible with the basic equation that underlies the attitude component of the theories of reasoned action and planned behaviour. Attitude profiles can therefore be easily operationalised as drivers of cognitive consumer choice models that are based upon these theories (Wilkie & Pessemier, 1973; Van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2012; Fotopoulos, Krystallis, Vassallo, & Pagiasslis, 2009).



\* Result in this case is hypothetical for illustration only.

Fig. 1. Multi-factor consumer evaluation after Steptoe et al. (1995)\*.

The combination of functional attitudes and reasoned consumer action offers a very attractive paradigm to industry researchers and decision makers in terms of its completeness, coherence and capacity to be operationalised. Functional attitudes and the assumption of stable multi-dimensional evaluations are the dominant paradigm for consumer studies published in the food and meat research literature (Bernués, Ripoll, & Panea, 2012; Januszewska et al., 2011; Gracia & de-Magistris, 2013; Verbeke et al., 2010; Sepúlveda, Maza, & Mantecón, 2008).

## 2.2. Constructive attitudes

While noting these advantages of functional attitudes in their recent review of attitude research, Argyriou and Melewar (2011) noted that doubts remain as to the applicability of functional attitudes in many fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) markets. These markets include those for meat and meat derived retail products. Consumer decisions with regard to FMCG products are characterised by high frequency, wide variety and short duration from initiation through search and evaluation to decision – typically a matter of seconds and within a single location (Dickson & Sawyer, 1990; Grunert, 2006).

Due to these constraints and the relatively low value of each individual FMCG transaction, such decisions are also characterised by a lower level of cognitive and affective engagement by the consumer, leading to the application of the term 'low involvement consumer decision making' to them in established consumer behaviour texts (Evan, Foxall, & Jamal, 2009; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2014; Assael, 2003).

These low involvement/FMCG decision parameters are inimical to the elaborate structure and active learning/assimilation processes required by TRA, TPB and the multi-factor functional attitudes that support them (Ehrenberg, 2004; Kuyykaite, Dovaliene, & Navickiene, 2015). This perception has led to the development of an alternative 'constructive' consumer attitude and decision paradigm based around decision processes that are highly context dependent and are driven by specific attitudes that are constructed by the consumer at the point of purchase from simpler generic components retrieved from memory in response to stimuli directly presented by the environment (Scheibehenne, Miesler, & Todd, 2007; Hamlin, 2010). These attitudes are constructed and then discarded once the decision is made, after a lifetime of maybe a few seconds (Slovic, 1995).

The process of constructive attitude formation is shown diagrammatically in Fig. 2 for a consumer meat product evaluation equivalent to that shown in Fig. 1. Note that there is no requirement for structural commonality for the abstract constructs used to form each individual constructive attitude, and there is no requirement for each individual constructive attitude to have been formed from an equivalent set of abstracted constructs. This is an inevitable outcome of fact that alternative products rarely present an equivalent cue set to the consumer, in either its structure or content. Some cues like 'organic' may evoke a complex, developed and stable generic (functional) attitude for use as an input, others like 'coupon saver' may evoke an attitude component that is devoid of cognitive or affective components, and is thus little more than decision heuristic. A single cue of this type presented by one product may form the entire basis of a purchase driving attitude (e.g. 'I always buy the product on coupon book saver'). In that situation, only a single attitude with a strong conative component (Attitude 1) may be constructed based upon a single processed input (cue 'A' → abstract construct 'a'), and no further cue processing, attitude development or comparative product evaluation will occur. In other situations, more than two attitudes may be constructed to support an evaluation and choice between multiple products.

One of the major advantages of constructive attitudes is their cognitive parsimony. The stable attitude structure required for functional attitude theory and cognitive decision making would require a consumer to start a weekly supermarket shop with several hundred uniformly structured product-specific functional attitudes already in place. Constructive attitudes remove this requirement. The hundreds of

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