



Promoting positive change: Advancing the food well-being paradigm[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Food well-being (FWB) is defined as “a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food at both the individual and societal levels” (Block et al., 2011, p. 6). This article seeks to advance our understanding of FWB along two dimensions. First, we discuss how awareness of consumer goals, as well as motivation and readiness to change, may help us to understand consumer preparedness to advance FWB. Second, we deconstruct the automatic and deliberative influences on food decision making into cognitive and emotional information that guide food choices and can be used by consumers to advance their own FWB. We close with a discussion of how measurement and strategies to influence FWB may allow researchers, policymakers, and industry to help consumers advance FWB.

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1. Introduction

In 2005, a small but growing movement within the field of consumer research formed to deliberate key issues related to consumer welfare (Mick, 2006). This movement, transformative consumer research (TCR), encourages researchers to tackle chronic social problems plaguing consumers worldwide. One central TCR research stream examines how food decision making influences health and well-being. Researchers from the 2009 TCR Conference advocated for research and consumer programs that foster a positive relationship with food, crafting a vision for the food well-being paradigm (Block et al., 2011). These researchers defined food well-being (FWB) as “a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social

relationship with food at both the individual and societal levels” (Block et al., 2011, p. 6). This paradigm shift set an exciting path for researchers to focus on how a positive relationship with food may help consumers achieve a higher level of well-being.

Participants at the 2011 TCR Conference advanced the paradigm by envisioning FWB as a continuum and suggesting measurement of five core areas: social influences, economic factors, food literacy, emotional knowledge, and physical and psychological traits to assess an individual's starting point on the FWB continuum (Bublitz et al., 2012). We continue the dialogue by focusing on how to empower consumers to take steps to advance FWB. Specifically, we merge research on goals and motivation with research investigating the automatic and deliberative influences on food choices to further our understanding of how consumers can make changes that help them progress along the FWB continuum. We begin with a discussion of how consumer goals and motivations may influence movement along the FWB continuum. Then, we integrate research on food decision making to identify opportunities for consumers to advance their FWB. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for policymakers, researchers, and industry leaders who seek to advance our understanding of FWB.

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2. Food well-being goals

Consumer goals impact perceptions of FWB as well as the strategies consumers adopt to advance FWB. Further, a consumer's ability to determine their own FWB level (i.e., their subjective assessment of their own relationship with food) may not align with more objective measures of health and well-being. This section discusses the role of consumer goals and subjective versus objective measures of FWB in an effort to link research on food decision making to opportunities to advance FWB.

2.1. Consumer goals

Consumers hold a wide variety of food-related goals, including functional, symbolic, or hedonic. This section explores how these different types of goals influence FWB.

2.1.1. Functional goals

Consumers often examine their food consumption as they strive to improve health or reduce health risks (Vallis et al., 2003). Their goals can be prevention (e.g., healthy eating to avoid future health problems) or promotion oriented (e.g., increasing fiber intake to promote digestive health). Some consumers take a mechanical approach to managing their consumption by counting calories, sodium, or fat using online tracking tools and mobile applications to monitor their nutrient intake. For some consumers, closely monitoring their food consumption may help them advance their health goals (e.g., diabetics who manage carbohydrate intake to regulate their blood sugar). However, for others, obsessive focus on dieting and tracking may actually be counterproductive, resulting in periods of deprivation followed by periods of overindulgence (Heatherton, Polivy, & Herman, 1991). The FWB paradigm encourages consumers to adopt a positive approach designed to encourage a healthy relationship with food (Block et al., 2011).

2.1.2. Symbolic goals

Consumers also nurture social relationships through eating. Family relationships in many cultures are strengthened through mealtime rituals such as eating Sunday dinner together (Motley & Perry, 2009). Other affiliation-related goals manifest when consumers use dieting behaviors to align with social norms of physical attractiveness (Hayes & Ross, 1987). Consumers also strive to express their identity through eating by demonstrating self-control (Roth, Herman, Polivy, & Pliner, 2001). For example, consumers eat different amounts when dining with members of the opposite sex as a way to project their masculinity or femininity (Allen-O'Donnell, Cottingham, Nowak, & Snyder, 2011). Using food to achieve and display aspects of identity may influence movement along the FWB continuum.

2.1.3. Hedonic goals

Some consumer goals focus on enjoying the sensory experience of eating. Firms develop flavor innovations to reach this segment and increase demand for their products (Gottfried, 2010). The hedonic pleasure consumers derive from eating may increase caloric intake, as greater food variety leads consumers to focus on the enjoyment of the consumption experience (Mela, 2006). However, the interplay between pleasurable food experiences, overall health, and well-being is critical to the FWB paradigm (Block et al., 2011). In fact the pleasure associated with food can also be positive and is likely intertwined with associations and memories that connect some foods with social occasions, family, and other positive experiences. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that consumers who diet frequently may develop an unhealthy relationship with food that can negatively influence health (Blublitz, Peracchio, & Block, 2010).

2.1.4. Goals to advance FWB

Understanding functional, symbolic, or hedonic goals may point toward different paths to advance FWB. Consumers with functional

goals may perceive higher levels of FWB as desirable and be motivated to pursue a better relationship with food. However, those with hedonic goals should identify which consumption experiences advance and which undermine their own FWB. Those with symbolic goals may have distinct affiliation or identity motivations, which can be leveraged in the pursuit of FWB. Consumer goals are not always stable: research suggests that consumers often vacillate between restriction or dieting goals and hedonic consumption goals (Stroebe, Papies, & Aarts, 2008). In addition, consumers may simultaneously experience goals that conflict such as the hedonic desire for something that tastes good along with a desire to pursue healthy eating goals. The FWB concept suggests that balancing and satisfying both healthy and hedonic desires are part of having a positive relationship with food.

2.2. Subjective vs. objective measures

Motivating consumers to advance FWB may depend in part on the gap between an individual's subjective assessment of his/her own FWB and more objective measures of health. The potential discrepancy between subjective and objective measures of well-being makes setting uniform goals for FWB difficult. For example, some studies show that African-American women are less dissatisfied with their weight than white women (e.g., Rucker & Cash, 1992). Differences in the normative pressure to achieve a certain body size may make some cultures less critical of deviance from the ideal or norm. This may explain why African American girls tend to believe that their size is considered satisfactory by important others (Kemper, Sargent, Drane, Valois, & Hussey, 1994). These young women may have a higher level of body esteem. Having low body esteem has been linked to unhealthy dieting and eating disorders as well as depression and anxiety (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Measures of health and well-being often incorporate more objective standards such as body mass index (BMI). However, BMI has been criticized because the proportion of lean to fat body tissue can vary depending on factors such as age and ethnicity (Prentice & Jebb, 2001). For women with higher than the recommended BMI but high body esteem, messages to lower their BMI may negatively influence how they feel about their body. Balancing the relationship between objective (e.g., BMI) and subjective measures (e.g., body esteem) is critical to efforts to advance FWB.

Other objective measures of health status have similar limitations. Measures such as weight status or cholesterol levels used to assess healthfulness do not examine psychological influences on food consumption. For example, the consumer emotional intelligence scale (CEIS) – a measure that captures a consumer's ability to reason about and use emotional information – has been shown to be a better predictor of high quality food choices than one's nutrition knowledge (Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008a, 2008b). Another relevant factor is health literacy, which focuses on an individual's ability to understand and communicate health information (Baker, 2006). Some scales attempt to identify consumers with lower health literacy levels (Wallace, Rogers, Roskos, Holiday, & Weiss, 2006) and other measures focus on consumer understanding of nutrition information (e.g., Moorman, 1996). An assessment of FWB should encompass a broad range of measures including social influences, economic factors, food literacy, emotional knowledge, and physical and psychological traits (Blublitz et al., 2012). Within these dimensions, a combination of subjective and objective measures will provide a more complete understanding of FWB. Future research should examine in more detail the differences between subjective and objective measures with particular emphasis on understanding how a gap between these two perspectives may influence a consumer's motivation and ability to advance on the FWB continuum.

3. Motivation and readiness to change

A healthy relationship with food requires insights into consumer motivation and abilities as well as environmental or contextual

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