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Product satisfaction in food choice is multiple-reference dependent: Evidence from an in-store non-hypothetical consumer experiment on bread



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ABSTRACT

Consumer behaviour is goal-orientated. In food product research, goals as cognitive constructs have been shown to translate through the product into an evaluation of product attributes and onto actual choice. In relation to food consumer behaviour and food product choice, however, the manner by which goals operate on post-purchase affective states (need fulfilment) has been largely unexplored. This study examined how food product attributes relate to consumer satisfaction and how this association differs along the goal gradient. We posited that goals are translated through the target object (the product) into a satisfaction representation of product attributes of the identified product. Based on tri-reference point (TRP) goal dependency and the Kano approach to satisfaction measurement, we then analysed the product attribute satisfaction that characterised different goal levels using data collected in an in-store, non-hypothetical consumer experiment with a random sample of 229 consumers. The existence of TRP dependence on product attribute satisfaction was strongly supported, indicating that need fulfilment was directed by transitions across goal reference states. Moreover, a lack of direct proportionality between goal valuation and the instrumentality of the product attributes as means to need fulfilment was identified. These results have normative implications for food product development and research in terms of targeting consumer needs.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that people's behaviour, including that relating to their role as a consumer, is goal orientated. The relationship between motivation and goals has long been documented within the marketing area (e.g. Pieters & Wedel, 2007) and in the field of consumer decision making (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998). However, goals involve no specific action, although goal attainment may ultimately be attempted by performing a variety of reasoned and unreasoned actions. For food consumers, goals as motivators can refer to what the product has (or does not have) in terms of features, but it can alternatively appeal to wide ranges of standards of consumer expectations in terms of need fulfilment and, ultimately, the satisfaction derived from aligning goal attainment and behavioural action. Consumers are therefore exposed to advertisements that appeal to wide ranges of standards of expectations, such as “Boost yourself to perfection”, “...for a special

occasion”, “Enjoy plant power” and “Good for you”, each with a connotation with product performance, ultimately aiming to generate a post-purchase affective state of satisfaction to induce brand or product loyalty.

Consumers' product evaluation for low-involvement products is known to be dynamic and determined by habitual goals (e.g. Verplanken & Aarts, 1999) or based on goals triggered by information and context immediately available to the consumer in the form of arrays of cues (Hamlin, 2010) such as brand, colour, price, etc. Together with product conceptualisations in the form of conscious or unreasoned meaning assigned to what is perceived (Thomson, 2010), such considerations of goals influence the desirability of products and eventually become manifested through intentions to attain the goal (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2008). Goal-based choice studies, where in a connectionist network consumers evaluate products, have emerged recently (Stijn, van Osselaer, & Janiszewski, 2012). In an editing and evaluation process, goals as cognitive constructs are translated through a target object or a set of target objects as sub-goals (the product) into a representation of identified product attribute preferences

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(instrumental means) and on to actual choice (Lagerkvist, Normann, & Åström, 2015).

According to goal setting theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), goals represent cognitive constructs having distinct motivational meaning. Goal systems are then defined to represent systematic networks of mentally desirable end-states (super-ordinate goals) which are inter-connected with their means of achievement and to alternative super-ordinate goals. Goal-attainment as a motivational construct thereby involve management of goal conflicts as well as means choice and substitution that might be activated during goal pursuit. The concept of means relates to “any activity, event or circumstance perceived as likely to contribute to goal progress” (Kopetz, Kruglanski, Arens, Etkin, & Johnson, 2012, p. 212). A single goal might be associated with multiple instrumental means, or multiple simultaneous goals sharing some means may exist at the same time, thus implying existence of means substitution effects. Moreover, alternative goals might exist with or without a common set of means, thus leading to potential cognitive conflicts (Hull, 1938). For instance, the goal of buying bread could include various sub-goals such as a specific purpose (e.g. bread for breakfast) or bread with certain functional (i.e. what the bread can do for the consumer), emotional and/or hedonic features. The various instrumental means would then represent certain product salient features or attributes. Fig. 1 depicts a possible multiple goal system with two alternative goals and a set of interrelated and inhibitory means.

Goal setting theory posits that goal activation triggers activation of specific goal-means configurations (i.e. actions). Such configurations can be unique and stable in being formed by goal-means associations established by the individual to be instrumental (i.e. habits), or non-unique, leading to alternative pursuits to its attainment. The extent of desirability and the strength of goal-mean associations in goal considerations then come to relate to a value attached to the goal itself and a transfer of value from the goal to the means, with the consequence of establishing a preference structure for certain means over others (Zhang, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2007).

Existing research confirms that a goal might serve as a reference point, as it divides potential outcomes into regions of success or failure (Heath, Larrick, & Wu, 1999), and that goals inherit the properties of loss aversion and diminishing sensitivity to value changes as proposed by prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Analogously, a range of multiple goals (i.e. on a goal gradient or a range of motivational phenomena) would generate multiple reference points. This is consistent with the fundamental allocational property of goal systems by which more or less mental

resources are allocated to a given goal attainment depending on where on the goal gradient the goal is located (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Recently, Lagerkvist et al. (2015) found that the characteristics of the goal-value function extend to a food product evaluation situation with multiple goals, where three goals serve as reference points (a base level as status quo (SQ)), striving to reach a target level (TL), while simultaneously seeking to avoid a bottom line (referred to as the minimum requirement, MR). The subjective value function was found to be asymmetric in changes of goals along the goal gradient, which then become partitioned into four regions: Success ($x > TL$), gain ($x > SQ$), loss ($MR < x < SQ$) and failure ($x < MR$). Multiple goal reference points thus imply that consumers who are below a certain goal, say the MR level, will work harder to attain certain product features or to obtain a more favourable overall impression to increase their achievement than consumers who are above this MR level.

Goals as reference points then implies that mean choices and preference formation among competing products (as sub-goals and means) that are considered acceptable but which differ in some means to attainment are formed differently along the continuum from bottom line to target level and beyond, and therefore should differ in desirability. This refers to the substitutability relations between various means along the goal gradient. Additional criteria for the identification of goal reference points are that they reflect the mental values of specific end-states rather than general desires and depend on the choice environment (Förster, Liberman, & Friedman, 2007). Together, these criteria suggest that need fulfilment as motivation and need satisfaction as attainment are “inextricably intertwined” (Oliver, 2010, p. 140). Moreover, the criteria suggest that people may have a set of expectations ranging from the worst acceptable to the ideal, and a corresponding set of post-purchase affective states to such desired standards (Santos & Boote, 2003).

1.1. Present study

There has been little research on goal-directed product satisfaction, but it is widely accepted that if people commit to goals, the goal alters their values (e.g. Locke & Latham, 1990). Therefore, we considered the following question for multiple goals as reference points for satisfaction: How are different attributes (as means) for a given food product differently related to customer satisfaction and how does this relation differ along the goal gradient? The sense of achievement can be expected to differ along the goal gradient, as consumers may have different goal-directed

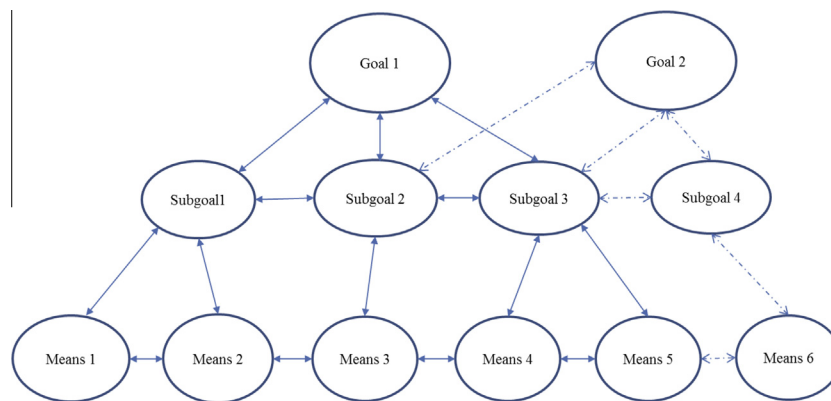


Fig. 1. A system of multiple goals and means (own adaption to a multiple goal system from Kruglanski et al., 2002). Facilitative links relate vertically connected elements (i.e. goals and their means of attainment). Lateral links exist between competing (substitution) and/or common (complementary) sub-goals and/or means. Note: dashed lines indicate the systemic structural effect from having goal 2 to represent an alternative to goal 1, sharing three sub-goals and with indirect relationships to certain means to attainment. Sub-goal 4 and Mean 6 is unique to goal 2 (i.e. inhibitory to the goal 1 system). Several goals, sub-goals and means can be added to reflect an even more elaborate goal system hierarchy.

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