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ANALYSIS

Consumers' motivational associations favoring free-range meat or less meat

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyzed the motivational orientations of consumers who choose to eat (1) small portions of meat or (2) ethically distinctive meat, such as free-range meat, in relation to the motivational orientations of their opposites. Going beyond the conventional approach to consumer behavior, our work builds on recent insights in motivational psychology about the ways in which people may approach matches or avoid mismatches to the desired end-state of “getting enough nourishment by eating the right food”. Consumers who tend to approach matches are often focused on choosing the best alternatives from their choice set (chronic promotion focus). Consumers who tend to avoid mismatches are often focused on rejecting unacceptable alternatives from their choice set (chronic prevention focus). Distinguishing these two motivational orientations provides a scientific basis for the aim to foster more sustainable food consumption and production patterns. Our approach involves a systematic analysis of consumers' goal orientations regarding meat choices. We examined how a sample of Dutch consumers ($n=939$) described their chronic motivational orientations regarding food, their own meat choices and, about two weeks later, their promotion- and prevention-oriented associations favoring either small portions of meat and free-range meat or their opposites. Largely in line with our hypotheses we found that consumers with a chronic prevention orientation avoided the mismatch of “large portions”. Also, those of them who paid the premium price of free-range meat considered eating “meat produced by intensive farming” a mismatch. Conversely, if consumers with a chronic promotion orientation paid the premium price of free-range meat, they considered this the best alternative from their choice set. Accordingly, choosing a small portion of meat was often approached with a prevention orientation and choosing free-range meat with either a prevention or a promotion orientation. These differences in motivational orientation underline that the pursuit of sustainability requires careful consideration of not just undesirable but also of desirable alternatives.

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1. Introduction

Modern patterns of food consumption are overusing our natural resources (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Particularly relevant

here are people's meat choices. Food production will cause much less pressure on crucial resources (i.e. energy, water, biodiversity), human health and animal welfare, if people in Western countries choose to eat smaller quantities of meat as

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well as types of meat that are produced in a more responsible way, such as organic or free-range meat (Aiking et al., 2006; Smil, 2000). However, many consumers, both in the United States (Heller and Keoleian, 2003) and in Europe (Bernués et al., 2003), seem to give little thought to the links between their consumption behaviors and the process of food production. Moreover, insights and instruments based on conventional economics fail to improve consumers' ability to live better by consuming less and reduce their impact on the environment in the process (Jackson, 2005). One of the prerequisites for such a change is a better understanding of their underlying motivations. A new theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000) about the regulation of goal directed behavior provides an interesting scientific basis for this purpose. It can explain how consumers may get the experience of "feeling right" about what they are doing if they consume less or opt for a product at a premium price (Higgins et al., 2003). This involves the two basic motivational orientations, termed promotion and prevention, which underlie people's concerns with obtaining nurturance (e.g. nourishing food) and avoiding harm (e.g. seeing to moral and health aspects of eating) respectively. Because it is vital to obtain more insight into how the notion of food sustainability can be made more appealing, the present paper takes a closer look at promotion- and prevention-orientations of Dutch consumers favoring either free-range meat or small portions of meat versus their opposites (i.e. meat produced by intensive farming and large portions of meat).

Promotion and prevention can be seen as the dual motivational underpinnings of the sustainability concept. Because a food system is sustainable only if it can be maintained at a desirable quality level for a very long time, the two orientations are crucial for creatively maximizing a system's qualities (e.g. promotion goals) in a responsible and harmonious way (e.g. prevention of deterioration). At the individual level, a promotion focus makes the person sensitive to positive outcomes that may be gained, for example, through accomplishments, aspirations, and ideals (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). Also, a person with a prevention focus becomes sensitive to negative outcomes that have to be avoided, for example, by fulfilling one's moral obligations and responsibilities. Both orientations can be relevant for a person's strategies to reach a desired end-state, either by ensuring the presence of positive outcomes that *match* the desired end-state (promotion focus) or by ensuring the absence of negative outcomes that *mismatch* the desired end-state (prevention focus). If consumers' desired end-state is "getting enough nourishment by eating the right food", their meat choices may be motivated by matches they would like to attain, such as links with free-ranging animals, or mismatches they would like to avoid, such as links with environmental deterioration.

Higgins' theory specifies how people's experience of "feeling right" about what they are doing results from the psychological "fit" between their goal orientations (promotion or prevention), their strategies to reach the goal (eager approach or vigilant avoidance), and goal-relevant attributes of the choice options (promotion-related or prevention-related associations). Various experiments (Spiegel et al., 2004) show that a promotion focus is sustained by eagerness and doing extra things, whereas a prevention focus is sustained by vigilance and being careful. The experience of

"fit" increases the value of what people are doing. With regard to consumption, a "fitting" combination of goal orientation, strategies to reach the goal and goal-relevant attributes of the choice options may become linked with a product. That is, consumers can learn to associate products with either promotion or prevention (Zhou and Pham, 2004). For example, consumers with a promotion orientation may prefer a piece of fruit that they see as an energizer, whereas consumers with a prevention orientation may prefer fruit that they associate with health precautions (Florack and Scarabis, 2006; Spiegel et al., 2004). The difference between promotion and prevention is also related to the decision rule that consumers apply to a choice set; selection of the best alternative fits a promotion focus and rejection of unacceptable alternatives a prevention focus (Chernev, 2004). As summarized in Fig. 1, the process ends with different emotional appraisals of success and failure; people feel cheerful if their approach strategy is successful, but disappointment if it fails; they feel relaxed if their avoidance strategy is successful, but concerned if it fails.

A person's momentary focus on promotion or prevention will depend on circumstances induced by the situation at hand in combination with his or her personal history and cultural background. In the case of food choices, a promotion orientation may include all the social and culinary motives that emphasize the importance of food as a positive force in life—a pattern that is quite common in countries such as France and Belgium, but less so in the United States and Japan (Rozin et al., 1999). In contrast, a prevention orientation may put much decision weight on those food choice criteria that ensure protection from personally felt threats, such as criteria on the moral and health aspects of eating. The importance

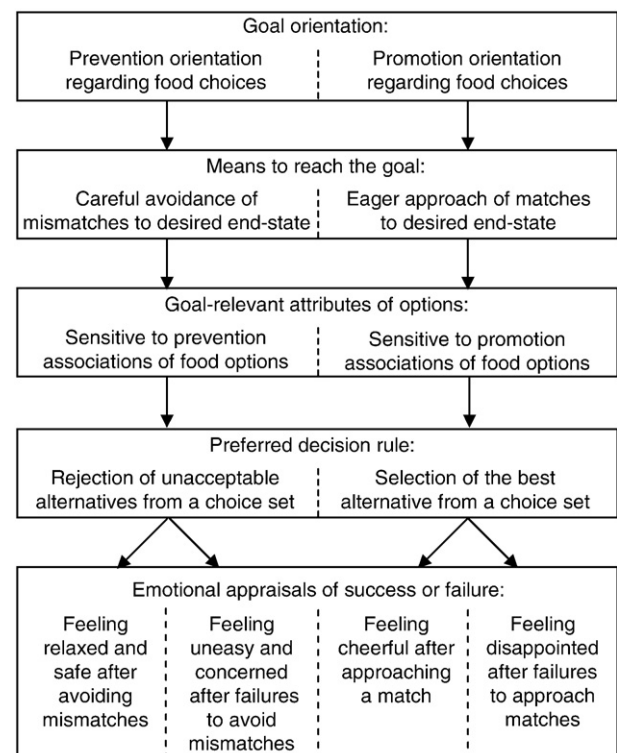


Fig. 1 – Main elements of Higgins' motivation theory applied to consumer behavior.

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