



# Food and value motivation: Linking consumer affinities to different types of food products



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## ABSTRACT

This study uses the consumer affinity concept to examine the multiple motives that may shape consumers' relationships with food. The concept was applied in a study on four broad product types in the Netherlands, which cover a wide range of the market and may each appeal to consumers with different affinities towards foods. These product types may be denoted as 'conventional', 'efficient', 'gourmet' and 'pure'. A comparative analysis, based on Higgins' Regulatory Focus Theory, was performed to examine whether food-related value motivations could explain different consumer affinities for these product types. The affinities of consumers were measured by means of a non-verbal, visual presentation of four samples of food products in a nationwide survey ( $n = 742$ ) among consumers who were all involved in food purchasing and/or cooking. The affinities found could be predicted fairly well from a number of self-descriptions relating to food and eating, which expressed different combinations of type of value motivation and involvement with food. The analysis demonstrated the contrasting role of high and low involvement as well as the potential complementarity of promotion- and prevention-focused value motivation. It is suggested that knowledge of the relationships between product types, consumer affinities and value motivation can help improve the effectiveness of interventions that seek to promote healthy and sustainable diets in developed countries.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding the forces that can bring consumers and food products together is key to improving healthy eating and promoting "fair, culturally-appropriate, biodiversity-based, sustainable diets" (Lairon, 2012, p. 35). The achievement of these objectives requires an ethical transformation of consumer behavior and a cultural transformation of products and markets (Holt, 2012; Lang, 2010; 2012). However, as Scholliers (2007, p. 337) notes, consumers do not just experience market influences: they co-create them by their expectations, language and expenditures. Therefore, an important strategic question in this context is whether and how the transformations can be linked to consumers' food-related *value motivation*, i.e. motivation to have desired results (Higgins, 2012). When dealing with this question, researchers should avoid being either too abstract in terms of values or too specific in terms of

product likings. The present paper puts forward the view that the analysis of broad affinities may be a promising intermediate strategy. An *affinity* is a favorable and primarily affectively based attitude toward someone or something, such as food that has been produced in a special way or in a particular country, which can affect buying decisions directly and independent of product judgments (Oberecker, Riefler, & Diamantopoulos, 2008). The affinity construct may be one of the factors to explain the coincidence of pairs of items in a market basket (Russell & Petersen, 2000). In particular, a comparative analysis of different affinities can give highly relevant information on the forces that shape consumer choices. These forces may be understood metaphorically as a kind of reciprocal affinity (see Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009), i.e. consumers can be said to choose particular types of products, but there is also a sense in which products 'choose' consumers, for instance, via shops they visit and the displays they look at. In the present paper, we examined differences in affinities for four broad types of products, which cover a wide range of the market in the Netherlands and may be denoted as 'conventional', 'efficient', 'gourmet' and 'pure'. The aim to compare affinities for these types of foods was suggested by an earlier study (De Boer, Hoogland, &

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Boersema, 2007), which identified four main ways of relating to food, based on combinations of different levels of involvement with food and the two types of value motivation (i.e. prevention and promotion) from Higgins' Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT, see Higgins, 1997; 2012). The current paper describes a consumer survey that measured differences in affinities by means of non-verbal, visual presentations of four samples of food products and tested whether the differences could be predicted by combinations of involvement and type of value motivation, after controlling for demographic variables.

Cooking and eating are forms of goal-directed behavior with many complementary and competing motivational aspects, such as the need to strive for variation, to make balanced choices, to avoid 'bad' food, and to preserve favored combinations of use situations, meals, products and ingredients (e.g. Fischler, 1980; Rozin, 1976; Scholliers, 2007). These aspects can be translated in the language of short self-descriptions, which may help consumers recognize how they relate to food (e.g. "I am curious about new tastes"). Although the self-descriptions can be analyzed in several ways, it is important to assess their consistency with some theoretical principle, as self-reports are themselves behaviors that require dynamic interpretation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). De Boer et al. (2007) developed a number of self-descriptions relating to food and eating in order to assess how they can be arranged in a structure of underlying complementary and competing motivations, which revolve around two axes: level of involvement with food and type of value motivation (i.e. promotion- or prevention-oriented). The concept of *involvement* refers to the differences between consumers in terms of how important food and eating are in an individual's life (Marshall & Bell, 2004; Ohly et al., 2013; Verbeke & Vackier, 2004). Value motivation can be divided into ensuring better results from actions (with a promotion focus) and ensuring against worse results from actions (with a prevention focus) (Higgins, 1997; 2002; 2012). *Promotion-focused motivation* is basically concerned with obtaining nurturance (e.g. 'good' food); it underlies concerns with the pleasurable presence of positive outcomes, including accomplishments, aspirations and ideals. In contrast, *prevention-focused motivation* is concerned with obtaining security and avoiding negative outcomes (e.g. 'bad' food); it underlies concerns with safety and fulfillment of responsibilities. An individual's momentary focus on promotion or prevention will depend on his or her personal history and circumstances induced by the situation at hand. Hence, the distinction between promotion and prevention gives a broader theoretical interpretation to the omnivore's paradox between novelty and tradition (Fischler, 1980; Rozin, 1976; Scholliers, 2007).

In a nationwide survey among consumers in the Netherlands, de Boer et al. (2007) found four main ways of relating to food. The set of self-descriptions could be classified in terms of involvement with food and type of value motivation, and the underlying structure could be validated by showing that the self-descriptions were differentially correlated with the values of Schwartz' value model (see Schwartz et al., 2001). The latter approach was chosen, because there is no generally accepted standard measurement tool to assess all the aspects of regulatory focus (Haws, Dholakia, & Bearden, 2010). Importantly, the results were also in line with the literature on specific motivational aspects of food. The big picture is that valuing a varied and adventurous taste (e.g. Ullrich, Touger-Decker, O'Sullivan-Maillet, & Tepper, 2004; Wycherley, McCarthy, & Cowan, 2008) can be categorized as *promotion-oriented and highly involved*, whereas being easy about food (e.g. Buckley, Cowan, & McCarthy, 2007; Candel, 2001) can be termed as *promotion-oriented and lowly involved*. Also, giving reflective attention to the wider implications of food choices in terms of health, naturalness of the food, weight control and ethical considerations (e.g. Pollard, Steptoe, &

Wardle, 1998; Schifferstein & Oude Kamphuis, 1998; Torjusen, Lieblein, Wandel, & Francis, 2001) can be classified as *prevention-oriented and highly involved*, whereas preferences for a familiar meal (e.g. Kitsawad & Guinard, 2014; Pula, Parks, & Ross, 2014) can be labelled as *prevention-oriented and lowly involved*. Hence, although these four ways of relating to food should not be seen as fixed, culturally invariant categories, they may be very suitable for a comparative analysis of affinities.

The link between affinities and value motivation is based on the experiences that underlie an individual's evaluative sensitivity to a particular type of products. Analysis of motivational differences in relation with consumption patterns has led to interesting insights into how consumers can learn to associate different products with either promotion or prevention (Higgins, 2002; Zhou & Pham, 2004). Higgins' theory specifies that consumers get the experience of 'feeling right' about what they are doing if there is a psychological 'fit' between their goal orientation (promotion or prevention), their strategy to reach the goal (eager approach or vigilant avoidance), and goal-relevant attributes of the choice options (e.g. promotion-related or prevention-related product benefits). As consumers tend to be most attentive to product information that is fitting with their predominant goal orientation, they may learn to prefer either products with a promotion benefit or the ones with a prevention benefit and apply their choice strategy over and over again, rather than reconsider it on every occasion (Zhou & Pham, 2004). This may result in an increased affinity for particular products. In terms of product properties, for example, luxury and technological innovation may appeal to promotion-oriented consumers, whereas safety and reliability may appeal to prevention-oriented ones (e.g. Chernev, 2004a, 2004b; Higgins, 2002).

It should be noted, however, that the relationship between promotion and prevention is not a simple one; Higgins (2012; p. 412) suggests, for example, that good cooking may involve both promotion and prevention aspects working together. As the two aspects are conceived as distinct but not bipolar constructs, individuals and situations can be either relatively high in both promotion and prevention focus concerns or they can be relatively low in both. Another point is that the role of promotion and prevention focus depends on the individual's level of involvement in the activity (Avnet, Laufer, & Higgins, 2013; Wang & Lee, 2006). The notion that promotion and prevention aspects may work together is relatively new (Bohns et al., 2013; Higgins, 2012). The notion implies that it may be advantageous or even necessary for an individual to switch between regulatory strategies (approach or avoidance) and to focus on other aspects of an issue that require attention. There is growing evidence that such a switch is more likely under conditions of high involvement (Wang & Lee, 2006; see also Avnet et al., 2013). In this way, promotion and prevention aspects may become complementary, which can make them both more accessible for highly involved individuals (Higgins, 2012).

These complexities suggest that a comparative analysis of more than two product types is needed to assess their relative appeal to promotion- and prevention-focused individuals. Building on the work by de Boer et al. (2007), the present study examined how the set of self-descriptions can help to predict differences in consumer affinities evoked by four broad types of products, often sold by different outlets. Theoretically, it may be expected that consumers with an affinity for food items purchased in a *gourmet* specialty shop will have a promotion focus and a high level of involvement (e.g. valuing a varied and adventurous taste). Those with an affinity for *efficient* foods, sold in convenience packaging, may also have a promotion focus but a low level of involvement (e.g. being easy about food). Consumers with an affinity for *pure* ingredients, sold at a natural food shop, may have a prevention focus and a high level of

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