Consumer responses to hedonic food products: Healthy cake or indulgent cake? Could dialecticism be the answer?

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ABSTRACT

Marketing of indulgent food products with healthy claims (e.g., healthy cake) is challenging, and studies explaining consumer responses to such products are limited. This research addresses this limitation by focusing on an unexamined driver of responses to vice food products marketed as more healthy—dialectical thinking. Three experimental studies using samples from online panels show that dialecticism has a positive effect on consumers' evaluations of such products when primed within a predominantly non-dialectical culture, across cultures with different levels of dialecticism, and as an individual difference. In all three studies experienced discomfort mediates this effect. This research contributes to extant literature by (1) identifying the role of dialecticism in mitigating consumers' aversion to vice food products with healthy claims, (2) confirming the effects of dialecticism at both cultural and individual levels, and (3) highlighting the managerial relevance of dialecticism.

1. Introduction

The consumption of vice food products, or "guilty pleasures" (Giner-Sorolla, 2001), that offer immediate gratification but are harmful in the long run (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999), is associated with the pursuit of hedonic goals (Belei, Geyskens, Goukens, Ramanathan, & Lemmink, 2012). Fast food, a typical example of vice products, is closely associated with pleasure-seeking goals. At the same time, such food is synonymous with being harmful to health and long-term well-being (Nestle, 2003). Consumers' focus on hedonic characteristics of vice products undermines the self-control necessary to achieve and maintain a healthy lifestyle (Madzharov, Ramanathan, & Block, 2016; Thomas, Desai, & Seenivasan, 2011) and often results in lapses of self-control and choices that are suboptimal for reaching higher-order goals and long-term benefits (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 2002).

Curbing the consumption of vice food products can be challenging because consumers may possess inherent preferences for this type of food (Nestle, 2003). As such preferences may be resistant to change, a promising strategy would be to make vice foods less unhealthy either by adding an ingredient that is beneficial for health or by removing a harmful one. In line with this strategy, marketers have tried to appeal to consumers by launching products such as Hershey's chocolate with extra antioxidants, Jif's creamy omega-3 peanut butter, and Pizza Hut's The Natural organic pizza with a honey-sweetened multigrain crust.

However, marketing such products can prove challenging for most companies because of the conflict between the pursuit of hedonic goals activated by the vice product (Belei et al., 2012) and higher-order goals, such as living a healthy lifestyle (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007), that are activated by the healthy claim. This conflict results in ambivalence following hedonic consumption that may lead to an aversive state on the part of consumers (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007), which in turn may exert a negative impact on product quality perceptions, attitudes, price premiums, and purchases (van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011). Such goal conflict may have contributed to the failure of Frito Lay's Flat Earth Chips and Burger King's "Satisfries" (Tuttle, 2014). Extant research examines the role of such factors as goal conflict (Belei et al., 2012), quality perceptions (van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011), and consumer intuitions (Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006) in the consumption of indulgent products with healthy claims. However, research on the cultural factors underlying consumer responses to such products is lacking. To address this limitation, we focus on a factor previously unexamined in this context that may help consumers resolve, or at least mitigate, the goal conflict associated with vices that have healthy claims: dialectical thinking (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Wang, Batra, & Chen, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, understanding whether and how consumers differ in their ability to pursue both health-related and hedonic goals is important. From a managerial perspective, it is critical to

identify factors that can reduce or at least mitigate the associated goal conflict and make less unhealthy hedonic products more palatable to consumers. With the current marketplace becoming increasingly globalized, understanding the impact of culture on the experience of goal conflict is imperative.

Existing cross-cultural research documents differences across Western and East Asian cultures in their ability to tolerate conflicting goals, cognitions, and affect (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Therefore, the detrimental effect of goal conflict is likely to be subject to cultural influences and to have significant consequences for corporate strategies. In addition to investigating the cross-cultural effect of dialecticism, we heed the call to examine cultural effects at the individual level (Briley, Wyer, & Li, 2014; Kale & Sudharshan, 1987). Thus, we assess consumers' differential responses to vices with healthy claims depending on the level of dialecticism—a concept that captures the ability to tolerate conflicting goals and contradictions (Peng & Nisbett, 1999)—both across and within cultures. Study 1 shows the effects of the manipulated dialecticism on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions in the United States. Study 2 documents culture-level effects of goal conflict in food products (vices with healthy claims vs. vices with indulgent claims) on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions across the United States and China. Finally, Study 3 focuses on the effects of the dispositional trait of dialecticism on responses to food products with different levels of goal conflict.

Our main contribution to the extant research is demonstrating that dialectic thinking results in more favorable attitudes and purchase intentions toward indulgent food products with healthy claims by mitigating consumers' discomfort when they are exposed to such products. We ascertain these effects of dialecticism at both the cross-cultural and individual levels and highlight the managerial relevance of dialecticism.

2. Theory and hypotheses development

2.1. Vices with healthy claims and goal conflict: perspective from traditional goal and attitude theories

Vices with healthy claims are likely to result in goal conflict for consumers exposed to these products (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007). Goals, meanwhile, are internal representations of desired outcomes, events, or processes that cut across cognitive, personality, and motivational domains (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1982). Goal theories assume that goals are organized within a hierarchical structure (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Lower-order (short-term) goals, which are closely linked to action levels, constitute concrete means for reaching higher-order, more abstract, and more stable goals (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003; Fishbach & Labroo, 2007).

Barsalou (1991) shows that goals influence products' cognitive representations in line with "goal-derived categories" that represent the extent to which a common goal defines an established food category. For example, people often consider fruits and vegetables inherently nutritious and thus categorize them as virtues that serve the higher-order, long-term goal of healthfulness. Conversely, people often classify indulgent foods (e.g., cake) as vices because they serve the lower-order, short-term goal of indulgence but are detrimental to the higher-order, long-term goal of staying healthy. Furthermore, matching vices with healthy claims to established goal-derived food categories (Barsalou, 1991; Ratneshwar, Pechmann, & Shocker, 1996) such as virtues and vices (Chernev & Gal, 2010; Wertenbroch, 1998) can be difficult because of contradictory or incongruent goals evoked by food products with combinations of healthy and indulgent attributes.

In general, the number of goals that an individual can pursue is relatively limited (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), and studies show that the pursuit of multiple goals may lead to goal conflict when these are of a contradictory or incongruent nature (e.g., El Dahr & Fort, 2008). Studies also document that the ability of a food product to satisfy either the indulgence or the healthfulness goal reduces the ability to satisfy the other goal (Belei et al., 2012; Raghunathan et al., 2006). Thus, traditional goal theorizing clearly indicates a goal conflict associated with the combination of vice products and healthy claims.

Goals are inherently intertwined with another core construct of social psychology—attitude, or the tendency to evaluate an entity with favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). Attitudes are related to motivation insofar as they serve social identity goals. Specifically, attitudes help consumers connect with desired identities and dissociate themselves from undesirable identities (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). Furthermore, attitudes are characterized by internal consistency (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). States of conflict, by contrast, are usually associated with feelings of discomfort that individuals strive to resolve by re-establishing consistency (Kelly, Mansell, & Wood, 2015). Thus, attitude inconsistency may be a source of discomfort in consumer responses to vices with healthy claims.

Because attitudes, according to traditional theory, are consistent, goals that are satisfied by respective attitudes are also likely to be consistent. Indeed, extant theories incorporating goals emphasize such a consistency in the structure of goals (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Thus, any goal conflict is a detrimental state that needs to be resolved. However, the theory of dialecticism introduces a different view of goal conflict to established theories.

2.2. Attitudes, goals, and theory of dialecticism

Considering that attitude and goal theories have been developed in the West (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), a discussion of cultural factors is limited even in recent reviews (Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Kelly et al., 2015). However, evidence shows that attitude and goal characteristics and functions may be different in non-Western cultural contexts (Riemer, Shavitt, Koo, & Markus, 2014). Extant research finds that people perceive inconsistent facets of attitudes as less of a threat to their self-concept and experience inconsistency in attitudes more comfortably in non-Western than Western contexts (Heine & Lehman, 1997). Members of non-Western cultures are also more comfortable in pursuing conflicting goals (Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010).

According to Peng and Nisbett (1999), dialecticism helps explain differences in tolerance for inconsistencies in attitudes and goals. Dialecticism reflects a cognitive tendency to accept contradiction (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010), and dialectical thinkers are more often members of East Asian than Western cultures (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). Therefore, predictions from traditional attitude theories may not necessarily apply to dialectics who show inconsistent attitudes (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). For example, dialectics show in-group derogation and a preference for out-groups (Ma-Kellams, Spencer-Rodgers, & Peng, 2011). In the goals domain, dialectics show a greater ability than non-dialectics to maintain intrinsic motivation when extrinsic goals are activated (Li, Sheldon, & Liu, 2015).

Some debate in the literature remains about the extent to which cultural syndromes (Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009) such as dialecticism or individualism are characteristic of society at large or primarily exist in the minds of individuals (Wan & Chiu, 2009). One increasingly popular belief is that even if the world were not organized into nation-states, cultural effects would still exist (Chiu & Hong, 2007). We concur with researchers who emphasize the need to examine cultural differences at both the individual and cross-cultural levels (Briley et al., 2014; Kale & Sudharshan, 1987), and we expect the underlying mechanism driving the dialectical tolerance for contradiction to transcend the cross-cultural level and to account for similar differences within a culture (Li et al., 2015; Ma-Kellams et al., 2011). Therefore, we propose that our hypotheses apply to dialecticism's effects at both levels.

In our study of vices with healthy claims, goal conflict is likely to result from a combination of the nature of the products (indulgencies)