

Buyer beware: Consumers in conflict may become victims to unwanted influence

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When products don't easily fit into our goals, we experience conflict. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, conflicted consumers are easily swayed by unwanted influences.

"Because there is competition between [products](#) in the marketplace, consumption decisions typically present conflict between means to achieve a goal," write authors Jonathan Levav, Ran Kivetz (both Columbia University), and Cecile K. Cho (University of California, Riverside). "One product might have a lengthy warranty but a clunky feel, while another might feel sleeker but have a shorter warranty. The relative weight that the different product attributes receive depends on their compatibility with a consumer's goals."

The authors' research focused on the basic goals that underlie people's [motivation](#) to act, in particular the class of goals called "regulatory goals," which help us ensure gains and avoid losses.

"Consider two products that differ on their warranty and stylishness. For a consumer who worries about incurring future losses, the conflict is relatively easily resolved in favor of the product that has a better [warranty](#)," the authors write. "But what happens when the conflict is less easy to resolve, such as when both attributes are consistent with one's goals?"

In such cases, [consumers](#) become conflicted and are more likely to rely on the context of the decision to make their choice, instead of focusing

on the value they might extract from the products themselves.

"Such situations of conflict lead to a pronounced tendency to accept a compromise alternative, to be swayed by irrelevant choice alternatives, and to defer the decision altogether," the authors write.

In cases where none of the product's attributes fulfill a consumer's goals, people "pick their poison" and choose an option that is strong on one attribute and weak on another, the authors conclude.

More information: Jonathan Levav, Ran Kivetz, and Cecile K. Cho. "Motivational Compatibility and Choice Conflict." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2010.

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