

Diet soda and fries, please: How consumers balance their food choices

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With the public under a seemingly constant barrage of nutritional information and advice, researchers are making headway at understanding how people make choices when shopping for food. New research aims to untangle the apparent disconnect between stated health concerns and actual food purchases.

In "Impact of Healthy Alternatives on Consumer Choice: A Balancing Act," Marketing Professors Minakshi Trivedi of the State University of New York at Buffalo, Karthik Sridhar of Baruch College, and Ashish Kumar of the Aalto University School of Business analyzed scanner data and survey responses from several hundred supermarket shoppers to see whether and to what extent consumers consciously balanced their health concerns with their food preferences when filling their market baskets.

They found evidence of significant balancing behavior across product categories and consumer health segments that has implications for retail strategies as well as for [public policy](#).

The authors grouped consumers into three segments, based on their attitudes and concerns: health-driven, balanced, and hedonic. When faced with healthy or unhealthy choices - which the study based on the level of fat, sugar, or salt - the segments showed distinct variations in characteristics, purchasing behavior, and response to marketing mix variables such as price and discount. Each group made tradeoffs on the healthy/unhealthy mix to varying extents based on its priorities. Not surprisingly, however, the data showed there was a marked difference

between stated behavior and actual behavior.

Different strategies can be designed around the behavior they document to encourage purchases of healthier foods, the authors suggest. Retailers can use their research as guidance regarding which products to bundle for promotions and which element of the bundle to promote in order to maximize the impact on healthy consumption. As for public policy, "If government agencies are to have any impact in promoting healthy consumption, it is imperative to understand the nature of this mechanism and tailor strategies for specific behavioral segments."

Provided by New York University

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