

Researchers find a wealth of unconscious decision making among consumers

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Consumers can easily go astray—especially if they are ordering naughty items or treating themselves for doing good deeds. And please, don't trust them with portion sizes. At least that's what the results of three studies done by Fuqua researchers examining consumer habits suggest.

As Americans gear up for the biggest shopping season of the year, they need to be mindful. "All three studies capture a general truth out there in the consumer market place," says Gavan Fitzsimons, R. David Thomas Professor of marketing and psychology. "We tend not to be nearly as conscious in our consumer decision making as most people would like to

think we are."

Old-school economists and most consumers buy into a false belief that people will consciously and actively consider all the options and choose the one that will give them the best outcome, he explains. "That couldn't be further from the truth."

Who is left holding the bag? It depends on whether you brought them on your own or the store mandated that you provide bags.

When customers bring their reusable grocery bags to the store, they purchase more organic items but also reward themselves with indulgent items, such as cookies and ice cream, per findings in a study by Fuqua professor and researcher Bryan Bollinger published in the *Journal of Marketing*.



"For most people it's likely not a conscious decision," says Bollinger, who worked on the study with Uma Karmarkar of Harvard Business School. It seems that buying more environmentally friendly items was associated with a "priming" effect: Doing a "green" deed primes you to do another.

Rewarding yourself with a sweet treat, though, was attributed to the licensing effect. It turns out, grocery shoppers felt that taking the time to bring their own bags gave them license to indulge themselves with unhealthy foods. If the store required shoppers to bring their own reusable bags, they didn't treat themselves to those same items.

Bollinger says the findings could be significant to store managers in the placement of products and in encouraging shoppers to bring their own bags.

"But it can't feel like the store is forcing shoppers to bring bags," Bollinger says. "It was important for consumers to attribute that good deed to themselves."

And if no one is watching, folks really splurge. Professor Ryan McDevitt found that customers placed less healthy and more complicated pizza orders when they could do so online, without interacting with a clerk. So people are more likely to order the gyro, onion, tomato, and tzatziki sauce pizza online.

"If you don't talk to anyone, it changes your behavior," says McDevitt, who worked with Avi Goldfarb and Brian Silverman of the University of Toronto and Sampsa Samila of the National University of Singapore, on the study. Their findings will be in the journal *Management Science*.

When a clerk is taking the order, it seems consumers don't want to complicate things, especially with the threat of being put on hold as

clerks answer other calls. "With ordering online, there's no time pressure," Mc- Devitt says. "You don't want to repeat yourself."

More smoked reindeer slices, please.

The researchers also saw sales of hard-to-pronounce items increase after liquor stores in Sweden introduced self-service purchases. McDevitt says shoppers' bolder behavior also extends to buying more embarrassing items.

The findings indicate that retailers need to think about making certain items more accessible. "The biggest implication for businesses is that they should be mindful of how social interaction influences their customers," McDevitt says. "Especially for sensitive products, like personal-care items, stores should find ways to cut down on the amount of interaction required to make a purchase.

"You don't want to draw attention to yourself, if the order is a little different in a brick-and-mortar store. Or if the purchase is at odds with your demographic."

So, an older woman buying five copies of the 50 Shades of Grey trilogy may feel more at ease getting the books through an e-commerce retailer instead of the neighborhood bookstore, where the clerk knows her name.

"If no one is judging, you are more likely to order exactly what you want," he says.

Often consumers want plenty. That's why Peter A. Ubel, associate director of Health Sector Management, and the Madge and Dennis T. Mc- Lawhorn University Professor, is afraid a federal plan to encourage healthy eating, by changing [portion sizes](#) on nutrition labels, could have the opposite effect.

Proposed changes to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's nutrition facts label—the first update in more than twenty years—include an increase in serving sizes to reflect more accurately how much Americans are consuming at each meal.

"It all sounds great, and public-health people are really excited about it," says Ubel, a physician and behavioral scientist who studies subtle influences on decision making. "But we were worried it would tell people what they ought to eat. It would suggest to them that the appropriate serving size is what they're consuming."

Indeed, Ubel's study, published online in the journal *Appetite*, found that Americans don't understand the meaning of serving size on a label. In fact, in one study, more than 78 percent who saw the proposed labels with larger portions still incorrectly believed they referred to the appropriate amount to consume at one sitting.

Further studies showed that misunderstanding can also affect behavior. The researchers, who included Peggy Liu, a Ph.D. student at Duke, and Steven Dallas, of New York University, asked fifty- one adults in line at a basketball game to choose the number of cookies they would normally eat for a snack. Those who saw the proposed labels, which listed a serving as six cookies instead of the old label's three, ate 41 percent more cookies than those who saw the current label.

"It's a bit of a 'lose-lose,'" Ubel says. "We eat too much."

Each of the studies shows these situational factors are incredibly powerful when it comes to shopping and eating behaviors. As we approach the holiday season, consumers should be deliberate in their thinking, creating lists and checking them twice.

"A lot of times, we are making choices that are fast and complicated.

We go with a quick judgement influenced by situational factors,"
Fitzsimons says. "Stay focus and be mindful."

Provided by Duke University

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