

Flour power: How shoppers choose which bread to buy

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You're standing in the bread aisle, faced with an array of loaves with a variety of claims. There's low GI, multigrain, added vitamins, unbleached, gluten free... Which one do you buy? And what is the main

influence on that decision—health, value, taste?

Australians spend more than \$90 million a year on bread, so understanding the intricacies of our bread preferences is big business. Our choice of bread also influences our health, so policymakers are keen to know what might nudge us in healthier directions.

Researchers at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) have developed a new marketing research tool that provides a deeper insight into how we choose between products that have multiple features and benefits, and what drives these preferences—and they've tested it on bread shoppers.

They surveyed Australian consumers who evaluated bread according to brand and [product features](#) such as type of flour, low GI, enriched with Omega 3, presence of seeds, grains, vitamins and minerals, expiry date, loaf size and price.

The results, just published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, provide a fascinating insight into our bread buying behaviour. They reveal that brand is the biggest influence on our selection, with supermarket brands dominating the list (34%), followed by Helga's (23%), Abbott's (11%), and Tip Top (10%).

"A lot of bread manufacturers play around with product features and the claims they make on the front of pack, but what we found is that brand dominates consumers' decisions," says Associate Professor Paul Burke, Deputy Director of UTS Centre for Business Intelligence and Data Analytics.

"It seems that brands provide a short-cut to our preferences—so if we care about health we buy Helga's, or if our focus is value for money we buy a supermarket brand.

"Companies might advertise a product as 'low carb' or highlight the additional minerals and vitamins to improve perceptions around health. However, consumers judge the healthiness of a product mostly according to brand," he says.

As well as [brand](#), the type of wheat was also an important factor, with more than half of those surveyed (52%) opting for wholemeal breads compared with 35% who bought white varieties and 10% who bought unbleached varieties.

"Brand and flour type dominated other considerations, including various key claims such as whether a product is promoted as being low GI, high fibre, or "stone-milled". The respondents also preferred breads that were larger, cheaper and had a longer expiration date," says Associate Professor Burke.

Value was also an important consideration, with nearly half of all shoppers surveyed buying bread on special, at an average discount of around 19% off the shelf price. Most shoppers bought either one or two loaves at a time.

After screening out those with allergies and other specific dietary requirements, the researchers found that only 1% of those surveyed reported regularly purchasing gluten-free breads, however this rejection was mostly due to perceived lack of value for money.

Associate Professor Burke says the new marketing research model disentangles multiple results to provide information about how each feature drives perceptions such as health and value. For example, Abbott's is perceived to be relatively healthy but is poorly positioned in terms of value.

"It's about the relative importance of attributes that drive perceptions

and choices. It's those trade-offs that ratings scale based approaches do not always allow you to see in the consumer."

"Our method allows companies to understand how the market will respond to product alterations not just in terms of overall demand, but the reasons behind why that demand is shifting among certain segments," he says.

For [policy makers](#) the method also offers insights into potential policy failures. For example, consumers may agree that a certain ingredient or calorie count represents an unhealthy product, but that may not be a driving factor in their buying decision.

Associate Professor Burke also notes the new research method is not just suitable for understanding fast moving consumer goods such as [bread](#). Manufacturers of products such as cars would also benefit from understanding how perceptions drive preferences.

"Car manufacturers offering new engine types need to understand that while the innovation may have perceived environmental outcomes, the same feature might create poor perceptions around power, performance, safety, value and resale value.

"When these other benefits dominate choices it makes no difference how environmentally friendly the car is—consumers will buy elsewhere," he says.

More information: Paul F. Burke et al, A Multiattribute Benefits-Based Choice Model with Multiple Mediators: New Insights for Positioning, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0022243719881618](#)

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