

**GOAL CONFLICTS IN CONSUMER FOOD CHOICES**

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**Abstract.** Paper provides an analysis of goals and choices attached to food consumption. The study is an insight into intertemporal decisions that involve uncertainty and risk. Results were explained by a model of hyperbolic discounting that describes inconsistent preferences which appear to be frequent phenomena among hedonic and utilitarian goals when options are attributed to different moments.

**Key words:** consumer, consumption, hedonic goals, utilitarian goals, hyperbolic discounting, intertemporal choice, food

**INTRODUCTION**

Conflicting goals are one of the most aversive experiences in our life. The pain of the tradeoff we are forced to make is sometimes unbearable so we choose one and try not to think about another alternative for not to uncover the superiority of the latest [Aaker and Lee 2001]. This schema is responsible not only for not optimal choices but also for unsatisfactory choices in our life. Blocking of extensional analysis of available alternatives is characteristic for sets of goals where at least one is evaluated by affection, a kind of intuitive judgment. Remaining goals can be assessed by deliberative reasoning. The process of evaluation governed by affect and intuition is very quickly and strong in a sense of periodic impact; in turn process of evaluation based on deliberative reasoning is slow and usually less persuasive in a sense of temporal impact on a decision maker. The idea that goals could be evaluated in this two ways is cascading through cognitive sciences from the ancient times, now it finds its implementation and renaissance in dual – processed theories, that stress the difference between quick and associative forms of others judgments and ones that demand slow, logical reasoning and use rules characteristic for rational assessment. These two cognitive methods are linked

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to two main systems of cognition that work simultaneously but have different function in evaluation process. So their operation can not be understood as being linked to a particular semantic meaning of goal but one system can have dominative impact, what is connected with the mining of goal. System 1 is described as to process intuitive answers very quickly when they appear, system 2 controls the quality of the answers and can also answers endorse, correct or override [Kahneman and Frederick 2005]. The response from system 1 can be extremely strong therefore sometimes system 2 is not in a position to correct the judgment. The case is to get tighter control under the system 1 - it could be done by weakening the response of the system 1 or by enhancing the monitor function of system 2.

The nature of intrapersonal conflict is not as well explored as the more overt types of conflict like interpersonal, organizational or international ones which have ample theory and practice of solving behind. Thus we know that reducing those conflicts even in well structured, prescribed "rational" way is not so easy for human beings.

Intuitive understanding of conflict in a decision process leads to inference that there must be at least two decision alternatives to elicit conflict. Moreover conflict concerns many levels of decision process starting from general decision parameters as goals ending at the solutions – means to goals and ways of their application. On each stage we can be afflicted by a conflict. This paper focuses on a goal conflict in food choices as one of the major guiding parameter for the rest of decision process especially when one seeks for information [Higgins 2002].

Each conflict produces tension and a kind of uncertainty, ambiguity, so a person falls into a state of depletion of cognitive resources. This unpleasant effect is to be reduced as quickly as possible that is why people use different strategies to shorten or avoid this stage of decision process. They employ usually non-compensatory strategies, not necessary leading to optimal solutions. Inconsistent preferences changed by erroneous evaluation of time and risk appear here to be one of the most frequent methods of getting rid of intrapersonal dilemma [Urminsky and Kivetz 2005]. Examples of such conflicts can be found in many situations, when we admit that we had eaten too much because we just like this sort of food or we overeat, because we try to accompany friends or a meal looks delicious that we can not refrain from it.

The importance of existing conflicts in our everyday choices results from the painful way we experience them and the powerful lust to avoid it. Understanding this issue should be of much interest for marketers and could serve as an inspiration for new product development. Although capitalizing on goal conflict should be guided by some mentioned below rules. Findings come from quantitative research concerning habitual styles, consumption habits and preferences for food. We also reviewed literature for traces of conceptual models or theories, how do people usually behave in situations of internal conflict. In our study we were interested what goals are important in food consumption, what goals the most frequently collide with each other, what are consequences of contradictory goals, and how to interpret this phenomenon using system analysis model.

## **METHOD**

We built a questionnaire on consumption habits and preferences concerning food to interview 1665 people around Poland. Survey was designed to comply with rules of quota selection. Variables which affected the quota were:

- age,
- gender,
- place of living (big, medium, small city and rural area).

Usage of these quota variables was dictated by their importance to observed dependence variables (habits, customs, preferences, etc.). Data was gathered in year 2006. Presented in this paper results are only the excerpt of data.

## **RESULTS**

Analysis was conducted on 5 main consumption goals associated with food [Luomala et al. 2004] that is:

- taste,
- health,
- nutrition value,
- esthetics,
- prestige.

The importance of them was measured on 5 item scale (where 1 – completely unimportant, 5 – very important). In research we used a correlation analysis and testing differences.

At the beginning we found out pairs of goals that appeared the most frequently when both goals were evaluated as very important. From this study we selected the 4 most prevalent pairs of conflicting goals (Table 1) i.e.:

- health and nutrition value (23% of population),
- taste and nutrition value (21% of population),
- taste and health (24% of population),
- esthetics and taste (24% of population).

Each goal conflicts concerned more over 20% of respondents. To exclude similar goals, bivariate correlation for the whole range of answers concerning goals was conducted.

Then we eliminated by goals pairs which appeared to have the higher than 0,300 Spearman correlation. Degree of correlation was indicator for identity, near meaning of the goals, so one could serve as synonym of another goal and represented the same semantic associations (Table 2). The situation as described appeared for:

- health and nutrition value,
- esthetics and taste.

As the goals in pairs were treated as more or less identical we chose the more important goals using means as indicators of importance, so we could exclude nutrition value and esthetics.

Table 1. Frequency of pairs of goals that are perceived as simultaneously very important for consumers

Tabela 1. Częstość występowania par celów, które równocześnie są bardzo ważne dla konsumentów

	Nutrition value Odżywczość	Health Zdrowie	Taste Smak	Esthetics Estetyka	Prestige Prestiż
Nutrition value Odżywczość	0	23%	21%	14%	5%
Health Zdrowie	381 persons osób	0	24%	15%	5%
Taste Smak	347 persons osób	385 persons osób	0	24%	7%
Esthetics Estetyka	223 persons osoby	238 persons osób	391 persons osób	0	7%
Prestige Prestiż	85 persons osób	83 persons osoby	117 persons osób	115 persons osób	0

Source: own calculations.  
Źródło: opracowanie własne.

Table 2. Spearman correlation indicator for pairs of goals

Tabela 2. Wskaźnik korelacji Spearmana dla par celów

	Nutrition value Odżywczość	Health Zdrowie	Taste Smak	Esthetics Estetyka
Nutrition value Odżywczość	x	0,652	ns	ns
Health Zdrowie	0.652	x	ns	ns
Taste Smak	ns	ns	x	0.379
Esthetics Estetyka	ns	ns	0,379	x

ns – test is not significant or/and Spearman indicator is below 0.3.

Source: own calculations.

ns – test jest nie istotny lub/i wskaźnik korelacji Spearmana jest poniżej 0,3.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

Eventually we arrived at final solution i.e. the composition of the most prominent conflicts in food choice that is health and taste. This pair mirrors classic conflict between virtues and vices and conflict between utilitarian and hedonic needs [Khan and Urminsky 2004].

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This conflict from the perspective of behavioral economics could be described as a choice between easy and quickly attainable option and option which is more distant but leads to bigger rewards. This conflict could be described by a model of hyperbolic discounting introduced by Ainslie [1975].

Human preferences are inconsistent (Fig. 1). At the beginning we focus on more distant but more valuable option. Later when another option – smaller but more immediate is becoming available (a consumer crosses an indifference point) the preference is in favor of faster available option. If a consumer eventually decides for consumption of the nearest alternative, he usually is disposed of taking advantage of bigger, later reward. After consumption as the effect of comparison and conclusion that the behavior was not optimal, and vast value has been lost, decision maker feels regret [Sukhidial and Boush 2004]. Only making strategic choices from distant perspective and sticking to them could lead to choice of better option when the first option arrives. Syndrome of taking the easiest and the promptest reward is central to the majority of personal and social problems that plague modern societies. As we see this kind of phenomena emerges with a vengeance also in food consumption, which is full of easily attainable items but harmful for the future of consumer. The examples comprise junk food, alcohol, cigarettes and other addictive substances that offer not only prompt rewards but strenuous consequences sometimes for the rest of the life [Inman 2004].

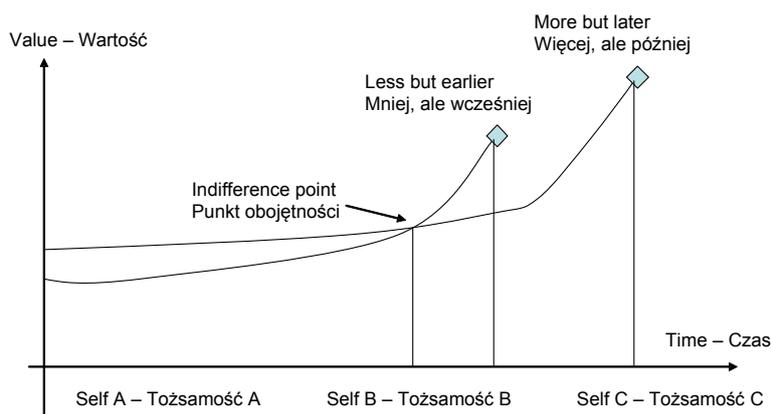


Fig. 1. Model of hyperbolic discounting shows inconsistency of preferences [Ainslie 2001]

Rys. 1. Model dyskontowania hiperbolicznego pokazujący niezgodność w czasie preferencji [Ainslie 2001]

Declaration stated by the respondents in questionnaire was deliberated, free from environmental, context influences and temptations. The conflict between taste and health is deeply pronounced there. And what is quite likely it exists before choice- so in far perspective and after the choice is made as retardation to the problem of choice. But what is going on when we are making our mind in front of a shelf in a supermarket?

There are ample evidences, what happens when choice of option is within a reach and is perceived as leading to a pleasant experience. The oldest part of the brain (cortex R) dominates the response so we are vulnerable to take what brings at once effects. So a choice between taste and health will be probably solved at the advantage of taste, but later the decision can elicit remorse and guilt. This is the situation we would like to avoid, so offering the option that serves both goals can somehow neutralize negative physical and psychological consequences allowing for partial satisfaction of both goals. There are many market products that could be the best examples of binding two or more goals like instant solutions with some valuable additives like vegetables, vitamins, light foods, functional foods and many more. But what does deplete their popularity?

Hence there are some evident remedies for consumers' pains, which allow for trade-off between taste and health they seem not as popular as they should and could be. We are still hiding from thoughts about consequences of careless choices. We use self-defense techniques and when not interrupted we could feel at the moment of decision quite comfortable. Conflict is apparent in strategic choices and after consumption, but is suppressed starting from the moment when first option is available through period passing to consumption by cortex R. There are few reasons, why cortex R is particularly sensitive to gains and is able to dominate the parts of brain responsible for deliberate judgment (prefrontal cortex). First of all because of our origin – we belong to beings that are oriented to the present and have problems with estimation of probabilities concerning future events. Future emerges as very ambiguous and somehow distant. Therefore we think that future reward is very far situated and our current decision will have no impact on the future well being. Another problem is caused by subjective feeling that the option that allows for trade off is of minor value – brings far less pleasure, in comparison to the fully tasty option. This perception of alternatives of choice leads us astray. That is why one should actively switch to a process of considering more rational propositions and later avoid some unpleasant consequences. To stick to strategic choice more rational but less pleasurable goal must be primed.

Priming is the most effective when we frame decision in terms of losses. Introducing information about the negative consequences and pain connected with choosing pleasurable option is one of the most persuasive ways of drawing attention of consumers and highlighting attractiveness of better solution [Freitas et al. 2002]. Of course less pleasurable remedy must deal with the problem efficiently and it is recommendable when it includes a kind of small but immediate reward or is presented as improving the well being at once.

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## KONFLIKT CELÓW W WYBORACH KONSUMENTÓW ŻYWNOŚCI

**Streszczenie.** Praca na podstawie analizy wyników badania ankietowego przedstawia najczęściej występujące konflikty celów w wyborach dotyczących żywności oraz wskazuje na dominację konfliktu między smakiem a zdrowotnością. Następnie prezentuje model, na podstawie którego można wnioskować, w jaki sposób konflikt pomiędzy celem hedonistycznym, jakim jest smak i celem utylitarnym, jakim jest zdrowotność, będzie rozwiązany. Proponowany model dyskontowania hiperbolicznego umożliwia wyjaśnienie preferencji, tak częstych w konsumpcji żywności a niestabilnych w czasie. Praca wskazuje również na to, w jaki sposób należy postępować, by zachować większą spójność preferencji i ustrzec się od wyborów niesatysfakcjonujących.

**Słowa kluczowe:** konsument, konsumpcja, teoria wyboru, cele hedoniczne, cele utylitarne, dyskontowanie hiperboliczne, wybór międzyokresowy, neuroekonomia, żywność

*Accepted for print – Zaakceptowano do druku: 17.12.2007*

*For citation – Do cytowania: Wielicka A., 2008. Goal conflicts in consumer food choices. J. Agribus. Rural Dev. 1(7), 149-155.*