

Mind your habits: Exploring the impact of different types of shopping habits on shoppers responsiveness to healthy-eating nudges

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Abstract:

An important question in consumer research and public health is why persuasive interventions aimed to improve people's food choices (e.g. healthy-eating nudges) continue to report modest success (Sunstein, 2017; Osman et al. 2020; Schramme, 2023). We argue that this is due, at least in part, to persistent shopping habits that obstruct shoppers deliberation, which results in shoppers' resistance to those persuasive interventions. Shopping habits develop as people repeatedly experience rewards (i.e. goal-achievement or satisfaction) for a purchase of the item in a stable context cue (e.g. time of the day, location, packaging).

To address the question of whether and why habitual shoppers show reduced responsiveness to healthy-eating persuasive interventions (which we term healthy-eating nudges), we identify two distinct mechanisms, contextual cue stability and promotion sensitivity. To investigate how these mechanisms link shopping habit strength to persuasive interventions, we use a longitudinal loyalty program purchase data obtained from one of largest retailers in Canada. We narrowed our analysis to N=100,000 transactions made in one major grocery store on the island of Montreal. After removing outliers who had negative spending totals, we remain with 71,749 transactions, corresponding to 10,912 items of 3,702 customers.

Our preliminary findings show that 5 out of the 24 product categories show the strongest habit strength, namely Beverages ($\beta = 0.09$, $t = 9.154$, $p < .001$), Eggs and Egg Substitutes ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 8.709$, $p < .001$), Fats and Oils ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 3.833$, $p < .001$), Snacks ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 4.431$, $p < .001$) and Sugars and Sweets ($\beta = 0.08$, $t = 5.276$, $p < .001$). Dairy products showed moderate statistical significance ($\beta = 0.07$, $t = 2.309$, $p < .05$). The remaining categories were not statistically significant. Our exploratory results suggest strong stickiness in purchases that are primarily unhealthy, i.e. Beverages, Fats and Oils, Snacks and Sugars and Sweets. These preliminary findings support our hypothesis that most habitual customers are conducting their shopping episodes with minimal deliberation. They further indicate that unhealthy purchases are especially sticky and habitual. As public health interventions continue to fail in making impactful improvement in people's diet, our results suggest that shoppers are in minimal deliberation when conducting such purchases and could therefore be "immune" to such interventions.