

## DETERMINANTS OF FOOD BUYING DECISIONS AMONG CONSUMERS

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores the stages of consumer purchasing decisions for food products, emphasizing the influences of price, emotion, packaging, and labeling. The consumer decision-making process involves recognizing an unsatisfied need, seeking information, evaluating alternatives, making the purchase, and conducting post-purchase evaluation. Information search and mental evaluation are particularly critical, as consumers assess products based on price, packaging, and labeling. Price significantly shapes emotions and purchase intentions, with favorable perceptions encouraging purchases and unfavorable ones deterring them. Packaging influences decisions, especially for low-involvement purchases, by evoking emotional responses through colors, images, and design elements. Labels serve as key communication tools, guiding consumer perceptions and choices, with health-related and hedonistic labels impacting skepticism and evaluation processes. The study highlights that effective marketing strategies addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects of consumer behavior can enhance decision-making, reduce post-purchase dissonance, and foster long-term satisfaction and loyalty. Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to optimize product presentation, pricing, and labeling to influence consumer choices effectively.*

**Keywords:** *Consumer behavior, Purchasing decisions, Price perception, Packaging influence, Labeling influence*

### **1. Introduction**

Beyond the persuasive aspects of advertising, it is ultimately the consumers who determine whether to purchase a product, with the purchasing decision being a notably intricate process (Barrena & Sánchez, 2012; Sălceanu, 2014). Marketing experts define the decision-making process as encompassing all actions taken before and after the acquisition of a product (Amrullah, Saadah, Ferawati, Mandini, Abubakar, Arfah & Sulaeman, 2021; Morariu & Pizmaș, 2001). The consumer's purchasing decision-making involves several stages such as recognizing an unsatisfied need, seeking information and identifying alternatives, processing information and evaluating alternatives mentally, making the purchasing decision, and conducting post-purchase evaluation (Azman, Albattat & Tham, 2021; Dumitriu, 2013; Morariu & Pizmaș, 2001; Rödiger & Hamm, 2015; Yildirim & Aydin, 2012). Among these, the stages of information search,

mental evaluation of alternatives, and the final purchasing decision are considered the most critical. The stages of the purchasing decision process encompass a complex interplay of affective processes (emotional responses to price), cognitive processes (knowledge and perception of price, beliefs, and information search about price, learning and understanding of price, and evaluation of price and its alternatives), and intentional processes (intention to pay a certain price and the final decision regarding the price) (Rödiger & Hamm, 2015). Packaging and label significantly influence the buying decisions for foods, assisting consumers in evaluating the food product before making a purchase, thereby facilitating informed decision-making (Fenko, Kersten & Bialkova, 2016; Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015; Makanjuola & Enujiugha, 2015; Van der Merwe, Bosman & Ellis, 2014; Westerman, Sutherland, Gardner, Baig, Critchley, Hickey, Mehigan, Solway & Zervos, 2013). This article aims to examine the stages of consumer buying decisions for foods, emphasizing the roles of price, emotion, packaging, and labeling. By analyzing each stage of the food buying decision and the associated emotions discussed in this paper, strategic approaches can be implemented to enhance business profitability, build trust, and maintaining shopper engagement, thereby significantly increasing customer loyalty through repeat purchases and recommendations.

## 2. Stages of Food Buying Decision

From a marketing standpoint, it is feasible to guide the complex decision-making process toward the customer's ultimate product selection. This implies that, among the available product alternatives, customers opt for the one that most efficiently satisfies their needs and requirements (Vrtana & Krizanova, 2023). The process of consumer buying decision-making encompasses several distinct stages. These include the recognition of an unsatisfied need, search for information and identification of alternatives, mental processing and evaluation of these alternatives, the actual purchasing decision, and a subsequent post-purchase evaluation (Azman, Albattat & Tham, 2021; Dumitriu, 2013; Morariu & Pizmaş, 2001; Rödiger & Hamm, 2015; Yildirim & Aydin, 2012) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Stages of Food Buying Decision**

### **2.1. Recognition a Need**

Consumers recognize a need, whether utilitarian or hedonistic, which is prompted by various circumstances such as internal stimuli (e.g., thirst, hunger) or external stimuli (e.g., encountering an advertising banner, a commercial, or viewing a product) that they experience (Azman, Albattat & Tham, 2021; Dumitriu, 2013; Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014; Pace-Schott, Amole, Aue, Balconi, Bylsma, Critchley, Demaree, Friedman, Gooding, Gosseries, Jovanovic, Kirby, Kozłowska, Laureys, Lowe, Magee, Marin, Merner, Robinson, Smith, VanElzaker, 2019; Sapronov & Gorbunova, 2022). Upon recognizing this need or desire, consumers identify the type of product that can satisfy it. Marketers should aim to identify the needs that drive consumers to purchase a product and highlight these needs in their communication strategies, utilizing appropriate stimuli in advertising messages (Dumitriu, 2013; Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014; Vrtana & Krizanov, 2023). Often, consumers do not immediately fulfill their needs by purchasing a product, except in cases involving high-interest or impulse products (Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014). The need can be triggered by factors such as depleting stock, information on new products, changes in economic status, the acquisition of a product that generates additional needs, advancements in marketing techniques, price, sensory appeal, and nutritional content (Imtiyaz, Soni & Yukongdi, 2021; Lee & Yun, 2015).

### **2.2. Information Research and Alternative Identification**

Once a consumer's interest has been piqued and a need has been acknowledged, they will seek additional information about products that may fulfill this need. This involves utilizing various external research sources such as personal sources (e.g., family, friends), commercial sources (e.g., advertisements, websites, emails, retailers, packaging), public sources (e.g., mass media, rating agencies, statistics), and experiential sources (e.g., product demonstrations, examinations, and consumption) as well as internal sources such as recalling past experiences with the product (Azman, Albattat & Tham, 2021; Dumitriu, 2013; Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014). For routine products, internal search typically suffices. Consumers often seek information regarding the product's location, price, selling points, and quality (Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014).

### **2.3. Information Processing and (Mental) Evaluation of Alternatives**

The information gathered during the research stage is processed, leading consumers to identify the products or brands that can fulfill their needs (Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014). Consumers tend to have clear and stable preferences when they possess comprehensive information about the characteristics of the available alternatives (Ahmetoglu, Furnham, & Fagan, 2014). In evaluating various alternatives, key factors considered include price, functional features, brand reputation, and availability (Azman, Albattat & Tham, 2021; Dumitriu, 2013). The evaluation process involves several stages: recognizing a need, attributing benefits to the selected solution, and fulfilling the need. During this process, consumers form preferences for specific brands and may develop the intention to purchase the brand that aligns most closely with their preferences (Dumitriu, 2013).

#### **2.4. Evaluation Result – Buying Decision**

When making a purchasing decision, the consumer may consider secondary decisions related to the brand, retailer, quantity, timing, and payment method. The intention to purchase is influenced by the attitudes of others and unforeseen circumstantial factors, such as an uncooperative retailer, publicity and promotional activities for other products, a higher-than-expected price, or receiving a recommendation for an alternative product. The characteristics of the purchasing decision include spontaneity (prompted by promotional messages), emotion (the excitement of deviating from the daily routine and acquiring the desired product), and indifference to consequences (making an impulsive purchase without considering the consequences) (Dumitriu, 2013; Morariu & Pizmaş, 2001). After proper assessment, the decision may result in purchasing the product, postponing the purchase, or replacing the initial product with another.

#### **2.5. Post-Buying Behavior**

After acquiring a product, consumers may experience post-acquisition mental dissonance (disappointment with certain disliked product characteristics, dissatisfaction, or the product not meeting standards) or consonance (satisfaction, delight, and confirmed expectations), which significantly impacts their future consumer behavior (Azman, Albattat & Tham, 2021; Dumitriu, 2013; Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014; Morariu & Pizmaş, 2001; Vrtana & Krizanova, 2023). The level of satisfaction depends on the disparity between expectations and actual performance, influencing post-acquisition purchasing behavior (Dumitriu, 2013; Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014; Morariu & Pizmaş, 2001). Generally, consumers evaluate the costperformance ratio; if product performance exceeds expectations, satisfaction increases, whereas when expectations are higher than actual performance, satisfaction decreases (Rödiger & Hamm, 2015; Zhang, 2015). A satisfied customer is likely to repeat the purchasing behavior, while a dissatisfied customer is a lost one who may abandon the product and dissuade friends (potential consumers) from purchasing it as well. In this context, experience plays a crucial role and enhances the learning process. The role of marketing extends beyond the point of sale, continuing after product acquisition; marketers must act to reduce post-acquisition dissonance by ensuring that products meet customers' expectations (Dumitriu, 2013; Ladipo, Iyiegbuniwe, Ighomereho & Ganiyu, 2014; Morariu & Pizmaş, 2001).

### **3. Price, Emotion and Purchasing Decision**

Price is a critical criterion utilized in the evaluation of alternatives during the decision-making process (Mishra, 2018). In making a purchasing decision, consumers heavily rely on the price, with their purchasing intention influenced by the emotions associated with the product's price (Ahmetoglu, Furnham, & Fagan, 2014; Campbell, DiPietro, & Remar, 2014; Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Furnols, Realini, Montossi, Sañudo, Campo, Oliver, Nute, & Guerrero, 2011; Rödiger & Hamm, 2015). Emotions can be negative, positive, or neutral (e.g., curiosity, tranquility) (Gutjar, Dalenberg, de Graaf, de Wijk, Palascha, Renken, & Jager, 2015; Jiang, King, & Prinyawiwatukul, 2014; King & Meiselman, 2010). Negative emotions (e.g., avoidance, non-communication) tend to generate more passive consumer behaviors, while positive

emotions (e.g., pleasure, excitement) result in proactive behavior and a stronger purchasing intention (Campbell, DiPietro, & Remar, 2014; Rödiger & Hamm, 2015). However, emotional excitement related to price does not significantly impact the purchasing decision; for instance, joy may be associated with a positive perception of product quality. The perception of a certain price level is linked to emotions such as joy, fear, and interest, while stress and anger (fury) are more related to value perception. Low prices (positive emotions) elicit significantly richer facial activity than high prices. Nevertheless, a study conducted in discount stores shows that low prices amplify feelings of contempt and shame but reduce stress and fury (Rödiger & Hamm, 2015). Although consumers physically see the price in the same manner, they interpret the perceived message uniquely, translating the price into a personal or psychological price; for example, two consumers might see the same price, but one may perceive it as excessively expensive, while the other views it as a bargain. The way a consumer perceives and interprets the price of a product depends on several factors, such as previous experience, memory, and socio-economic and demographic factors. One of the psychological factors correlated to price acceptability is awareness. A price-aware consumer determines whether the price is higher than what is acceptable in their mind, and if so, they will not proceed with the purchase. Moreover, a price-aware customer is unlikely to pay for the distinctive characteristics of a product if the price difference for those characteristics is perceived as too high. Utilizing targeted emotional marketing strategies that promote product features and benefits can increase the consumer's desire to purchase more (Campbell, DiPietro, & Remar, 2014).

#### **4. Package, Emotion and Purchasing Decision**

Packaging, a crucial form of communication in point-of-sale marketing, is an extrinsic attribute that consumers evaluate when intrinsic attributes cannot be assessed before purchase (Koutsimanis, Getter, Behe, Harte, & Almenar, 2012; Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015; Westerman, Sutherland, Gardner, Baig, Critchley, Hickey, Mehigan, Solway & Zervos, 2013). Packaging serves a persuasive function and significantly influences purchasing decisions for food products, especially where these decisions are characterized by low involvement and impulsive processes (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015; Makanjuola & Enujiugha, 2015; Westerman, Sutherland, Gardner, Baig, Critchley, Hickey, Mehigan, Solway & Zervos, 2013). Packaging is perceived either as a collection of individual elements – such as colors, images, shapes, dimensions, and text – that influence the overall product evaluation and purchasing behavior, or as a holistic design (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015; Pentus, Mehine & Kuusik, 2014; Westerman, Sutherland, Gardner, Baig, Critchley, Hickey, Mehigan, Solway & Zervos, 2013). Images are particularly vivid and central stimuli that evoke stronger consumer emotions compared to other elements, greatly influencing emotional and unconscious responses (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015). Colors convey various messages: black is associated with luxury, green with ecological products, and different colors evoke distinct emotional responses – high wavelength colors (red, orange, yellow) generate more excitement and enthusiasm than low wavelength colors (blue, green) (Ahmetoglu, Furnham, & Fagan, 2014; Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015). Text elements influence

consumer perceptions as well; natural fonts are more relaxing and pleasant, while fancy fonts can energize consumers (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015). Packaging elicits strong conscious and unconscious emotions (Gutjar, Dalenberg, de Graaf, de Wijk, Palascha, Renken, & Jager, 2015; Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015). Implicit unconscious emotions are spontaneous, automated affective responses that often occur without conscious awareness or reporting. Explicit conscious emotions are self-reported feelings with defined valence and intensity (e.g., “I feel happy” and “this feeling is strong”). Consumer decisions are influenced by these spontaneous unconscious affective responses, which require low or no cognitive effort (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015). Emotions significantly impact attention and play a crucial role in decision-making (Pentus, Mehine & Kuusik, 2014). These emotional responses occur within microseconds of experiencing a relevant stimulus and are reflected in behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, and body postures (Jiang, King, & Prinyawiwatkul, 2014; Leitch, Duncan, O’Keefe, Rudd, & Gallagher, 2015; Pentus, Mehine & Kuusik, 2014). Emotional responses can be measured through self-assessment or various techniques (Facial Electromyography, Skin Conductance, Eye-Tracking, Heart Rate, etc.). Self-assessment is commonly used in research to evaluate discrete emotions and subjective feelings (anger, joy, surprise) (Gutjar, Dalenberg, de Graaf, de Wijk, Palascha, Renken, & Jager, 2015; Leitch, Duncan, O’Keefe, Rudd, & Gallagher, 2015; Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015; Pentus, Mehine & Kuusik, 2014; Vu, Tu & Duerrschmid, 2016). However, because emotions can be spontaneous, fleeting, and subconscious, self-assessment of subtle emotions may be subject to cognitive bias and may not be the most accurate method for assessing directly experienced emotions (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou & Lockshin, 2015). Most consumers tend to choose food products with which they have an emotional connection, with many eating disorders linked to emotional stress (e.g., compulsive eating, refraining from eating). Companies should understand the emotional connotations of food products to better target consumers, create emotional needs in other consumers, and explore new markets (Jiang, King, & Prinyawiwatkul, 2014).

## **5. Label and Purchasing Decision**

The label of a food product serves as a crucial communication tool, providing consumers with essential information such as product composition and nutritional profile, enabling them to compare and select products effectively (Van der Merwe, Bosman & Ellis, 2014). Labels assist consumers in evaluating the product before making a purchase, thereby facilitating informed decision-making (Fenko, Kersten & Bialkova, 2016). Food product labels can be categorized as either health labels or hedonistic labels. Hedonistic labels are introduced by manufacturers or retailers to emphasize the pleasurable aspects of the product, such as traditional recipes, specific or improved ingredients, and sensory characteristics like smell, taste, and texture (Fenko, Kersten & Bialkova, 2016; Gutjar, Dalenberg, de Graaf, de Wijk, Palascha, Renken, & Jager, 2015). Consumers tend to be more skeptical of hedonistic labels compared to health labels. In general, consumer skepticism and concerns regarding the accuracy of label information can negatively affect product evaluation and hinder purchasing decisions at the point of sale (Fenko, Kersten & Bialkova, 2016). Despite the prevalence of health labels, there is an increasing number of hedonistic

labels on packaging, often forcing consumers to choose between health and pleasure (Bialkova, Sasse & Fenko, 2016). Emphasizing health benefits can adversely affect certain product expectations, such as taste, naturalness, pleasure, and hedonism. When exposed to advertising, consumers only see the packaging image and may touch the material packaging in stores, but they cannot taste the product until after purchase, when their expectations are either confirmed or not. The consumer's response depends on the sensory information available when assessing the product. While consumers generally respond positively to hedonistic labels, they can assess price and color at the moment of purchase and taste after the purchase, but health benefits cannot be verified by the consumer, leading to generally low credibility of health benefit information. To combat skepticism, marketers should provide product samples to enhance the multisensory experience. The lack of clear behavioral effects generated by nutrition labels may reduce the effectiveness of public policy efforts aimed at promoting healthy diets and improving public health. Therefore, marketing policies, consumer behavior researchers, producers, and marketers should develop effective strategies to reduce skepticism and provide well-informed choices at the point of sale, enhancing product evaluation and purchasing intention (Fenko, Kersten & Bialkova, 2016). Generalized consumer anxiety regarding new products often leads to the failure of introducing innovative foodstuffs (Barrena & Sánchez, 2012; Jiang, King & Prinyawiwatkul, 2014; Vidigal Minim, Simiqueli, Souza, Balbino & Minim, 2015). Marketers should identify the emotional profile of new food products during the market launch stage to adapt the product to various emotional associations (Jiang, King, & Prinyawiwatkul, 2014). The label on a product, as perceived by the consumer, can be mentally processed in two distinct ways. Path 1, which is cognitively oriented, involves conscious efforts to interpret the information on the label. This sense-making process can be divided into comprehension and evaluation (inferences). Comprehension can be subjective (where the consumer believes they understand the meaning) or objective (Grunert & Aachmann, 2016). Inferences are conclusions about what the label signifies in the purchasing decision-making process, based on clues such as brand, appearance, packaging, ingredient information, nutritional content, health benefits, expiration date, and country of origin. These conclusions then enter the decisionmaking process, influencing the willingness to pay and ultimately leading to brand choice. Label processing via Path 1 depends on the consumer's motivation and ability to process information when purchasing the product. However, food products are often purchased out of habit, and brand choice may be habitual. Path 2, which is affectively oriented, leads to a positive affective response that is not necessarily based on understanding the label's meaning or any conscious effort to decode it. Research on food product labeling typically does not differentiate between these two paths, focusing primarily on cognitive responses, as research on affective responses is still developing. The influence of labels on consumers depends on the product's features and type, as well as the consumer's characteristics, such as motivation levels, prior knowledge, attitudes, and demographic traits (Grunert & Aachmann, 2016).

## **6. Conclusions**

The consumer purchasing decision process, particularly for food products, is intricate, involving several stages influenced by emotional, cognitive, and intentional factors. This study examines these stages, the impact of price and emotion, the role of packaging, and the influence of labeling on consumer behavior. The purchasing process includes recognizing an unsatisfied need, seeking information, evaluating alternatives, making the purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. Each stage involves a complex interplay of affective and cognitive processes, highlighting the multidimensional nature of consumer behavior. Information search and mental evaluation of alternatives are critical stages, as consumers rely on various sources and cognitive processing to assess product options based on price, quality, and brand reputation. Price significantly affects consumer emotions and purchasing intentions. Positive emotions linked to favorable price perceptions encourage proactive purchasing behaviors, while negative emotions deter purchases. The perception of price is subjective, reflecting the complex relationship between price and emotions. Packaging is crucial in consumer decisionmaking, especially for low-involvement and impulsive purchases. Elements like colors, images, and text on packaging evoke strong emotional responses, influencing consumer perceptions and behaviors. A holistic packaging design can significantly enhance product evaluation and purchasing decisions. Food labels are essential communication tools that provide critical information, aiding informed decision-making. Health labels and hedonistic labels affect consumer perceptions differently, often with skepticism surrounding health claims. Effective labeling strategies that reduce skepticism and enhance the multisensory experience can improve product evaluation and purchasing intention. Consumers process label information through cognitive and affective paths; understanding these paths helps marketers design labels that effectively capture attention and influence decisions. Post-purchase evaluation significantly impacts future behavior. Satisfaction depends on how well the product meets expectations, influencing repeat purchases or product abandonment. Marketers must ensure products meet consumer expectations to maintain satisfaction and loyalty. Understanding the multifaceted purchasing decision process helps marketers develop targeted strategies addressing both rational and emotional aspects of decision-making, enhancing consumer experience and fostering long-term satisfaction and loyalty.

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