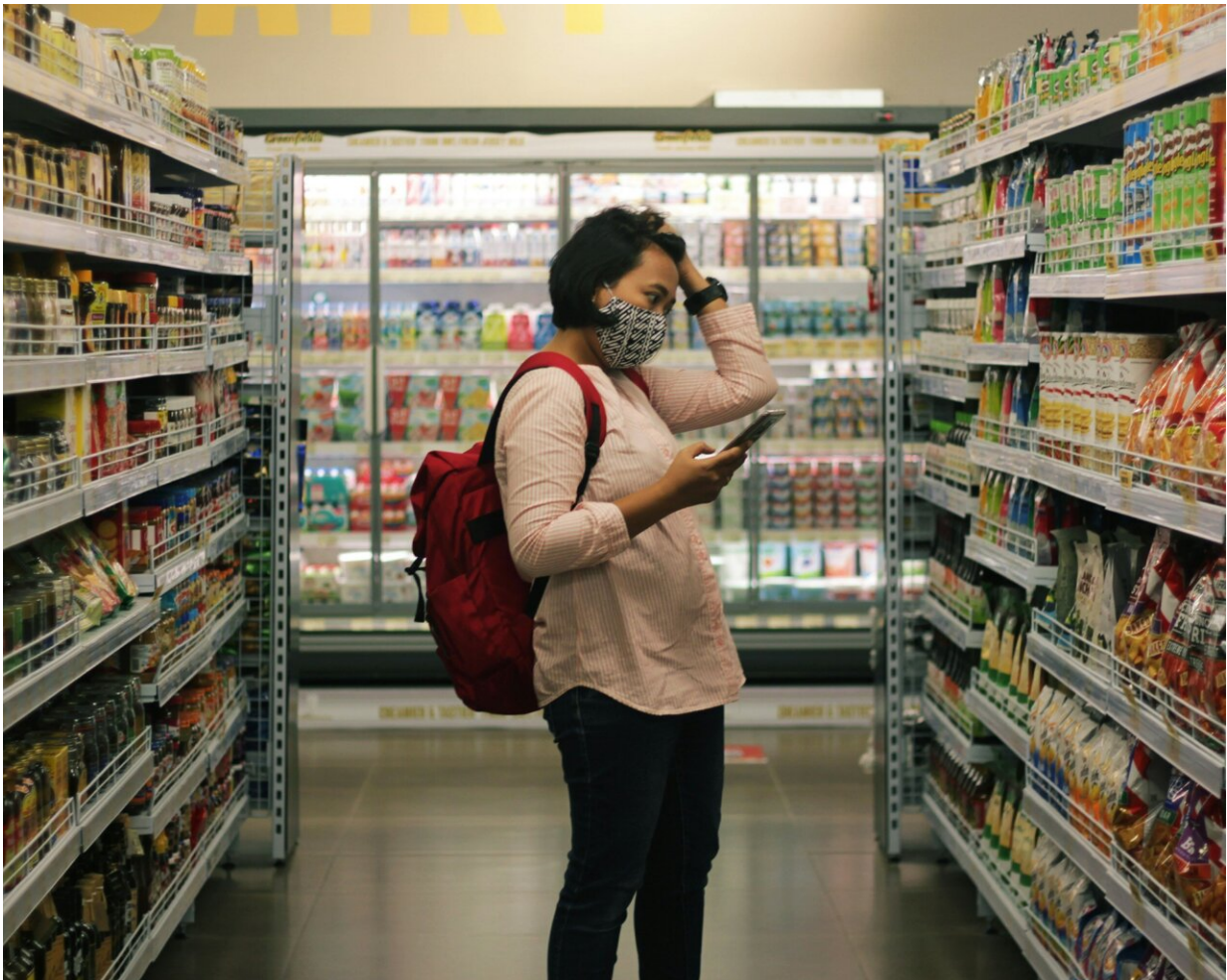


The chaos of choice: How do people pick their food products?

July 17 2024, by Elke Godden



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Every family needs groceries, and most people regularly venture to the supermarket to gather supplies. If researchers can help shoppers make healthier choices, we can improve the obesity problem in a simple yet effective way. But until recently, nobody really understood what motivated people to choose certain products—we knew what they bought, but not why. We've therefore investigated shoppers' choice strategies, hoping to use this information to help people choose healthier.

Imagine you are in your favorite supermarket. As you stand in front of the shelf of cereals, you may be overwhelmed by the numerous alternatives: Some products tell you they are "fat-free," others that they are "all-natural," and the supermarket's house brand is next to the top brand that you usually pick. Do you know what you would choose? More importantly: do you know why you would make that particular choice?

Until recently, nobody knew what motivated shopping decisions like this. That's why, at the University of Antwerp, we performed [a study](#) where we repeatedly let people choose between two products and analyzed their decisions. We discovered that there are three types of shoppers:

- The first group consistently chooses the healthiest product available.
- The second always chooses their favorite brand.
- The third poses a problem, unfortunately—they purposefully pick the least-healthy product option.

Does healthy = bad-tasting?

The third group's decisions might seem strange, but their reasoning is based on the intuition that "healthy things can't be tasty." The consequences of this mentality require urgent attention, particularly as the European Union is currently in the midst of a [fierce debate](#) on

whether a nutritional [label](#) should be made mandatory across all of Europe. If a significant proportion of shoppers believes that healthy products taste bad, putting a healthiness-grade on the package will likely lead to them choosing unhealthier options. It is therefore clear that we must learn more about this group and figure out how we can effectively reach them before we implement a label that may be detrimental to their health.

The Nutri-Score label and how it works

Our main interest in our research was the effect of a new label called Nutri-Score. It was developed to help us with shopping choices, and it is now in the running to become the official European label. It cannot tell you anything about the price of a product, but at least you know what you're paying for: It informs you about the healthiness of that food.

Though it may sound like a marketing scam, Nutri-Score was in fact developed by scientists. It took them four years of cooperating, designing, calculating, testing, and refining to come to this label, which still undergoes regular evaluations and updates. In contrast to the empty claims on many food packages, and misleading commercials and product names, the Nutri-Score doesn't lie. There is no "healthwashing" for the sake of selling a product.

The Nutri-Score label assigns grades based on relative product healthiness. The best Nutri-Score grade is an A and the worst grade is E.

Let's go shopping

This rigorousness and objectivity of Nutri-Score may come as a surprise, particularly if you've seen certain newspaper articles with [sensational headlines](#) saying the label implies "fries are better for your health than

salmon." These stories were the unfortunate result of intentionally sensationist reporting, and also a basic misunderstanding of how the label works. The Nutri-Score is designed to compare alternatives within a product category. The easiest way to demonstrate this is through a shopping example.

So, let's go on a hypothetical shopping trip. Step one: you need to decide what you want to eat. Importantly, this step comes before looking at any label. Are you eating breakfast or dinner, for example? Meat or vegetarian? Once you have decided on the broad category, you can start using the Nutri-Score to your advantage. Let's say you want to buy breakfast food, and you are in the mood for strawberry yogurt. On the supermarket shelf, there is this one cup that is full-fat yogurt with a lot of added sugar. Next to that, there is a similar strawberry yogurt but with no fat or added sugar.

Before the Nutri-Score, you'd have to turn over each yogurt and find your way through the jungle of numbers and terms on the back of each package. Now, you can see at a glance that the Nutri-Score of the first yogurt is "grade C" and the second is "grade A." The choice is still yours, but at least now you can easily make an informed decision. This is what the Nutri-score was created for: assessing comparable options within a food category. Comparing the Nutri-score of yogurt and salmon probably isn't relevant, because you're unlikely to replace your breakfast yogurt with a salmon steak.

Some advice for the three groups of shoppers

- If you are part of the first group of shoppers and want to make [healthier choices](#), I have good news for you: the Nutri-Score is not a marketing scam and can be a very effective tool if you use it within a product category. Before looking at the label, pick what kind of food you want to eat and then compare the

alternatives with the Nutri-Score. And keep up the good work.

- If you're in the second group and tend to pick your favorite top brand no matter what, I want you to pause for a moment and consider the following: the inferior quality of house brands is history; some house brands these days are even produced in the exact same factories as their "competitor" top brands. So what are you actually paying for? The answer is usually just the brand name and the commercials on television. If you want to know what is healthier, let the Nutri-Score guide your choices.
- If you are one of the people in group three who believes healthier food is less tasty, I want to challenge you to a blind taste test. Research has shown that this long-held belief isn't always true, but don't take our word for it: try it yourself. If you truly don't care about eating healthy, then at least let your taste buds decide. Because if you simply take the least healthy option, you might be worse off in terms of both health and enjoyment.

We all make shopping choices based on our personal priorities, but also based on what we think we know about the products. Unfortunately, marketing, preexisting beliefs, and "intuitions"—as reasonable as they may seem—have potential to lead us astray. As researchers, we are working hard to provide everyone with easy-to-interpret information about the food on supermarket shelves, so that every shopper can make an informed decision about the food they are buying—and hopefully improve their health while they're at it.

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