

How to Get Consumers to Choose Fruits, not Fries

Marti J. van Liere

Independent consultant, France

Valerie Curtis

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Department of Disease Control, UK

Key messages

- > Evolutionary theory explains human taste preferences for fat, sweet and salty, which is detrimental for food choices in today's omnipresence of cheap, unhealthy foods.
- > Compliance with healthy eating practices requires high levels of self-control and an orientation towards the future, both being unnatural for most people.
- > Private-sector marketing taps successfully into people's tendency for impulsive behavior, our need for immediate benefits and fitting into the social group and our aversion to change or choice from fear of losing what we have and know.
- > Similar marketing techniques can be used to promote healthy foods and healthy eating habits.
- > Healthy foods must become the easy and convenient, the desirable and affordable, the rewarding and status-enhancing choice and habit.

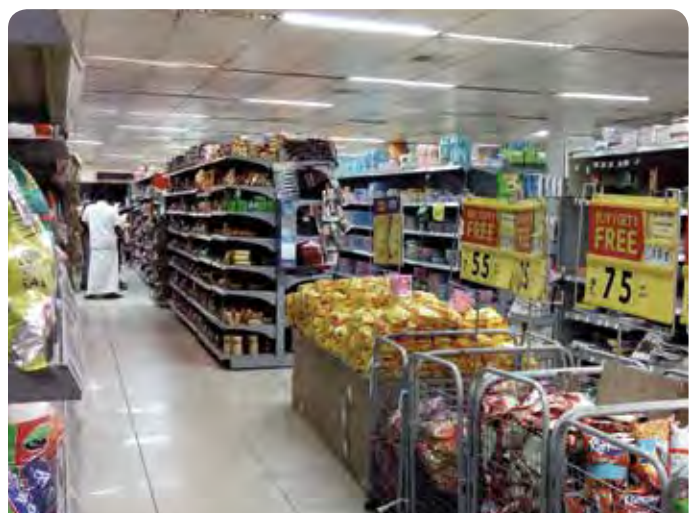
Introduction

Why do many consumers choose french fries over fruits? Soft drinks over plain water? Baby formula over breastfeeding? Packaged crisps over carrot sticks? How is it that the marketing and promotion of fatty, salty and sweet ultraprocessed foods is so effective – with consequences for obesity, overweight and diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)? And what can be learned from these practices to influence consumer food choices towards eating healthy foods?

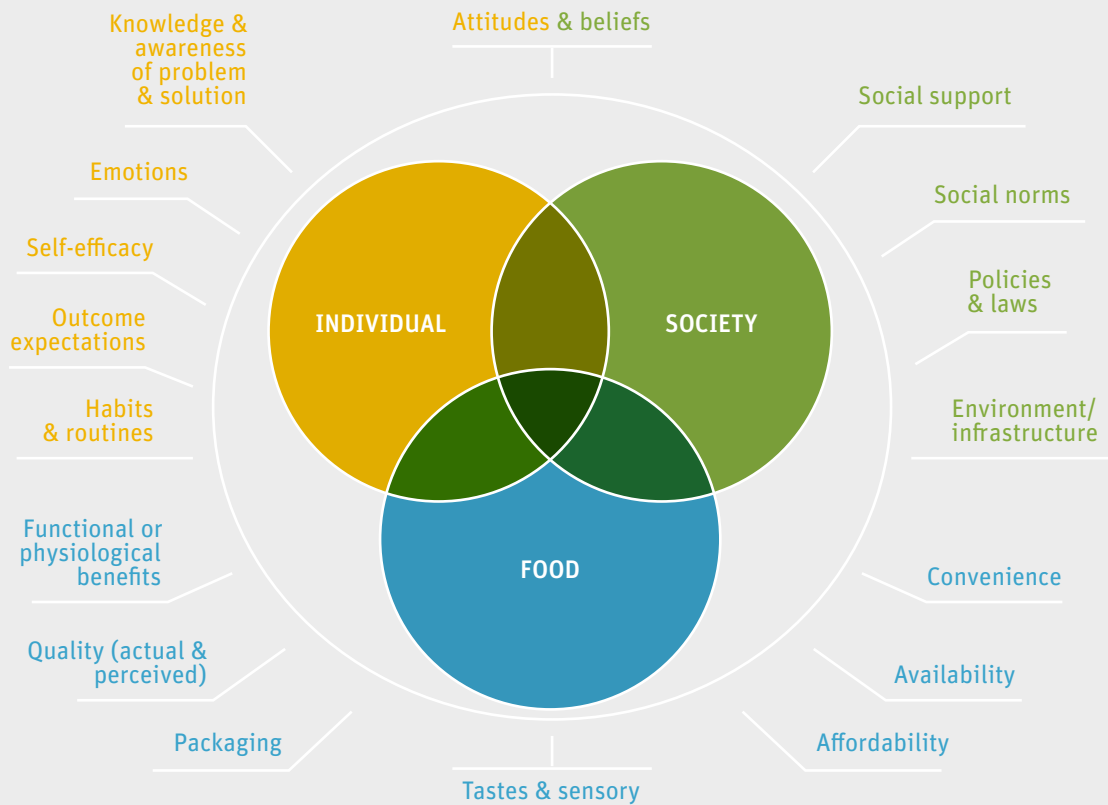
“How is it that the marketing and promotion of fatty, salty and sweet ultraprocessed foods is so effective?”

Evolution has prepared human beings to live in environments of food scarcity where survival required high levels of physical activity.¹ This gave humans their appetite for fatty, sweet foods and their capacity to accumulate fat. However, in a modern world of cheap and easily available food and energy-saving devices,^{1,2} this contributes to overeating. We humans have a preference for high-fat (energy-dense) and sweet foods, as this helped us to survive in a natural environment where access to food was erratic and limited.³ This was still true until recent decades: foods were precious, meals were shared with family and sweets were a reward for good behavior from a loving mother.

Nowadays, treats are cheap – they are everywhere, every day. Modern technology has played into consumer preferences and made these desired foods cheap and easy to obtain, prepare and consume. Market competition between companies has amplified the appealing characteristics of products, leading to more sweet, fat, salty and colorful food that is more ‘convenient.’ Also in low-income countries, infants and young children at risk of



Why do so many consumers choose french fries over carrot sticks?

FIGURE 1: Determinants of food choices

Source: Modified from Frewer, Risvik and Schifferstein, 2001.

– albeit not always rational – benefits.¹¹ Commercial promotion techniques play to the fact that human beings are by nature lazy: they look for the easy choice and the immediate benefit, they prefer the status quo over change, and they like to conform to what others do.¹¹

The attractiveness of unhealthy versus healthy foods

Modern processing technology has made foods available, affordable, easy to get and convenient. Food factors that appeal to consumers include functional attributes, food quality and safety, attractive packaging and sensory attributes. Such attributes are being used to successfully promote ultraprocessed foods using the four key principles in commercial product marketing called the 4 P's: Product, Price, Promotion and Placement.¹² Similar principles need to be applied to healthy, nutritious and less-processed foods.

Product attributes: Food companies have begun making efforts in reformulating food composition to reduce the 'bad-dies' in their foods (saturated fat, sugar, and salt). They can do even more to increase the 'goodies' (e.g., fibers, micronutrients),

while maintaining similar taste and desirability to consumers. Attractive product packaging of the right size is another product attribute used to guide the consumer's choice for snacks and ultraprocessed foods. Less-processed foods should be offered in attractive, convenient, right-sized packages as well.

“Less-processed foods should be offered in attractive, convenient, right-sized packages as well”

Price: In Western society, the higher price of healthier foods compared to less-healthy foods may inhibit low-income consumers to make the healthy choice.¹³ At the same time, consumers in low-income countries often choose a branded, processed food product of trusted reputation over a non-branded, locally produced product.¹⁴

Food companies and supermarkets need to use pricing strategies to make healthier foods more affordable and accessible.



If consumers are to switch to better diets, then healthy food options must be both attractive and affordable

For instance, the ‘buy-one-get-one-free’ promotions for junk foods can be used to promote fruits. Subsidies on healthy foods or additional taxation of unhealthy foods may help to shift the price advantage. Also, healthy foods should be made available in single-portion sizes for a healthy snack on the go, priced at a magical price point that corresponds to that one coin or note of cash that consumers have in their pocket and use for a quick purchase.¹⁵ Rao and his coauthors¹³ suggest that an improved infrastructure and commercial framework facilitating production, transportation and marketing of healthier foods could increase the availability and reduce the prices of more healthy products.

Promotion: Nutritious foods, such as fruits, vegetables and eggs are often non-branded and are rarely the subject of a marketing campaign. Producer groups supported by public health authorities should invest in promotion campaigns of fresh healthy products, using attributes such as ‘fresh,’ ‘natural,’ ‘healthy,’ or ‘locally produced’ to promote their consumption. For healthy processed foods, attributes such as ‘low in fat,’ ‘high in fiber,’ and ‘enriched with vitamins and minerals’ can be used to guide consumers’ choices. Promotion must follow regulations of food standards, front-of-pack labeling or health claims. Signaling approaches to inform consumers about the healthier choice will only work if the message is easy to understand and the food is also an easy choice – as simple to prepare, as affordable and as tasty as the less healthy choice.

Placement: Finally, it is not just direct promotion of the foods or their price, but also their placement (in shops, in easy eyesight, in kiosks, in schools, or in popular TV shows or internet blogs) that influences the consumer choice. Restrictions should be made on placement of unhealthy foods, banning them from school vending machines, cafeterias and checkouts. Simultaneously, incentives should be put in place for producers of healthy, nutritious foods to distribute and make their products available in these environments.

Societal support for individual healthy food choices

The attractiveness of food is not just about the features of a particular food product. Nor is it simply about where it is consumed, and in whose company. Societal norms and values around food exert a massive influence on our food choices. Early in life we are influenced by family traditions such as family Christmas or Chanukah dinners, but the way parents talk about food, cook meals and eat together also has a huge influence on the healthy eating habits that a child develops.¹⁶

More often people eat on the couch in front of the TV instead of the family table and youngsters hang out in fast food restaurants with their peers.

Later in life, people are influenced by their peers and role models, but also by social media and hidden product promotion in TV series or by bloggers. Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver uses

his fame to campaign for healthier food options, thus helping to change social food norms in the UK.¹⁷

Restrictions on promotion and placement of unhealthy foods are being put in place in various countries or municipalities, specifically when it comes to marketing to children. Though these restrictions are helpful, they only address one end of the spectrum and do not help to make healthy foods more attractive. Food companies, restaurants and supermarkets should be incentivized to market healthy foods to children, using effective techniques that are currently being used to sell unhealthy foods – for instance, using cartoon characters to promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables, quality protein and low-fat dairy snacks and water.

Applying the psychology of choice to healthy eating:

Concluding remarks

The abundant availability of unhealthy foods directly appeals to humans' inborn need to accumulate fat for times of energy scarcity at a high cost. In combination with aggressive marketing techniques that appeal to our tendency for impulsive behavior, this contributes to the obesity pandemic and the increasing double burden of nutrition in developing and emerging economies.

.....

“Instead of appealing to rational behavior to achieve long-term goals, public health nutritionists should make use of the psychology of choice”

.....

The same marketing techniques can be used to promote healthy foods and healthy eating habits. Instead of appealing to rational behavior to achieve long-term goals, public health nutritionists should make use of the psychology of choice. Cognitive psychologists and behavioral economists have extensively described how psychological traits influence human behavior. They have described that people do not like change (status quo bias), do not like to lose anything (loss aversion), have a strong preference for 'free' products, would rather not make a choice (default bias), prefer immediate over long-term benefits (discounting delayed events) and imitate others (social proof).^{18,19}

Few companies will offer insights as to how they determine their marketing strategies. One company published its generic approach, which draws on lessons from cognitive psychology and behavioral economists.²⁰ Some companies work in partnership with public health organizations and apply their insights to public health campaigns.²¹

Public health authorities continuously state that food habits are hard to change, but this viewpoint is contradicted by the wholesale transformation of our diets that has occurred over the

past few decades. If we want to turn the tide and encourage people towards healthier eating habits, we must learn the lessons about how the food industry changed our habits in the first place. This means more than just making (the choice for) healthy foods easy to understand. We must also:

- > **Make healthy food both desirable and affordable**
 - through the use of colorful packaging, single-size portions and subsidies;
- > **Reward the consumer for making healthy food choices**
 - by rendering the attendant health effect visible (e.g., reduction in number of sugar lumps, provide rewards for repeat behavior such as stickers, points, etc.);
- > **Use normative and status-enhancing exemplars**
 - by having heroes, role models and key figures in society publicly exercise healthy food choices; and
- > **Make healthy eating a habit**
 - by introducing healthy food consumption at key points in the day, for instance, by linking fruit consumption to breakfast or a midafternoon snack, and ensuring there are plenty of reminders to repeat the behavior over and over in order to encourage the formation of good habits.

If we can make all arrows of the food environment and individual food choices point in the same direction, we can create a food revolution that alleviates the double burden of malnutrition and improves diets across the world.

.....

Correspondence: *Marti J. van Liere,*

Email: *marti.j.vanliere@gmail.com*

.....

References

01. Wells JC. The evolution of human fatness and susceptibility to obesity: an ethological approach. *Biol Rev Camb Phil Soc.* 2006;81(2):183–205.
02. Bellisari A. Evolutionary origins of obesity. *Obes Rev.* 2008;9(2):165–80.
03. Logue AW. *Evolutionary theory and the psychology of eating.* New York: Baruch College, City University of New York; 1998.
04. Bielemann RM, Pozza Santos L, dos Santos Costa C, Matijasevich A, Santos IS. Early feeding practices and consumption of ultra-processed foods at 6 yrs of age: findings from the 2004 Pelotas (Brazil) Birth Cohort Study. *Nutrition.* 2018;47:27–32.
05. Pries AM, Huffman SL, Champeny M, Adhikary I, Benjamin M, Coly AN, et al. Consumption of commercially produced snack foods and sugar-sweetened beverages during the complementary feeding period in four African and Asian urban contexts. *Matern Child Nutr.* 2017;13(Suppl 2):e12412.
06. Martínez Steele E, Popkin BM, Swinburn B, Monteiro CA. The share

of ultra-processed foods and the overall nutritional quality of diets in the US: evidence from a nationally representative cross-sectional study. *Popul Health Metrics*. 2017;15(1):6.

07. Louzada ML da C, Martins APB, Canella DS et al. Impact of ultra-processed foods on micronutrient content in the Brazilian diet. *Rev Saúde Públ*. 2015;49:45.
08. Frewer LJ, Risvik E, Schifferstein H. *Food, people and society, a European perspective of consumers' food choices*. Berlin: Springer Verlag; 2001.
09. Vandevijvere S, Swinburn B. Creating healthy food environments through global benchmarking of government nutrition policies and food industry practices. *Arch Publ Health*. 2014;72(1):7.
10. Cisneros PMC, Silva CLH (2017) Temporal discounting and health behavior: a review. *MOJ Pub. Health* 2017;6(6):00189.
11. Wilcox M. *The business of choice: marketing to consumers' instincts*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, FT Press; 2015.
12. McCarthy EJ. *Basic marketing: A managerial approach*. Homewood, IL: R. D. Irwin; 1960.
13. Rao M, Afshin A, Singh G, Mozaffarian D. Do healthier foods and diet patterns cost more than less healthy options? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open*. 2013;3(12):e004277.
14. van Liere MJ, Shulman S. Creating consumer demand and driving appropriate utilisation of fortified foods. In: Mannar V, Hurrell R, eds. *Food fortification in a globalized world*. Elsevier; 2018:101–12.
15. MQSUN. *Where business and nutrition meet: review of approaches and evidence on private sector engagement in nutrition*. Washington, DC: MQSUN+ Report; in publication.
16. Weinstein, M. *The surprising power of family meals. How eating together makes us smarter, stronger, healthier and happier*. Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press; 2005.
17. Jamie Oliver. *Campaign news*. 2018. Internet: www.jamieoliver.com/campaigns (accessed 27 July 2018).
18. Kahneman D. *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2011.
19. Ariely D. *Predictably irrational: the hidden forces that shape our decisions*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial; 2010.
20. Curtis VA, Garbrah-Aidoo N, Scott B. *Masters of marketing: bringing private sector skills to public health partnerships*. *Am J Publ Health*. 2007;Apr 97(4):634–41.
21. Unilever. *Expert insights into consumer behavior and Unilever's five levers of change*. London: Unilever; 2011. Internet: www.unilever.com/Images/slp_5-levers-for-change_tcm244-414399_en.pdf (accessed 27 July 2018).