

Study: We learn as we shop

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Consumers might not know it, but a Canadian study finds the ability to learn from experience is of central importance when people buy products.

Such ability allows us to acquire many of the skills we need to complete a wide variety of complicated, multi-step tasks in an efficient manner, the researchers said. But it also creates habit -- a critical, if often overlooked, factor in the product and service choices consumers make.

Kyle Murray of the University of Western Ontario and Gerald Haubl of the University of Alberta say such "cognitive lock-in" can cause us to remain loyal to a product, even if objectively better alternatives exist.

Murray and Haubl discovered habits are dependent not only on the acquisition of a particular skill set, but on our desire to achieve specific goals.

"This has important implications for consumer behavior," they said. "For example, learning to navigate a particular grocery store to purchase orange juice does not necessarily lock consumers into that store when their goal is to buy a cake."

The study appears in the Journal of Consumer Research.

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