# **Chapter 13: Consumer Decision-Making** **Alternative Evaluation and Selection**

An important phase in the consumer decision-making process is the alternative evaluation and selection stage, where consumers sift through various options before making a final choice. This chapter explores various elements tied to this phenomenon, including choice overload, evaluation of alternatives, and the psychological frameworks that guide consumer decisions.

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Discuss the rational choice theory and how it differs from consumer behavior in real life context.
2. Recognize the evaluation criteria consumers take into account when making purchasing decisions.
3. Discuss the rules of attribute-based choices in consumer behavior.

Key Concepts to Remember:

* Rational choice theory
* Bounded rationality
* Metagoal
* Types of goals
* Consumer choice process
* Types of choices:  
  affective choices, attitude-based choices, attribute-based choices
* Evaluative criteria
* Types of motives
* Choice overload
* Tangible vs. intangible evaluative criteria
* Decision rules for attribute-based choice:  
  conjunctive rule, disjunctive rule, elimination by aspects, lexicographic rule, compensatory rule

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## **Rational Choice Theory[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Rational choice theory posits that consumers make decisions based on a logical assessment of available information, attempting to maximize their utility. For instance, when purchasing a car, a rational consumer might compare fuel efficiency, safety ratings, and overall cost of ownership to determine which vehicle provides the greatest economic value over time.

However, this idealized notion doesn’t always align with reality, as emotional factors often shape consumer choices. An example of this is when a buyer opts for a luxury car, not purely based on practicality but also due to emotional appeal and status associated with the brand. The Rational Choice Theory assumes that consumers purse one optimal solution to the problem they recognized. Another assumption made by the rational choice theory is that the customers have the motivation and skills to find that optimal solution. And that the optimal solution remains the same regardless of situational factors. However, as you learned earlier marketers can influence situational factors and these factors play a critical role in shaping consumer decisions.

## Bounded Rationality[[2]](#footnote-2)

Bounded rationality acknowledges the cognitive limitations of consumers as they process information. For example, a busy professional might settle for a particular meal kit service rather than thoroughly researching all available options, as, due to time constraints, they are willing to accept a “good enough” choice rather than an optimal one.

Additionally, when planning a vacation, consumers might focus solely on popular destinations like Hawaii or Las Vegas, overlooking potentially better or more cost-effective alternatives simply due to familiarity, demonstrating how bounded rationality influences decision-making.

*Reflect*

1. How does **bounded rationality** explain why people don’t always choose the “best” option?
2. Can you think of a purchase where you were influenced by **both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations**?

## **Metagoal and Types of Goals[[3]](#footnote-3)**

A metagoal refers to an overarching objective that influences consumer behavior during the evaluation stage. For example, if a consumer prioritizes an environmentally friendly lifestyle, their metagoal might be to find a car that aligns with their sustainable values. In doing so, they may evaluate electric vehicles or hybrids against conventional gasoline options.

Goals can be categorized into various types:

* **Functional Goals**: These relate to fulfilling practical needs, such as choosing a car based on fuel efficiency. A college student may prioritize a used sedan due to budget constraints, focusing on economic value over aesthetic appeal.
* **Experiential Goals**: These focus on emotional or sensory satisfaction, such as seeking pleasure or social connection. For instance, a couple choosing a restaurant for a special anniversary may prioritize a romantic ambiance over cost.
* **Symbolic Goals**: These align with self-image or social identity, influencing premium purchases or brand loyalty. For instance, a professional might choose a luxury watch not just for its functionality but to project an image of success and sophistication.

## Types of Consumer Choice Processes[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the process of attitude evaluation, consumers make affective, attitude-based, or attribute-based choices.

In consumer behavior, the process of attitude evaluation significantly influences how individuals make choices. Attitudes, defined as a consumer's overall evaluation of a product or service, play a critical role in shaping preferences and guiding decision-making. Within this framework, three primary choice processes emerge: affective choices, attitude-based choices, and attribute-based choices. Each process reflects different underlying motivations and strategies adopted by consumers when evaluating alternatives.

*Types of Consumer Choices*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Choice Type | Description | Example |
| Affective Choices | Emotion-driven selections | Buying a perfume based on a nostalgic scent |
| Attitude-Based Choices | Decisions based on brand perception | Choosing Coca-Cola due to positive attitudes toward the brand |
| Attribute-Based Choices | Analytical evaluation of product features | Selecting a laptop based on RAM, battery life, and processor |

### Affective Choices[[5]](#footnote-5)

Affective choices are primarily driven by emotions and feelings rather than rational analysis. When consumers opt for this choice process, they rely on their immediate emotional responses to products or brands, which can significantly influence their decisions.

Consider a consumer shopping for perfume. Their purchase may be guided by the immediate emotional impact of a fragrance upon first sniffing it. If the scent evokes positive feelings or reminds them of a cherished memory e.g. of a loved one, they are likely to choose it regardless of its price or brand reputation. Similarly, a person selecting a car might gravitate towards a model that makes them feel excited or happy, even if it's not the most practical option.

### Attitude-Based Choices[[6]](#footnote-6)

Attitude-based choices involve making decisions based on overall attitudes rather than specific attributes or features of the alternatives. In this process, consumers draw on their pre-existing opinions or beliefs about a brand or product category without delving into detailed comparisons.

A classic example can be seen in consumers' loyalty to a specific soft drink brand. If a consumer has a strong positive attitude toward Coca-Cola based on past experiences, brand identity, and advertising, they will likely choose Coca-Cola over Pepsi, regardless of product comparisons such as ingredients or sugar content. Their favorable attitude towards Coca-Cola becomes the guiding factor in their purchasing decision. This choice process shows how powerful brand loyalty and consumer perception can be in influencing behavior.

### Attribute-Based Choices[[7]](#footnote-7)

In attribute-based choices, consumers make decisions by evaluating specific product features or attributes. This process is more analytical and involves weighing various factors to identify which product aligns best with their needs or preferences.

When choosing a laptop, a consumer may adopt an attribute-based approach, considering factors such as price, RAM, processor speed, battery life, and brand reputation. They may compare several models side-by-side, assessing which laptop offers the best combination of attributes that meet their specific requirements, such as higher performance for gaming or better battery life for portability. This method not only requires a detailed examination of alternatives but also reflects the individual’s focus on functionality and quality in their decision-making.

Understanding these three choice processes—affective, attitude-based, and attribute-based—provides insights into how consumers evaluate alternatives during their decision-making journey. While affective choices highlight the importance of emotions and personal connections, attitude-based choices underscore the significance of prior beliefs and brand loyalty. In contrast, attribute-based choices reflect a more rational, deliberate approach to consumer evaluation. By recognizing these processes, marketers can craft strategies that align with consumer motivations, ultimately influencing choice and fostering stronger connections with their target audience.

## Evaluative Criteria[[8]](#footnote-8)

Evaluative criteria play a crucial role in steering consumer behavior. For instance, when purchasing a hybrid vehicle, consumers might evaluate not only fuel efficiency (a tangible criterion) but also brand reputation, after-sales service, and environmental impact (intangible criteria). Marketers must strategically communicate how their products meet or exceed these criteria to influence potential buyers.

*Tangible and Intangible Criteria*

Consumers often confront both tangible and intangible evaluative criteria during decision-making.

* **Tangible criteria** include measurable factors such as price, warranty, and material quality. For instance, a parent selecting a new crib may weigh the safety ratings, build quality, and price against other products.
* **Intangible criteria** encompass elements like brand image, customer service quality, and overall experience. For example, when selecting a hotel for a vacation, travelers might consider reviews regarding the service quality and the emotional connection conveyed in the brand’s story, which could outweigh other tangible aspects such as price.

Recognizing the balance between these criteria is vital for marketers aiming to appeal to diverse consumer bases.

**Choice overload**, also known as analysis paralysis, refers to the overwhelming feeling consumers experience when presented with an excessive number of options. Research has consistently demonstrated that when faced with too many choices, consumers can feel uncertain and dissatisfied with their final decisions. A classic example is in the context of grocery shopping when consumers are presented with hundreds of cereal options, they may struggle to make a choice, leading to indecision or a preference for familiar brands.

Additionally, studies have shown that a balance is key: while having a limited selection may result in fewer initial options, it typically leads to increased confidence in the choice made. For instance, a curated selection of five high-quality chocolate brands may lead to a more satisfying purchase experience compared to being bombarded with hundreds of choices, where the likelihood of regret increases.

Once consumers identify potential products or services that could satisfy their specific needs, they engage in the evaluation of alternatives. For consumer electronics, this often involves comparing specifications of multiple products. For example, when selecting a new laptop, consumers may evaluate alternatives based on processing power, battery life, brand reputation, and price.

Another example is when a traveler chooses a hotel, they may weigh factors such as location, amenities, reviews, and price to evaluate the best alternative. The evaluation process is often guided by personal experiences and recommendations, which can greatly influence the decision.

Motives driving consumer decisions can be intrinsic or extrinsic:

* **Intrinsic Motives**: These stem from personal satisfaction, such as a desire for knowledge or self-improvement. For example, an individual purchasing a self-help book may seek personal growth rather than external validation.
* **Extrinsic Motives**: These include social influences and external rewards, such as peer pressure or promotional discounts. A good example is a student purchasing branded clothing to fit in with her peers, driven by the external desire for acceptance.

*Example – An Interplay of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motives*

Sarah, a young professional, decides to buy a premium smartwatch. She is intrinsically motivated by her desire to track her fitness goals, improve her daily routine, and enhance her health. At the same time, she is extrinsically motivated by the social status associated with owning a high-end brand and the limited-time discount offered by the retailer. Her decision is influenced by both her personal growth aspirations and the external appeal of the product's prestige and savings.

*Reflect*

1. How do you personally balance **tangible and intangible** evaluative criteria when making a purchase?
2. Have you ever experienced **choice overload**? How did you overcome it?

### **Decision Rules (Attribute-Based Choices)[[9]](#footnote-9)**

Decision rules are strategies consumers use to choose among alternatives. These rules help streamline the evaluation process by providing a structured way to compare options based on certain attributes. The application of these decision rules can significantly impact the final consumer choice, as they guide how information is processed and options are assessed. Here, we will explore and expand on several key decision rules: conjunctive, disjunctive, elimination by aspects, lexicographic, and compensatory rules, with detailed explanations and relevant examples for each.

*Attribute-Based Choices – Alternative Evaluation*

#### Conjunctive Rule[[10]](#footnote-10)

The conjunctive rule requires that a product must meet a minimum level on multiple attributes. Essentially, this means that a consumer sets a cutoff point for each attribute and eliminates any options that do not meet all of these minimum requirements for all criteria. This rule is particularly useful when consumers prioritize several essential features and cannot compromise on them.

*Example- Conjunctive Rule*

Imagine a consumer looking for a new smartphone. Before starting their search, they might establish a set of essential criteria: the phone must have at least a 12-megapixel camera, a battery that lasts a minimum of 24 hours on a single charge, and at least 128 GB of storage. This consumer will assess various smartphones against these set criteria:

**Camera:** Must be at least 12 MP.

**Battery Life:** Must last at least 24 hours.

**Storage:** Must be 128 GB or more.

Any smartphone that falls short in any one of these categories would be eliminated from consideration. For instance, if a smartphone offers a good battery life of 30 hours but has only 10 MP in camera quality, it would not be a viable option. This decision-making method ensures that the consumer ends up with a product that meets their essential needs without having to compromise on critical features.

#### Disjunctive Rule[[11]](#footnote-11)

The disjunctive rule requires that a product meets the important desirable attributes (at a relatively high level), rather than all of them. This approach is beneficial when consumers want to ensure they get at least one key feature while still considering multiple alternatives.

*Example – Disjunctive Rule*

Consider a consumer shopping for a new car. They might decide that the vehicle must have excellent fuel efficiency (at least 30 miles per gallon) and a five-star safety rating. In this case, the consumer assesses various cars mainly on the following criteria:

**Fuel Efficiency:** Must be at least 30 MPG.

**Safety Rating:** Must be four stars.

**Gas/electric:** Not critical

**Trunk space:** Not critical

If a car meets both of these criteria, it remains in contention for purchase and the more it surpasses these requirements the better. No cars that do not meet the two critical criteria will be considered regardless how well they perform on the other non critical criteria. The disjunctive rule allows consumers to explore a wider range of choices while ensuring that at least one key desire is satisfied.

#### Elimination by Aspects (EBA)[[12]](#footnote-12)

The elimination by aspects decision rule involves ranking attributes by importance and systematically eliminating options that do not meet a minimum requirement for one attribute before moving to the next. This method is useful for narrowing down a wide array of choices progressively.

*Example – Elimination by Aspects*

When selecting a laptop, a consumer may prioritize certain attributes in the following order:

**Rank 1 - RAM:** Must be at least 16 GB.

**Rank 2 - Price:** Must be under $1,000.

**Rank 3 - Brand Reputation:** Must be from a trusted brand.

The consumer first eliminates any laptops that don’t meet the minimum 16 GB of RAM requirement. After this round of elimination, they are left with a smaller selection of laptops. Next, they will scan this shortlist and eliminate any that exceed the budget of $1,000. Finally, they might filter their final selection to include only those brands they trust based on prior experiences, reviews, or brand reputation.

Through this method, the consumer can efficiently eliminate unsatisfactory options and hone in on a final choice that aligns closely with their priorities.

#### Lexicographic Rule[[13]](#footnote-13)

The lexicographic rule requires consumers to prioritize criteria based on their importance. In this approach, the consumer chooses between alternatives based on the most important attribute. If there’s a tie in that attribute, they then consider the next most important attribute, and this continues until a decision is made.

*Example – Lexicographic Rule*

Suppose a consumer is choosing a new jacket and has established the following hierarchy of preferences:

**Price:** Prefer the least expensive option.

**Style:** If multiple jackets are priced the same, they will then prefer the style they find most appealing.

**Material Quality:** If still undecided, they will finally consider the material quality and durability.

The consumer begins their search by comparing jackets based on price. If they find two jackets that are the same price, the decision process proceeds to style. If both jackets are similarly styled, they will evaluate the material quality. This decision rule emphasizes the importance of structure in the consumer's thought process and can lead to a more satisfactory selection based on prioritized criteria.

#### Compensatory Rule[[14]](#footnote-14)

Unlike the other rules discussed above – all of which are noncompensatory rules, the compensatory rule allows consumers to weigh the pros and cons of different attributes against one another. Under this rule, a strong performance in one attribute can compensate for a weaker performance in another.

*Example – Compensatory Rule*

If a consumer is considering purchasing a digital camera, they might evaluate the alternatives by assigning weights or importance levels to various attributes such as image quality, price, and battery life. They may create a scoring system based on their preferences:

**Image Quality:** 40% importance

**Price:** 30% importance

**Battery Life:** 30% importance

A camera might score high in image quality but be more expensive than another option. If the first option's high image quality compensates for its price in the consumer's assessment, they may choose that camera over a less expensive model with poorer image quality. This rule accommodates a balanced evaluation, allowing consumers to consider trade-offs among different attributes before making a final decision.

*Attribute-Based Decision Rules*

Each of these decision rules (conjunctive, disjunctive, elimination by aspects, lexicographic, and compensatory) provides consumers with distinct frameworks for making choices. By understanding how these rules operate, marketers can tailor their strategies and communications to align with consumer decision-making processes, ultimately improving customer satisfaction, guiding product positioning, and enhancing the overall purchasing experience. Whether a consumer is looking for a smartphone, car, or any product, these rules play a pivotal role in how they navigate options and arrive at informed choices. Understanding these dynamics not only benefits consumers but also empowers businesses to engage effectively with their target audiences.

*Reflect*

1. Which decision rule do you think you use most often, and why?
2. Can you give an example of when **a compensatory rule led you to overlook a product’s weakness**?

*End-of-Chapter Self-Reflection*

1. Think about a major purchase you made. What **decision rule** did you use?
2. Have you ever let **emotions** override logical evaluation? Did you regret it?
3. Do you think your decision-making process is **rational** or **bounded by limitations**?

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