When Temptation Hits You: the Influence of Weak Versus Strong Food Temptations

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Abstract
In daily life, people are often exposed to food temptations, such as ads for chocolate or friends offering cookies. This article examines how consumers respond to such food temptations. We investigate whether food temptations, differing in strength (weak vs. strong), lead consumers to eat more or rather help them in exerting self-control. The results of three experiments suggest that weak food temptations activate food-related thoughts, and lead to overconsumption. Strong food temptations, on the other hand, inhibit this desire to eat, and help consumers to control their food-intake.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Food temptations are common in everyday life, in ads, in stores, on coffee tables during social visits, or in one’s own refrigerator… Such temptations constitute a permanent threat to the accomplishment of consumers’ long-term goals of looking attractive. Resisting these food temptations requires self-control, and fails on some occasions. This happens when attention is diverted from inhibitory restrictions, and narrowed to the most salient available cues, which -ironically- are often the food itself (Ward & Mann, 2000). However, salient temptations might also remind consumers of their objectives (Fishbach et al., 2003), and facilitate self-control. In this paper we study when temptations (weak versus strong) prevent and when they facilitate reaching food-intake control objectives. We distinguish two levels of temptation: weak and strong. According to the ‘inoculation’ theory (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961), a weak temptation should strengthen self-control because it activates defensive mechanisms that are helpful in warding off subsequent strong temptations. Contrary to this theory, Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge, & Wilson (2004) state that a strong temptation should strengthen self-control because it activates inhibitory goals. Weak temptations are not threatening enough to do so. The present research explored the effects of different temptation levels (no versus weak versus strong temptation) on the self-regulation of food intake.

In a first study, one hundred and ninety female undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three manipulated temptation levels. Participants were told that the manufacturer of a well-known candy brand, ‘Quality Street’, was interested in consumer inferences of the relationship between flavors and wrapper colors and shapes. Participants in the Weak Temptation condition were asked to associate twelve pictures of the candies (of different colors and shapes) with the corresponding flavor of each candy (e.g. ‘chocolate with strawberry cream’). Participants in the Strong Temptation-condition were given the same task while a bowl filled with about 50 ‘Quality Street’ candies was present next to them. Participants in the No Temptation-condition were asked to associate ten colors with ten words (e.g. ‘white’ and ‘elephant’). Then, participants were given two bowls of the same volume, one with regular M&Ms® (400 grams), and the other with the ‘new’ crispy M&Ms (300 grams). They were allowed to sample as many of the M&Ms as they needed to complete a comparison taste test of both types of M&Ms. After the taste test, the remaining M&Ms in both bowls were weighed to assess the amount consumed. The main effect of Temptation was significant, indicating that the weak temptation seemed to increase consumption compared to the No Temptation and the Strong Temptation-condition. The strong temptation seemed to help participants in resisting the M&Ms. These results imply that the weak temptation leads to increased consumption in female eaters, whereas strong food temptations seem to help female eaters in exerting food-intake control.

In a second study, we directly measured concept/goal activation resulting from temptation manipulations. One hundred twenty-one female undergraduate students participated. Temptation level was manipulated as in study 1, except that the ‘Quality Street’ candy was replaced by ‘Cote d’Or®’ mini-chocolates that exist in five different flavors. Then, participants were given a lexical decision task in which they were asked to respond as quickly and accurately as possible whether the stimulus was a word (‘W’ or a pseudo-word (‘N’). Response times and accuracy were recorded. The test consisted of one hundred trials, including 30 words related to food, dieting and temptation, 20 neutral words, and 50 pseudo-words. Of the 30 goal-related words, half were related to inhibitory goals like dieting and health, and half were related to the taste of food and consumption. A repeated measures ANOVA with Goal Type (food versus diet) as within subject variable, and the average reaction time of the neutral words as a covariate, revealed a significant interaction between Goal Type and Temptation. In comparison with the no temptation condition, the food-consumption goal was more activated in the Weak Temptation-condition and less in the Strong Temptation-condition. These results show that a weak temptation arouses positive feelings related to food consumption. The strong temptation, on the other hand, inhibits these positive food-related thoughts.

In a third study, we examined the viability of the causal role of goal activation as suggested in study 2. We tested whether the strong temptation condition was able to inhibit the appetizing effects of an olfactory cue. The results of the third study showed that in the No Temptation-condition, participants in the Scent-condition ate more than in the No Scent-condition. Moreover, in the Scent-condition, the strongly tempted participants consumed fewer M&Ms than the participants that were not tempted. These results imply that the strong temptation seems to inhibit the consumption increasing effect of the scent on consumption. This supports the causal role of the food goal activation.

In summary, the results of study 1 show that weak food temptations might lead to overconsumption while strong food temptations might help consumers in controlling their food-intake, offering support for Gilbert et al.’s (2004) theory. Hence, advertisements featuring food temptations might be more detrimental for overconsumption than placing food right in front of consumers. As study 2 shows, weak temptations arouse positive feelings related to food consumption. The strong temptation, on the other hand, inhibits these positive thoughts related to food and, in this way, strong temptations seem to facilitate self-control. Study 3 showed that the activation of the eating goal by the scent of freshly baked brownies leads participants to increase consumption. However, the strong temptation inhibits this effect, again indicating that strong temptations seem to facilitate self-control by the inhibition of the desire for food.

REFERENCES