One Chocolate Cake and a Short-Term Mate: the Influence of Unhealthy Foods on Short-Term Mating

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Three studies show that consumption of unhealthy foods can influence short-term mating tendency. Specifically, actual or imagined consumption of unhealthy (vs. healthy) foods leads to increased interest in short-term mating. Gender and hunger moderate these effects, with the effect only holding for males, and getting reversed under high hunger.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anecdotal evidence suggests a strong link between foods and sex/mating. For example, some foods are proposed as being “better than sex” (Food Network.com 2012), others as aphrodisiacs (e.g., oysters) (Lawlis 2009), and still others are used during sex (e.g. whip cream) (Fisher 2011). However, from a theoretical perspective, the relationship between food and mating remains unclear. In that context, this research examines how certain types of foods (e.g., healthy vs. unhealthy) might influence short-term mating (STM) tendency. STM is defined as a brief non-romantic sexual encounter that lacks emotional depth (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

Recent reports show that STM is increasing among all age groups (McGuire 2010). This increase is potentially disconcerting because there are serious health related consequences of STM (Garcia et al. 2012). In addition, some evidence suggests that STM influences consumer behavior (Monga and Gürhan-Canli 2012). While several studies examine the consequences of STM less research examines the situational antecedents of STM. We focus on the situational influence of consumption of certain types of foods on STM tendencies. Understanding this link is practically relevant since although individuals often have direct control over their food choices, there are many instances when food choices are limited (e.g. weddings, catered events).

Exposure to unhealthy foods can simultaneously activate conflicting goals related to indulgence (Shiv and Fedorikhin 2002) as well as restraint (Geyskens et al. 2008). This occurs because consumers learn to associate unhealthy foods with indulgence (e.g. cake for birthday/wedding celebrations) as well as self-control (e.g. foods to avoid when dieting) (Redden and Haws 2012), and overtime exposure to unhealthy foods automatically activates these conflicting goals (Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

We propose that when consumers sample an unhealthy food item they symbolically breach self-control and hence the indulgence goal wins out. One breach of self-control often leads to others (Soman and Cheema 2004) because once individuals breach self-control they tend to say “what-the-hell” (Coehran and Tesser 1996, 99) and subsequently engage in other behaviors that undermine self-control (Polivy and Herman 1985). We predict that sampling an unhealthy food will represent a symbolic breach of self-control which will lead individuals to say “what-the-hell” when it comes to STM. Sampling a healthy food will not lead to self-control breach and thus will not influence STM.

There is a rich stream of literature documenting gender differences in mating. Men have stronger desires for engaging in STM (Haselton and Buss 2000) and more favorable attitudes towards STM than women (Clark and Hatfield 1989). There are several proposed reasons for this difference including greater social acceptability for men to engage in STM (D’Emilio and Freedman 1997) and greater parental investment for women than men (Trivers 1972). Consistent with this stream of research we predict that unhealthy foods will influence STM to a greater extent in men than in women.

STUDY 1

We test this prediction with a 2 (sampled food: healthy vs. unhealthy) X 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) between subjects design. Participants sampled a healthy (i.e., fruit salad) or an unhealthy (i.e., chocolate cake) food (e.g. Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). Subsequently, as part of an “unrelated task”, participants responded to measures related to interest in STM (Schmitt 2005).

Sampling an unhealthy (vs. healthy) food item influenced STM tendency, but only for males. Females’ responses regarding interest in STM were not influenced by the type of food sampled.

STUDY 2a

Visceral factors decrease self-control (Loewenstein 1996). In the context of eating, hunger is a visceral factor that represents a state of food deprivation. High levels of hunger can inhibit individuals’ ability to exercise self-control (Nederkoorn et al. 2009) even in non-food domains (Briers et al. 2006).

Because visceral factors lead to decreased self-control if as we theorize a symbolic lapse of self-control leads individuals to say “what the hell”, the effect of unhealthy food on STM should only exist under low hunger when sampling the unhealthy food is viewed as a breach of self-control. Under high hunger sampling the food may be related to fulfilling a basic physiological need to reduce hunger (Maslow 1943) and would not represent a self-control breach. Overall, we predict that the effect of unhealthy (vs. healthy) food on STM will only exist under low (vs. high) hunger.

We test this prediction with a 2(food type: healthy vs. unhealthy) X 2(hunger: high vs. low) between subjects design. The procedure and stimuli were identical to Study 1 except that hunger was manipulated by having subjects participate before or after a meal (e.g. Goukens et al. 2007).

As predicted, the results show that under low hunger participants report a greater interest in STM after sampling an unhealthy (vs. healthy) food. However, unexpectedly under high hunger, sampling a healthy (vs. unhealthy) food led to greater interest in STM. One possible explanation for the reversal of effects under high hunger might relate to the low perceived satiating power of fruit (Rolls et al. 1990). If the chocolate cake was perceived as more filling/satiating than the fruit, participants who were hungry and sampled the fruit may have been relatively hungrier than participants who sampled the cake leading the former to respond more impulsively to the STM measures.

STUDY 2b

In Study 2b we investigate the influence of unhealthy (vs. healthy) foods on STM when individuals merely imagine consuming the food. This seems important since consumers may be tempted by images of unhealthy foods and since prior research shows visual images of food items have similar, albeit relatively weaker effects than actual food items (e.g. Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999; 2002).

This study employed a 2(food type: healthy vs. unhealthy) X 2(hunger: high vs. low) between subjects design. The procedure was similar to Study 2a except we used an online panel (e.g. Mechanical Turk), participants viewed an image of a healthy or unhealthy food, and we measured hunger.

The results of Study 2b replicate the results of Study 2a and show that merely imagining consuming an unhealthy food can influence interest in STM.
CONCLUSION
Our experiments show that unhealthy (vs. healthy) foods can influence STM tendency.

REFERENCES


