Tasting Who You Want to Be: Product Experience and Psychological Needs

Aner Tal, Ono Academic College, Israel
Yaniv Gvili, Ono Academic College, Israel
Moti Amar, Ono Academic College, Israel

Across three studies, we show that those who desire a particular identity evaluate food products associated with the desirable identity as tastier. We argue that food will taste better when answering the motivation, or psychological need, to draw closer to and defend a desired identity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1700215/volumes/v11e/E-11

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Tasting Who You Want to Be: Product Experience and Psychological Needs
Aner Tal, Ono Academic College, Israel
Yaniv Gvili, Ono Academic College, Israel
Moti Amar, Ono Academic College, Israel

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Across three studies, we show that those who desire a particular identity evaluate food products associated with the desirable identity as tastier. We argue that food will taste better when answering the motivation, or psychological need, to draw closer to and defend a desired identity.

People are generally motivated to create and sustain a favorable and consistent identity (Gecas, 1982; Turner, 1982; Berzonsky, 1993; Epstein, 1980). Among other strategies, consumers employ products to support desired social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975). The more important an identity is, the more attractive the products associated with it become (Kleine III, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

Our choices are led not only by our current selves, but by possible selves – our ideas of what we might, would like to, or are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). People go about purchasing products that are consistent with, enhance, or in some other way fit well with their future self (Ross, 1971). For example, people may dress in particular clothing (Kang, Sklar, & Johnson, 2011), undertake plastic surgery to achieve an attractive body shape (Schouten, 1991).

Consumers may use product choices to not only build but defend their identities. For example, loss of control (Levav and Zhu 2009) or power (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) may shift consumers’ choices to restore control or power. Similarly, felt deficits in affiliation needs (Lee and Shrum 2012) and intelligence (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009) can shift people towards choices that are congruent with identity.

Here, we show that the experience of a product may change when it serves such an identity-related purpose. While previous research has already demonstrated that food tastes better when it answers physiological needs, we argue that food will taste better when answering the psychological need to support a desired identity.

In general, enjoyment is enhanced when objects fulfill needs. For instance, enjoyment of warmth depends on body temperature (Cabanac, 1969). Similarly, fasting can improve taste experience (Cabanac, 1979; Cabanac, 1992). Pleasure in food can indicate the presence of nutrients required by one’s body (Drewnoski 1995; Drewnoski et al. 1992; Bertino, Beauchamp, & Engelman, 1982). The more useful a nutrient is, the tastier it is.

If pleasure does generally signal need fulfillment, then fulfillment of psychological needs, as well as physical needs, should lead to increased pleasure.

Hypothesis 1: Taste evaluation will be higher for consumers who desire an identity the product supports.

Further, support for identity may be particularly relevant when one possesses it. If one does not feel athletic, eating an energy bar will not suffice to establish identity. However, if one feels an identity, consuming identity-relevant food may not only support the identity, but protect it.

Hypothesis 2: There will be an interaction between current identity and extent of identity desirability, such that taste is enhanced for those who see themselves as possessing the desired identity.

STUDY 1: IDENTITY DESIRABILITY AND TASTE EXPERIENCE

Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (N=62) were presented with a list of eight food brands, and rated their tastiness on 9-point Likert scales. They also rated how desirable they found the image tied with each food.

There was a significant effect of identity on taste evaluation in a mixed model with repeated measures, such that people who expressed stronger desire for the identity tied to the food evaluated it as tastier. The effect was significant at a <.0001 level: F(1,60)=336.27.

STUDY 2: TASTES LIKE BEING IN SHAPE

Study 2 was designed to provide evidence for H2. To examine this, we separated desired vs. current identity by measuring not just the desirability of an identity but belief about current identity. Participants (N=85) were asked to taste and evaluate powdered Gatorade, described as a sports drink consumed by athletes.

Participants rated the drink’s taste and quality on 9 point likert scales. They also rated how much they’d like to be perceived as part of the group of the drink’s consumers, and whether or not they perceive themselves as athletic.

We tested our hypotheses using a general linear model which included the effect of desire for identity, self-perception as an athletic person and the interaction between the two on taste. There was a significant effect of desire for an identity on taste, such that people who aspire more strongly to possess the identity of those who consume the drink experienced the drink as tastier: p=.01 level: F(1,84)=11.20, η²=.11.

In support of H2, we found an interaction between desire for identity and self-perception as an athletic person. Specifically, desire for identity was positively related to taste experience and drink quality evaluation only for those who perceive themselves as athletic: F(1,83)=8.32, p=.01, η²=.08 for taste experience, and F(1,83)=3.89, p=.05, η²=.04 for food quality evaluation.

STUDY 3: DARK AND SOPHISTICATED

Participants (N=166) in a large Northeastern University completed this for-credit study. Participants were randomly assigned into two conditions: one where the link between dark chocolate and sophistication was created, and one where it was not. They tasted and rated dark chocolate on a 9-point likert scale. They also rated their desire to be sophisticated and whether they currently see themselves as sophisticated.

Results indicated that participants rated chocolate as tastier the more they desired to appear sophisticated, with stronger results for those who consider themselves sophisticated (consistent with study 2). This only occurred for participants who were given an explanation about the link between dark chocolate and sophistication. In other words, there was a significant 3-way interaction between sophistication of dark chocolate, desire to appear sophisticated, and feeling like a sophisticated person (p<.05).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The more a person desires to be perceived as having a particular identity, the tastier he or they say products matching that identity are. In the same way that food would taste better when it fulfills nutritious...
needs, it would taste better when it fulfills psychological needs. More generally, subjective product (food) experience is improved when a product helps support a psychological need (desired identity).

The studies contribute to our understanding of the relation between identity and product choice. In general, these findings indicate a role for motivation in liking. When products fulfill a motivation, be it physical or psychological, their experience is improved. This research also contribute to our understanding of branding by stressing the importance of branding focusing on fulfilling a desired identity.

REFERENCES


