EXTENDED ABSTRACT - This study attempted to investigate what takes place when high versus low affect intensity subjects are presented with product descriptions that are either emotionally evocative and richly vivid, versus product descriptions that are dull and information-oriented. The vivid and emotionally evocative description was designed to activate a network of memories of pleasurable indulgence in consuming a product category that is generally considered to be a 'forbidden pleasure'-cookies and pizza.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study attempted to investigate what takes place when high versus low affect intensity subjects are presented with product descriptions that are either emotionally evocative and richly vivid, versus product descriptions that are dull and information-oriented. The vivid and emotionally evocative description was designed to activate a network of memories of pleasurable indulgence in consuming a product category that is generally considered to be a ‘forbidden pleasure’—cookies and pizza.

In their attempt to model the consumer’s encounter with the choices and decisions associated with ‘guilty pleasures’ such as the temptation of chocolate cake versus fruit salad, Shiv and Fedorikhin (2002) proposed and tested the Affective-Cognitive Model of stimulus-based affect. In contrast to the scenario that will be tested in this paper, Shiv and Fedorikhin’s model considered choice situations where affect and cognitions are derived from the choice object itself. The Affective-Cognitive Model proposes two routes through which affect and cognitions may influence the choice behavior of the consumer. In the “higher order” route choices are governed by more ‘consequence-based’ or cognitive related motives. In the “lower order” route choices are influenced by automatic and spontaneous affective processes. Because of the need to limit the scope of this study, only the lower order route will be addressed in this study.

According to the Affective-Cognitive Model, when an individual is confronted with a temptation like the sight of something enticing as chocolate cake, the lower order structures of the brain whose function is to scan the environment for emotionally relevant stimuli receive information (i.e., lower-order cognitions) associated with the chocolate cake. These cognitions (e.g., thoughts or memories of previous pleasant consumption pleasures) activate the release of lower order affective reactions (e.g., cravings and desires). The lower order affective reactions, in turn, are likely to influence action tendencies via the activation of basic appetitive goals (Wyer et al. 1999). This may most likely lead to choosing the chocolate cake rather than some other healthier alternative like a fruit salad (Shiv and Fedorikhin 2002, p. 345).

The current study expands on the processes predicted through the lower route by addressing the following considerations: (a) Sometimes lower order affective processes may be activated not by the visual presence of a choice object, but by various types of product descriptions which may set in motion a series of emotional responses. In this study, the type of product information presented to the consumer will be varied: Product attribute related information versus consumption related information. It is expected that the vividness of the descriptions depicted in the consumption focused descriptions will be more effective than the product attribute description in activating appetitive responses. (b) Instead of focusing on the choice or decision outcome as the dependent measure of interest, this study will focus on the affective, appetitive reactions that are activated through the lower order route—craving (Gendall et al. 1997), desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003), and the perceived ability to resist the eating temptation (Bagozzi, Moore and Leone 2004). (c) Because of the powerful nature of emotions such as desire and craving, it is possible that because people do differ in the characteristic strength with which they respond to emotional stimulation (Larsen 1984), the level of craving and desire expressed by participants in this experiment may differ as a function of the type of product information they may be exposed to.

Using the affect intensity construct as an individual difference measure, it was predicted that high affect intensity subjects will report higher levels of craving and desire only when the product description is vivid and emotionally evocative product description.

The study (N=225) featured a 2(Affect Intensity: High vs. Low) x 2(Product Description: Emotionally Evocative vs. Information Oriented) between subjects design.

Results showed that subjects who were high on the affect intensity measure expressed significantly higher levels of craving and desire for cookies and pizza only when exposed to a vivid emotionally evocative description of the product. High affect intensity subjects, compared to their low intensity counterparts, were more likely to express the feeling that they had lost almost all their resistance to the temptation of eating cookies and pizza after reading the product description.

The fascinating aspect of these findings is that the product descriptions presumably created a network of stored memories of consumption pleasures. Using the affect intensity construct as an individual difference measure, it was predicted that high affect intensity subjects will report higher levels of craving and desire only when the product description is vivid and emotionally evocative product description.

An important theoretical question is whether the product descriptions did, in fact, activate a network of cognitive operations which activated the affective responses of craving and desire. As far as is currently known, this is the first study to investigate whether high affect intensity subjects are capable of expressing emotions such as craving and desire in the context of yielding to an evocative description of enticing food.

REFERENCES


