Wanting a Bit(E) of Everything. The Role of Hunger in Variety Seeking

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Wanting a Bit(e) of Everything. The Role of Appetitive Desire in Variety Seeking. CAROLINE GOUKENS, K.U.Leuven SIEGFRIED DEWITTE, K.U.Leuven MARIO PANDELAERE, K.U.Leuven LUK WARLOP, K.U.Leuven abstract Two experiments and one field study investigate the importance of appetitive desire when making multiple consumption choices at once. In the first two studies, we show that an increase in the attractiveness of the object of desire, namely food, enhances variety seeking in the object of desire. Our results also provide theoretical insights on the effect of desire on choice rules. In a last study, we replicate these findings in a real-life setting and generalize them to other types of desire. The findings are situated in prior work on variety seeking and integrated into a discussion on the theoretical implications.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conceptualization
Most people prefer some variety in their activities, snacks, music, clothes, restaurants… In this article, we examined the effect of appetitive desires like hunger, thirst, and the desire for holidays on the tendency of individuals to seek diversity in the desired product classes like food, drinks, or holidays. Drawing on cognitive emotion theory (Lerner and Keltner 2000), we expected appetitive desire to facilitate variety seeking. By the reasoning that desire is an affective state that triggers changes in the attractiveness of the object of desire, we expected that desire makes it easier to divert from one’s favorites.

Experiments
In a first study, we examined how hunger influences variety seeking. We asked hungry versus satiated participants to choose five sandwiches from a set of eight for the coming week. Variety seeking was operationalized as the number of different sandwiches participants ordered. We found that hungry participants chose significantly more variety than satiated participants. Moreover, our results indicated that this effect was mediated by increased food attractiveness. In particular, consumers rated food items more positively when hungry, and, because more food items satisfied their needs, they opted for a more varied choice set. Further analyses revealed that in comparison with satiated participants, hungry participants chose more in proportion to their food ratings and less for their favorite.

A follow-up study confirmed the crucial role of food attractiveness. In the second study, we also manipulated sandwich attractiveness by placing a plate of sandwiches in the laboratory. Previous research has shown that seeing a food stimulus has a positive effect on consumers’ food attractiveness (Lambert and Neal 1992). Here, however, instead of using fresh sandwiches, we displayed sandwiches that were about two days old. In a pilot study (n=63), we found that a plate of stale sandwiches as a food cue increased the sandwich attractiveness for low disgust sensitive people, and decreased it for high disgust sensitive people. The results corroborated the findings of study 1 regarding the facilitating effect of hunger on variety seeking. We also found that the presence of the stale sandwiches was able to block the hunger effect in high disgust sensitive people. So, hunger does not increase variety seeking when the presence of stale food blocks the increase in food attractiveness that typically follows a hunger state. We can conclude that an increase in food attractiveness is a necessary condition for hunger to influence variety seeking.

In a third study we tried to generalize the above-found effects to other types of “hunger”, namely thirst and desire to go on holiday. We found that consumers who are thirsty (at the exit of a fitness centre) or desirous to go on holidays (at a travel agency) prefer more variety in their drinks, respectively in their holiday activities, compared to consumers who are not particularly thirsty (at a travel agency) or not particularly desirous to go on holidays (at a fitness centre). Thus, desire appears to increase variety seeking, at least when the objects to choose from are relevant for the specific desire.

Major findings
In sum, the three studies reported in this article provide strong evidence that appetitive desire leads to more variety seeking in the desired object class, caused by an increase in the attractiveness of the object of desire. We propose that, because of this increase in the attractiveness, more items in the desired object class are considered as satisfying, which makes it less threatening to divert from the absolute favorites.

Our results strongly support the view that when consumers are in a non-neutral visceral state, in this case desires, they fail to correctly predict their future tastes (Loewenstein 1996). Several articles report that the current hedonic response provides a powerful anchor in predicting future tastes in the relative short term (Kahneman and Snell 1992; Read and van Leeuwen 1998). So, in predicting, consumers do not take sufficiently into account how much their tastes change over time (Kahneman and Snell 1992). Instead, they persist in weighing their current tastes heavily when predicting what they will want, even though these are poor or useless guides to future tastes (Loewenstein 1996).

All in all, our findings point to the power of appetitive desires. Although our findings suggest that desire has an unmistakable role in consumption decision making, previous studies have devoted little attention to the role of desire (but see Belk et al. 2003). Our studies provide evidence that, when trying to increase the attractiveness of a product, marketers do not only have to focus on the product features. One should be aware that marketers can often increase a product’s attractiveness via the desire of the consumer. Gibbs and Forehand (2003) recently found in their experiment that desire can be primed. Our results indicate that also ‘natural desire’ states, like hunger, thirst and desire to go on holiday, can offer a possible means to influence variety seeking tendencies.

References