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Mood Self Verification Relates to the Selection and Intake Frequency of Comfort Foods

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ABSTRACT Does a person's mood relate to the types of food eaten? This work suggests that the food people eat for "comfort" may have unknowingly been selected to verify their mood. Positive moods were robustly associated with the reported likelihood of consuming more nutritive foods while negative moods were robustly associated with the reported likelihood of consuming less nutritive foods. Weight loss strategies that generate negative moods for noncompliance may exacerbate weight problems by stimulating the overeating of less-nutritive comfort foods. Women and younger people seem particularly vulnerable to this process.

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Mood Self Verification Explains the Selection and Intake Frequency of Comfort Foods

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Comfort foods are those foods that provide a dimension of psychological comfort when they are consumed. These foods have often been associated with unintended weight gain (Ganley 1989; Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003). However, it is not known whether systematic associations exist between a person's mood (psychological state) and the selection and intake of different types of comfort foods. Awareness of any such biases could enable people to more knowingly make food choices that will benefit their health. Based on a self-verification framework, it is examined whether the foods that obese and non-obese individuals claim they eat for "comfort" may have unknowingly been selected to verify their mood.

In contrast to self-enhancement, which suggests people are psychologically motivated to increase their positive self regard, self-verification contends that people are psychologically motivated to confirm self-impressions for reasons of prediction and control (Geisler and Swann, 1999). For example, if a man has low-self esteem on a particular occasion, he may be more likely to seek, accept, and agree with negative feedback more so than positive feedback (Swann and Ely 1984; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler 1992). Similarly, bulimic individuals with poor body self concepts were more likely to self-verify by seeking an interest in negative feedback that corroborated their self concepts, thereby leading to an aggravation of bulimic symptoms (Joiner 1999). From this, it is not difficult to assume that it may be the case that bulimics use food to serve their conceptions of themselves, thus supporting the idea of mood self-verification. Indeed, negative emotions, which preceded binge eating, actually increased after the binge eating episode (Lynch, Everingham, Dubitzky, Hartman, and Kasser 2000). This suggests that people may use food as a means to confirm how they feel about themselves, rather than to improve their negative mood states.

In addition, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that individual characteristics, such as age and gender, may also influence mood. Research indicates that both women and younger people have a relatively greater intensity of negative affect than men and older people (Cheng 2004; Robins et al. 2002; Charles and Pasupathi 2003). Because women and younger people have been shown to have a greater intensity of negative affect (as compared to men and older people), they should tend to be more likely to consume less-nutritive comfort foods, which is consistent with an attempt to verify their relative stronger negative mood state intensity.¹

A content analysis of clinical eating records (diaries and interviews) of obese individuals, were combined with results of three focus groups to better understand the relationship between mood and the consumption of what individuals commonly refer to as "comfort foods." Based on self-reported commonly experienced moods and self-reported commonly eaten comfort foods, a phone survey of 1014 randomly selected North Americans was conducted to determine which foods were most likely to be consumed under

various mood states. Chi-square tests examined how one's selection of a comfort food varied across differences in mood, gender, age, and obesity. In the interview, participants were asked whether they would be likely to consume (yes or no) ten different comfort foods when experiencing each of ten specific moods.

Both positive and negative moods were associated with the reported likelihood of consuming comfort foods for both obese and non-obese individuals. Importantly, however, positive moods were robustly associated with the reported likelihood of more nutritive food consumption while negative moods were associated with the reported likelihood of less nutritive food consumption.² Females, in comparison to males, were more likely to report consuming comfort foods in negative mood states. Similar results were found when comparing younger adults to older adults, and when comparing normal weight adults with overweight adults.

This study provides an important first step in understanding the ecological correlation between mood states and reported comfort food consumption. While this study used self-assessment surveys and interviews as exploratory tools for research, self-assessment surveys and interviews are important in obtaining information about past behavior. Although laboratory tests would confirm the results of this study, they generally obtain information only for a single consumption experience. Further support for mood self-verification in comfort food consumption could come from research that measures mood *before* consumption and *after* consumption. A similarity of mood, in both pre- and post-consumption would provide additional evidence of mood self-verification, and it will also test for boundary conditions that define situations when this may or may not occur. Last, knowing what other factors (besides gender, age, and BMI) could influence mood could facilitate a better understanding of what types of interventions could be had to increase consumption of more nutritive foods. The resulting interventions would have implications for clinical settings (i.e., weight loss) and the consumer.

When selecting comfort foods, people appear to consume foods that match their mood. Weight loss strategies, which focus on negative emotions for compliance, may actually be responsible for the maintenance or even exaggeration of a person's weight. This research suggests that this is because when a person experiences negative mood states, they will attempt to verify these moods by eating less nutritive foods. In this way, a person can predict and control how they feel about themselves by matching their mood with the corresponding comfort food. Therefore, a vicious cycle, based on reinforcement of mood, may ensue.

As one is made to feel guilty (a negative emotion) about a particular failure to lose weight, they will eat less-nutritive food, which could increase their weight. Once their weight increases, they may feel even more negative emotion, which would correspond to further non-nutritive consumption of comfort foods. As is suggested by this research, women, younger people, and overweight people could be particularly vulnerable to this vicious cycle. This implies that these people should pay particular attention to their mood when searching for comfort food. In this way, instead of

¹Interestingly, the literature also suggests that while there may be differences in negative affect intensity for females and younger people compared to males and older people, these differences disappear for positive affect intensity (Cheng 2004).

²The "more nutritive" "less nutritive" distinction is one that has been commonly used in comfort food research (Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003)

the tendency for searching for a less nutritive comfort food when in a negative mood state, as suggested in this research, a more cognizant decision can be made about comfort food choice.

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