The Role of Quality-Of-Experience and Affect in Maladaptive Food Consumption

Luke Kachersky, Fordham University, USA
Sylvia Clark, St. John's University, USA

In the last several decades, Western cultures have benefited from an abundance of food. Yet this fortune has had unintended consequences. For one, eating often becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (i.e., to satisfy hunger). We propose that this maladaptive behavior occurs because eating is an efficient but not optimal solution to satisfying experiential and affective needs. In our first study, we show that low-quality experiences lead to greater food consumption. This increased food consumption positively influences affective states, but not to the same extent as does a high-quality experience, even without additional food consumption.

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A postal questionnaire was developed and which was similar to all informants. In the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to write a truth based story of a following topic: “Me as a responsible consumer”. They were asked to describe the events from childhood until the present day. In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about socio-demographic characteristics including age, gender, education and the nature of being a responsible consumer (the frequency of buying fair trade/organic products, participation in associations, boycotts).

The analysis was made at two levels. At the first level, the differences in the thematic structures of stories indicated how the responsible consumption appears mostly as a specific goal for the respondents. Each of these four goals included two main themes which were found through the content analysis. These goals vary particularly according to the motives, the level of commitment and the actualized responsible actions. The goals I nominated as follows: 1) Responsibility as a way to rational consumption 2) Responsibility as a way to healthiness 3) Responsibility as a way to save the nature 4) Being comprehensively responsible. These goals are not absolute in the sense that the same respondent can have more than just one goal. Moreover, the changes in goals over time became apparent in the stories. For example, the responsibility starts to have more meanings in respondent’s life and this lead adopting new goals and perhaps also new behavioral patterns.

At the second level of analysis, the plot structure of stories was used to identify whether there are differences in the developing paths. Through that I noticed that each story can be divided into three life stages: childhood, youth, and maturity. Three distinctive developing paths were nominated as follows: 1) From childhood landscape into eco-consumerism 2) Through teenage rebel into savior of earth 3) Through slowly changing into a critical consumer. This life stage separation allowed recognizing not the particular stage of life in which the identity as a responsible consumer started to develop but also the possible changes in time concerning the personal commitment and goals. For example, the changes in the subjective values and motives or in social environment seemed to have an influence on the process of growing into a responsible consumer.

The study indicates firstly the different positions of responsible consumption in respondent’s life. For example, for one the responsible consumption appears as a goal to be healthy while for another it appears as an intention to change the “bad capitalistic world”. For most of the respondents, the commitment appears as daily routines including such actions as recycling, giving donations, buying fair trade/organic products and boycotting unethical business. On the other hand, the goal of being comprehensively responsible indicates more radical form of responsibility (c.f. The Simple Living Movement). Secondly, the life stage division helped to recognize the special events and changes in timeline. This permitted again finding out the specific life period which was significant in terms of growing into a responsible consumer. Worth noting is also the changes in the level of personal commitment and goals which can lead someone to move from modest behavioral patters toward more extreme or vice versa.

References

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“Hungry? Why wait,” asks a popular advertisement for a candy bar. Perhaps more curious is the inverse, “Waiting? Why hunger?” In a recent survey, 47% of 16-24 year-olds and 40% of 35-44 year-olds reported that they had eaten because they had nothing better to do (BBC News, 2004). This is an important issue since such maladaptive behavior undermines long-term life satisfaction (Kushner and Foster 2000).

The accepted knowledge of consumer behavior positst that consumers exhaust resources in order to satisfy needs. In eating, consumers use up natural resources–animals and plants–to sustain themselves. Yet, as the BBC survey indicates, eating that is not motivated by sustenance is a common occurrence. So which need is satisfied in such consumption? In addition to sustenance needs, people have experiential needs to “keep consciousness in an organized state, focused on some activity that requires attention” (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 270). When people satisfy such needs with high-quality experiences, they also satisfy the ultimate goal of feeling good (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 1997). The present research proposes that people eat when they are deficient in QOE to improve their experiential and affective states.

There are other options besides eating to satisfy experiential needs; one could engage oneself in work or hobbies, for example. However, humans often use shortcuts to satisfy psychological needs. Eating both immediately engages attention and, as many studies have shown, provides a psychophysical response that improves one’s affective state (e.g. Christensen 2001, Van der Does 2001). While this sounds like a promising solution, studies have shown that consumers are happier when they are having high-quality experiences than when they are consuming (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 1999). As a result, the following relationships among quality-of-experience (QOE), eating, and affect are proposed:
Our first study was conducted with 34 participants recruited from introductory marketing classes at a large northeastern university. Students were offered extra course credit in exchange for their participation. Participants were first asked to work on a task in which they were given ten minutes to unscramble as many words as possible from a list of 75 scrambled five-letter words. A bag of 60 Skittles candies was placed on each participant’s desk, and they were free to partake. At the conclusion of this task, participants were asked to stop working and to place their bag of Skittles underneath their chairs. The number of Skittles eaten served as our measure of food consumption. They then completed a questionnaire measuring positive and negative affect (PANAS; Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988); perceived skill and challenge of the word task (Novak 1997; to measure QOE); the last time they ate, and liking for Skittles. Finally, at dismissal participants were told the true purpose of the study and given the option to have their data discarded. No participants chose this option.

Low QOE denotes a person of low-to-moderate skills whose skills are mismatched with the perceived challenge of the experience. High QOE means skills are high and commensurate with the challenge of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Participants’ responses to the perceived skill and perceived challenge scales were placed on a “map of everyday experience” (Csikszentmihalyi 2003), which is a Cartesian plane with axes defined for challenge and skill. The plane is divided into low-quality experiences (e.g., apathy) and high-quality experiences (e.g., arousal). The resulting classification matched the underlying construct. High QOE participants (N=14) saw themselves as skilled at the word task and perceived the task as offering a similarly high level of challenge (M_{skill}=4.71 vs. M_{challenge}=5.11, p=.32). Low QOE participants (N=20) saw themselves as less skilled, and overmatched by the challenge (M_{skill}=2.70 vs. M_{challenge}=3.77, p<.01). Across the QOE groups, participants did not differ in their liking for Skittles, the last time they ate, or the number of words they correctly solved (p’>.20).

In keeping with hypothesis 1, high QOE participants ate fewer Skittles than did low QOE participants (M_{high}=7.79 vs. M_{low}=17.65, p<.03). Further, consistent with hypothesis 2, high QOE participants felt more positive affect than low QOE participants (M_{high}=3.44 vs. M_{low}=2.82, p<.03). However, as predicted in hypothesis 3, as low QOE participants ate more Skittles, they also felt more positive affect (r=.55, p<.02), but the same was not true for high QOE participants (r=.25, p=.93).

Together, these results suggest that a deficiency in QOE can drive people to eat more (hypothesis 1), which improves one’s affective state (hypothesis 3), but not to the extent of a high-quality experience (hypothesis 2). This study represents a first step in explaining the causes and consequences of eating to satisfy experiential but not sustenance needs. Follow-up studies will explore ways in which consumers and marketers can cure this maladaptive behavior.

References

Mine Versus Ours: Does It Matter?
Bernadette Kamleitner, Queen Mary, University of London, UK
Anna Rabinovich, University of Exeter, UK

In particular when it comes to high-involvement acquisitions consumers often jointly buy and own objects such as cars, computers, and houses. Whereas there is extensive literature on how these joint decisions come about (e.g., Davis 1976; Su et al. 2008), there is paucity in research on how joint ownership affects consumer behavior after an acquisition has been made. The question of whether joint ownership leads to differences in consumer behavior has yet to be addressed. Theoretically there are three possibilities. First, there may be no behavioral differences between joint and individual owners as both cases involve factual ownership. For the most part existing consumer literature on ownership effects does not address the issue of different ownership modes (e.g., Beggan 1992; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991); possibly because no differences are to be expected.

Second, joint ownership may have a positive impact on consumer behavior. It has been argued that ownership creates a sense of responsibility for an object (e.g., Furby 1978) which instigates behaviors towards protecting and enhancing the owned object (e.g., Van Dyne and Pierce 2004). Joint ownership signifies that at least two consumers are entitled to use an object and can hence be held responsible for an object (e.g., Furby 1978) which instigates behaviors towards protecting and enhancing the owned object (e.g., Van Dyne and Pierce 2004).