Not all consumers respond to marketplace and product package cues in the same manner. Larger packages may prompt some consumers to eat more, while other consumers, restrained eaters who are more diet conscious, actually eat less (Scott et al. 2008). This paper explores how restrained and unrestrained eaters respond to their food environment. Specifically, we take an in-depth look at the role of cognitive processing as well as how the variety and assortment of healthy and unhealthy food choices impact the eating behaviors of restrained and unrestrained consumers.

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Thinking Makes Me Hungry: Differences in Restrained and Unrestrained Eating Behaviors in a Rich Food Environment

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Researchers are concerned with the over-consumption of food and its negative effects on society. This paper synthesizes research from the field of psychology in the area of dietary restraint with research on how marketplace and product cues influence overeating, particularly of unhealthy as compared to healthy foods. Using these two research streams as a platform, we examine the differences between how some consumers, those classified as restrained eaters, respond to consumption cues. Specifically, we propose that the cognitive demands of perpetual restraint may make diet conscious consumers more susceptible to some triggers to overeat and less susceptible to others. Understanding these differences has important public policy implications because food packaging and labeling may not have the intended effect for restrained eaters, resulting in more, rather than less, consumption for this group. In addition, understanding how the behaviors of restrained eaters differ may help nutrition advocates better educate these consumers.

The characteristics and behaviors of restrained and unrestrained eaters have been widely explored in the field of psychology over the past 40 years (Herman and Mack 1975; Herman and Polivy 1980; Heatherton, Striepe, and Wittenberg 1998). Restrained is the perpetual “cognitively mediated effort that an individual makes to combat the urge to eat and restrict food intake to control body weight” (Herman and Mack 1975). Restrained eaters constantly monitor and regulate the food they eat through “self-imposed dietary rules and restrictions” (Ward and Mann 2000, 755). However, this constant focus on food does not result in dietary perfection. In fact, the continuous attention and effort required to restrain ones’ eating behavior despite the plethora of temptations faced daily, often results in dietary lapses and overeating by this group (Herman and Mack 1975). By contrast, unrestrained eaters spend less time and cognitive effort focusing on food; they eat when they feel hungry or want the food and generally stop eating when they are full. This important distinction may make restrained eaters more likely to rely on product cues such as package size, specific product claims such as “low-fat” or “high fiber” or their own health beliefs such as the perceived healthfulness of one restaurant as compared to another to determine how much they should eat rather than their own body’s signal of satiety.

Research on the role of marketplace and product cues in consumption has increased our understanding of how package size (Scott et al. 2008), serving size (Rolls, Morris, and Roe 2002), serving dishes and utensils (Wansink and Cheney 2005) and product assortment and variety (Kahn and Wansink 2004) influence how much consumers eat. We have also learned more about the underlying factors that prompt eating behaviors. For example, Scott et al. (2008) explore the emotional response of restrained eaters to food. By prompting restrained eaters to consciously think about the food they would consume as nonfood objects, these researchers were able to reverse the consumption differences between restrained and unrestrained eaters (Scott et al. 2008).

Beyond their emotional response to food, restrained eaters are susceptible to dietary lapses whenever outside factors interfere with their ability to devote the cognitive attention required to restrict what they eat. Consumption differences have been attributed to the depleted cognitive (Ward & Mann 2000) or self-control (Baumeister 2002) resources restrained eaters possess due to their continuous efforts to regulate their behavior. One challenge restrained eaters face is the steady stream of daily activities that require their cognitive attention and self-control resources. Recent research shows how the act of continuous decision making during a shopping trip actually reduces both the accuracy and persistence consumers display in subsequent cognitive tasks (Vohs et al. 2008). Similarly, constant pursuit of specific eating goals by restrained eaters may deplete their self-control resources, leading to choices that conflict with their restraint goals.

A wide variety of cues in the marketplace may prompt similar differences in the amount of food restrained and unrestrained eaters consume. This research explores how the variety and assortment of foods may stimulate different consumption patterns. Research by Kahn and Wansink (2004) shows that increasing the variety and assortment increases consumption by enhancing the anticipated pleasure consumers expect to derive from eating more. Similar to the response of restrained versus unrestrained eaters to smaller package sizes (Scott et al. 2008), we expect restrained and unrestrained eaters to respond differently to an increased variety and assortment of food choices. We hypothesize that like the larger package sizes, restrained eaters will anticipate the danger increased variety and assortment present and exercise more vigilance in restraining their consumption. By contrast, we expect unrestrained eaters to follow the pattern Kahn and Wansink (2004) observed, eating more as variety and assortment increase. We also investigate how restrained eaters respond to variety and assortment changes when they are placed in a cognitively taxing situation. Lastly, this research explores how the addition of healthy choices to the variety and assortment of foods affects the consumption decisions of restrained eaters. Wilcox and his colleagues (2009) find that the mere presence of healthy choices among less healthy alternatives may actually increase indulgence. We hypothesize that while large assortments of unhealthy foods, such as sweets and snacks, prompt restrained eaters to concentrate on fighting the temptation placed before them, large assortments of foods they view as healthy choices, such as fruits and vegetables, will license restrained eaters to let their guard down resulting in increased consumption of both types of foods.

References


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In this presentation we discuss early findings that explore how restraint behaviors, cognitive processing and a rich food environment interact to affect consumption. This research adds to our understanding of how product and marketplace cues influence consumption for restrained and unrestrained eaters. In addition, we hope our research provides information to empower consumers to use their cognitive and behavioral resources to facilitate healthy food choices. As public policy officials work to combat the obesity epidemic, understanding the influences on food consumption will inform decision-makers as they implement remedies designed to reduce over-consumption and promote healthy lifestyles.

References

Motivated Bias in Affective Forecasting
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Affective forecasters exhibit an impact bias, overestimating the intensity and duration of their emotional reaction to future events. We suggest that forecasters make extreme forecasts to motivate themselves to produce desirable outcomes. In two studies, affective forecasts were more extreme when outcomes were more important, and when forecasters could influence an outcome than when it was determined but unknown. Subsequent studies found that the extremity of forecasts determined the amount of mental and physical effort forecasters expended to produce desirable outcomes. Errors in affective forecasting may thus not be solely cognitive in origin, but have a motivated component as well.

To Do with Others or to Have (or To Do Alone)? The Value of Experiences over Material Possessions Depends on the Involvement of Others
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How does money promote happiness? Recent studies have addressed this question. People may intentionally buy hedonic goods to increase their happiness (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). Spending money on others makes people happier than spending money on themselves (Dunn, Akinin, & Norton, 2008). Finally, spending money on experiences makes people happier than spending money on material objects (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). The present research focuses on the distinction between experiences and material possessions, and their relative effects on happiness.

There are a number of possible reasons why experiential purchases might make people happier than material purchases, but one that has received little attention is the social nature of many experiences. It may be that experiences bring people more happiness than material goods to the extent that others are involved in the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted the importance of consumption for satisfying desires for belongingness and connectedness, and recent research has verified that experiential purchases satisfy relatedness needs more