The Dove Effect: How the Normalization of Obesity Can Influence Food Consumption

Lily Lin, University of British Columbia, Canada
Brent McFerran, University of British Columbia, Canada

The current research examined the negative consequences of normalizing obesity. In two studies, we found that normalizing obesity lead to greater consumption of an unhealthy food item, resulted in the creation of meals with higher calories, and lowered one’s motivation to engage in a healthier lifestyle.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16002/volumes/v38/NA-38

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
message among the four mandatory messages imposed by the French government (INPES study, 2007). The hedonic food advertisement used was a real advertisement for McDonald’s showing the picture of a BigMac. To measure the implicit attitude towards the product, we developed a visuo-semantic priming protocol. In a task unrelated to the test, participants were instructed to determine as quickly as possible if character strings were real French words or not (lexical decision task). The test comprised a total of 96 sequences including 12 test sequences and 84 distractive sequences designed to prevent participants from understanding the real objective of the study. The 12 test sequences were constituted by the presentation of the Big Mac advertisement followed by the presentation of a real French word. The words used as semantic concepts targets were the following: health, nutrition, wellness, pleasure, taste, credibility, obesity, constraint, casual, guilt, weakness, confusion; they represented 6 positive concepts and 6 negative concepts. The Big Mac advertisement was presented alone in half of the trials and including the sanitary message in the other half.

Participants were then asked to fill in a questionnaire. Before answering they were presented the Big Mac picture with or without the sanitary message for 5 seconds. Participants answered questions about their attitudes towards the product (adapted from Voss, Spangenberg & Grohmann, 2003; Homer, 1990) and general questions, such as gender, age, weight and height, and when was their last meal. After finishing the questionnaire participants received a McDonald’s coupon as a thank-you gift for their participation in the study. They had the choice between two coupons for a McDonald dessert: a sundae (unhealthy option) or a bag of fruits (healthy option).

Results indicated no effects of the sanitary messages on the explicit attitudes towards the product, neither on the behavioural measure (choice of dessert). However, results of the lexical decision task demonstrated greater reaction times to process the negative concepts when the Big Mac advertisement was presented with a health message that when it was not. Thus, implicit measures showed that participants associated more easily negative concepts to the product when the advertisement was presented without the sanitary message than when it was presented with a health sanitary message. This result is consistent with our conceptualization.

The presence of the health message can automatically activate representations associated to a justification for the product consumption, leading to a less negative perception of the product. Thanks to implicit and explicit data collection protocols, our research shows that the presence of a health sanitary message on an advertisement for a hedonic product made it less negative. These results highlight an unconscious automatic process which could lead to the association of health messages to a justification for an indulgent behaviour, leading therefore to opposite effects than those expected. Further research should replicate these findings using other products and other health messages in order to design new ways to communicate obesity prevention messages.

References

The Dove Effect:
How the Normalization of Obesity Can Influence Food Consumption
Lily Lin, University of British Columbia, Canada
Brent McFerran, University of British Columbia, Canada

Extended Abstract
Several years ago, Dove introduced the “Real Beauty” campaign, which featured “real women with real curves” as the models in its advertisements. While one of the goals of this campaign was to counter the stigma often faced by overweight individuals, the campaign also set out to enhance women’s self-esteem by encouraging them to embrace their physical appearance. Although there is no question that finding ways to reduce the stigma many obese individuals face and promoting a healthy body-esteem are laudable and important
goals (e.g., Smeesters et al. 2010), it may be equally important to examine whether such campaigns and advertisements can influence people’s food consumption choices. For instance, if one is told that women who are overweight are “normal” or “real”, perhaps this reduces consumers’ motivation to eat healthy and lose weight. Given the problem of obesity, and how it is largely driven by food intake (Young and Nesle 2002), this is a relevant concern.

We examined this research question in two studies. In both studies, we manipulated perceptions about what a plus size and what an average size person looks like. We then investigated how viewing a single advertisement could influence people’s decisions during a food selection task, their attitudes toward healthy eating and weight loss, and their actual consumption behavior. While previous research had shown that exposures to certain figures in the media can impact consumers’ perceptions about their own appearances (Smeesters and Mandel 2006; Trampe et al. 2007), our research examined if “normalizing” larger body sizes would change consumers’ food choices. Furthermore, we examined whether the normalization of obesity would influence people’s selections of menu items and their motivation to pursue a healthier lifestyle.

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine how the normalization of obesity would influence people’s actual food consumption tendencies. The study was a one factor between-subjects design, where 49 participants were either assigned to a “plus size” or “normal” condition. Following past research (McFerran et al. 2010, Smeesters and Mandel 2006, and Trampe et al. 2007), only females were included in the study. In both conditions, participants were asked to view an advertisement for a new clothing store that had a photo of an obese female model posing in the center of the ad. While the model and ad copy were the same between conditions, the tag line that was shown with the model was different between the two groups. In the “plus size” condition, the tag line that appeared with the model was “For Plus-Size Women”. In the “normal” condition, the tag line that appeared with the model was “For Real Women”. Participants then completed a number of dummy measures related to the ad copy and brand, as well as studies unrelated to the present experiment that served to disguise the true purposes of the research. To measure how the exposure of the advertisement affected people’s consumption choices, ten chocolates were placed on the table where the participants were seated. Participants were told that the chocolates were left over from a previous study, and that they should feel free to eat as many of them as they wished. The number of chocolates consumed during the course of the study served as the behavioral measure. We found that participants in the “normal” condition consumed more chocolates by the end of the session than those in the “plus size” condition.

Study 2 was designed to replicate the effect from study 1 using a different measure containing several food choices as well as caloric information. The second purpose of the study was to increase the generalizability of the previous study by including both genders in our sample. The third purpose was to extend the previous results by measuring one’s motivation to engage in a healthier lifestyle, which would provide some process evidence for the effect. The participants were 95 Amazon.com users, and the study employed the identical design and manipulation for the “plus size” and “normal” conditions as the first study. After the participants viewed the advertisement for a few minutes, they were asked to create their ideal meal from a list of 15 food items. Pictures of the food and caloric counts of the items were shown, and participants could select as many or as few items as they wished. Participants also rated their current motivation to exercise more, lose weight, and eat a more healthy diet on 7-point Likert Scales. Results showed that the meals created by those in the “normal” condition contained significantly more calories in total than those in the “plus size” condition. Additionally, those in “normal” condition provided lower ratings on questions related to motivation to be in better shape, to get down to one’s desired weight, and to eat a more healthy diet. Importantly, in both studies, the participants’ own BMI did not have any mediating or moderating effects.

Two studies showed that while presenting obesity as “normal” or more socially acceptable may be intended to increase consumers’ feelings towards their own body image, in doing so consumers may have a reduced desire to make healthy lifestyle decisions. Our research dovetails with that of Christakis and Fowler (2007), who showed that obesity can spread through social networks, but provided little evidence for the mechanism. Perhaps if one’s social network is made up of a greater percentage of people who are obese, obesity would become increasingly “normal” to a given individual, and the stigma would be attenuated. While reducing the stigma of obesity is important, normalizing it may also have adverse public health effects.

References


