Distracted By the Man in the Mirror: Focusing Attention on the Outside Body Reduces Responsiveness to Internal Signals in Food Intake

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Paradoxically, western societies witness a simultaneous increase in the number of overweight individuals and in the emphasis on thinness and beauty ideals. We test the relationship between focusing on body appearance and compensation for food consumption and show that focusing on appearance hinders consumers in compensating for previous consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In Western societies, an increasing number of people is overweight or obese (WHO 2004). At the same time, media increasingly emphasize thinness ideals and outward appearance (Wiseman et al. 1992). In the current study, we test the relation between focusing on outside appearance and food consumption. More specifically, we hypothesize that focusing on the outside of the body impedes internal body cues to have an effect on food consumption.

A wealth of literature shows how internal cues, external cues and psychological states separately influence food intake (Wansink 2004), yet little is known on whether and how these cues and psychological states interact. Our study extends this work by examining consumers’ responsiveness to internal satiety cues in different psychological states. To do so we assess how capable consumers are of compensating for previous food intake rather than looking at an absolute amount of food intake at a single point in time. One of the psychological states that has been found to stimulate food intake is distraction. Whereas it has been repeatedly demonstrated that distraction increases food intake within the consumption episode (e.g. Bellisle, Dalix and Slama 2004), there is some recent evidence that the effects of distraction may go beyond the consumption episode in affecting subsequent consumption (Higgs and Woodward 2009). We build on this work and, drawing on self-objectification theory, propose that focusing on outward appearance is a distractor that hinders individuals in compensating for previous food intake.

Self-objectification has been defined as the process whereby individuals observe themselves from a third-person perspective and regard their body as an object instead of as a subject (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Appearance focus is a manifestation of self-objectification. Fredrickson et al. (1998) found that a state of self-objectification, had detrimental effects on task performance due to a limited availability of cognitive resources. Based on the same reasoning, self-objectification theory predicts that focusing on outward appearance reduces responsiveness to bodily cues. Initial evidence indeed shows that self-reported measures of self-objectification and responsiveness to bodily cues are negatively related (Daubenmier 2005). However, using self-report measures of these constructs seems problematic. In the current study we have therefore tested this prediction assessing actual consumption.

In a pilot study we tested and showed that exposure to a mirror induces in participants a focus on public observable parts of the body, but not on private parts of the body. Thus, the use of a mirror appears to be a good manipulation of an outward appearance focus. In an experiment we subsequently tested the effects of an outward appearance focus on consumers’ ability to compensate for the caloric content of previous food intake. Participants were served either a high caloric milkshake or a low caloric milkshake and were either seated in front of a mirror or not. In a second part of the experiment, participants evaluated neutral video fragments with a bowl of M&M’s placed next to their screens. At the end of the experiment, participants’ M&M consumption was assessed.

The effects of appearance focus and caloric content of the milkshake were assessed for the likelihood of M&M consumption and for the amount of M&M consumption. The results showed that the likelihood of starting to eat M&M’s was influenced by the caloric content of the milkshake: When participants had previously been served a high caloric milkshake, they were less likely to start consuming M&M’s. Interestingly, the effect that the caloric content of the milkshake had on the amount of consumption, was qualified by whether an appearance focus was induced in participants. Under control conditions, participants compensated for the caloric content of the milkshake by consuming fewer M&M’s when previously served a milkshake of high caloric content than when served a low caloric milkshake. However, when participants were induced to focus on their outward appearance, the effect of caloric content on M&M consumption was (marginally) significant in the opposite direction. That is, participants consumed more M&M’s when they had previously consumed a high caloric milkshake than a low caloric milkshake, indicating counterregulation rather than compensation of previous food intake.

The current study makes a number of contributions to the literature on cues affecting eating behavior. As our findings demonstrate that an appearance focus reduces the extent to which individuals are able to compensate for their previous intake, this indicates that the psychological state a consumer is in affects the influence of internal cues on consumption. This extends previous work that has looked mostly at how internal cues, external cues and psychological states separately affect food intake. The current findings provide insight into how a psychological state and internal physiological cues can jointly affect consumption. We have done so by looking at compensation for previous intake, rather than at absolute amounts of food intake. How well individuals are able to compensate for previous food intake under different psychological states, may also provide an understanding of when individuals are able to counteract the negative influences that a range of external cues and psychological states have on consumption levels (Wansink 2004). Finally, our findings suggest that future research may benefit from assessing both initiation of consumption and the amount of consumption, as our findings indicate that they may be affected by different processes.

This study has implications for consumers who regularly focus on their looks to monitor and regulate the potential harmful consequences of food consumption on body appearance. Our findings show that the effect may be counterproductive: Focusing on the outer body diminishes the power of internal satiety cues to regulate food consumption. This could result in a pattern where consumers overeat, gain weight and subsequently focus even more on their looks. On a broader level, the thinness and beauty ideals that are conveyed through commercials and other media may also foster an attentional focus on outward body appearance. These have the potential of negatively affecting healthy eating patterns as they may exert their effects within consumption contexts such as TV commercials, shopping malls or cinema’s.