We examine the effects of physical burden on food choices and consumption. We demonstrate that consumers choose and serve more unhealthy foods when carrying heavy burdens. We argue that this is because burden serves as a distraction which reduces attention to the choice process and illustrate this throughout four experiments.

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Pound Per Pound: Do Heavy Burdens Make Heavy People?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Excessive body weight has become an increasingly common problem, as an increasing number of the adult world population is overweight and even obese. Obesity is associated with a variety of health risks, contributing to many chronic diseases and disabilities. The increased incidence of weight-related diseases has also led to an overall rise in total health care costs for testing, management, and prevention of these conditions.

Mindless eating, driven by environmental cues that bias food consumption, is a major contributor to obesity. Such eating behavior is often determined not by conscious deliberation, but rather by unconscious influence of cues in consumers’ environments. In the current work, we investigate one possible understudied and ubiquitous environmental cue that might contribute to mindless eating. Specifically, we argue that carrying a heavy burden reduces consumers’ sensitivity to the type and amount of food they serve, and consequently leads to increased choice of less healthy foods as well as increased consumption. The influence of weight cues is highly relevant for actual consumption settings because consumers often face situations where they carry burdens while making food choices. For example, consumers may carry shopping bags while choosing foods at the mall or use plates and trays to serve foods. In a series of four studies, we provide evidence for the influence of the weight of carried bags (studies 1 and 2), trays (study 3), and plates (study 4) on food choices and consumption. All evidence is from actual food choice and consumption studies: two field studies, one at a mall food court (study 1) and one at a cafeteria (study 2) and two in a lab setting (studies 3–4).

More specifically, study 1 provides initial evidence for increased consumption of unhealthy, higher caloric foods given burden in a field setting. If burden indeed distracts people from the food decision making process, carrying a heavy load would lead people to choose more indulgent, unhealthy food. The findings demonstrate that the extent of burden is indeed associated with choice of higher caloric meals. Study 2 aims to provide converging evidence that consumers burdened by greater weight choose less healthy, more caloric foods in a field setting with actual food choices (in this case, a cafeteria). The results again support the idea that burdened participants choose less healthy foods. Next, study 3 aimed to demonstrate that greater burden leads to serving increased amounts of food and that this effect is likely to be enhanced when the food is liked more, which is indeed confirmed by the findings. Moreover, the analysis offers initial process evidence by showing that burdened participants did not pay as much attention to the food served, consequently not registering how much they served themselves. Study 4 replicates and extends the first three studies by first directly manipulating burden through another widely used serving dish – plates – and by offering formal process evidence on the mediating role of reduced attention under burden that leads to less healthy food choices.

From a theoretical perspective, our studies make contributions to several research streams. First, the studies contribute to research in mindless eating by documenting an important factor in the environment that can trigger increased choice of unhealthy foods as well as overall food consumption, focusing on the prevalent but neglected dimension of burden. In this they offer an easy intervention to improve choice healthiness. Second, the studies contribute to our understanding of the effects of physical burdens, extending our understanding of how heavy weight affects product judgment and choice by drawing attention away from the choice process. Third, the research contributes to literature on cognitive resources, by providing an initial demonstration that physical load (burden) can serve as a type of cognitive load in its effects on attention. Fourth, the studies offer a potential contribution to the literature on licensing and the justification of hedonic choice, in documenting that people holding heavier weights selectively increase their choice of favored indulgent foods, in effect using weight as a cover for serving themselves more of the foods they like.

The studies also have important implications for consumer welfare. Across many real world situations, consumers carry loads while choosing food. If these loads could lead to increased unhealthy choices and food consumption, consumers and businesses alike should be made aware that burden can lead to mindless eating, so that preventative measures can be taken. Controlling environmental cues such as the weight of the serving dish could be helpful in guiding consumers towards healthier choices in spite their mindless behavior. Also, consumers themselves often look for strategies to manage food choice situations. The current research may offer another method consumers could use. Specifically, consumers that self-serve food at home or at social events may opt to use lighter serving dishes as yet another strategy to optimize food choices. Educating consumers about the potential biases in their choices may also help reduce the impact of burden on choice. If one knows about the reduced attention to food choices and portions caused by burden, they can avoid making food choices when burdened, to an extent, in the same way as they can avoid shopping when hungry.