How Exposure to Romantic Stimuli Affects Consumer Preference For Sweet Food

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Drawing from research on food consumption and assimilation and contrast, we examine how exposure to romance stimuli (e.g., a romantic ad) affects consumer preference for sweet foods. Romantic exposure increases choices of sweet foods among romantically uninvolved consumers but results in more choices of less-sweet foods among romantically involved consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Americans consume an astounding amount of sugar and a staggering variety of sweet foods, gulping down the equivalent of 22.2 teaspoons (or 355 calories) of sugars per day. Given the precipitous growth of sweet indulgence and its redoubtable social and health consequences, it is crucial to understand when consumers are likely to fall prey to or sustain the temptation of sweet foods. Unlike previous research, which has focused mostly on food consumption in general rather than the unique contributors of the consumption of foods featuring primarily one of the basic tastes, this article examines how exposure to romantic stimuli (e.g., watching a romantic ad), an activity seemingly unrelated to food consumption, influences consumers’ subsequent sweet food decisions between sweet and less-sweet options. Drawing from conceptual metaphor research (Landau, Meier, and Keefer 2010) and work on assimilation and contrast effect (Martin 1986), we predict that romantic stimuli exposure may increase or decrease consumers’ likelihood of choosing sweeter food options, dependent on their romantic status (romantically involved or uninvolved).

Our main thesis that exposure to romantic stimuli may influence consumers’ subsequent sweet food decisions is derived from research on conceptual metaphor, which argues that people sometimes resort to metaphorical thinking and recruit knowledge from a seemingly unrelated category to help them comprehend and decipher certain abstract and complex social phenomena (e.g., love, justice, power; Lakoff and Johnson 1989; Landau et al. 2010). Consider the metaphorical expression that is at the core our thesis—love is sweet: people’s knowledge about the target category (the gustatory state of taste), which is more concrete and closer to one’s mundane life, transfers and affects their perceptions and understanding of the more elusive, abstract target category (love).

Ample research on conceptual metaphor has demonstrated the mundane target category (e.g., perceptual states) and the elusive social phenomenon in a conceptual metaphor can influence each other, casting important implications for judgment formation and decision making (Landau et al. 2010). Moreover, researchers have suggested semantic activation as a possible mechanism (Zhang and Li 2012). For example, to explain why consumers holding heavy objects judge the subject they are contemplating more important, Zhang and Li (2012) posit that perceptual systems (holding a heavy shopping bag) activate corresponding semantic concepts in the associate network (heavy, weight), which influence their judgments of the importance of the subject (an elusive social concept) through the metaphorical connection between weight and importance.

Though these insights suggest that exposure to romantic stimuli activates the concept of sweetness, which in turn makes consumers more likely to choose sweeter food options, work on assimilation and contrast predicts that the reverse can also be possible. According to the set/reset model of assimilation and contrast (Martin 1986; 1990), assimilation effect prevails when irrelevant contextual influence is incorporated into the judgments of the target while contrast effect occurs when people engage in an over-correction process to remove reactions produced by non-target, contextual stimuli from their target judgments. In this over-correction process, referred to as “resetting,” consumers inhibit the formation of an inappropriate reaction of the target and instead seek out an appropriate reaction (Martin 2009). Importantly, researchers find that this resetting process is not necessarily conscious (Martin 2009) and that obliviousness to the non-target, contextual influence produces an assimilation effect while awareness of the contextual source engenders a contrast effect (Forehand and Perkins 2005).

Exposure to romantic stimuli is likely to render the semantic concept of sweetness accessible among both romantically involved and uninvolved consumers. However, because the romantic stimuli elicit romantic experiences of various social distances between romantically involved and uninvolved consumers (Liberman and Trope 1998), consumers are likely to exhibit different levels of awareness of the source of their experienced sweetness. On the one hand, exposing romantically involved consumers to romantic stimuli is likely to bring their own romantic experiences to the forefront of their attention. These romantic experiences are idiosyncratic and relatively concrete, and thus consumers are more likely to become cognizant of the source of their psychological sweetness and the sweetness they experience is more specific (i.e., psychological). On the other hand, though exposing romantically uninvolved consumers to romantic stimuli also activates sweetness, this psychological sweetness is based on other people’s romantic experiences and thus is more generic and abstract. Thus, consumers are more likely to be oblivious to the source of their sweetness and the sweetness they experience is more generic. Consequently, after exposure to romantic stimuli, romantically involved (vs. uninvolved) consumers are more likely to become cognizant of the source of psychological sweetness.

Because of a more specific and concrete understanding of their experienced sweetness after exposure to romantic stimuli, romantically involved consumers are more likely to inhibit the use of psychological sweetness engendered by the romantic stimuli when they make sweet consumption decisions, resulting in a reset process. Accordingly, these romantically involved consumers should be less likely to choose sweet foods after exposure to romantic stimuli (contrast effect). Conversely, romantically uninvolved consumers are more likely to remain oblivious to the source of sweetness and thus their sweetness perceptions more ambiguous and these consumers are more likely to incorporate sweetness activated by the romantic stimuli when making subsequent food decisions. Hence, romantically uninvolved consumers should be more likely to choose sweet foods after romantic ad exposure (assimilation effect).

Three experiments supported our theorizing that exposure to romantic stimuli makes romantically uninvolved consumers more likely to choose sweeter foods while renders romantically involved consumers more likely to choose less-sweet foods. Our findings are robust as we used various manipulations of romantic stimuli exposure (watching romantic vs. non-romantic ads, reading romantic vs. non-romantic stories, etc.) and different operationalizations of sweet food decisions (choice of sweet vs. less sweet foods; the amount of actual sweet consumption). The findings contribute to the food consumption literature by examining predictors of food consumption involving one specific taste (sweet) and also contribute to the conceptual metaphor literature by further investigating the mechanism and direction of conceptual metaphor on decision making (conceptual metaphors can produce either an assimilation or a contrast effect on decision making).
REFERENCES