Blaming Mcdonald’S: Anthropomorphized Temptation, Failed Self-Control, and Support For Paternalistic Intervention

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When facing self-control failure, anthropomorphizing a tempting object (e.g., fast food) increases one’s delegation of responsibility for self-control failure to the object itself and its manufacturer (e.g., fast-food companies). Subsequently, anthropomorphism increases support for paternalistic interventions that impose regulations on the object (e.g., fast-food ban in schools).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Temptation is a challenge for most people. Dieters get enticed by sugary cookies, students get tempted by TV shows when studying for exams, and smokers get seduced by the smell of a cigarette when trying to quit smoking. When facing self-control failures, one starts searching for a target to blame, and assesses whether the self or something else in the environment should be accountable for the failure (Heatherton and Nichols 1994). For example, do children fail to lose weight because they do not exercise enough, or because their school cafeteria is filled with junk foods?

Where people attribute responsibility for self-control failures has important implications for what strategies they use to prevent such failures in the future (Polivy and Herman 2002). If one holds the food industry responsible for causing obesity, for example, one will be more likely to support regulations on the industry’s practices to reduce obesity. Those regulations often take the form of paternalistic interventions—policies and campaigns that change (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) or restrict the environment (Jonson, Lindorff, and McGuire 2012) to assist individual self-control—such as putting health warnings on tobacco products and restricting fast foods in schools. Despite potential benefits, one of the biggest hurdles for the implementation of paternalistic interventions is the public’s lack of support, because interventions are often perceived to infringe upon personal autonomy and freedom (Felsen, Castelo, and Reiner 2013). It is thus of interest to examine factors that influence the endorsement of interventions.

The current research examines anthropomorphism—ascription of humanlike traits to a non-human agent—as one such factor that shifts the way people attribute responsibility for self-control failures, and thereby affects the extent to which people support paternalistic interventions to prevent such failures in the future. We propose that anthropomorphizing a tempting object (e.g., putting faces on food products) will increase delegation of responsibility to the object itself (e.g., fast food) and its manufacturer (e.g., fast-food companies). Anthropomorphizing a temptation creates the perception of another agent imbued with capability and intentionality and this agentic “presence” can lead people to delegate more responsibility to it for the outcomes of self-control. When people believe that a tempting object is responsible for causing self-control failure, they will also be more likely to hold the manufacturer that produces it accountable (Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocero 2013). It follows that people will also be more likely to believe that regulating the object and its manufacturer is an effective strategy to prevent self-control failure in the future (e.g., fast-food ban in schools). That is, anthropomorphizing a tempting object will increase one’s support for paternalistic interventions that impose regulations on it to prevent failure future.

Study 1 tested whether anthropomorphizing a tempting object would increase the delegation of responsibility for individuals’ self-control failures to the object’s manufacturer. We recruited only dieters, and presented them with potential weight gain as self-control failure. We used a high-calorie cookie as a tempting object, and as a manipulation of anthropomorphism, we applied a human-like (vs. round) shape to the cookie, provided it with a human name (“Jamie” vs. no human name), and described it in the first person (I vs. It). Participants then imagined a scenario whereby they gained weight after adding the cookie to their regular diet, and indicated the extent to which they attribute responsibility for the weight gain to the object’s manufacturer (delegation of responsibility) and to themselves (self-accountability). As predicted, anthropomorphism increased delegation of responsibility to the tempting object’s manufacturer but decreased self-accountability.

Study 2 extended the effect of anthropomorphism from the individual to societal levels (childhood obesity). Participants were presented with a poster for a health campaign in which the tempting object (i.e., fast food) was either anthropomorphized or not, and reported to what extent they held the object responsible for childhood obesity. As a manipulation of anthropomorphism, the poster contained pictures of fast foods that had human-like features (eyes and eyebrows vs. no such features) and the following tagline describing the fast foods in the first person [vs. objective]: “Do you blame us [these]?” As predicted, anthropomorphism increased the delegation of responsibility for causing childhood obesity to fast foods.

When people hold a tempting object responsible for self-control failure, they will be more likely to believe that regulating it is an effective strategy to prevent self-control failure in the future. Accordingly, Study 3 examined whether anthropomorphizing the tempting object increases one’s support for paternalistic interventions that impose regulations on the object. We used the same materials and anthropomorphism manipulation as in Study 2, and measured the extent to which fast foods and their manufacturers should be regulated in a paternalistic manner with three items (e.g., “How strongly do you feel that fast food sales to children should be regulated by the government?”). As predicted, anthropomorphism increased participants’ support of regulating fast foods and their manufacturers.

Lastly, Study 4 was designed to provide a more rigorous test on one’s support for paternalistic regulations of a tempting object. Participants view the same poster on childhood obesity from Studies 2 and 3. They then read about two non-profit organizations that promoted either paternalistic regulation of the object (“Safe Lunch”; emphasizing the need for regulating the sales of fast foods in school cafeterias) or personal effort in self-control (“Youth Run”; emphasizing the role of exercise and the need for developing running programs for children), and chose one to which they were willing to donate their money and time. Participants also evaluated the perceived effectiveness of each organization’s approach. As predicted, anthropomorphism increased perceived effectiveness of Safe Lunch’s approach, which in turn increased the likelihood of supporting Safe Lunch over Youth Run.

In sum, the findings provide novel insights into the attribution of responsibility for self-control failures through the lens of anthropomorphism. When facing self-control failure, anthropomorphizing a tempting object increases one’s delegation of responsibility for self-control failure to the object itself and its manufacturer. Subsequently, anthropomorphism increases the perceived effectiveness of paternalistic intervention as a strategy to prevent future failure, which further motivates people to support it.

REFERENCES


