Counterhedonic Food Consumption: How Eating “Yucky But Healthy” Food Promotes Marketplace Morality
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We theorize the consumption of “yucky, but healthy” food is driven by a novel counterhedonic eating drive that complements the basic homeostatic and hedonic pathways. Across four studies, we demonstrate that counterhedonic food consumption can influence consumers’ post-consumption morality, leading to heightened moral self-regard that translates into marketplace morality.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With rising awareness of widespread obesity and food-related health concerns, there has been an increase in the consumption of “yucky, but healthy” foods. This category of food includes items like cod liver oil, wheatgrass, kale, and Marmite, but also foods like edible worms, ants, crickets and grasshoppers. Since the consumption of these “yucky, but healthy” foods cannot be adequately explained by the fundamental homeostatic (to maintain one’s energy balance) or hedonic (reward-based) eating pathways (Lutter & Nestler, 2009), we herein posit that this category of food consumption is driven by a counterhedonic pathway that complements the homeostatic and hedonic pathways already established in food consumption theory. To be categorized as “counterhedonic”, a food has to be “yucky, but healthy” - i.e. the food has to be unpleasant in taste/texture/flavor and generate an offensive oral experience that leads to feelings of disgust during the consumption process, while delivering significant health benefits (for example, edible worms, wheatgrass juice, etc.).

We further theorize that since counterhedonic food consumption entails one’s ability to withstand disgusting food in order to gain its health benefits, the retrospective evaluation of this consumption leads consumers to experience heightened moral self-regard post-consumption that translates into marketplace morality. Moral self-regard is considered as a reflective view of oneself or a moment-to-moment self-concept that answer to the question “How moral am I?” (Monin & Jordan, 2009). Drawing on opponent process theory (Solomon, 1980) and the retrospective rosy view theories (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001), we theorize that the primary a process for counterhedonic food consumption is aroused at the time of consumption by the sensory properties of unappetizing foods, which elicits feelings of disgust or oral offensiveness. Such an affective state, however, is short-lived and terminates when the stimulus is removed (when food consumption is completed). Shortly after, the opponent loop b process is activated by self-reflection or self-evaluation wherein overcoming the bad taste and eating something good for one’s own health is considered positive, virtuous and morally good.

Since the desire for a positive moral self-regard motivates people to engage in prosocial actions (Schaumberg & Wiltemuch, 2014), and moral affective experiences serve as the energy that drive people to do good and avoid doing bad (Kroll & Egan, 2004), we further argue that the positive moral self-regard post-consumption would orient consumers to a greater good (Keltner, 2016) and can translate to enhanced marketplace morality (Kirmani, 2015; Loureiro et al., 2016).

This research aims to make three theoretical contributions. First, we propose a novel food consumption pathway – the counterhedonic pathway – to complement and expand upon the already established homeostatic and hedonic food consumption pathways. Second, we identify a novel downstream consequence of counterhedonic food consumption – the feeling of positive moral self-regard which in turn orients consumers to a greater good and promotes prosocial behavior and marketplace morality. Third, this work lends further support to the notion that food consumption can serve as an antecedent to marketplace morality - when we eat well (physical consumption), we can also feel virtuous and do good (impact on our psychological states).

We present a set of four studies to support our theorizing (Figure 1). In study 1, we provide evidence to support our main hypothesis that counterhedonic consumption leads to greater marketplace morality. As predicted, participants perceive counterhedonic food (wheatgrass juice, M_counterhedonic = 4.12) as to be significantly more disgusting (disgusting, unpleasant, revolting, tasty (reverse coded), 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .89) than baseline homeostatic food (purified water; M_homeostatic = 1.99; F(1, 115) = 73.14, p < .05). However, participants in the counterhedonic condition showed heightened post-consumption morality: they were willing to donate more money to charity (M = $13.28) compared to participants in the homeostatic condition (M = $8.63; F(1, 115) = 4.85, p < .05).

Study 2 compares the counterhedonic food pathway with the higher order hedonic food pathway and provides initial support for the underlying mechanism. Results show that even counterhedonic food (Marmite spread; M_counterhedonic = 4.70) was considered significantly more disgusting than hedonic food (chocolate spread; M_hedonic = 1.97; F(1, 84) = 62.70, p < .05). Participants in the counterhedonic condition felt significantly heightened moral self-regard compared to participants in the hedonic condition (M_counterhedonic = 3.50, M_hedonic = 2.82; F(1, 84) = 5.00, p < .05). In terms of marketplace morality (helping experimenter pick up pencils), participants in the counterhedonic condition felt more likely to help the experimenter than those in the hedonic condition (63% vs. 41%; χ²(1) = 4.05, p < .05), and they also picked up more pencils (M_counterhedonic = 6.39, M_hedonic = 3.38; F(1, 84) = 7.28, p < .05). Mediation analysis indicates significant mediation by post-consumption moral self-regard on consumption type and marketplace morality (95% CI = [.0168, .5441).

Studies 3 and 4 examine the parameters of counterhedonic consumption as well as identify boundary conditions for the effect. Specifically, study 3 shows that changing the costliness of the initial behavior by modifying a counterhedonic food (original edible worms) to look and sound tastier (chocolate covered worms) diminishes both the post-consumption moral self-regard (M_original = 4.01, M_chocolate = 3.13; F(1, 153) = 10.53, p < .05) and marketplace morality (time to volunteer for a charitable event; M_original = 10.53 hours, M_chocolate = 7.28 hours; F(1, 153) = 7.38, p < .05). Study 4 replicates and builds upon the findings of study 3 by illustrating that modifying the counterhedonic food to make it more hedonic or by concealing the health benefits of the food similarly diminish moral self-regard and decrease marketplace morality.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that counterhedonic food consumption is uniquely characterized by the sensory feeling of core disgust during the consumption of a food that delivers significant health benefits. Post-consumption, these feelings of disgust are replaced by positive moral self-regard, which orients consumers to a greater good and can translate to enhanced marketplace morality.

REFERENCES


