Choosing Unhealthy to Appear Warm: How Consumers Signal Personality Traits Via Food Choice
Marija Grishin, University of Kansas, USA
Jessica Yexin Li, University of Kansas, USA
Jenny G. Olson, Indiana University, USA
Surendra N. Singh, University of Kansas, USA

We test the novel proposition that impression management goals within warmth and competence have differential effects on consumers’ food choice. Results reveal observer effects, where unhealthy food choice increases perceptions of the chooser’s warmth, and actor effects, where motivation to appear warm significantly increases the likelihood of choosing unhealthy foods.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024943/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Choosing Unhealthy to Appear Warm: How Consumers Signal Personality Traits via Food Choice

Marija Grishin, University of Kansas, USA
Yexin Jessica Li, University of Kansas, USA
Jenny G. Olson, University of Kansas, USA
Surendra N. Singh, University of Kansas, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Food consumption is an inherently social activity, as most of our meals are consumed in the presence of at least one other person (Redd and de Castro 1992). Because food choices are often observed by dining partners, consumers can (and often do) modify their eating behavior in order to create a particular impression (Vartanian 2015). Drawing upon previous research on food choice, the stereotype content model, and social cognition, we examine the role of impression management on food choice in social contexts.

Our social interactions are heavily influenced by the need to signal warmth and/or competence as the two fundamental dimensions of social cognition (Fiske et al. 1999, 2002). Warmth typically includes evaluations of kindness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness (Aaker et al. 2010), while competence includes perceptions of effectiveness, power, and skillfulness (Hoegg and Lewis 2011). Warmth and competence are central to social judgments as they “account almost entirely for how people characterize others” (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007, 78).

We propose that consumers associate different types of food with traits that fall along the fundamental dimensions of warmth and competence. Many food associations are developed as a result of the social context in which the food was consumed and are likely learned from an early age. For instance, unhealthy foods like waffles, eggs and bacon are strongly associated with family, sharing and happiness (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004). In contrast, rules about delaying dessert till after a more nutritious meal has been consumed or forcing children to eat vegetables result in healthy foods being associated with discipline and restraint (Cooke et al. 2011; Lupton 1994). Because of the inherent link between unhealthy (healthy) food and warmth (competence), we hypothesize that consumers are more likely to consume unhealthy (healthy) food when they are motivated to convey warmth (competence). We also propose that consumers’ tendency to choose unhealthy (healthy) food is driven by warmth and competence-related associations of the food such that consumers motivated to appear warm (competent) are more likely to choose food positioned with warmth (competence) traits, regardless of food type.

As an initial test of our hypothesis, we administered a field survey (N=219) at a local restaurant. Patrons who were dining with at least one other person were approached by servers at the end of their meal and asked to fill out a survey indicating their purpose of visit (business or casual), and the perceived healthiness of their meal. Results revealed that participants dining with friends or family rated their meals as significantly less healthy than participants who came in for business meetings. To further examine the casual relationship between impression management goals and food choice, we conducted three experiments.

Our first experiment (N=206) tests the hypothesis that consumers will be more likely to choose unhealthy (healthy) food when they are motivated to appear warm (competent). We also included a control condition with no impression goal to measure default consumption preferences. The experiment had a 3 (Impression Goal: Warmth vs. Competence vs. Control) x 2 (Food Type: Healthy, Unhealthy) mixed-model design with food type as a within-subjects factor.

We informed participants that they have been assigned to convey a specific impression (warmth or competence) to another person. As a measure of our main dependent variable, we told participants to imagine going to lunch with the other person and asked them to indicate their likelihood of choosing a healthy or unhealthy meal. The results revealed a significant interaction between impression goal and food choice. Participants motivated to appear warm (competent) were more likely to order an unhealthy (healthy) than healthy (unhealthy) meal. There were no significant differences in likelihood of choosing healthy or unhealthy food among participants in the control condition.

Experiment 2 (N=92) was designed to further test our predictions in an incentive-compatible choice task. Participants were asked to select products that they believe convey either warmth or competence and would get to keep the products if successful at conveying the impression. The experiment was a two-cell (Impression Goal: Warmth vs. Competence) between-subjects design. Participants chose one of two snacks (M&Ms’s—unhealthy choice, and Raisins—healthy choice). Results revealed that participants motivated to convey warmth were more likely to choose the unhealthy snack than participants who were motivated to convey competence.

In experiment 3 (N=150), we test food stereotypes as the underlying mechanism of the effect of impression management on food choice. The experiment had a 2 (Impression Goal: Warmth vs. Competence) x 2 (Food Description: Consistent, Inconsistent) x 2 (Food Type: Healthy, Unhealthy) mixed-model design with Food Type serving as a within-subjects factor.

Participants were told to imagine that they recently moved into a new town and “would like to find a job” (competence condition) or “would like to make friends” (warmth condition) and that they and their potential employer (friend) are going to a new restaurant. Participants were presented with two meals—healthy and unhealthy. The two meals included a “chef’s note” which in the consistent condition matched the food type; i.e. the healthy food had competence-related description, and the unhealthy food had warmth-related description. In the inconsistent condition, the descriptions were reversed. Participants were asked to indicate their likelihood of choosing each dish.

The results revealed a significant interaction between impression goal, food description and food type. Results in the consistent description condition replicated previous findings such that participants motivated to appear warm (competent) were more likely to order an unhealthy (healthy) than healthy (unhealthy) meal. However, in the inconsistent food description condition, participants motivated to appear warm (competent) were less likely to order an unhealthy (healthy) than healthy (unhealthy) meal.

This research demonstrated that the two fundamental dimensions of social cognition influence our food choices such that that motivation to appear warm (competent) significantly increases the likelihood of choosing unhealthy (healthy) foods. Moreover, we demonstrate that food healthiness is used as an impression management tactic because of the inherent associations between unhealthy (healthy) food and warmth (competence). Finally, our results show that unhealthy choices can be inhibited by positioning unhealthy food as possessing competence-related associations.
REFERENCES: