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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Few areas of consumer behavior rival the importance of eating. Americans spend over \$750 billion each year for food, nearly 15 percent of total expenditures (U.S. Department of Commerce 2001). Moreover, eating in most cultures is strongly associated with morality in that most religions have normative beliefs about what to eat, when to eat, and how much to eat. The historical connection between morality and eating has received renewed attention recently (Rozin 1999), perhaps because of growing health problems associated with over-eating. Over the past few decades, obesity has increased dramatically in developed countries such as the U.S. contributing to a variety of negative health conditions (Must et al. 1999). Some have referred to this trend as an obesity epidemic, and have warned that strategies for weight control need to receive a greater public health priority (Mokdad et al. 1999).

This paper measures eating guilt and tests a model of its antecedents and consequences using structural equations. The model test serves both to assess the validity of the scale and to provide substantive insights regarding the role of guilt in consumer behavior. Despite extensive research into the role of guilt in eating disorders, guilt about food has not been widely studied relative to food consumption in a healthy population.

The Concept of Guilt

Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) define consumer guilt "as an emotional state involving penitence, remorse, self-blame, and self-punishment experienced after committing a violation or contemplating a future violation of internalized standards of proper behavior." Thus, guilt can occur because one did something which violated one's standards (guilt by commission) or because one failed to do something consistent with one's standards (guilt by omission). In addition, central to the concept of guilt is the idea of alleviating guilt via making reparations for one's transgressions. Guilt inducing messages can be effectively used to motivate consumers to make reparations for their transgressions by consuming certain products.

Measuring Eating Guilt

Statements designed as guilt indicators were generated from the literature by the authors. A pool of 40 such items was reviewed by a panel of marketing doctoral students and reduced to 13 based on ambiguity and redundancy. A sample of 267 student respondents was asked to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement on 6-point scales where 1=strongly disagree and 6=strongly agree (sample item: I often feel guilty about overeating at meals). Using these data, the 13-item scale was reduced to six items based on exploratory factor analysis and evaluation of Cronbach's alpha. The exploratory factor analysis resulted in a two-factor solution that explained over 74% of the variance in the data. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .85. This appropriateness of this two-factor scale for eating guilt was then confirmed via confirmatory factor analysis. Consistent with theoretical conceptualizations, scale items reflect guilt by omission (not doing what one feels one *should* do) and guilt by commission (doing what one *should not* do). Respondents in the main study which tested a structural model involving eating guilt were 79 male and 87 female students at a large Midwestern university.

Tests of Relationships in the model

The model hypothesized eating guilt as a central mediating variable. Hypothesized antecedents of eating guilt were concern for appearance and concern for healthy food. Consequences of guilt were making reparations, the physical appearance component of self esteem and preoccupation with health. An explicitly affective component of guilt based on a modified version of the Harder and Lewis (1987) Personal Feelings Questionnaire was used to measure eating guilt-evoked feelings.

Tests of the model indicate factorial invariance between males and females in the measurement of latent variables. That is, the measurement items load similarly on the latent variables for males and females. Also, all scales to measure the independent and dependent variables showed a factor structure consistent with theory and acceptable levels of coefficient alpha. Cronbach's alpha for the eating guilt scale was .85.

Consistent with theory, guilt leads both males and females to make reparations (i.e., by exercising or eating less at the next meal). Guilt also seems to lead both men and women to a preoccupation with health. The negative feelings associated with guilt strongly mediate the effect of guilt on self-esteem for both males and females. That is, guilt as measured by statements incorporating both cognitive evaluations and feelings had no direct effect on physical appearance self-esteem. One plausible interpretation of the mediating role of these strong negative feelings is that people also have very strong feelings about their physical appearance. Once the strongest feelings surrounding guilt have been accounted for, the less affective component of guilt has little effect on self-esteem.

Interesting gender differences also emerged in this study. Women were more apt than men to feel guilty if they were concerned with their appearance, and men tended to feel more eating guilt if they were more concerned with healthy food.

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