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Sneaky Small Sins Flying Under the Radar: Package Sizes and Consumption Self-Regulation

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Contrary to the general belief that consumers are better able to self-regulate their consumption when tempting products are presented in small package sizes, we found that larger package sizes can be better self-regulatory tools. We propose that large package sizes, compared to small package sizes, are more likely to activate a conflict between indulging in temptation versus self-regulatory goals, which prompt efforts to exert self-control. As hypothesized, the offer of tempting products in large package sizes, compared with small package sizes, reduced the likelihood of consumers with high self-regulatory concerns initiating consumption and led to lower total quantities consumed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Products are increasingly offered in various package sizes, in particular single serving-sizes, and these single serving sizes are becoming smaller. For example, *Kraft Foods Inc.*, in 2003, started putting a cap on the portion size of single serve-packages as a social measure to help consumers fight obesity (<http://www.kraft.com/newsroom/07012003.html>, 20/10/2003). Also *McDonalds*, in 2004, as part of its initiative “Eat Smart, Be Active”, downsized the super-sized portions to cater to consumers’ growing preference for healthier foods. Also, various products such as Häagen-Dazs and Ben and Jerry’s ice-cream, and Pringles and Lays chips are now being offered in small, single-serve packages. Moreover, growing numbers of multi-packs with individually-wrapped single-serve portions are being offered, such as chips (Potato Heads, Ruffles), cookies (Filipinos, LU) and candy (KitKat, Toblerone, Twix).

These developments rest on the assumption that when products, especially tempting products as the ones mentioned, are offered in these small packages, consumers are better able to exert self-regulation by restraining the total quantity consumed. This view is consistent with findings that small packages are perceived to be helpful in exerting self-control (Wansink and Park 2000), with consumers often even paying premiums for them (Werthebroch 1998). For example, cigarettes are in many countries sold in a 10 cigarettes-pack instead of the more traditional 20 cigarettes-pack, with consumers paying higher unit costs with the 10 units pack than the 20 unit pack—a premium to presumably keep control over the “daily amount”. The question that arises then is to what extent the offer of tempting products bundled in these smaller package sizes indeed contributes to consumers’ better self-regulatory ability.

In the present research we propose that the presentation of tempting products in these small single-serving sizes (the small “sins”) may have, contrary to what is intended, a negative effect on consumers’ self-regulatory ability. In order for self-regulatory behavior to occur, consumers need to perceive the current consumption act as a self-control conflict in which attraction to a temptation hinders the pursuit of an overarching goal (Fishbach and Shah 2006). If behaviors do not produce a self-regulatory conflict, consumers will not activate self-regulatory strategies that could restrain the tempting consumption, thereby actually falling into temptation.

The apparent tendency of consumers to believe that smaller quantities of tempting products are “acceptable” and to consider small single-serving packages as helpful self-regulatory tools can contribute to a higher likelihood of consumption than if products were offered in quantities considered to be “unacceptable”, which could instigate consumption restraint. Therefore, we propose that large package sizes may actually be better self-regulatory facilitators than small single-serving packages, because they are more likely to activate a self-control conflict and preventive control strategies to deal with it. In this way, small single-serving package sizes can lead to the perverse effect of increasing rather than reducing likelihood of consumption, and thus possibly to the long-term negative effects that they intended to prevent.

The present research examines this phenomenon, in the context of different package formats for tempting products that usually imply eating regulation (e.g., chips, chocolates, and candies). Packaging characteristics may influence usage behavior long after

it has influenced purchase (Wansink 1996) with previous research showing that stockpiling increases the consumption quantity (Chandon and Wansink 2002), that consumers tend to consume more of a product when they perceive the unitary costs to be lower (Wansink 1996), that product elongation influences product perceived capacity (Raghubir and Krishna 1999; Wansink and Ittersum 2003), and that the perceived supply of the product raises the quantity that is consumed (Folkes, Martin and Gupta 1993). However, we are not aware of research analyzing whether, independent of the supply, package size influences consumption and, more specifically, consumers’ self-regulatory ability.

Study 1 ($n=59$; 2 (package formats: large, small) \times 2 (reasons to choose, reasons not to choose) \times 2 (self-regulatory concerns: high, low) within-subjects design) analyzes the type of beliefs and predictions that consumers have regarding the consumption of tempting products in different package formats. We assess consumers’ beliefs with respect to offering products in different package sizes, asking them to list reasons that could lead to choosing and not choosing tempting products in different package sizes. Results indicate that small package sizes tend to be considered self-regulatory facilitators, especially by those that have high self-regulatory concerns, while larger packages are perceived to be self-regulatory threats.

In study 2 ($n=140$; 2 (package sizes: small vs. large) \times 2 (self-regulatory concerns: control vs. activated) between-subjects design) we assess the influence of offering tempting products in different package sizes on real consumption behavior. Using behavioral measures of consumption while consumers supposedly participated in an “ads evaluation study”, we tested to what extent larger as compared to smaller packages indeed lead to higher ability to exert self-control, analyzing the likelihood of opening packages and actual consumption behaviors. Findings suggest that large package sizes, compared to small package sizes, are more likely to activate a conflict between indulging in short-term temptation versus long-term self-regulation, which prompts efforts to exert self-control. Results indicate that compared with smaller packages, large packages contribute to better self-regulation reducing the likelihood of initiating consumption and leading to lower total quantities consumed.

In sum, findings from the two experimental studies provide support for the idea that although smaller packages are the ones more often chosen for self-regulatory purposes and indicated as self-regulatory facilitators, large packages actually contribute to better self-regulation. This demonstrates that, contrary to common belief, offering products in small package sizes may reduce self-control ability. This sneaky “small sin” effect contributes to consumption misregulation, and it reveals that in the case of self-regulation, small is not better since it flies under the consumers’ radar.

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