I Am How Much I Eat: How Self-Monitoring Influences Food Consumption Across Genders

Brian Wansink, Cornell University, USA
Kevin Knifflin, Cornell University, USA
Collin Payne, New Mexico State University, USA
Junyong Kim, Purdue University Calumet, USA
Se-Bum Park, KAIST Business School, Korea

Curious findings from a study of dating couples at a movie theatre indicated that women monitored how much popcorn they ate and ate less, but men monitored what they ate and ate more. Two follow-up lab studies show why this happens and the funny consequences, for dating and for diets.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009591/volumes/v39/NA-39

[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/.
mented the pervasive tendency of emotions to carry over from one situation to another, coloring behavior in unrelated tasks (for reviews, see Forgas 1995; Isen 1993; Keltner and Lerner 2010; Loewenstein and Lerner 2003; Schwarz 2000). In the domain of consumption, emotions have been shown to influence in-store shopping (Woodruffe 1997) and in-home food choice (Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003). With the nation increasingly concerned with overeating and obesity, understanding how incidental affect influences food intake along with its mediators and moderators is an important topic.

One of the most curious carryover examples of emotion effects involves sadness and consumption. Its effects depart from what one would predict based on emotional valence. The standard prediction of a valence-based model would be that any negative emotion, including sadness, should trigger generalized negative valuation. That is, a negative state should lead one to perceive the world in negative ways. While disgust fits that predicted pattern, sadness does not. Sadness actually triggers positive valuation of new products, as measured by willingness to pay (Lerner et al. 2004).

Additionally, this carryover effect drives consumption behavior across diverse domains such as consumption and willingness to pay. In the domain of eating, for example, sadness (relative to happiness) leads to increased consumption of tasty, fattening food products, such as buttered popcorn and M&M candies (Garg, Wansink, and Inman 2007). Sadness’ effect on consumption can be understood by examining its core relational theme of loss and helplessness (Lazarus, 1991) which might trigger implicit goals of reward replacement (Raghunathan and Pham 1999) and changing one’s circumstances (Lerner et al. 2004). Notably, sadness is associated not with simple loss (e.g., loss of a replaceable possession) but rather with a sense of irrevocable loss (e.g., loss of a loved one). Recent research has argued that it is this combination of loss and helplessness associated with sadness that leads to compensatory tendencies (Garg and Lerner 2011).

In the present research, we hypothesize that given these underlying themes of loss and helplessness associated with sadness (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure 1989; Lazarus 1991), sadness’ effect on consumption can be attenuated by increasing decision makers’ sense of individual control and decreasing their sense of helplessness. We focus on helplessness because it connects to the issue of control, which has proven important in guiding emotion effects, based on past investigations using the appraisal tendency framework (Garg et al. 2005; Lerner & Keltner 2000), and because it is part of sadness’ core relational theme (Lazarus 1991). In the process, we replicate and extend the existing research in the sadness-consumption domain. Specifically, we conduct a series of three studies to examine whether offering a choice of a product can attenuate sadness’ influence on consumption of hedonic food (in grams) and whether the focus of decision making (for self or for others) matters in the choice context. Further, we explore the role of self-awareness in the sadness-consumption relationship. Prior research (Cryder, Lerner, Gross, and Dahl 2008) has found self-focus to be a mediator of sadness’ effect on willingness to pay where the more self-focused a sad individual was, the more he/she was willing to pay for an object. On the other hand, existing research also shows that self-awareness reduces intake of fatty food products (Sentyrz and Bushman 1998). These alternative views regarding the moderating effect of self-awareness on sadness’ effect are tested.

Study 1 examines whether explicit choice of a hedonic (vs. a non-hedonic) good attenuates sadness’ effect on hedonic food consumption. We expect that a choice will be more powerful than simple endowment because it will afford some semblance of control to individuals and might therefore alleviate the helplessness associated with sadness. To test this hypothesis, we compare participants endowed with a hedonic gift to those who are specifically asked to choose between a hedonic gift and a non-hedonic one. A 3 (emotion: sad, happy, neutral) x 2 (choice of a gift, no-choice) between-subjects design was implemented to test the hypotheses of the study. Results find that only when sad individuals are afforded an opportunity to make a choice, does it succeed in overriding the effect on consumption (> 50% drop in amount consumed). Also as predicted, neutral and happy individuals display no drop in consumption and are similar across choice versus no-choice conditions.

Study 2 has a twofold purpose: to validate our findings from Study 1 by replicating the results and, more importantly, to clarify whether the locus of choice - for self or others – influence its efficacy in attenuating sadness’ effect. Study 2 used a 2 (emotion: sad, happy) x 3 (choice for self, choice for others, no-choice) between-subjects design to examine this question. Results reveal that the effect of sadness is attenuated only when choice affects self.

The final study aims to examine whether self-awareness moderates sadness’ effect. Prior research has found that participants in the high self-awareness condition (where they could see themselves in a mirror) curtail their consumption of fatty food products (Sentyrz and Bushman 1998). However, existing research also shows that sadness increases self-focus and this increased self-focus increases individuals’ willingness to pay more to acquire a new object (Cryder et al. 2008). We argue that while self-awareness will attenuate consumption for individuals in other emotion conditions (e.g., neutral), it will actually amplify consumption for sad individuals. Study 3 will test this hypothesis with a 3 (emotion: sad, happy, neutral) x 2 (self-awareness: low, high) between-subjects design.

The empirical examination is well underway. Studies 1 and 2 are complete and Study 3 will be fielded in the spring of 2011. Overall, the current research aims to provide critical insight into the theoretical moderators and mediators underlying the sadness-consumption relationship. This will have important implications for the strategies employed to attenuate emotion effects and for improving our understanding of managing unbidden consumption and its negative consequences.

I am How Much I Eat:
How Self-Monitoring Influences Food Consumption Across Genders

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

What causes us to attenuate or extenuate our consumption of food when we are with others? Past studies have identified multiple factors such as the number of companions (De Castro 1990, 1994), the attractiveness of these companions (Mori, Chaiken, & Pliner 1987), and even the serving sizes we are given (Wansink 1996; Werdenbrock 1998). Although these studies have studied each of these factors in isolation, their findings suggest that there may be systematic interactions between these factors.

This research investigates how gender-specific self-perceptions influence how closely one monitors what they eat when on a date, and how this subsequently influences how much of a food they choose to consume. Although past work has indicated that females perceive it more feminine to constrain their consumption, there is little corresponding consumption-related evidence as to what males perceive as masculine.

We often act in ways that we hope others perceive as socially desirable. This impression management motivation can cause us to monitor and modify the amount of food we eat in public, particularly in dating situations. In this research, we present a field study in a...
movie theatre and two lab studies that examines whether both men and women eat in accordance with what they think is appropriate for their gender. In general, it will be examined whether increased self-monitoring in social settings differentially affects the way males and females react to larger serving size because of the differences in social norms that they perceive to be applied to them. It also influences perceptions of other males/females who ate more/less than average. Heavy male eaters were seen by males as being more masculine (being able to bench press more weight and so on), but were seen much less attractive to females.

Situational cues, such as package size, have been shown to have a powerful and unknowing influence on consumption. Interestingly, females on dates tend to exhibit a high level of self-monitoring, and render these cues as ineffective. However, males’ eating behaviors are associated with their self-images to a lesser degree. The eating behavior of males, however, is associated with their self-image to a lesser degree. While more males described themselves as hearty eaters than females (Study 2), neither their self-representation strategy (Study 1), nor others’ evaluation of them (Study 3) were significantly influenced by food intake. As the result, food consumption volume by males is not surprisingly more susceptible to the effect of serving size.