



The social image of food: Associations between popularity and eating behavior



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 August 2016

Received in revised form

13 March 2017

Accepted 27 March 2017

Available online 28 March 2017

Keywords:

Snacking

Fruit and vegetable intake

Social norms

Social image

Identification

ABSTRACT

One factor that determines what we eat and why we eat is our social environment. In the present research, two online studies examined the relationship between food intake and social images. Specifically, the present research assessed the relationship between the food intake university students ascribed to peers who varied in popularity and own self-reported food intake, and whether this relationship was moderated by identification with the peer group. Participants ($N = 97$ in Study 1; $N = 402$ in Study 2) were randomly presented with one of four (Study 1) or two of eight (Study 2) vignettes describing a popular or unpopular student (male or female) from their university without receiving any information about the peer's eating behavior. Subsequently, healthy and unhealthy eating ascribed to the peers and own self-reported eating behavior were assessed. Results indicated that popular peers were perceived to eat more healthily than unpopular peers. Moreover, eating behavior ascribed to popular peers were associated with own healthy and unhealthy eating. Importantly, the relationship between healthy eating behavior ascribed to popular peers and own healthy eating behavior was moderated by identification with the student group – the more participants identified with their peers, the more their own eating was aligned with the healthy eating ascribed to a popular peer. Hence, the popularity of others seems to shape perceptions of the food they eat and may facilitate healthy eating via social influence.

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1. Introduction

Food consumption in contemporary western society is more than just providing the body with energy. Studies have identified a whole range of motivations for eating, showing that not only hunger, but also factors like the social environment play an important role in food choice. Several social motives that influence eating behavior have been identified, e.g. sociability, social norms, and social images (Renner, Sproesser, Strohbach, & Schupp, 2012). These social cues provide a guide on what and how much to eat is correct or acceptable in certain situations (Higgs & Thomas, 2016). The current study explores whether the popularity of peers moderates the influence social motives have on eating behavior.

During childhood and early adolescence, parents act as

nutritional gatekeepers (Wansink, 2006) by determining a substantial amount their children's food intake, from being breast- or bottle-fed, to adopting an adult diet (Savage, Fisher, & Birch, 2007). This process invariably shapes children's food preferences (Pliner & Stallberg-White, 2000); however, influences from other sources within the proximal social environment (e.g. friends and classmates) increase as children and adolescents grow older and become more independent. Peer groups are especially influential regarding snacks (Feunekes, de Graaf, Meyboom, & van Staveren, 1998) and fast food (Ali, Amialchuk, & Heiland, 2011) as they are consumed outside of the family home. As young adults who move away from home and transition to university build new social connections and become responsible for their daily food supply and intake for the first time, they may seek guidance outside of their parents (Deliens, Clarys, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Deforche, 2014) as well as being encouraged to conform to the social environment (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000; see also LaCaille, Dauner, Krambeer, and Pedersen (2011) for a qualitative study). Recent studies confirm this notion, showing college students' eating behavior to be

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associated with both their families' and their friends' food consumption patterns in different food choice contexts, such as purchasing, preparing, and consuming fruits and vegetables (Graham, Pelletier, Neumark-Sztainer, Lust, & Laska, 2013; Pelletier, Graham, & Laska, 2014). Thus, family, friends, and peers all influence eating behavior by setting eating-related rules and norms that convey which behaviors are appropriate and/or expected of members of their social group (Lien, Lytle, & Klepp, 2001; Pliner & Stallberg-White, 2000).

1.1. Using social influences to change eating behavior

Alongside cross-sectional and field studies, which have established that the proximal social environment influences eating behavior, health behavior models like the Theory of Planned Behavior indicate the effect of social influences, like subjective norms (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). Reviews summarizing results on predicting dietary behavior using the TPB show moderate correlations between subjective norms and behavioral intention across the lifespan (McDermott et al., 2015; McEachan, Conner, Taylor, & Lawton, 2011). Moreover, experimental studies have shown that eating-related norms can be used to influence eating behavior, e.g. to increase fruit and vegetable intake (Stok, de Ridder, de Vet, & de Wit, 2014; Stok, de Vet, de Ridder, & de Wit, 2012; Stok et al., 2015) or reduce high calorie snack (Robinson, Harris, Thomas, Aveyard, & Higgs, 2013) and soft drink consumption (Stok et al., 2015) in adolescents and young adults. Recent meta-analyses and reviews consistently report medium effects of social norm interventions on eating behavior (Robinson, 2015; Robinson, Thomas, Aveyard, & Higgs, 2014; Stok, de Vet, de Ridder, & de Wit, 2016), and these findings corroborate the results of meta-analyses investigating the correlation between social norms and behavioral intention in the Theory of Planned Behavior (e.g. McDermott et al., 2015; Rivas & Sheeran, 2003). These effects are usually tested by providing information about the peer group's behavior (descriptive norm) or approval of a behavior (injunctive norm).

1.2. Who is influential?

Besides leveraging social norms in experimental studies and health behavior interventions, social norms are used in food advertisements. Celebrities, athletes, and cartoon characters usually appear in TV commercials, printed advertisements, and food packaging promoting unhealthy products (e.g. de Droog, Valkenburg, & Buijzen, 2010; Harris, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2010; Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Kelly et al., 2010; Pringle & Binet, 2005), thus communicating social norms, roles, and images alongside product information (Pollay & Mittal, 1993). As many unhealthy food products are advertised by popular public persons who may be used as role models (Martin & Bush, 2000), the question arises whether being successful and popular is generally associated with an unhealthy diet due to associations shaped by advertising. On the other hand, most celebrities and athletes are thin and fit, thus their popularity might also be associated with a healthy lifestyle. Either way, people may emulate the displayed behavior in the hope of assuming the associated social attributes (Higgs, 2015; Hogg & Banister, 2001). Similar influences might also become evident in the increasing number of popular food bloggers and youth displaying their food choices online on photo-sharing services like Instagram, further shaping associations between food consumption and social appeal (Holmberg, Chaplin, Hillman, & Berg, 2016).

Research has examined the association between descriptions of social appeal and eating behavior by providing participants with a description of a person's eating habits and a subsequent

questionnaire on personality traits including items assessing the prototype's social standing. However, such studies have so far reported mixed results on the relationship between described food preferences or food intake and perceived social appeal: While healthy eaters are perceived as being more intelligent, dutiful, and moral, they are also perceived as being less sociable and friendly (for a review, see Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007). Oakes and Slotterback (2004) compared personality ratings for eaters of two types of breakfast, a healthy oatmeal and an unhealthy pie. Adult oatmeal eaters generally are ascribed more positive attributes, e.g. being more successful, attractive, and popular, while adult pie eaters are seen as, amongst other things, more undisciplined, selfish, lazy, and overindulgent.

While a range of studies have investigated expectations about personality or popularity based on eating styles, few explore expectations about a person's diet based on a description of their popularity. In a field study asking school children to indicate the most popular and unpopular children in their class and their eating behavior, Giese, Juhász, Schupp, and Renner (2013) found that popular children were perceived to eat more healthily than their unpopular classmates. However, it remains open whether these findings can be generalized to other populations or broader referent groups, e.g. all school aged children, as it requires inferring a peer's behavior using perceived norms rather than observed behavior (Robinson, 2015).

1.3. Who is influenced? The role of identification with the referent group

Besides the relationship between popularity and perceived healthier food choices, Giese et al. (2013) reported an association between the intake of unhealthy foods ascribed to the popular peer and own food preferences and intake. While this study did not account for personal moderators of this relationship, the literature suggests that identification with the referent group (e.g. the school class or school children in general) might moderate whether one is prone to being influenced by a certain social group. As summarized in a recent review, identification with the referent group moderates the relationship between descriptive social norms and food intake: Adolescents and young adults who identify with the given referent group are more likely to adapt their behavior to that of the referent group (Stok et al., 2016). Moreover, people may be more willing to behave according to a group's rules and norms when a perceived connection to the same social group exists, (Ajzen, 1991; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Turner, 1991). Which behavior is exhibited may therefore depend on the salient social identity as the identity highlights the norms that might be most important to oneself in the current social setting (Higgs & Thomas, 2016). Adolescents and young adults might be more prone to social influences than older adults because they are still forming their identities and want to fit in with the peer group to create social connections (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Stok, de Ridder, Adriaanse, & de Wit, 2010).

1.4. Present research

Extending the literature, the current research aimed to investigate the relationship between the popularity of a peer, the food consumption ascribed to the peer, and own eating behavior in university students. In line with previous studies on the relationship between eating behavior and social appeal (e.g. Gerrits, de Ridder, de Wit, & Kuijer, 2009), peers in the context of the present research are defined as people in the same living context (i.e. university students) without assuming a personal relationship.

In Study 1, we first investigated whether vignettes describing a

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