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Combining food type(s) and food quantity choice in a new food choice paradigm based on vice-virtue bundles

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ABSTRACT

Given the prevalence and rising rates of obesity in many countries, including the United States, much food decision-making research ultimately aims at understanding how consumers can make healthier choices. The two predominant choice paradigms used in food decision-making research ask consumers to choose (a) between a “vice” (or unhealthy food) and a “virtue” (or healthy food) or (b) among varying portion sizes of “vice.” We propose a new food choice paradigm that encourages consumers to jointly consider both food type(s) choice and food portion size at each decision point. The purpose of this paradigm is two-fold. First, it aims to allow examination of more comprehensive eating behavior (e.g., to examine the overall composition of a plate of food rather than choice of a single food). Second, it aims to shift consumers towards including large proportions of virtues and smaller proportions of vice in their overall consumption portfolios. For this paradigm, we draw upon a recently introduced food product innovation called “vice-virtue bundles” (Liu et al., 2015) that illustrates the basis of this new food choice paradigm, in which food type(s) and portion decisions are made simultaneously. Accordingly, we first discuss relevant findings on vice-virtue bundles as well as the differences between simultaneous and sequential choice of multiple products. Second, we examine the benefits for managing and controlling one’s consumption that are provided by vice-virtue bundles and this joint food choice paradigm more generally. Third and finally, we point out opportunities for future research by discussing (a) multiple factors that influence food choices, (b) decision processes affected by food choice paradigms, and (c) issues of generalizability related to the presence of vice-virtue bundles.

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Two different food choice paradigms are widely popular in research aimed at understanding how consumers develop or maintain a healthy diet. Both of these existing choice paradigms appear to highlight possible tradeoffs between health and taste in food choice. The first choice paradigm consists of asking consumers to choose between a “healthy” option (e.g., fruit, salad) and an “unhealthy” option (e.g., cake, fries) (e.g., [Bannon & Schwartz, 2006](#); [Gal & Liu, 2011](#); [Laran, 2010a](#); [Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999](#)). This choice paradigm has long been popular and is important because a healthier diet is indeed one that consists primarily of “healthy” options and contains relatively few “unhealthy” options. The second choice paradigm consists of asking consumers to choose from a choice array consisting of various small, medium,

and large food portions—typically of “unhealthy” or “vice” foods ([Cornil & Chandon, 2015](#); [Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2012](#); [Haws & Winterich, 2013](#); [Sharpe, Staelin, & Huber, 2008](#)). Relatedly, some prior research focuses on food consumption quantity, which is similar to size choice, although susceptible to “mindless eating” factors ([Wansink, 2006](#)). This vice portion size choice paradigm has garnered increased attention as growing portion sizes of energy-dense foods are often blamed as one of the major culprits in overweight and obesity trends in the United States ([Nielsen & Popkin, 2003](#); [Raynor, 2014](#); [Young & Nestle, 2002](#)).

In this paper, however, we suggest an important third food choice paradigm that prompts consumers to simultaneously consider food type (healthy vs. unhealthy) and portion sizes, given that these decisions together influence ultimate outcomes with respect to weight and overall health. In doing so, we discuss a recently introduced product concept (“vice-virtue bundles”; [Liu, Haws, Lambertson, Campbell, & Fitzsimons, 2015](#)) that is illustrative of this choice paradigm. Specifically, this third choice paradigm

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consists of asking consumers to select from a choice array consisting of options varying in their relative proportions of “unhealthy” and “healthy” food, holding the overall portion size constant (see [Table 1](#) for examples of each choice paradigm). Here, we first review [Liu et al. \(2015\)](#)’s findings on vice-virtue bundles as well as other relevant research related to simultaneous (choosing multiple foods at one time) versus sequential (choosing one food at a time) choice and quantity decisions. Second, we discuss the benefits derived by consumers, in terms of more balanced and healthier consumption, from the joint consideration of food type(s) and food quantities, specifically using choice among vice-virtue bundles to illustrate. Third and finally, we propose opportunities for future research on this joint food choice paradigm by discussing (a) various food decision factors that may shape consumers’ choices among vice-virtue bundles, (b) important decision making processes that apply particularly to the vice-virtue bundle context, and (c) issues related to the generalizability of prior findings based on consumer characteristics and contextual factors. As such, we recommend ways in which consumers, researchers, marketers, food industry managers, and public policy makers might derive benefits from considering and using this new food choice paradigm

combining choice of food(s) and portion size selection.

1. The joint decision paradigm of vice-virtue bundles

In comparison to the two primary existing food choice paradigms mentioned earlier, a food choice paradigm that promotes joint consideration of types and quantities of foods may provide unique benefits in terms of food decision-making patterns. Prior research regarding the simultaneous choice of multiple items from a single category (e.g., food) shows that simultaneous choice (e.g., choosing all of one’s yogurt flavors for the week) and sequential consumption (eating the yogurts one per day for the week) leads to greater variety seeking than the more typical choice-consumption-choice-consumption sequence, in which people tend to prefer their favorite flavor of yogurt ([Simonson, 1990](#)). Relatedly, research has compared “cluster hiring” (in which multiple people are hired during the same decision process) versus a more typical “individual hiring” process and found that “cluster hiring” promotes greater racial diversity in the overall portfolio of hires ([Brooks & Purdie-Vaughns, 2007](#)). This research generally suggests that simultaneous choice of multiple items (be it flavors of yogurt or employees)

Table 1
Different food choice paradigms.

Choice paradigms	Examples
Food type choice: healthy vs. unhealthy option	 
Portion size choice: different portion size options	 
Combining food type and portion size choice: vice-virtue bundles	 

Note: The images for the food type choice example are adapted from [Shiv and Fedorikhin \(1999\)](#) and [McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, and Morales \(2010a\)](#). The images for the portion size choice examples are adapted from [Cornil and Chandon \(2015\)](#) and [Haws and Winterich \(2013\)](#). The images for the combining food type and portion size choice example are from [Liu et al. \(2015\)](#).

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