



Research report

Activating health goals reduces (increases) hedonic evaluation of food brands for people who harbor highly positive (negative) affect toward them[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Associations of pleasure and fun with junk foods have the potential to create considerable challenges for efforts to improve diets. The aim of this research was to determine whether activating health goals had the potential to exploit mixed motivations (i.e., health and pleasure) that people have related to food, and subsequently strip junk foods of the expected pleasure derived from them. In study 1, 98 participants evaluated a soft drink brand after being primed (not primed) for health. In study 2, 93 participants evaluated a presweetened breakfast cereal brand after being primed (not primed) for health. In both studies, participants who harbored highly positive feelings for the food brands devalued their hedonic judgments of them when they were primed for health. However, in an unexpected result, participants in both studies who harbored highly negative feelings for the food brands revalued their hedonic judgments of them (i.e., increased the favorability) when they were primed for health. Thus, increasing health salience is only effective in decreasing expected pleasure derived from junk foods for people who harbor positive affect toward junk food brands, and is likely counterproductive for people who harbor negative affect toward junk food brands.

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Introduction

Rates of obesity and overweight continue to climb despite a plentitude of studies documenting their prevalence and their associated implications on public health. Many researchers place at least some blame on a “toxic environment” where foods and drinks high in sugar and/or fat and low in nutrients are inexpensive and ubiquitous (Wadden, Brownell, & Foster, 2002). Indeed, snack foods, soft drinks, candy, and fast food represent an industry with worldwide sales in excess of \$1 trillion (Allday, 2012; Connell, 2012; Sivasailam, 2012). In this research, we investigate the potential of health goal activation on stripping unhealthy foods of some of their appeal. Specifically, we provide evidence that priming health in subtle ways leads to less favorable hedonic judgments of junk food brands among those who harbor strongly positive affect toward them. However, in an unexpected effect, we

also find that priming health also leads to more favorable hedonic judgments of junk food brands among those who harbor strongly negative affect toward them. We begin our paper by examining literatures on affect toward brands, attitude ambivalence, and conflicting motivations. We then present the results of two experimental studies and discuss the implications of our research.

Affect toward food brands

Junk foods are frequently associated with pleasure, such as fun and a pleasant taste. Thus, it is not surprising that people who harbor highly positive feelings toward junk food brands would rate them in an affect-congruent direction as more pleasurable and fun (Forgas, 1995; Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, & Evans, 1992). These associations of pleasure and fun have the potential to create considerable challenges for efforts to improve the diets of people who strongly like these brands.

Repeated exposure to a brand via advertising, product placements, and packaging cues can lead to increased liking of the brand (Zajonc, 1968). Previous research has indicated that when people trust brands and display positive affect toward brands, both an

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attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (in the form of purchases and consumption) to these brands results (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Indeed, people often have relationships with brands that are parasocial in nature and can resemble relationships with other people (Fournier, 1998). Furthermore, the resulting commitment to these brands can lead people to forgive transgressions and even defend these brands when they are exposed to negative information about them (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). Thus, attempts to change beliefs toward beloved junk food brands become problematic from traditional information-processing perspectives. We suggest that more subtle environmental cues might be more effective by exploiting attitude ambivalence about these brands.

Ambivalent attitudes and food brands

People often have attitudes that are ambivalent; that is, they possess positive attitudes on some dimensions and negative attitudes on other dimensions of the object of the attitude (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). In the domain of food, people often have a lay intuition that foods that taste good are also unhealthy (Raghu-nathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006). Attitude ambivalence about unhealthy foods has been demonstrated to attenuate the link between favorable attitudes toward the hedonic pleasure derived from foods and the intention to consume these foods (Conner, Povey, Sparks, James, & Shepherd, 2003; Sparks, Conner, James, Shepherd, & Povey, 2001). However, the bulk of this research was conducted in the domain of categories of food products (e.g., junk foods versus healthy foods) rather than food brands, and defined the hedonic pleasure associated with food with how the foods taste. We believe it is important to consider the role of food brands because (1) brands create preferences that vanish when the products are stripped of their branding labels (Allison & Uhl, 1964; Markens, 1965; McClure et al., 2004; Nevid, 1981), (2) people develop strong connections to brands and that can result in more resilient attitudes than those toward foods themselves (e.g., Coca-Cola versus soft drinks in general) (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Fournier, 1998; Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner, 2012), and (3) brand associations for foods can carry hedonic associations that go beyond the product's palatability (e.g., fun, happiness, prestige).

Previous research has shown that restrained eaters in particular have ambivalent attitudes about food and have strong evaluations of the negative aspects of foods that deliver hedonic pleasure (Papies, Stroebe, & Aarts, 2007, 2009). We believe these findings about restrained eaters can be extended to the general public by examining theories of motivational conflict. That is, restrained eaters have a persistent goal to regulate their weight that conflicts with satiation and hedonic goals related to food (Herman & Mack, 1975; Polivy & Herman, 1983). Similarly, among the general public, health is a persistent and important goal that would also conflict with hedonic goals related to food. Thus, activating health goals is likely to make the more negative aspects of unhealthy foods more accessible and the more rewarding aspects of them less accessible.

Conflicting motivations involving food brands

Previous research has shown that activating a goal can result in devaluation of unrelated objects (Brendl, Markman, & Messner, 2003; Markman, Brendl, & Kim, 2007). Fishbach and Ferguson (2007) suggest that this occurs because people have many goals, but have limited resources to pursue them. Thus, when one goal is activated, the accessibility of other goals is often inhibited (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004; Ouwehand & Papies, 2010; Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002). In the case of junk food brands, we believe that

activating health goals will make hedonic goals less salient. In addition, when objects of evaluation have the potential to actually thwart an active goal, then previous research has found that tempting options become less accessible (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003) and the positive valence associated with them is attenuated (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Fishbach, Zhang, & Trope, 2010). For example, Fishbach et al. (2010) found that dieters gave negative evaluations of tasty but fattening food and college students devalued leisure time when ongoing academic goals were made salient. Their findings suggest that the competing goal must be active and unfulfilled for this devaluation to occur, and that people appear to be unaware of the adjustments they make in their judgments that help facilitate success of goal fulfillment (Fishbach et al., 2010).

Previous research has demonstrated that goals can be activated and lead to behavioral changes through subtle techniques such as priming (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Ferguson, Hassin, & Bargh, 2008). Field studies have supported the assertion that behavioral cues can serve as real-world primes that affect eating behavior (Painter, Wansink, & Hieggelke, 2002; Scheibehenne, Todd, & Wansink, 2010; Shimizu & Wansink, 2011; Wansink, Payne, & Shimizu, 2010). For example, snack food advertisements have been shown to lead people to overeat (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009). On the other hand, Papies and Hamstra (2010) found that placing a sign in a retail environment that referred to maintaining a slim figure helped people avoid tempting options. Thus, the predominating goal tends to dictate how people will evaluate options and choose among them.

The current research

We believe that, consistent with work by Ferguson and Bargh (2004), activating a goal will simultaneously make information relating to goal fulfillment more accessible and information relating to impedance of goals less accessible. In the context of food brands, when health goals are activated, junk foods are not useful to this goal. At the same time, however, strong positive affect toward these brands will cause people to resist changing their judgments on domains related to negative information (e.g., lowered likelihood to change judgments on the healthiness of a junk food brand when health goals are made salient) (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Lisjak et al., 2012). People can then fulfill their health goals instead by devaluing the hedonic pleasure associated with the junk food brand because it is not useful in reaching the health goal but is not related to negative information about the food brand that becomes accessible when health goals are primed. Therefore, we predict that activating a health goal through priming (Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986; Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982) could decrease the value of a specific set of attributes that are unrelated to the goal of health (i.e., hedonic pleasure) among people who harbor strongly positive affect toward junk food brands. However, because individuals who display neutral or negative affect toward these brands are less likely to exhibit such strong goal conflict to begin with, then this devaluation effect is not likely to occur when affect toward the brand is not highly positive.

Across two experimental studies, we find that making health salient by priming can result in judgments of fun and tastiness that are less favorable for people who harbor highly positive feelings toward junk food brands. We first provide the results of two pre-tests. The first pre-test demonstrates that the manipulation used in the experimental studies (primed health) indeed activates a health goal. The second pre-test provides evidence that the manipulation used in the experimental studies does not alter reported affect. We then provide the results of the two focal studies and conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

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