



From groups to grits: Social identity shapes evaluations of food pleasantness



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ABSTRACT

Throughout human history, food consumption has been deeply tied to cultural groups. Past models of food preference have assumed that social concerns are dissociated from basic appetitive qualities—such as tastiness—in food choice. In contrast to this notion, we tested and found support for the novel idea that social identities can shape the evaluation of food pleasantness. Specifically, individual differences in social identification (Study 1) as well as experimentally manipulated identity salience (Study 2) were associated with the anticipated tastiness of identity-relevant foods. We also found that identity salience influenced perceived food pleasantness during consumption (Study 3). These results suggest social identity may shape evaluations of food pleasantness, both through long-term motivational components of identification as well as short-term identity salience. Thus, the influence of social identity on cognition appears to extend beyond social evaluation, to hedonic experience. We discuss implications for theories of identity, decision-making, and food consumption.

1. Introduction

When people eat Canadian Maple Syrup for breakfast, Pad Thai for lunch, or Southern Chicken Fried Steak for dinner, their food choices often reflect deeply held cultural identities. These associations transform food consumption into a socially meaningful behavior (Barthes, 1997). Past models of food preference have assumed that social concerns are dissociated from basic appetitive qualities of foods—such as tastiness—in food choice (Rangel, 2013). However, it is possible that social identities can shape the evaluation of food pleasantness itself. This possibility carries real-world implications, as the consumption of identity-relevant foods can yield negative health outcomes, as in the case of the American diet (see Guendelman, Cheryan, & Monin, 2011). In the present research, we examined whether social identities influence evaluations of food pleasantness.

Social identification is the product of perceiving oneself as part of a social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which involves both defining oneself as part of a collective and attaching motivational significance to group membership (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Correll & Park, 2005; Leach et al., 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Social identification therefore helps determine one's attitudes and behavior. Indeed, previous psychological and economic theories have implicated social identity in shaping consumption behavior and motivation (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000;

Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). People may choose to consume foods to signal their social identity to fellow group members (Barthes, 1997), follow norms of a social group or culture (Weber & Morris, 2010), or feel like one has attained a desired identity (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

Past research has also found a direct link between social identity and food consumption. For example, people increase or decrease their food intake based on the behavior of in-group but not out-group members, indicating that group norms shape food consumption (Cruwys et al., 2012). Sports fans increase unhealthy eating after experiencing a vicarious defeat when their favored team loses, suggesting that events that impact the group can influence members' food consumption (Cornil & Chandon, 2013). Similarly, immigrants whose sense of American identity has been threatened are more likely to eat unhealthy American foods, demonstrating that people can use food consumption to fit into a group (Guendelman et al., 2011). It is unclear, however, whether social identity shapes food pleasantness *directly*—that is, whether group members find social identity-relevant foods more pleasant than similar foods that are not social identity-relevant. People may simply want to eat in-group foods to align themselves with the in-group, but it is also possible people internalize their social identities to the extent that they find in-group foods more appetizing and pleasant to consume. Indeed, according to the Perceptual Model of

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Intergroup Relations (Xiao, Coppin, & Van Bavel, 2016), highly salient social identities might alter perceptual judgments of taste and flavor.

Here, we examined whether social identity can alter the hedonic evaluation of food pleasantness. Numerous studies have found that top-down expectations about foods and beverages—such as believing a wine is expensive (versus cheap) or viewing an appetizing (versus unappetizing) food label—influence self-reported pleasantness during consumption and activation in brain regions associated with pleasantness (Grabenhorst, Rolls, & Bilderbeck, 2008; Plasmann, O'Doherty, Shiv, & Rangel, 2008; Wardle & Solomons, 1994). Moreover, culturally held schemas can influence food preferences (Zhu, Brescoll, Newman, & Uhlmann, 2015), and the contexts in which foods are evaluated shape implicit attitudes toward foods (Roefs et al., 2006). Therefore, people may anticipate that identity-relevant foods will be tastier prior to consumption (*expected* pleasantness) and even experience these foods as more pleasant during consumption (*experienced* pleasantness).

According to the Perceptual Model of Intergroup Relations, this impact of group membership is likely to occur when an individual's self-categorization with a group is highly accessible and they strongly identify with the group (Xiao et al., 2016). To test this possibility, we examined the relationship between two aspects of social identity (salience and collective identity strength) and evaluations of pleasantness for identity-relevant foods. In doing so, we build on past work that has demonstrated social identification influences evaluation—for instance, that people evaluate other people differently as a function of shared group membership (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Turner et al., 1994; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The present research aimed to extend the influence of social identity to one's own hedonic experience.

Social identities permeate perceptual and cognitive processes, including face processing (Van Bavel, Packer, & Cunningham, 2011), olfactory judgments (Coppin et al., 2016), appraisals of temperature (Pandey, Stevenson, Shankar, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2014), auditory processing (Shankar et al., 2013; Srinivasan et al., 2013), and representations of physical distance (Xiao & Van Bavel, 2012). Indeed, recent theorizing has proposed that social identity may act as a framework shaping people's perceptual judgments and experiences, which may include evaluations of food pleasantness (Xiao et al., 2016). However, the vast majority of research on this topic has examined visual perception. Little work has examined the impact of social identity on taste or flavor, presenting a surprising gap in our understanding of social identity and perceptual judgments (Xiao et al., 2016). As such, the present research has importance for human behavior given the link between culture and eating, on the one hand, and between eating and health, on the other hand.

1.1. The role of identification and identity salience

Social identities differ across people and situations in two critical ways. First, people differ in the extent to which they identify with different social groups, and a group member's degree of social identification moderates the influence of identity on behavior (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Leach et al., 2008). Identities carry long-term motivational importance, and people who identify with a social group seek to maintain a positive evaluation of the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In contrast, individuals who are weakly identified—or disidentified—with a particular group often do not want to be categorized as a group member (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Hamstra, Sassenberg, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Rietzschel, 2015). When group identity is made salient, individuals with low social identification may experience negative emotions, distance themselves from the group, and even “put down” other

in-group members (Branscombe et al., 1999). Therefore, an individual's degree of identification with a group should predict whether they seek to evaluate the group positively or negatively. Moreover, identification has been further divided into components reflecting motivational investment in the group (“group-level self-investment”) and perceived similarity to other group members (“group-level self-definition”; Leach et al., 2008). To the extent that evaluation depends on group-level motivations (e.g., maintaining a positive evaluation of the in-group), the impact of identification on food evaluation may depend on motivational components of identification.

Second, social identities vary in salience across contexts: in different situations, different identities can become active and guide behavior (Turner et al., 1994). Identification involves categorizing oneself and others as members of a social group (Turner et al., 1987), and this self-categorization depends on contextual factors (Turner et al., 1994). Thus, various identities can become active in different contexts.

The present work simultaneously addresses these two influential traditions in social identity research that have elaborated the role of identification and identity salience in parallel: social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987). Whereas SIT is primarily concerned with the motivational and evaluative implications of group identification, SCT is primarily concerned with the flexible categorization of the self as an interchangeable member of social groups. Although these theories are strongly related—and indeed, SCT stems from SIT (see Hornsey, 2008)—in practice, researchers studying identity effects on motivation often tend to focus their studies on predictions that would stem from one or the other. For example, theories of identity economics (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000) and research on identity motivation (Oyserman et al., 2007) have focused on the role of identity salience in shaping motivation, whereas research on the pursuit of self-defining goals has focused on the motivational strength of identities (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). However, both social identity salience and the strength of social identification influence identity-relevant behavior (Hornsey, 2008; Reed, 2004). Therefore, if social identification impacts evaluations of food pleasantness, we propose it should do so for people who are particularly invested in a given social identity and for whom that social identity is salient. That is, we hypothesize that people who care about a particular identity will evaluate identity-relevant foods more positively, whereas those who are low on identification with a group will evaluate identity-foods more negatively—but these effects should emerge primarily when group identity is salient. This perspective simultaneously accounts for social identification and self-categorization in shaping hedonic evaluation: one's long-term identification with a group can shape the motivational relevance of identity-relevant goods, but this motivational impact depends on the extent to which a given social identity has been activated.

Altogether, this perspective also suggests that hedonic preferences for foods are not fixed and stable, but rather depend on contextual features of a decision process. These features may include the social meaning of a food to an individual, given that individual's degree of identification with a group and the extent to which an identity is activated by a given context. This insight goes beyond prior work finding that cultural contexts impact economic decisions (Weber & Morris, 2010), suggesting that social psychological factors can influence not only decisions but also hedonic evaluations. Finally, this view suggests a possible bridge between the effects of social identity on evaluation (e.g., Van Bavel & Cunningham, 2009) and on motivation (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2007). If social identity influences judgments of hedonic pleasantness, these altered evaluations may in turn influence the motivation to consume social identity-relevant goods. Thus, we propose that hedonic preferences depend on the social identity contexts in which they are embedded—taking into account a person's long-term

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