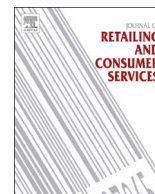


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Dieting, priming, food meanings and (un)healthy choices: When shoppers fall for pleasure

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to establish what factors predispose some consumers to non-consciously fall for palatable food choices. To achieve this, 1) a qualitative exploration of food meanings possessed by (non)dieting consumers (N = 20) and 2) a grocery shopping-prime experiment (N = 197) are conducted. Dieting consumers appear to have a more hedonic food-orientation, feel guiltier towards eating, struggle more with resistance of temptation, express less skepticism towards marketing actions, possess a narrower health control focus and appreciate less the role of food in life happiness. Thus, they are more easily prey to many implicit food cues in supermarkets.

1. Introduction

According to the latest statistics, 2.1 billion people on the globe are overweight or obese – resulting in 3.4 million annual deaths (Breuhl Smith and Smith, 2016). Even though obesity has many causes, a recent research stream highlights the importance of non-conscious influences in consumers' food choices (Köster, 2009). For example, Cohen and Babey (2012) claim that clever marketing of food products (packaging, design, claims, labels) strongly affects in-store food choices and consumption in ways that most people are unaware of. Their claim is supported by Wang and Lang's (2015) study: it documented the subliminal effects of special displays on subsequent grocery shopping behaviors.

However, consumers vary in terms of how subtle cues affect them. The same prime can possess unique motivational associations in different consumer groups and thus lead even to opposite behavioral effects (Wheeler and Berger, 2007). In prior research, the differences in individuals' dieting status have been used to segment consumers and understand their health behaviors and food perceptions and choices - with contradictory findings (Snoek et al., 2008).

The differences in food representations in dieting and non-dieting consumers' minds have been offered as an explanation for the distinct effects of health and pleasure primes (Stroebe et al., 2013). However, in past priming studies, these food meanings have practically always been reduced to the simplistic dichotomy between pleasure and health goals that, in turn, have predominantly been activated by direct concrete cues. This crude approach overlooks the complexities inherent both in food meanings and their triggers (Zarantonello and Luomala, 2011). Consequently, uncovering new motivational origins of priming effects

advances theory-building.

While tackling these shortcomings, this article contributes to marketing research dealing with non-conscious influences in in-store food choice behaviors. First, it identifies a previously unrecognized type of priming cue that can lead dieting consumers non-consciously to fall for pleasure. Second, it creates a new in-depth picture of the nuanced variation in food meanings between dieting and non-dieting consumers. Third, it demonstrates how this understanding can be used to unravel the motivational priming effects in food choice behavior.

Dieting is a multi-billion retailing and service business. In the U.S. alone, the annual revenue of the weight-loss industry, including diet foods and drinks, diet books, diet drugs and weight-loss surgeries is roughly 20 billion dollars (Eriator et al., 2015). Societally, more refined understanding of how non-conscious psychological processes function can steer health educators as they help dieting consumers not to fall for pleasure.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. The conceptual framework for guiding the empirical investigations is developed. Second, the intricacies of food meanings in the lives of (non)dieting consumers are revealed through an interpretive qualitative exploration. Next, the ability of a novel, less direct and concrete, prime (grocery shopping) to differently affect (non)dieting consumers' choices of healthy vs. palatable foods is demonstrated. Finally, the academic, managerial and societal implications of this research are discussed.

2. Development of conceptual framework

To build the conceptual underpinnings for this study, the goal conflict theory of eating and sources of food meanings are paid

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attention to first. This understanding is then tied to pre-existing knowledge priming studies have produced in relation to the role of dieting status as an influencer of non-conscious food choices.

2.1. Why do food meanings matter?

The goal conflict theory of eating (Stroebe et al., 2013) helps to understand why variation can exist in non-conscious behavioral responding to subtle food cues. It posits that eating behavior is determined by two conflicting goals: eating enjoyment vs. weight control. Consumers are proposed to differ in terms of how sensitive they are to more or less perceptible internal or external triggers of these goals and how deliberately their self-regulatory resources are used. In turn, all of this is shaped by the meanings food carries.

However, there is no consensual definition of food meanings. They can be approached by the theories of cultural geography (e.g. Everts and Jackson, 2009), sociology (e.g. Warde et al., 2007), practice (e.g. Wills et al., 2011) or psychology (Renner et al., 2012). Warde's (1997) cultural food antinomies represent a classic meaning taxonomy: novelty vs. tradition, health vs. indulgence, economy vs. extravagance and convenience vs. care. Another simpler, albeit more abstract, basic food meaning classification is provided by the healthy eating discourses Chrysochou et al. (2010) identified: indulgence, control, ordinariness and resignation. Food self-evidently signifies pleasure, but it also denotes restraint. Alternatively, food can also stand for a quest for balance in everyday life or it may represent areas of disinterest or even submission.

These meanings do not only emanate from eating itself, but also from shopping for (e.g. Megicks et al., 2012; Elms et al., 2016), preparing (e.g. Southerton, 2001; Daniels et al., 2012) and disposing of (e.g. Sirieix et al., 2017) food. To illustrate, shopping for local food can entangle with meanings pertaining to intrinsic product quality, hedonic enjoyment, sustainability and parochial support (Megicks et al., 2012) or organic foods can be favored for their social signal value (Hwang, 2016). According to Southerton (2001), in kitchens cooking, food and eating construct the meanings of family values, relationship intimacy and social interaction with peer groups. As regards disposal of food, Sirieix et al. (2017) assert that conflicting and even paradoxical emotional meanings can be generated, for example when deciding whether one should leave left-overs or ask for a doggy bag in a restaurant.

In a rare study pertaining to dieting and non-dieting consumers' food meanings, Keller and van der Horst (2013) found that the former group has more negative associations with eating than the latter group. As this examination was quantitative, the in-depth understanding of origins of differences in food meanings between (non)dieting consumers is still missing. Yet, these meanings hold a key to explaining why various primes can exert a distinct effect on their food choice behaviors. This is what Study 1 sets out to uncover.

2.2. Brief review of priming research concerning (un)healthy food choices of (non)dieting consumers

A number of studies addressing how health and pleasure primes affect dieting and non-dieting consumers' food choices have recently been conducted. Ironically, dieting consumers have been shown to end up choosing the unhealthiest side dish more often in the presence of healthy options (menus as primes) than non-dieting consumers (Wilcox et al., 2009). Yet, opposite findings have also been offered. In a restaurant experiment, health primes in the menu led dieting patrons to make more healthy choices than non-dieting guests (Papies and Veling, 2013). These findings were corroborated in a grocery shop experiment (recipe flyers as primes) involving (non)overweight consumers (Papies et al., 2014). In turn, a comparison of the choices of (non)overweight restrained consumers as a response to temptation primes (scrambled sentence completion task) revealed that high-calorie

foods were preferred more by the latter group (Ouweland and Papies, 2010).

Dieting consumers are more responsive to food smell primes than non-dieting consumers and this can lead them to eat more afterwards (Fedoroff et al., 2003). A tempting prime (visual and olfactory sensing of chocolate) pushed dieting consumers eat 60% more snacks compared to a situation where they were exposed to healthy prime (visual and olfactory perception of an orange) (Buckland et al., 2013). Employing (un)healthful brands as primes resulted in differences in the amount of food eaten by dieting vs. non-dieting consumers: the former group ate more after being primed with the healthful brand (Cavanagh and Forestell, 2013).

Priming effects of food advertisements (snack vs. nutrition) on food intake have been reported. Dieting consumers ate more as a response to snack ads than non-dieters; nutrition ads exerted a similar influence on both of the groups (Harris et al., 2009). On the other hand, when non-dieting consumers were asked to sample an item primed (use of evocative words) as healthy, they later reported to be hungrier and ate more food than those who sampled the same item primed as tasty; this effect was not detected for dieting consumers (Finkelstein and Fishbach, 2010). Even the body shape of a waitress serving the food can prime consumers to eat more: the obese server increased food consumption of dieting consumers while the thin server did the same for non-dieting consumers (McFerran et al., 2010).

This brief review warrants two conclusions. First, health and pleasure primes exert a distinct effect on dieting vs. non-dieting consumers' food choices, even though contradictory findings are not uncommon. This sends an obvious call for more research. Second, the primes used in prior studies have been of concrete nature. This facilitates what Ronteltap et al. (2012) call nutrient or product level construal of food meanings. However, if the construal of food meanings occurs on the lifestyle level, a possibility suggested by these authors, then this common priming practice can produce an incomplete picture. Thus, the aim of Study 2 is to test, if activating the higher level construal of food meanings through a grocery shopping-prime still influences concrete (un)healthy product choices. If yes, then does consumers' dieting status play a role?

Fig. 1 integrates the conceptual issues discussed above into one single framework. It also serves to inform and interlink the empirical studies of this research.

3. Study 1: a qualitative exploration into food meanings of (non) dieting consumers

3.1. Interview informants

The informants (N = 20) consisted of self-reported dieting (5 men, 5 women, $M_{age} = 54.0$, $M_{BMI} = 33.4$) and non-dieting consumers (5 men, 5 women, $M_{age} = 55.6$, $M_{BMI} = 24.4$). The aim was to recruit informants

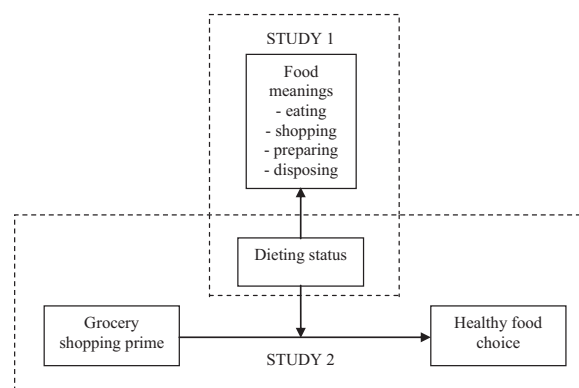


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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