

Research Article

“I can almost taste it:” Why people with strong positive emotions experience higher levels of food craving, salivation and eating intentions

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to examine whether individual differences in affect intensity predict people's responses to food advertisements. In doing so, we aim to uncover individual differences and situational factors that are associated with higher food cravings and other consumption-related responses. Studies 1 and 2 identified three mediators (emotional memories, weak impulse control, and the intensity of pleasure anticipation) which indirectly link affect intensity to food cravings and behavioral intentions. Studies 3 and 4 identified two moderators (vividness of advertisement, dieting status of participants) of the relationship between affect intensity and consumption-related outcomes. In Study 3 high affect intensity individuals reported stronger food cravings only in response to vivid advertising appeals. In Study 4, respondents with high levels of positive affectivity, a sub-dimension of affect intensity, experienced increased salivation, but especially when they were dieters exposed to vivid food images. Implications for theory development and for marketing and public policy strategists are discussed.

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Keywords: Affect intensity; Positive affectivity; Emotional memories; Pleasure anticipation; Food cravings; Salivation

Introduction

Most consumers can recall some occasion when they experienced cravings and salivation for tempting foods like a hot delicious pizza loaded with appetizing toppings and thick sizzling mozzarella cheese oozing over the edge. These cravings may have been activated by exposure to vivid food advertisements, or enticing aromas when walking past a restaurant. Food cravings are cue-elicited expectations that are stimulated by the anticipation of food-related sensory pleasures (e.g. sweetness, texture, aroma; Cepeda-Benito, Gleaves, Williams, & Erath, 2000). Cravings go beyond liking or preferring a type of food.

Rather, cravings are intense feelings of appetitive desire that are vivid, overpowering, and feel uncontrollable (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Loewenstein, 1996), often with a focus on a specific food item (Belk et al., 2003; Fedoroff, Polivy, & Herman, 2003; Pelchat, Johnson, Chan, Valdez, & Ragland, 2004). They can collapse one's self-control and increase the likelihood of buying and consuming unhealthy food (Siwik & Senf, 2006; Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001).

Food cravings have been linked to overeating and higher levels of fast food consumption, both of which may be contributing to the rise in obesity-related diseases (Siwik & Senf, 2006). Obese individuals have 42% higher medical bills, and obesity itself is responsible for over 9% of all American healthcare spending (Stipp, 2011). Thus, uncontrolled food consumption brought on by cravings represents a serious economic and public health issue, thereby underscoring the importance of understanding the specific role of marketing and

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advertising in stimulating food craving. Furthermore, since cravings are powerful visceral drives that undermine the control of food intake by both dieters and non-dieters alike, we need more understanding about how consumers differ in their responses to vivid presentations of food cues. It is inappropriate to assume that consumers are homogenous in their reactions to marketing stimuli designed to stimulate food consumption.

This paper presents and tests a theoretical model designed to predict impulsive food consumption-related outcomes. In doing so, we aim to uncover individual differences and situational factors that are associated with higher food cravings and other consumption-related responses (Fig. 1). We follow a person by situation theoretical approach that has been successfully used to predict other impulsive behaviors (e.g. aggression: Anderson & Bushman, 2002; sexual behaviors: Cooper, 2010). Thus, we apply the prevalent interactionist view within personality and social psychology to food consumption-related outcomes (e.g., cravings, behavioral intentions, and salivation), hypothesizing that these outcomes should depend on both individual differences (e.g. traits such as affect intensity, individual differences such as dieting status) and contextual factors (e.g. features of advertisements).

Fig. 1 gives an overview of the current studies, and we now briefly review the key research questions that they address. First, are there predictable individual differences in craving intensity after advertisement exposure? For example, people tend to differ in the intensity of the emotions (“affect”) they experience when exposed to emotionally-charged stimuli (Larsen & Diener, 1987; Moore, Harris, & Chen, 1995). However, it is unknown whether affect intensity is related to craving intensity, behavioral intentions, and salivation responses. Understanding the role of affect intensity is important because of the possibility that people who are dispositionally

inclined to experience their emotions intensely may be the same ones who have difficulty controlling their food cravings and appetitive impulses (Fedoroff et al., 2003; Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009).

Second, why should affect intensity be associated with more consumption-related outcomes? Can we uncover potential mediating variables that help to explain its role in eliciting cravings and other consumption-related responses? In Studies 1 and 2 we identify three psychological processes that help to explain why affect intensity may directly or indirectly stimulate food cravings: (a) the role of emotional memories; (b) the weakening of impulse control, and (c) the intensity of pleasure anticipation, all of which are hypothesized to amplify cravings in high affect intensity individuals (see Fig. 1).

Third, Studies 3 and 4 examine whether these relationships are moderated by vivid versus pallid product descriptions, and the dieting status of the respondent (Study 4). These moderated relationships should be investigated to better understand how appetitively charged advertising appeals affect a variety of consumers differently. Specifically, to what extent does the vividness of product descriptions in advertisements contribute to the stimulation of food cravings among high affect intensity people? Furthermore, does being on a diet also affect how these individuals respond to such vivid cues? Studies 3 and 4 also examine the importance of measuring salivation—a non-conscious physiological response in anticipation of the pleasure of food consumption (Krishna, Morrin, & Sayin, 2014; Spence, 2011).

Fourth, are specific sub-dimensions of the affect intensity construct (Larsen & Diener, 1987) more likely to impact consumption-related responses? In Studies 2 and 4, this paper makes important theoretical contributions by testing which of the sub-factors of the affect intensity construct, positive

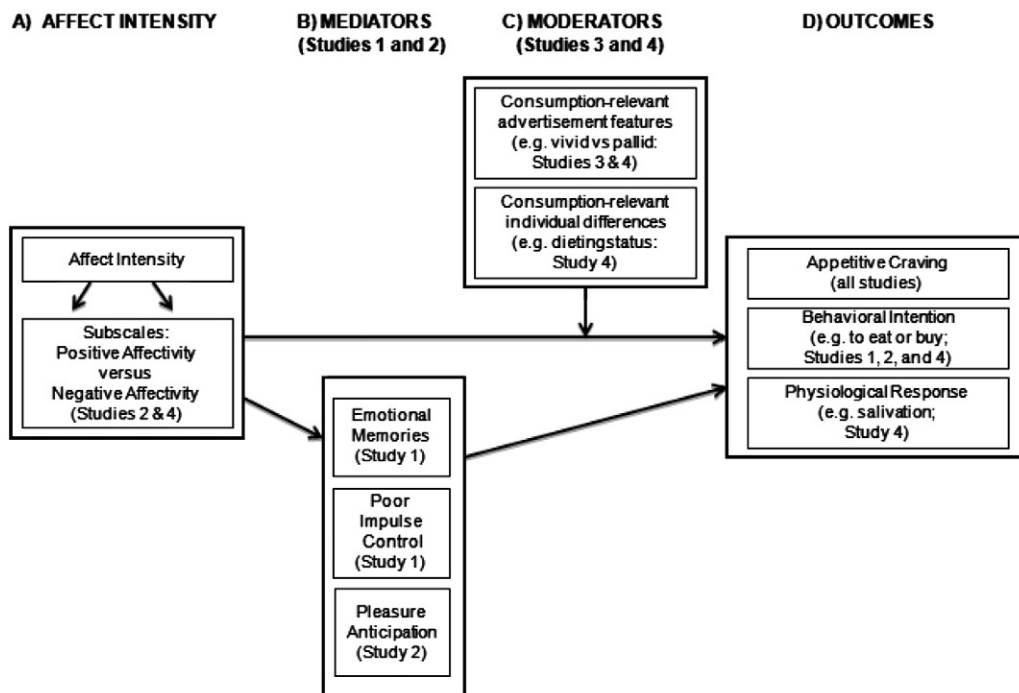


Fig. 1. A theoretical model of mediators and moderators of the relationship between affect intensity and consumption-related responses.

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