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Research Article

Better moods for better eating?: How mood influences food choice

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Abstract

How do moods influence one's preference for foods? By introducing the role of enjoyment- versus health-oriented benefits of foods in the mood and food consumption relationship, this research informs both temporal construal theory and mood management framework by positing that mood influences the choice between healthy versus indulgent foods through its impact on temporal construal, which alters the weights people put on long-term health benefits versus short-term mood management benefits when making choices. The results from four experiments show that a positive mood cues distal, abstract construal and increases the salience of long-term goals such as health, leading to greater preference for healthy foods over indulgent foods. The results also show that a negative mood cues proximal construal and increases the salience of immediate, concrete goals such as mood management, leading to greater preference for indulgent foods over healthy foods.

Keywords: Mood; Well-being; Mood management; Temporal construal; Healthy eating

Introduction

There is more to food than just nutrition. Past research has found that food intake is associated with an individual's affective states (Arnow, Kenardy, & Agras, 1995; Macht, 2008). Many people eat in order to distract themselves from, compensate for, or cope with negative affects such as stress, anxiety, frustration, fear, daily hassles, sadness, boredom, depression, and fatigue (Chua, Touyz, & Hill, 2004; O'Connor, Jones, Conner, McMillan, & Ferguson, 2008; Polivy & Herman, 1999; Schachter, Goldman, & Gordon, 1968; Wallis & Hetherington, 2004, 2009; Willner et al., 1998). The foods eaten under these circumstances are sometimes referred to as comfort foods, and most of these foods are indulgent, sweet, carbohydrate-and fat-rich foods because such foods can provide immediate satisfaction and even psycho-physical benefits. For example, foods with high levels of fat and sugar trigger the release of insulin and endorphins (Benton & Owens, 1993; Gold, MacLeod, Frier, & Deary, 1995), and intragastric infusion of fatty acid solution affects brain activity in multiple regions in people with sadness (Van Oudenhove et al., 2011).

Similarly, studies have found that positive emotions are often associated with high appetite levels (Mehrabian & Riccioni, 1986), particularly for familiar foods (Mela, 2001), because happy individuals seek out foods in order to celebrate or reward themselves (Rozin, 1982; Rozin & Tuorila, 1993). Likewise, research has shown that joy (Macht, Roth, & Ellgring, 2002) and positive mood accompanied by strong emotional arousal (Cools, Schotte, & McNally, 1992) increase the consumption of indulgent foods such as chocolate and buttered, salted popcorn.

However, more recent studies showed that negative moods and positive moods may lead to preference for different types of foods. For example, Garg, Wansink, and Inman (2007) found that people ate more of a hedonic food when they were sad, and more of a less-hedonic food when they were happy. Fedorikhin and Patrick (2010) also showed that, given a choice

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between chocolate candies and grapes, individuals in a positive mood were more likely to eat grapes than those in a neutral mood.

A few studies offer insights into why positive moods are associated with preference for such diverse foods, based on the affect regulation framework (Gross, 1998; Wegener & Petty, 1994). For example, Andrade (2005) found that a positive mood increased one's willingness to try an indulgent food (i.e., chocolates) when a mood-lifting cue was present but decreased willingness to try a healthy food (i.e., coconut water) when a mood-threatening cue was present. When no mood-changing cue was present, however, a positive mood increased willingness to try both chocolate and coconut water compared to a neutral mood. Similarly, Labroo and Mukhopadhyay (2009) showed that people in a positive mood chose nutritious foods when they did not feel the need for mood maintaining behaviors, but chose indulgent foods when they felt the need for mood maintaining behaviors.

However, these studies were limited in that the affect regulation motive for choosing healthy or indulgent foods was experimentally given to participants as lay theories about the nature of moods or explicit cues about mood-changing consequences associated with consuming the target foods. Moreover, although some researchers have interpreted the finding that people in a positive mood prefer healthy foods to indulgent foods as an indication of people in a positive mood acting in their long-term interests like health (Fedorikhin & Patrick, 2010; Labroo & Mukhopadhyay, 2009), the relationships between mood, affect regulation, temporal perspective, and food choice have not been empirically tested in a comprehensive manner. The present work extends past research on mood and food consumption by marrying the affect regulation framework with a temporal construal theory explanation to enhance our understanding of the process underlying the effects of mood on preference for healthy or indulgent foods. In particular, four laboratory experiments test the hypotheses that individuals in a positive mood will prefer healthy foods to indulgent food for long-term health or well-being benefits and those in a negative mood will prefer indulgent foods to healthy foods for immediate, hedonistic, mood management benefits.

Theoretical background

Affect congruency and food consumption

An individual's affective state often guides attention to information consistent with the valence and quality of his or her affective states (for a review see Berkowitz, 2000, pp. 78–83). Adaval (2001), for example, indicates that an individual tends to put greater weight on affect-consistent product information particularly when his or her product evaluations are made on the basis of hedonic rather than utilitarian criteria. The affective congruency hypothesis suggests that, when evaluating indulgent foods (e.g., chocolates), positive moods enhance attention to affect-consistent, favorable attributes such as sweet taste and diminish attention to affect-inconsistent, unfavorable attributes such as high fat content and expensive price. On the other hand, however, the opposite will be the case for negative moods.

Therefore, the affect congruency hypothesis suggests that relative to neutral mood, positive mood leads to more favorable evaluations and increased consumption while negative mood leads to less favorable evaluations and decreased consumption. Consistent with this hypothesis, Cools et al. (1992) found that a positive mood accompanied by strong arousal increased the consumption of snack foods. Similarly, several studies have found that joy increased an individual's willingness to eat indulgent snack foods whereas sadness decreased the perceived pleasantness of and willingness to eat the same snack foods (Baucom & Aiken, 1981; Macht et al., 2002; Willner & Healy, 1994). Andrade (2005) also found that willingness to try both chocolate (which can be viewed as indulgent) and coconut water (which can be viewed as healthy) increased in an affect-congruent manner in the absence of a mood-changing cue.

Affect regulation and food consumption

The hedonic contingency or affect regulation hypothesis (Gross, 1998; Wegener & Petty, 1994) provides additional insights into the relationship between mood and consumption, and it predicts a different relationship. Wegener and Petty's (1994) hedonic contingency hypothesis suggests that individuals process information in such ways that processing of the information either maintains a favorable mood or improves an unfavorable mood. Extending this reasoning to mood and food consumption relationships, one would predict that people will prefer foods that can help repair a negative mood or maintain a positive mood but avoid foods that may disrupt a positive mood or aggravate a negative mood.

In support of this prediction, Andrade (2005) showed that individuals in a positive mood were less willing to try coconut water, a healthy food, if mood-threatening consequences of consumption were cued and that individuals in a negative mood were more willing to try chocolate, an indulgent food, if mood-lifting consequences of consumption were cued. Similarly, Labroo and Mukhopadhyay (2009) showed that people in a positive mood chose indulgent foods when they believed their mood to be fleeting and so, inferred a need for mood maintaining action, but chose healthy foods when they believed their mood to be lasting and so, inferred no need for mood maintaining action.

Affect regulation-temporal construal hypothesis

Although the research cited provides support for the role of affect regulation in the effects of mood on food choices under some conditions, it does not address the mood-threatening consequences of consuming indulgent foods for those in a negative mood or the mood-threatening consequences of consuming healthy foods for those in a positive mood. In fact, consuming indulgent foods often has undesirable long-run physical and affective consequences, including reactive hypoglycemia (or glucose crash), regret, guilt, or depression (Larsen, 2000; Thayer, 1987, 1996). If people are aware of this vicious