

# Food, sex and the hunger for distinction<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Consumer preferences are often influenced by the distinctiveness of the options involved, but do needs for distinctiveness display motivational reward properties? Four studies suggest that they do. Activating needs for distinctiveness impacts the desirability of other, seemingly unrelated rewards, and reciprocally, preferences for distinctiveness are impacted by the presence of seemingly unrelated reward stimuli. Further, these cross-domain spillover effects were moderated by sensitivity to the general reward system and satiated by even seemingly unrelated intervening rewards. These findings shed light on the nature of distinctiveness and its implications for consumer behavior.

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Distinctiveness is an important identity motive that often impacts consumer preferences. People purchase distinctive clothes, for example, because they want to stand out from others, or order unique entrées to differentiate themselves from their dining partners. Thus how unique a given product or brand is has important implications for evaluation, choice, and preference.

But do preferences for similarity and distinctiveness exhibit motivational reward characteristics? Beyond merely noting that people prefer one thing or another, recent research provides a more nuanced view of preference as driven by a liking component and a more motivational reward component (Berridge & Aldridge, 2008; Higgins, 2006). This difference has important repercussions for understanding the nature of similarity and distinctiveness, as well as their effects on consumer behavior. Rewards are not just welcome positive outcomes but actively “hungered” for in that they arouse drive

states and reward pursuit. For example, they exhibit cross-domain “spillover” such that inducing a drive state for a reward in one domain can increase the attractiveness or desirability of reward stimuli even in seemingly unrelated domains (Knutson et al., 2008; van den Bergh, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2008; Wadhwa, Shiv, & Nowlis, 2008).

Consequently, if distinctiveness possesses motivational reward characteristics, it should have profound downstream effects on consumer behavior. Priming needs for distinctiveness, for example, should not only impact preferences for products that foster distinctiveness, but also spillover and affect the desirability of other rewards, such as one’s favorite food. Similarly, exposure to food, or sexually arousing stimuli, may impact preferences for more unique options.

This research investigates these possibilities. Four studies test whether distinctiveness exhibits motivational reward characteristics, and if so, how this impacts consumer behavior. We find that priming distinctiveness impacts the desirability of rewards, and reciprocally, preferences for distinctiveness are impacted by the presence of seemingly unrelated reward stimuli. Further, these cross-domain spillover effects are moderated by individual differences in sensitivity to the general reward system. Finally, these effects can be satiated by even seemingly unrelated intervening rewards. Taken together, our research provides a

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richer understanding of the nature of distinctiveness and its implications for consumer behavior.

### Differentiation desires and product preferences

Across the social sciences, research has examined the human desire for differentiation. Though this desire varies across individuals and cultural contexts, at a basic level, individuals want to maintain some difference relative to others (Brewer, 1991; see Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2000 for a review). The uniqueness literature (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), for example, argues feeling overly similar is an aversive state that individuals attempt to resolve by shifting their attitudes to reassert their individuality.

The desire for differentiation also impacts preferences (Snyder, 1992). Leibenstein (1950) argues that people “search for exclusiveness...through the purchase of distinctive clothing, foods, automobiles, houses, or anything else that individuals may believe will in some way set them off from the mass of mankind” (p.184). A car owned by 10% of people, for example, is more unique than a car owned by 25% of people. Along these lines, individuals made to feel overly similar to others prefer scarce experiences (Fromkin, 1970) and when choosing in group settings, consumers tend to avoid options chosen by other members of the group (Ariely & Levav, 2000).

Individual differences in desires for differentiation also shape preferences. Consumers with higher need for uniqueness (CNFU, Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001) prefer scarce and customized products (Lynn & Harris, 1997) and are more likely to choose products that are distinct (Tian et al., 2001). Similarly, individuals with a dominant independent self-construal (e.g., Americans compared to East Asians) have been shown to exhibit greater preference for more unique products (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001; Kim & Markus, 1999).

But while it is clear that individuals often prefer products that foster distinctiveness, the nature of these preferences is less clear: Does distinctiveness exhibit motivational reward characteristics?

### Reward characteristics

Rewards possess some unique characteristics. First they display drive transference or cross-domain spillover: exposure to reward stimuli in one domain (e.g., erotic pictures) enhances the motivational impetus to seek out rewards in an unrelated domain (e.g., money). Rewards ranging from money, erotic stimuli, and social acceptance activate the same mesolimbic dopamine pathways in the brain, pointing to a literal common currency for rewards in the brain (Saxe & Haushofer, 2008). The existence of this “common currency” led some researchers to propose that if the motivational reward system is potentiated by a reward-cue in one domain, it can also increase the pursuit of alternative rewards in the environment. In other words, the pursuit of rewards need not be specific to a domain but can be “secular.” This proposition has been tested in both behavioral as well as fMRI studies. For

example, Wadhwa et al. (2008) showed that exposure to a tasty beverage enhanced the desire for a romantic movie and for an experience at a spa. Similarly, van den Bergh, Dewitte and Warlop (2008) showed that male participants exposed to erotic pictures exhibited enhanced desire for money. Further, Knutson et al. (2008) showed that exposure to erotic pictures enhanced the desire for more rewarding monetary gambles and that this enhanced desire was mediated by activation in the nucleus accumbens.

Second, rewards display cross-domain satiation, which should moderate the effects of drive transference. Though extreme drives can likely only be satiated by rewards from the same domain (e.g., extreme hunger requires food), research suggests that cross-domain spillover effects can be satiated by rewards from other domains. Giving participants an intervening surprise reward (i.e., a dollar), for example, eliminated the effect of exposure to food on the desirability of other rewards (Wadhwa et al., 2008).

Finally, rewards also display drive-dependent attractiveness. The stronger the felt drive state the more attractive related rewards become. Sugar is tastier when people are hungry (Cabanac, 1979) and water is more refreshing when people are thirsty. Similarly, recovering heroin addicts valued a dosage of a heroin replacement drug twice as much when they had been deprived of their normal dosage (Giordano et al., 2002). These effects also extend to individual differences in reward desirability. Exposing individuals to a frosty mug of beer increased the urge to drink, for example, but only among people who drink heavily (Kambouropoulos & Staiger, 2001).

### The current research

We suggest that distinctiveness is rewarding, and as such, should exhibit the characteristics noted above. First, drive transference suggests that cross-domain spillover effects should be reciprocal. Just as one rewarding stimulus (e.g., A) can affect the desirability of another rewarding stimulus (e.g., B) in a different domain, so too should the reverse occur, whereby exposure to B should impact the desirability of A. In the context of distinctiveness, this suggests that presenting a cue related to distinctiveness should enhance the desire for a reward in an unrelated domain (e.g., food). Similarly, the reciprocal effect should also occur, whereby rewards from seemingly unrelated domains should enhance the desirability of unique products.

Second, distinctiveness should also show cross-domain satiation. The effect of a rewarding stimulus on drives for distinctiveness should be able to be satiated by a reward from a different domain.

Finally, though we do not focus on this issue in depth, the combination of drive transference and drive-dependent attractiveness suggest that individual differences in reward value should also moderate the spillover effects of drive activation on rewards in other domains. Exposure to beer also boosted people's desire for cross-domain rewards (e.g., money), for example, but only among heavy drinkers

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