



The spell of cuteness in food consumption? It depends on food type and consumption motivation



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ABSTRACT

Despite the popular use of cuteness in product designs, especially for foods, little is known about how cuteness influences consumption. This article contributes to the evolving stream of research on cuteness by designing two experiments based on the compatibility principle to examine the contextual factors that moderate the effect of cuteness on food consumption (i.e., food type and consumption motivation). We found that cute food induced more consumption when the food is perceived as vice or under hedonic motivation, whereas neutral food induced more consumption when the food is perceived as virtue or under utilitarian motivation.

“The cutest and most eye-catching products are the ones you won’t want to just shove into a drawer. Because, sometimes, it is what’s on the outside that counts.” – Taylor Bryant

1. Introduction

Cute products are popular among not only children (e.g., Branen, Fletcher, & Hilbert, 2002) but also adults (e.g., Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007; Miesler, Leder, & Herrmann, 2011; Nenkov & Scott, 2014). Cuteness has become a key visual cue that producers use to communicate with consumers. Food marketers use cute shapes to increase product likability, generating favorable consumer reactions such as positive emotions and a more positive attitude toward the product, consequently leading to more purchases and consumption (child sample: Boyer, Laurentz, McCabe, & Kranz, 2012; Branen et al., 2002; adult sample: Nenkov & Scott, 2014). As with other product categories, cute food may involve anthropomorphized features (Epley et al., 2007). The *kindchenschema* (baby schema) dimension of cuteness focuses on the cute features of newborns (e.g., large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, chubby cheeks, and a small nose and mouth) (Lorenz, 1943). Nenkov and Scott (2014) noted that *whimsical cuteness* triggers a sense of fun and playfulness. Whimsically cute shapes have been used to encourage increased fiber consumption (Elliott, 2009). However, many cute foods associated with “fun” lack nutrients and are high in calories and sugar (Boyer et al., 2012). Such cute foods might

induce overconsumption that can lead to obesity. Despite the prevalence of cute foods in the marketplace, little research has been done on how cute shapes increase or decrease consumption.

This current study assesses food consumption behavior (i.e., food intake) and contributes to the evolving stream of research on whimsical cuteness by examining contextual factors that moderate how cute shapes affect food consumption. Two moderators are explored: food type and consumption motivation. Previous studies have shown that foods can be (and often are) categorized as either healthy or unhealthy (Carels, Harper, & Konrad, 2006; Carels, Konrad, & Harper, 2007; Oakes & Slotterback, 2001). Perceptions about healthiness may influence consumer expectations and beliefs associated with the food (Carels et al., 2006; Carels, Konrad, & Harper, 2007). Since we expect the effects of cuteness to be subject to food perceptions, this study addresses the following questions. Compared with a neutral shape, will a cute shape increase a person’s consumption of a given food? If so, are the advantages of a cute shape contingent upon food type and consumption motivation? What are the boundary conditions for the use of a cute shape? Is it possible for a food’s cute shape to decrease a person’s consumption of that food?

Our theoretical platform for hypothesis development is based on the compatibility principle (Tversky, Sattath, & Slovic, 1988), and suggests that the dimension of an object (e.g., the hedonic benefits of cute food) has greater influence when it is compatible with or similar to the food type and the consumer’s consumption motivation. Thus, we predict that

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visual cues based on food shapes suggesting benefits that are *compatible* with the consumer's consumption goals will have a greater impact on the amount of food consumed than will food shapes associated with *incompatible* benefits. This compatibility is expected to result in increased food consumption.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Influences of food type

We expect food type to influence consumption differently for foods with cute and neutral shapes. Previous research has shown that people tend to categorize foods based on a good/bad dichotomy, in which foods are either good for one's health (e.g., fruits, vegetables and yogurt) or bad for it (e.g., fried chicken, ice cream or candy) (Rozin, Ashmore, & Markwith, 1996). Some researchers use the terms "vice" and "virtue" to describe unhealthy and healthy foods, respectively (e.g., Mishra & Mishra, 2011; Okada, 2005; Wertenbroch, 1998). Consuming unhealthy foods (compared to healthy foods) is typically more difficult to justify because the pleasure and enjoyment of that consumption comes at the expense of long-term health (Okada, 2005; Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). It is worth mentioning that, in regards to food, perceived healthiness may be a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Ares, Giménez, & Gámbaro, 2009; Sütterlin & Siegrist, 2015). In addition, many studies have indicated that consumers always have the intuition that "healthy = less tasty" (Huang & Wub, 2016; Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006; Werle, Trendel, & Ardito, 2013). Mixed feelings make it harder for the consumer to determine which is the more compelling stimulus.

Cute priming leads to a focus on self-reward, and induces consumer indulgence (Nenkov & Scott, 2014). Fun and playfulness offer consumers hedonic value in rewarding situations (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). We thus expect that the sense of "fun" generated by cute priming will raise consumers' focus on and responsiveness to cues regarding the possible self-reward of an indulgent opportunity. Cute foods are usually considered to be fun, suggesting that "eating is entertainment" (Elliott, 2009). According to the compatibility principle (Tversky et al., 1988), people attribute significant weight to dimensions that are compatible because such dimensions can be more easily and confidently mapped to the output being considered. The hedonic perceptions induced by cute food are compatible with the hedonic benefits provided by unhealthy food. This compatibility will increase food consumption.

On the other hand, healthy cute food is incompatible with consumers' expectation that healthy food should look serious (Elliott, 2009). In Elliott's (2009) study of children, fun food was found to obstruct the promotion of wholesome food habits. This implies that a cute food shape does not tell the consumer that the food is healthy. Since people expect healthy food to look serious, they may expect cute food to be less effective or have fewer health benefits than food that appears neutral, and thus consume less of it. A neutral appearance is more compatible with common perceptions regarding healthy food, and this perceived compatibility will increase consumption of a neutrally shaped healthy food. Two hypotheses are thus proposed as follows.

H1a: When exposed to unhealthy food, people will consume more cute (versus neutral) food.

H1b: When exposed to healthy food, people will consume more neutral (versus cute) food.

2.2. Influences of consumption motivation

Most classifications of the different types of consumer benefits start with the distinction between utilitarian and hedonic benefits (Holbrook, 1994). In a food context, utilitarian benefits provide an eater with a means to an end (i.e., being healthy or being full). Hedonic benefits are non-instrumental, experiential, and affective; they are

appreciated for their own sake, regardless of their practical purposes (Babin et al., 1994; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The tantalizing aroma, delicious taste or appealing appearance of the food provides eaters with hedonic benefits that are intrinsically rewarding since they enhance experiential emotions, pleasure, and sentimental gratification.

Foods are strategically portrayed as fun, either by association or via their own specific characteristics (Boyer et al., 2012). For some people, especially children, food intake might be encouraged if the shape of the food being offered resembles an interesting item. Studies on the influence of food visuals on the consumption of a given food have specifically focused on children, and the results have been inconsistent. Jansen, Mulkens, and Jansen (2010) indicated that visual appeal had a strong influence on children's consumption of fruit. However, other researchers have suggested that a cute food shape did not affect children's consumption of snacks (Boyer et al., 2012; Branen, Fletcher, & Hilbert, 2002). Although there is no direct evidence linking the cuteness of the food and the amount of food consumed, Nenkov and Scott's (2014) study of an adult sample indicated that consumers behave more indulgently after exposure to cute products. Such products prime mental representations of fun, increasing one's focus on impending self-rewards, and rendering one more likely to choose indulgent alternatives.

What, then, is the relationship between cute food and the hedonic consumption motivation? Consumers appear to derive pleasure from viewing cute images or objects (Bellfield et al., 2011). The priming effect of a cute product increases fun and playfulness, which are compatible with the hedonic consumption motivation. The compatible dimensions of cuteness and hedonism thus enhance mental representations of sensory pleasure, fantasy and fun, resulting in greater consumption of cute food.

In contrast, eaters who have a utilitarian consumption motivation expect the food to look neutral. Cute associations may dilute the consumer's perceptions of a food's utilitarian benefits. Therefore, cute food will be perceived as incompatible with the utilitarian consumption motivation. Elliott (2009) actually suggested that people expect healthy food to look serious. Compared with a cute shape, a neutral shape looks more serious and should evoke associations that the food has utilitarian benefits. This compatibility between neutral shape and utilitarianism can more easily induce people to eat the food. The following hypotheses are thus proposed.

H2a: When primed with a hedonic motivation, people will consume more cute (versus neutral) food.

H2b: When primed with a utilitarian motivation, people will consume more neutral (versus cute) food.

3. Empirical overview

We propose that the influence of a cute shape depends on food type or consumption motivation. We conducted four studies to provide supporting evidence. Before each study, a pretest was conducted to determine the manipulations. Study 1 used two different cookies to represent *healthy but not tasty* and *unhealthy but tasty* foods. Using identical experimental materials, Study 1a and Study 1b tested the same phenomena with samples of children and adults, respectively. Study 2 used jelly as the test product, and framed it as either healthy or unhealthy. Study 3 employed chocolate as the test product, and adopted a priming task for the manipulation of consumption motivation. Since the current research involved the use of a non-sensitive, completely anonymous survey, and participation would not induce undue psychological stress or anxiety, it was exempt from review by the research ethics committee at the author's university. There was no overlap of participants across all studies. This research used IBM SPSS statistics 20.0 to analyze the data across all studies.

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