



Research report

Mixed selection. Effects of body images, dietary restraint, and persuasive messages on females' orientations towards chocolate

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ABSTRACT

Many women experience ambivalent reactions to chocolate: craving it but also wary of its impact on weight and health. Chocolate advertisements often use thin ideal models and previous research indicates that this exacerbates ambivalence. This experiment compared attitudes to, and consumption of, chocolate following exposure to images containing thin or overweight models together with written messages that were either positive or negative about eating chocolate. Participants (all female) were categorised as either low- or high-restraint. Approach, avoidance and guilt motives towards chocolate were measured and the participants had an opportunity to consume chocolate. Exposure to thin ideal models led to higher approach motives and this effect was most marked among the high restraint participants. Avoidance and guilt scores did not vary as a function of model size or message, but there were clear differences between the restraint groups, with the high restraint participants scoring substantially higher than low restraint participants on both of these measures. When the participants were provided with an opportunity to eat some chocolate, those with high restraint who had been exposed to the thin models consumed the most.

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Introduction

Chocolate evokes mixed reactions in many women. It is one of the most craved foodstuffs among females, much enjoyed for its sensory properties (Rozin, Levine, & Stoess, 1991). Yet it can also be a source of concern because its caloric density presents risks of unwanted weight gain and because some consumers fear possible stigmatization for self-indulgence (Macht & Dettmer, 2006; Rogers & Smit, 2000; Rozin, Bauer, & Catanese, 2003). Recent studies have confirmed that chocolate evokes ambivalent attitudes (Cartwright & Stritzke, 2008; Holmes & Rozin, 2011; Rodgers, Stritzke, Bui, Franko, & Chabrol, 2011; Rodríguez, Fernandez, Cepeda-Benito, & Vila, 2005). Research with both children (Cartwright et al., 2007) and adults (Cartwright & Stritzke, 2008; Rodgers et al., 2011) has demonstrated that attitudes to this sweet can be distinguished into approach, avoidance, and guilt components. Importantly, these conflicting orientations are experienced often simultaneously. An individual can find herself at once drawn to chocolate but also anxious to avoid it and experiencing feelings of guilt if she consumes it. For example, high chocolate cravers reported feeling more joyful and more guilty than lower cravers

after eating chocolate (Moreno-Dominguez, Rodriguez-Ruiz, Martin, & Warren, 2011).

Consumers' ambivalence towards chocolate has implications both for those who seek to promote sales of it (e.g., advertisers) and for those who wish to provide advice about its consumption (e.g., health educators). In each context, issues arise concerning the impact of imagery and messages that might be employed in communicating with audiences: in response to any advertisement or warning, conflicting orientations could be instigated. At present, we lack information on the patterns of such reactions as a function of the nature of the communications. In this study, we examined the impact of visual imagery and verbal message contents on women's orientation to and consumption of chocolate.

Influencing feelings about chocolate

Affective orientations towards chocolate are not stable but vary as a function of hunger, mood, food related cognitions, information about nutritional contents, and exposure to the stimulus object or images of it (Benford & Gough, 2006; Fletcher, Pine, Woodbridge, & Nash, 2007; Holmes & Rozin, 2011; Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2009; Rodríguez et al., 2005; Rolls & McCabe, 2007; Steenhuis, 2009). Levels of approach, avoidance, and guilt orientations may each change in response to salient experiences, such as encountering an advertisement intended to promote desire for the sweet, or

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receiving a nutritionist's warning that too much can be bad for you. Visual imagery is used extensively in advertisements for most products, including chocolate. Exposure to images of chocolate can certainly heighten desire for it (Fletcher et al., 2007; Rolls & McCabe, 2007). Perhaps paradoxically, visual ads for chocolate often include also images of slender female models (Geiger & Fennell, 2003). It seems that advertisers wish to enhance the appeal of the foodstuff by associating it with the 'thin ideal.' The desire to be thin is highly motivating for many women throughout the lifespan (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Tiggemann, 2002) and advertisers may aim to exploit this aspiration. In contrast, a possible strategy for health educators who wish to alert the public to the consequences of over-indulgence is to associate the product with images of overweight women. We consider below the implications of these different visual strategies for affective reactions.

A related way to provide information about a foodstuff is to describe it and its consequences. As well as visual imagery, most advertisements contain some verbal or textual message about the desirability of the product. In the case of chocolate, these messages are often about its smooth and delectable taste (Hill & Radimer, 1997). Most health communications about chocolate, in contrast, disseminate warnings about the deleterious results of excess, emphasising weight gain and associated risks, and advising lower levels of consumption (American Dietetic Association & Duyff, 2006; Johnson, Hackett, Bibby, & Cross, 1999).

Message type and ambivalent reactions

Messages about chocolate could, then, be intended to promote its appeal (e.g., via advertising) or to moderate its consumption (e.g., via health education). The associated visual images could include thin or overweight women; the accompanying verbal texts could be positive or negative. Relatively little is known of how these messages affect audiences. Research into the effects of thin ideal imagery on female audiences has yielded mixed results (Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). Several investigators have reported negative affect and body dissatisfaction following exposure to this kind of imagery (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009; Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005; see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009 for reviews). Body dissatisfaction can lead to dieting and eating pathologies (Polivy & Herman, 2002; Stice, Marti, & Durant, 2011). The common advertising strategy of highlighting the thin ideal perpetuates images that many women believe are perceived as attractive (Brown & Slaughter, 2011) and, in combination with chocolate, it represents a foodstuff that is also perceived as attractive. Yet, the physical image is essentially unattainable and potentially anxiety-inducing and the foodstuff is associated with craving and bingeing.

Hence, in the context of chocolate, there is the possibility that the strategy could be counterproductive from an advertiser's perspective. The thin image + chocolate advertisement is a potent context for arousing ambivalent feelings. If the presence of thin models makes the commercial aversive, consumers' enthusiasm for the product itself might be tempered. Geiger and Fennell (2003) found in a qualitative study that many women expressed cynicism about chocolate + thin model ads and awareness of the paradox: "You can't look that good and eat chocolate" (p. 112). On the other hand, from a health campaigner's perspective, inciting aversive responses towards chocolate could be precisely the intended goal.

The picture is complicated, however, because some women appear to experience self-enhancement effects from exposure to thin ideal models, perhaps because they are inspired by the standards

of physical 'excellence' that the models represent (Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004; Mills et al., 2002). If the presence of thin models makes the ad attractive or motivating, then this supports the advertisers' assumptions and the possibility arises that the use of thin models could promote the appeal of chocolate, at least for some proportion of the audience.

Other images of females could, in principle, be used in representations of chocolate. For example, women of more natural shapes, including larger women, could be employed as models. Consider the possible consequences of having overweight women associated with chocolate. From an advertiser's perspective, this might not seem a helpful conjunction, because the large model could serve as a visible reminder to female consumers that chocolate can cause weight gain. Fear of being perceived as 'fat' is common among women (Cash & Hicks, 1990; Lieberman, Tybur, & Latner, 2011). In Western societies, portrayals of overweight people in the media tend to represent them as unattractive (Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003). Overweight images can elicit negative stereotypes, prejudices and even disgust in the audience (Lieberman et al., 2011; Solbes & Enesco, 2010; Vartanian, 2010). Yet, from a health campaigner's perspective, this reminder might be a message worth emphasising. Highlighting overweight as a possible association of chocolate could reduce its appeal and encourage women to avoid it, or feel guilty about consuming it. In combination with chocolate, then, an image of an overweight person could be an ambivalent stimulus.

Note that none of the reactions considered above should be assumed to be the exclusive response to a given advertisement or message. We stress again that chocolate, and hence representations of chocolate, can evoke mixed and ambivalent reactions (Cartwright & Stritzke, 2008; Moreno-Dominguez et al., 2011). Thus, an advertisement intended to sell chocolate could well increase desire for it (approach) but at the same time could inadvertently remind a prospective purchaser that this is a foodstuff she ought to eat less of (avoidance) and that she would feel she has violated a personal dietary standard if she desires or consumes it (guilt). Similarly, a health warning about excess consumption might lead an individual to eat less (avoidance) but could also bring to mind just how enjoyable the product is (approach); it could remind her that she has succumbed regularly to temptation (guilt), or, if models with more rotund shapes are associated with chocolate, it could provide an opportunity for favourable social comparison (less guilt).

Relatively little empirical evidence is available on which of the possible outcomes of exposure to different types of chocolate advertisements/warnings actually obtain. However, in one study, Durkin, Rae, and Stritzke (2012) investigated the effect of viewing thin and overweight images of models in chocolate advertisements on ambivalent attitudes towards the product. Female participants were allocated to a thin model condition, an overweight model condition, or a control group (no ads). Following exposure, participants in the thin condition had increased avoidance, approach and guilt scores on the Orientation to Chocolate Questionnaire (Cartwright & Stritzke, 2008; Cartwright et al., 2007), while participants in the overweight condition had decreased approach and guilt scores, with no change in avoidance. Control participants demonstrated ambivalence, but no changes over time. The authors concluded that common advertising strategies for chocolate (i.e., chocolate + thin model images) are likely to exacerbate ambivalence in female consumers.

Although Durkin et al.'s (2012) findings support the argument that women's reactions to different types of images about chocolate are ambivalent, the study had some limitations. First, it did not collect a behavioural measure (i.e., eating chocolate); hence, it did not test whether different conditions impact on actual consumption, arguably the most direct test of effects. Second, it did

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