

DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Young Eun Huh

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388 Posner Hall

Essays on Consumption:

Top-Down Motivational Processes in Food Consumption

Given the prevalence of obesity in our society today, it becomes very important to understand how food intake is regulated. Appetite and food consumption is not only influenced by the sensory properties of food (i.e., bottom-up processes), but also by the mental representation of the food (top-down processes). While consumer research has traditionally investigated the former, the researchers have recently started to investigate top-down motivational processes involved in food consumption. Exposure to a food can increase and decrease consumers' motivation to consume other foods. However, when and how such motivational changes occur is not well understood. My dissertation investigates how exposure to a food influences the motivation to consume other foods, especially complements and substitutes.

The first chapter examines how exposure to a food increases consumers' motivation to consume complementary foods. Previous research suggests that eating a food engenders habituation, that is, a decreased responsiveness and motivation to obtain the food. General-process theories of motivation also posit that eating a food sensitizes one to other foods (i.e., increasing responsiveness and motivation to obtain the other food), but when this occurs is unclear. I argue that sensitization occurs for foods that are frequently consumed in conjunction with a target food (i.e., complements) but that it does not occur for unrelated foods. Results of three experiments suggest that the repeated consumption of a food increases actual consumption of its complements but does not affect consumption of unrelated foods.

In the second chapter, I examine how the consumption of cross-category substitutes influences consumption of the target food. One would expect that when a target is unavailable, the most similar substitute (within-category substitute that is slightly inferior to the target) would satisfy consumer needs better than a less similar substitute (cross-category substitute). I show that although most consumers prefer the inferior within-category substitute when the target food is unavailable, consuming a cross-category substitute actually satisfies the consumer's need better than the within-category substitute. I plan to show that this effect occurs as a result of comparing the target to the inferior within-category substitute resulting in a contrast effect, however, no contrast arises when the cross-category substitute is compared to the target food.

Overall, my dissertation attests to the importance of top-down processes that regulate food consumption, specifically, the results of my studies deepen our understanding of what governs consumers' cravings for and intake of foods.