

Short communication

Does disgust enhance eating disorder symptoms? ☆

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Abstract

In the present study, the hypothesized causal relationship between disgust and eating pathology was investigated. Female undergraduates were either assigned to an experimental condition in which feelings of disgust were induced by means of a bad smelling odorant, or to a control condition in which no such disgust manipulation was carried out. Both groups completed questionnaires for measuring various eating disorder-related concepts (i.e., body esteem, restraint eating, and body change strategies). In addition, explicit and implicit preferences for high-caloric food were measured. Results demonstrated that women in the experimental condition did not report lower levels of body esteem, and neither showed higher levels of restraint eating or other body change strategies. Furthermore, they did not display a decreased explicit or implicit preference for high-caloric food. Thus, in the present study no indication for a causal relation between disgust and eating disorder symptoms in young females was found.

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1. Introduction

Various studies have suggested a relationship between disgust and eating disorders. For example, disgust sensitivity is found to be correlated to eating disorder symptoms (Davey, Buckland, Tantow, & Dallos, 1998), and eating disordered patients are found to be more disgusted by disgust-relevant stimuli than healthy control women (Troop, Treasure, & Serpell, 2002). However, there are also studies which found no relation between disgust (sensitivity) and eating pathology (e.g., Muris et al., 2000).

Apart from these inconsistencies in results, no study has directly examined the causal relationship between disgust and eating pathology. Therefore, the present study attempted to induce feelings of disgust in the lab by means of an odor manipulation, and investigated whether this would evoke decreased levels of body esteem and increased levels of eating disorder symptoms. Not only self-report questionnaires and an explicit food preference task were employed as dependent variables, but we also included an Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), which provides an index of the strength of automatic associations between concepts.

☆ An extended version of this article can be obtained from the first author.

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It was hypothesized that the experimental disgust manipulation would result in lower body esteem, and higher levels of restraint eating behavior and other body change strategies than a control condition. Furthermore, it was expected that experimentally induced disgust would yield less explicit appetite for high-caloric food, and a stronger implicit association between high-caloric food and negative stimuli.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Female undergraduate students were assigned to the experimental ($n=25$) or control ($n=25$) condition, and matched on eating pathology (Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ); Van Strien, Frijters, Bergers, & Defares, 1986; Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire; Fairburn & Beglin, 1994) and disgust sensitivity (Disgust Sensitivity Questionnaire; Rozin, Fallon, & Mandell, 1984).

2.2. Questionnaires

For the purpose of the present study, items were taken from the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984), the DEBQ (Van Strien et al., 1986), and the Body Image and Body Change Questionnaire (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2002), and reformulated in such a way that they measured state-like ideas of respectively body esteem, restraint, and willingness to employ body change strategies (all Cronbach α 's > .85).

2.3. Explicit food preference

Twenty-one food pictures depicting high-caloric (e.g., cake), medium-caloric (e.g., rice), and low-caloric (e.g., tomato) food were randomly presented on a computer screen. For each picture, participants were asked to indicate their desire to eat that particular food on that very moment by means of visual analogue scales (VAS; 0 = *no desire at all*; 100 = *very strong desire*).

The Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) is a computerized reaction time task that measures to what extent two target categories ('high-caloric' and 'low-caloric') are associated with two attribute categories ('positive' and 'negative'). Participants were instructed to sort target stimuli (pictures of high-caloric and low-caloric food) and to sort attribute stimuli (positive and negative words) as fast as possible to the category names. The IAT consists of seven phases (see Table 1; Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). In general, responses tend to be faster when the two categories that share a response key in the combined phases are somehow associated than when they are not. By comparing performance between phases 4 and 7, the relative strength of the target-attribute associations can be inferred.

2.4. Procedure

Participants were individually tested in a laboratory room. In the experimental condition, 4 nasty smelling Limburger cheeses were placed out of sight in the room. All subjects started with respectively the IAT and the explicit food preference task, and then completed the questionnaires. Afterwards, the disgust manipulation was checked by a

Table 1
Sequence of trial blocks of the Implicit Association Test on food preference

Phase	No. of trials	Function	Items assigned to left-key response	Items assigned to right-key response
1	20	Practice	Positive words	Negative words
2	20	Practice	Low-caloric food	High-caloric food
3	20	Practice	Positive + low-caloric	Negative + high-caloric
4	80	Test	Positive + low-caloric	Negative + high-caloric
5	20	Practice	High-caloric food	Low-caloric food
6	20	Practice	Positive + high-caloric	Negative + low-caloric
7	80	Test	Positive + high-caloric	Negative + low-caloric

Note. For half of the participants blocks 2, 3, and 4 were switched with blocks 5, 6, and 7. In addition, half of the participants were firstly confronted with a block of food stimuli (target) and after that with word stimuli (attribute). As a result, there were four experimental set-ups.

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