

Review

Why did I eat that? Perspectives on food decision making and dietary restraint

Melissa G. Bublitz^{a,*}, Laura A. Peracchio^a, Lauren G. Block^b

^a Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, PO Box 742, Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA

^b Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College, Marketing Department, B12-240, New York, NY 10010, USA

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Abstract

Consumers trying to watch or restrict what they eat face a battle each day as they attempt to navigate the food-rich environments in which they live. Due to the complexity of food decision making, consumers are susceptible to a wide range of social, cognitive, affective, and environmental forces determined to interrupt their intentions to restrict their dietary intake. In this article, we integrate literature from diverse theoretical perspectives into a conceptual framework designed to offer a better understanding of the antecedents, interruptions, and consequences of dietary restraint. We outline a path for researchers to investigate how restraint behaviors in the eating domain influence a wide variety of consumer psychological phenomena. It is our hope that a collective examination of this literature provides a lens that directs future research on food decision making and dietary restraint and empowers consumers to invest their cognitive and behavioral resources towards healthy eating behaviors.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bublitz4@uwm.edu (M.G. Bublitz), lperacch@uwm.edu (L.A. Peracchio), lauren.block@baruch.cuny.edu (L.G. Block).

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Introduction

Why did I eat that? Most people have asked themselves this question at least once, if not many times. After all, eating is essential to survival and an integral part of daily life. And, food temptations abound. Although the physiological need for food may sometimes prompt us to eat, a wide range of other factors including positive and negative moods, distraction, and sensory cues, as well as a plethora of other psychological and social influences, underlie most eating decisions and consequently, a majority of the empirical investigations into food decisions. Researchers from a broad range of theoretical perspectives have sought insight into consumers' food decision making. This substantial body of research and the ever-growing statistics on obesity demonstrate that overconsumption of food is a robust phenomenon.

Excessive eating and unhealthy food choices are at the root of one of the most pressing health concerns facing the United States and much of the developed world. The most recent results from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study (NHANES) investigating the prevalence of obesity reveals that approximately one third of adults in the United States, 32.2% of men and 35.5% of women over the age of 20, are obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010). Being overweight or obese has a negative effect on quality of life and has significant psychological (Falkner et al., 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2010), sociological (Brownell, Puhl, Schwartz, & Rudd, 2005; Christakis & Fowler, 2009), and economic (Finkelstein, Trogdon, Cohen, & Dietz, 2009) costs.

In an increasingly obesogenic environment, medical experts, nutrition advocates, and public health officials are urging consumers to be more aware of their eating decisions, encouraging moderation and a focus on healthy eating (Faith, Fontaine, Baskin, & Allison, 2007; Goldberg & Gunasti, 2007;

Howlett, Burton, & Kozup, 2008). In addition, with all the media and marketplace emphasis on the growing obesity epidemic, consumers are exposed to vast amounts of information about food decision making and are becoming increasingly diet conscious. One study found approximately 47% of men and 75% of women in the United States diet at some point during their lifetime (Jeffery, Adlis, & Forster, 1991). However, increased awareness and focus on dieting has yet to reduce or reverse obesity trends. This begs the question, how does a focus on diet with the intent to restrict eating, impact food decision making?

This review integrates findings from diverse theoretical perspectives in the areas of consumer, cognitive, and social psychological research to demonstrate how the complexity of food decision making contributes to failures to exercise dietary restraint. We integrate what we know about restricting food consumption, commonly referred to as dieting, and identify the many opportunities for researchers and practitioners to investigate and expand our understanding of food decision making. It is our hope that a collective examination of this area of inquiry will provide consumer psychology researchers with a lens empowering consumers to invest their cognitive, affective, and behavioral resources toward healthier eating behaviors.

We begin with an overview of food decision making, focusing on the psychological construct of dietary restraint. Introduced by Herman & Mack, 1975, restrained eaters are identified as those who are concerned with their weight and use dieting behaviors in an attempt, though not always successful, to maintain an "ideal weight." Next, we examine research that explores the antecedents to restrained eating. Then, we summarize key elements from consumer, cognitive, and social psychology research domains that may influence consumers' food decision making and interrupt dietary restraint. We conclude with a discussion that highlights investigations into

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