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Feeling Judged? The Presence of Outgroup Members Promotes Virtuous Choices

Short abstract (max 50 words):

We investigate whether the presence of an ingroup vs. outgroup observer influences consumer choices of virtuous versus indulgent foods. In seven studies, we find that consumers make healthier choices in the presence of outgroup (vs. ingroup) others, mediated by the anticipation of being judged negatively by outgroup members.

Long abstract (max 1000 words):

Consumers routinely choose between products of virtue (e.g., healthy food) and those of vice (e.g., indulgent food). These choices take place not in a social vacuum, but often in the presence of observers, for example in supermarkets or cafeterias. Whereas much research has shown that consumers choose virtue over vice in the presence of observers compared to when alone (e.g., Griskevicius, Tybur and van den Bergh 2010), what is not yet known is whether characteristics of the observers affect consumers' choices.

Social diversity is increasing in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces (Putnam 2007). As a consequence, consumers regularly encounter outgroup others who belong to different social groups (e.g., ethnic, academic, or professional outgroups). In such instances, consumers might fear negative judgment, because they themselves judge outgroup members more negatively than ingroup members (Brewer 1979). As consumption not only fulfills personal needs for specific products, but also social needs for recognition and acceptance (Berger and Heath 2007), consumers might choose products to alleviate the negative judgments they expect from outgroup observers.

In this research, we investigate whether the presence of an ingroup vs. outgroup observer influences consumer choices of virtuous versus indulgent foods. We predict that consumers will make healthier choices in the presence of outgroup (vs. ingroup) others, mediated by the anticipation of being judged negatively by outgroup members. In seven studies, we showed the effect of observers' group-membership on choice virtuousness using various types of group memberships (race/ethnicity, school- and work-affiliation), food choices, and participant populations (university-students and general-adult populations).

Study 1 tested the causal link between an observer's group membership and participants' food choices. Three hundred thirty-six participants were approached by a black or a white research assistant (RA) to complete a filler survey. Afterwards, participants chose between an indulgent KitKat bar and a healthier fruit snack (our dependent measure). We coded as ingroup (vs. outgroup) any responses for which the RA and the participant were of the same (vs. different) race. A greater proportion of participants in the outgroup condition chose the healthier raisins (44.16%) than in the ingroup condition (29.41%; $b = .64 (.33)$, $z = 1.94$, $p = .053$; see Figure 1).

Studies 2 and 3 replicated the effect of observer group-membership on food choice for another type of group membership: university affiliation. In Study 2, 180 student participants were approached by an RA dressed either in their university's t-shirt and cap (ingroup condition) or in another local university's t-shirt and cap (outgroup condition) to complete a filler survey. Afterwards, participants chose between indulgent M&Ms and healthier raisins (our dependent measure). A greater

proportion of participants in the outgroup condition chose the healthier raisins (31.25%) than in the ingroup condition (12.16%; $b = 1.19 (.45)$, $z = 2.66$, $p = .008$; see Figure 1). In Study 3, 154 student participants completed an online study they believed originated from their own university (ingroup) or a foreign university (outgroup). For our dependent measure, participants chose between a health-minded vs. an indulgent restaurant gift-card. A greater proportion of participants in the outgroup condition (80.77%) chose the healthier restaurant than in the ingroup condition (65.79%; $b = .78 (.38)$, $z = 2.08$, $p = .037$; see Figure 1).

Study 4 tested the role of expected interpersonal-judgment in the effect of observer group-membership on food choice. Using a causal-chain mediation, two separate studies examined this proposed psychological process (expected interpersonal-judgment) as both an effect of the independent variable (observer group-membership) and as a predictor of the dependent variable (food choice). In Study 4a, 206 participants imagined making an indulgent food choice in the presence of an ingroup (vs. outgroup) observer, and indicated their expected interpersonal-judgment from this person. Participants expected the outgroup member would judge them more negatively ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 2.03$) than the ingroup member ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.87$, $t(204) = 2.39$, $p = .018$). In Study 4b, 192 participants imagined choosing between indulgent and healthy food options in the presence of an observer (with unspecified group membership), and indicated their expected interpersonal-judgment from this person, as well as their food choice. The more harshly participants expected the observer to judge them, the more likely they were to choose the healthier option, $\beta = .235$, $SE = 0.113$, $t(197) = 2.076$, $p = .039$.

Study 5 tested the moderating roles of internal-attribution tendencies. Three hundred twenty-three student participants completed an online survey they believed originated from their own university (ingroup) or another local university (outgroup). Participants indicated their preference for healthy and indulgent subscription food-clubs, and their general tendency to make internal attributions for their own actions using Touré-Tillery and Light's (2018) self-diagnostics scale. We found a significant interaction of observer group-membership \times internal-attribution tendency \times food type ($F(1, 298) = 4.76$, $p = .030$). As we expected, internal-attribution tendencies moderated the effect of observer group-membership on food choice such that it replicated at lower—but not at higher—levels of internal-attribution tendencies.

In Study 6, we used (US) state-level search data from Google Trends to examine the relationship between the percentage of minorities in a state (our proxy for the presence of outgroup observers) and the relative number of Google searches for pretested healthy versus unhealthy foods in that state (our proxy for food choices). We found a significant interaction of food type \times percentage of minorities ($b = 15.63 (6.85)$, $t(49) = 2.28$, $p = .027$). As expected, as the percentage of minorities in that state increased, the relative number of searches for healthy food (vs. unhealthy food) also increased.

Our finding that observer group-memberships affects consumers' indulgent vs. healthy choices has several implications. On a theoretical level, research has not yet shown that people use food choices to influence others' perceptions. This finding is important because it highlights that the social environment impacts food choices in more complex ways than previously thought. On a practical level, marketers should consider the diversity of the environment in which they market healthy vs. unhealthy products. Thus, social diversity matters when marketing products and segmenting consumers.

FIGURE 1: MAIN EFFECT OF OBSERVER GROUP-MEMBERSHIP ON FOOD CHOICES IN STUDIES 1, 2 AND 3.

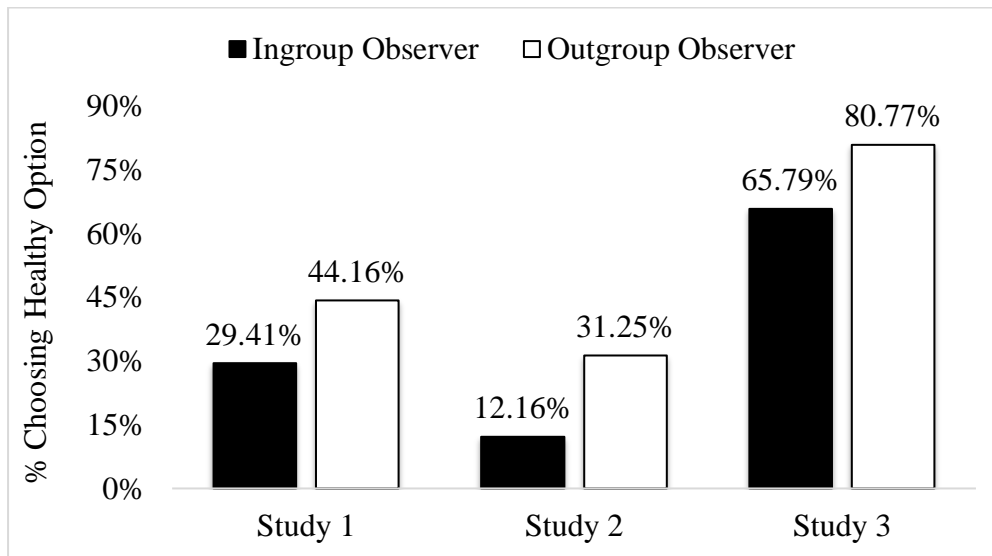
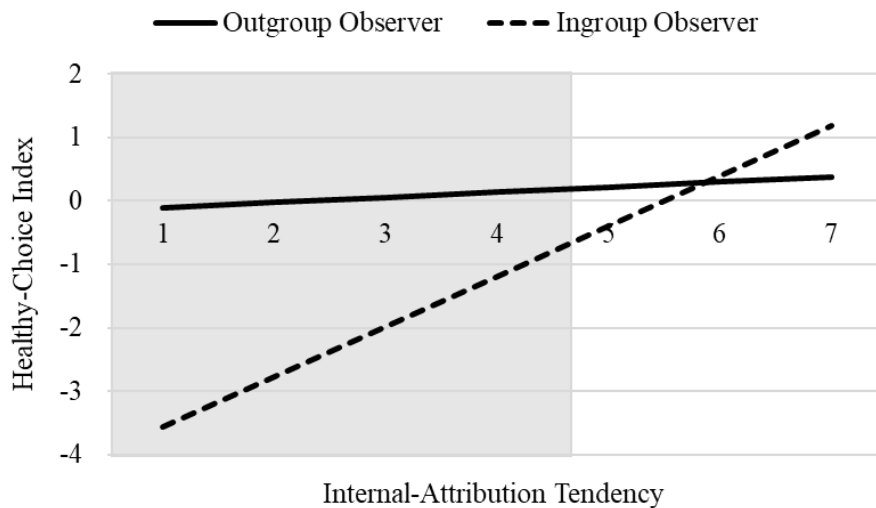


FIGURE 2: INTERACTION BETWEEN OBSERVER'S GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND INTERNAL-ATTRIBUTION TENDENCY ON REPORTED FOOD PREFERENCES



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