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**Managing Self-Image:
Choosing Healthy Food to Restore Competence**

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Choosing Healthy Food to Restore Competence**

by

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Abstract

Managing Self-Image: Choosing Healthy Food to Restore Competence

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Food consumption has been an area of study that received much attention, especially with the concern of nudging consumers towards healthy food choices to reduce the prevalence of obesity. Building on theories of Self-Affirmation and Self-Presentation, this study explores individuals' psychological need for self-competence as a potential motivating factor for consuming healthy food. Results of the study show that individuals had a greater likelihood of choosing healthy snacks when faced with self-threat (H1), and when allowed to restore self-competency through self-affirmation, the tendency towards healthy snacks was alleviated (H3). Finally, individuals' views of self-competence were on average higher after choosing healthy food, though the difference was not significant (H2). This study tests and demonstrates the novel proposition that impression management of one's self-image influences food choice. Contrary to previous findings on negative emotions and indulgent eating behavior, the present study shows that the threatened self chooses healthy options.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Many decisions are made daily, and common across populations is the decision of what to consume at mealtimes. While explicit factors such as taste and price may directly influence our food decisions, internal factors such as perceived associations of the food may also play a role in determining our consumption choices. Indeed, the impression management paradigm has consistently linked our consumption patterns to the perceived associations of products we consume—a behavior coined symbolic consumption. For instance, men were less likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors because they associate such behaviors with femininity (Brough et al. 2016) and the use of high-tech products were linked to innovativeness as a perceived personal characteristic (Wood and Hoeffler 2013). Thus, it should not come as a surprise that our food choices may also be influenced by our implicit associations of the food. Nevertheless, few studies have looked at impression management in the context of food (Vartanian 2015). Among those that did, research has mostly focused on gender identity and congruity with perceived food associations (e.g., White and Dahl 2006; Gal and Wilkie 2010, Experiment 4).

More recently, researchers examined the role of warmth and competence goals in understanding food choice, suggesting an implicit association of perceived healthiness of foods with the qualities of warmth (e.g., kindness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness) and competence (e.g., effectiveness, power, and skillfulness) (Grishin et al. 2017). Specifically, the researchers found that individuals were more likely to choose foods that are perceived as healthy (unhealthy) when they have an external goal to appear competent (warm). Grishin et al.'s (2017) research paved a new direction for the impression management paradigm, showing that food consumption stereotypes are not limited to gender.

While Grishin and colleagues (2017) propose a relationship between external impression goals and food choice, the present paper suggests an internal motivation approach to understanding food choice in the context of competence, drawing a parallel between competence (e.g., skillfulness, effectiveness, power) and self-integrity (self-competence). Specifically, as individuals have an internal motivation to maintain an overall self-integrity—being “morally adequate”—as proposed by the theory of self-affirmation (Steele 1988, p. 262), the present paper suggests that a threat to individuals’ self-integrity would trigger the motivation to restore it. As one of the ways to restore threatened self-integrity is through affirmation on another aspect of the self (Steele 1998), it is thus possible that individuals would seek such affirmation through their food decisions. Since healthy food has been found to be implicitly associated with competence (Grishin et al. 2017), is it possible that we use it to affirm our threatened self?

By proposing that healthy food acts as a medium to restore threatened self-integrity, the present research extends the largely outward-focused impression management literature (Vartanian 2015) to examine consumption as a means to maintain an internal balance of self-image. Specifically, the present study tests the proposed mechanism of restoring self-integrity by examining (i) whether individuals are more likely to make a healthy food choice when faced with self-threat and (ii) whether self-affirmation negates this propensity. Additionally, the present study also examines whether individuals’ perception of self-integrity changes after choosing healthy food. Although previous studies have examined internal motivation to restore identity on food choice (Gal and Wilkie 2010), to the author’s knowledge, the present paper is the first to examine such relationship beyond the context of gender.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT)

The theory of self-determination (SDT) proposes that human beings have an inherent psychological need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 1991). In fact, the mini theory of basic psychological needs (BPNT) within SDT looks at the effects of satisfaction and deprivation of psychological needs, including competence, on well-being (Ryan and Deci 2017). The researchers define well-being as “*thriving* or being *fully functioning* rather than merely by the presence of positive and absence of negative feelings” (Ryan and Deci 2017, p. 241) and consider the deprivation of the needs to represent “a stronger and more threatening experience than the mere absence of its fulfilment” (Vansteenkiste et al. 2020, p. 3). Studies conducted on these basic psychological needs have consistently shown that need satisfaction leads to wellness, whereas need thwarting leads to ill-being (e.g., Bartholomew et al. 2011; Cordeiro et al. 2016). According to BPNT, competence relates to the “experience of effectiveness and mastery” of skills and is fulfilled when one can use and broaden skills and expertise when engaging in certain activities (Vansteenkiste et al. 2020, p. 3). The current research agrees with SDT that individuals have a psychological need for competence. However, the current research focuses on the need to feel or perceive oneself as competent.

SELF-AFFIRMATION THEORY (SAT)

The self-affirmation theory (SAT) was introduced by Steele (1988), which shone new insights into cognitive dissonance research. In a typical cognitive dissonance study, people generally adjust their attitudes to match their behavior when they are led to believe that they had free choice over their actions (Steele 1988). In other words, people were motivated to maintain a psychological consistency between their behavior and attitudes.

However, Steele (1988) proposed that rather than maintaining psychological consistency, individuals seek to maintain a global self-integrity and do so through seeking explanations, about both themselves and the world. Here, the term self-integrity is used to denote the view of oneself as “morally adequate”, which includes being competent (Steel 1988, p. 262). The present paper aligns with this view and uses the term self-competence interchangeably with self-integrity.

The processes of seeking explanations and rationalizations make up the processes of self-affirmation. As outlined by Steele (1988), these processes are “activated by information that threatens the perceived adequacy or integrity of the self” (p. 262) and does not stop “until this perception is restored, through explanation, rationalization, and/or action” (p. 262). That is, when perceived self-integrity (competence) is threatened, individuals will be motivated to restore it to maintain an overall positive self-concept.

Central to the concept of self-affirmation is the idea that when self-integrity is threatened in one domain, one may cope with the self-threat by affirming oneself in an unrelated domain (Steele 1988). This was first suggested by the results of Steele’s earlier experiment on the effect of name-calling on compliance, which found that negative name-calling in both relevant (community cooperation) and irrelevant (driving safety) domains led to twice as much helping in a community project (Steele 1988). Since the findings could not possibly be explained by the need to maintain psychological consistency (it would not make sense for people that has been labeled a bad driver to resolve the inconsistency by engaging in non-driving related acts), Steele (1988) asserted that it could only be attributed to the activation of a “general ego-protective system” (p. 266) in which one of its function is to “affirm general goodness and worth after their goodness had been threatened” (p. 266).

Nevertheless, the affirmation in a different domain when self-integrity is threatened in a certain domain should only work when the former domain is at least as central to the global self as the latter (Steele 1988). That is, for the affirmation motive to be effectively reduced, the alternative self-image that one affirms should be at least as important as the one that is being threatened. In the case where there is no equally important alternative self, then affirmations that address the threat would be more effective than affirming a less important self-image (Steele 1988). Thus, in general, the SAT proposes that individuals are more concerned with maintaining a global self-integrity rather than resolving every provoking threat.

The conceptualization of SAT has inspired a plethora of contemporary research, demonstrating that the effect of a mere act of self-affirmation can be significant. Self-affirmation has been found to reduce self-control failure (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009), increase psychological well-being (Nelson et al. 2014), and increase the propensity to self-assemble products (Mochon et al. 2012), among other things. Still, research that examines self-affirmation and food choice has been limited (e.g., Cornil and Chandon 2013; Ivanic, 2016). More recently, Ivanic (2016) looked at the effects of self-affirmation on African American's food choice in the absence of threat and found that individuals who self-affirm after a group (racial)-focus prime exhibited healthier food and beverage choices. The research was primarily concerned with identifying ways to encourage healthier food choices among African Americans due to the prevalence of obesity among this racial group. However, it was conducted in a context where self-threats were absent and focused simply on the act of self-affirmation, as Ivanic (2016) argues that the presence of threat "is not a necessary condition to evoke behavioral changes" (p. 596-597) and that individuals do not always make food choices after receiving self-threatening information regarding their health or well-being.

While Ivanic (2016) claimed that studying the effects of self-affirmation in the absence of self-threat was essential because “individuals are not always surrounded by others and hence may not have available cues to drive food choices” (p. 603), the direction of the present paper would suggest otherwise. In fact, the current research argues that studying the effects of self-affirmation in the presence of threat is crucial as individuals are subjected to social comparison more than ever with the pervasiveness of smartphones and social media.

SOCIAL COMPARISON

Competence is a basic psychological need, and it is inevitable that individuals will seek to evaluate their abilities, which can be rather difficult to achieve in the absence of an objective standard (Elliot et al. 2017). Social comparison, proposed by Festinger in 1954, allows for such evaluation through comparing one’s performance with a “similar other” (Elliot et al. 2017, p. 193). More recently, social comparison has been described as “the process of thinking about information about one or more people in relation to the self” (Wood 1996, p. 520-521) and as the “process in which individuals relate their own characteristics to those of others” (Buunk and Gibbons 2007, p. 16). Simply put, individuals compare themselves with others to assess how they are doing in relevant areas.

Despite social comparison’s facilitation of one’s self-evaluation, it can also pose detrimental effects on one’s well-being. Past research has shown that individuals’ self-competence can be threatened when others perform better than them in domains central to the self (Thai and Lockwood 2015). That is, when someone we deem as similar to us is doing better than us in important areas in life, we may feel less morally adequate.

While it is easy to conceive that social comparison is a deliberate and conscious act, researchers have argued otherwise. As social beings, we constantly encounter

information about others and may be forced into comparison, regardless of whether we want to compare ourselves with them or not (Wood 2016). For example, it would probably be hard to not see someone lifting heavy weights or running at 8mph on the treadmill at the gym. Thus, one way or another, we are constantly faced with information that pushes us towards comparison (consciously or subconsciously) and that poses potential threats to our self-integrity.

The advancement in technology and the Internet of Things (IoT) has made it easier than ever to obtain social information and engage in social comparison with the introduction of social media. In 2019, the average daily time spent on social media by internet users worldwide is 144 minutes and has been increasing annually (Clement 2020). With the integration of smartphones in our lives, it is inevitable that individuals may be on social media applications prior to making a decision about their meals, and this decision may be influenced by the threatened self-integrity arising from social comparison.

Thus far, it has been established that individuals will try to restore threatened self-competence and that social comparison facilitates the threat. The literature on consumption stereotypes and impression management will be reviewed below to understand how food choice will be affected when self-competence is threatened.

CONSUMPTION STEREOTYPE

In general, consumption stereotype refers to how individuals form impression about others based on products or services they choose or use (Belk et al. 1982). The concept is founded on the idea that individuals view their possessions as an extension of themselves and that there is inherent meaning in consumption patterns (Belk et al. 1982). For example, one may infer that someone wearing a Rolex watch or driving a Mercedes Benz is wealthy. In the context of food, and the present paper, consumption stereotypes refer to how “people

form impressions a person on the basis of that person's eating" (Herman et al. 2019, p. 80). That is, individuals make judgments about others based on what and how much they eat.

Early studies conducted on consumption stereotypes were interested in how it relates to femininity and masculinity. Overall, the studies found that women are viewed as more feminine and less masculine when they have smaller meals while the results varied for men (Chaiken and Pliner 1987; Bock and Kanarek 1995). Further studies also looked at food intake and judgment of body size (Ogden and Awal 2003) as well as social appeal (Martins et al. 2004).

More central to the current research is the judgments related to what people eat, rather than how much. Similar to how people make inferences about others based on the cars they drive or the watch they wear, people make judgments about others based on what they eat as well. Think, for example, two individuals that are similar in appearances, but one is having a salad for lunch while the other is having a Five Guys' burger with fries. We may infer that the former is a healthy person while the latter is probably less health-conscious. Indeed, prior research has found that those who consume "good" meals (oatmeal with fruits and nuts) are perceived to be healthier, and generally considered to have more positive characteristics, than those who consume "bad" meals (pie) (Oakes and Slotterback 2004). Thus, it may be true that those who consume healthy food are also viewed as more competent.

In fact, individuals associate different food with traits that fall along the dimensions of warmth (e.g., kindness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness) and competence (e.g., effectiveness, power, and skillfulness) (Grishin et al. 2017). Further, in a series of studies, researchers found that consumers are more likely to consume healthy (unhealthy) food when they are motivated to appear competent (warm) (Grishin et al. 2017). That is, healthy food was found to be associated with the impression of competence.

SELF-PRESENTATION/IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

While consumption stereotypes refer to the impression formed on others based on their consumption patterns (Belk et al. 1982), impression management or self-presentation refers to how people change their behaviors to create a particular impression of themselves to others (Leary 1996, p. 2). As such, it can be inferred that consumption stereotypes are central to impression management—one would have to associate a behavior with a certain impression to effectively utilize it as a tactic to manage how others view them. In the context of the current paper, impression management would take the form of how people change their eating behavior to convey a particular impression, such as those highlighted by Grishin et al.'s (2017) study.

In his book *Self-Presentation: Impression Management and Interpersonal Behavior*, Mark Leary (1996) states that one of the reasons people engage in self-presentation “when they have no reason to influence others’ behavior” is self-identity maintenance (p. 43). He highlights the two types of tactics that people use to manage impression, (i) attributive and (ii) repudiative. Attributive tactics refer to behaviors used to “convey that a person possesses particular characteristics or is a particular kind of person” while repudiative tactics refer to behaviors used to “deny that the person possess particular characteristics or is a particular kind of person” (p. 17). Thus, one may use food as an attributive tactic to signal to oneself that he or she is a competent person when self-competence is threatened.

Even though it is possible that impression management can be used to maintain one’s self-image, as outlined above, the literature has not examined whether one’s self-perception changes after consuming or choosing to consume, certain food (Vartanian 2015). If healthy food is inherently associated with competence (Grishin et al. 2017), do people view themselves as more competent after consuming, or choosing to consume, healthy food? In the following section, Erving Goffman’s (1959) conceptualization of self-

presentation will be reviewed briefly to provide a foundation of how one might manage one's self-image.

GOFFMAN'S PRESENTATION OF THE SELF & IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The initial conceptualization of self-presentation took a dramaturgical approach. According to Goffman (1959), the three main components of self-presentation include (i) actors, (ii) audiences, and (iii) performances. He describes an actor as having the awareness of the impression he/she gives off and usually retains “destructive information about the show” (p. 144). On the other hand, the audience's knowledge of the show is limited to what is performed and unlike the actor, the audience do not have “destructive information” about the performance (p. 144).

To see how the three components fit into the maintenance of one's self-image, it would be vital to tease apart the various parts that make up the self. Here, it is proposed that there are two components of the self: (i) global and (ii) phenomenal. The global self, usually referred to as the self-concept, comprises of the total beliefs that an individual has about him- or herself (Leary 1996, p. 159). That is, the global self includes beliefs about oneself that are both conscious and unconscious. On the other hand, the phenomenal self refers to the set of beliefs an individual has about him- or herself that are present in conscious awareness at any time (Rhodewalt 1986). Considering one is motivated to maintain a global self-integrity, it would be reasonable to place the global self in the audience, viewing the performance brought forth by the phenomenal self to convince all components of the self that one is morally adequate.

SELF-COMPETENCY, SOCIAL COMPARISON, AND FOOD CHOICE

The overarching research question of the present paper concerns how threatened self-competence affects people's food choice. With the advancement of technology

allowing individuals to obtain social information at the tip of their fingers, the process of social comparison which poses threat to self-competence can occur at any moment. According to the SAT, when this happens, individuals engage in self-affirmation to restore a positive global view of themselves. As healthy food has been found to be associated with competence, it may serve the purpose of restoring an individual's threatened self-competence in the wake of conscious or unconscious social comparison. Following the afore literature review, the current research proposes the following hypotheses:

H1 When self-competence is threatened, individuals are more likely to choose healthy food compared to unhealthy food.

H2 When self-competence is threatened, individuals' views of self-competence will be higher after choosing healthy food compared to unhealthy food.

As it is hypothesized that individuals may use healthy food as a self-affirmation tactic to restore global self-competence, any other act of self-affirmation prior to making the food choice would likely reduce the need to choose healthy food. Thus,

H3 When allowed to self-affirm after self-competence is threatened, individuals are not more likely to choose healthy food compared to unhealthy food.

Chapter 3: Methods

SAMPLE

A total of 114 college students were recruited to take part in this study and received course credit for their participation. After excluding those with erroneous data (i.e., writing about why the least important value was most important to them instead of others), the final sample consists of 88 valid responses. Among these participants ($N = 88$), 30.7% ($n = 27$) were male, 68.2% ($n = 60$) were female, and 1.1% ($n = 1$) identified as non-binary. 96.6% ($n = 85$) of the participants were between ages of 18 to 24, 2.3% ($n = 2$) were between ages 25 to 34, and 1.1% ($n = 1$) was under 18. In terms of ethnicity, 52.3% ($n = 46$) of the participants classified themselves as White, 25% ($n = 22$) as Asian, 3.4% ($n = 3$) as Black or African American, 1.1% ($n = 1$) as American Indian or Alaska Native, 1.1% ($n = 1$) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 17% ($n = 15$) as Other.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

This study utilized a 2 (self-threat: yes, no) x 2 (self-affirmation: yes, no) between-subjects factorial design, administered through Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

STIMULI

Self-threat manipulation

Participants were informed that they would participate in a study to assess current college student's information processing capabilities and engaged in a vowel-counting task, similar to a vowel-cancellation task (Allport, 1924). The participants were given 60 seconds to count the vowels in a paragraph and were asked to input the number of vowels counted when the 60 seconds is up. After completing this task, participants received

feedback that they performed in the bottom 10% (self-threat) or top 10% (no self-threat) of their university population.

Self-affirmation manipulation

Reflecting on a personally important value should allow for the repair of self-esteem or global self-integrity (e.g., Steele, 1988) while reflecting on an unimportant value does not provide the opportunity to repair self-esteem or global self-integrity (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Steele & Liu, 1983). Thus, participants in the affirmation condition selected from their most important value a list of values (e.g., family relationships, wealth, religion) and wrote about why it is important to them. On the other hand, participants in the no-affirmation condition wrote about why their least important value from the list provided may be important to others.

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited at the University of Texas at Austin for course credit through a large undergraduate class.

After providing their consent to take part in the study, participants were given instructions to the vowel-counting task, purported to assess current college student's information processing capabilities. After reading the instructions, participants were directed to the task, and were given 60-seconds to count the vowels in a paragraph. Once the time was up, the survey automatically directed participants to the next page, where they were asked to input the number of vowels they counted. Then, participants were randomly given either positive or negative feedback on their performance.

Upon receiving feedback, participants were told that the researchers would also like to understand current college student's values and were provided with a list of values (e.g., happiness, wealth, family relationships). Participants in the affirmation condition chose the

value that was most important to them and wrote about it while participants in the no affirmation condition wrote about how their least important value may be important to others. Participants were then asked to indicate their food choice (healthy vs. unhealthy) and filled the self-esteem questionnaire.

MEASURES

Food choice

As the main dependent measure, participants reported their food choice by selecting from the given options in a binary-choice question. The healthy food option was described as “Fresh fruits (apple, banana, etc.) or nuts (almonds, peanuts, etc.)” and the unhealthy food option was described as “Chips, candy bars, cookies”.

Self-competency/Global Self-integrity

Self-competency, or global self-integrity, defined as the “general goodness and worth” (Steele, 1988) was measured with Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) 20-item state self-esteem scale (SSES) ($M = 4.697$, $SD = 0.7558$, $\alpha = 0.928$).

Preference check

Participants were asked to indicate how often they consumed the healthy ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.114$) and unhealthy ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.143$) snack group as a snack on a six-point scale (1 = daily, 2 = 4-6 times a week, 3 = 2-3 times a week, 4 = once a week, 5 = less than once a week, 6 = never). A paired-samples t-test revealed that there is a significant difference in preferences, such that on average, individuals consume the healthy snack group more often ($M = -0.784$, $t = -4.793$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the items were combined to create two binary variables, such that 1 = high preference, indicated by

consumption of more than once a week, and 0 = low preference, indicated by consumption of less than or equal to once a week for each snack group.

Health Motivation and Health/Diet Image

Because it is likely that individuals will choose healthy food to self-affirm following a self-threat, to the extent that healthfulness is a conscious identity, participants were asked to complete the four, six-point semantic differentials to assess health motivation (Hung & Labroo, 2011). The items were measured by “fitness is a virtue/indulgence is a virtue”, “I stay in shape/I aim for enjoyment”, “I exercise every week/I indulge every week”, and “health is more important than gratification/gratification is more important than health” (Hung & Labroo, 2011). Participants indicated which spectrum of the scale was more like them ($M = 2.938$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = 0.825$).

Additionally, participants also completed a five-item, five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all important (score = 1) to extremely important (score = 5) to assess the importance of a healthy image or diet in their daily lives. Participants rated the following statements in terms of how important it is to them as an individual: “maintaining a healthy diet”, “living a healthy lifestyle”, “watching caloric intake”, “losing weight”, and “maintaining a healthy image” ($M = 3.177$, $SD = 0.866$, $\alpha = 0.763$). The items were combined to form the health/diet image scale.

POTENTIAL CONTROL VARIABLES

In addition to the main independent variables, participants also reported on several possible control variable items.

Decision-Making Style

Five, seven-point semantic differentials adapted from Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999) were used to assess how participants believe their snack choice was made. The items were measured by “my thoughts/my feelings”, “my willpower/my desire”, “my prudent self/my impulsive self”, “the rational side of me/the emotional side of me”, and “my head/my heart” (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Participants indicated which spectrum of the scale was more like them ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.52$, $\alpha = 0.86$).

Long Term Orientation

The items used to measure long-term orientation was adapted from Bearden, Money, and Nevin’s (2006) Long-term Orientation Scale. The five-point Likert scale, ranged from does not describe me at all (score = 1) to describes me extremely well (score = 5). Items measured include “I plan for the long term”, “I work hard for success in the future”, “I don’t mind giving up today’s fun for success in the future”, and “Persistence is important to me” ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.857$, $\alpha = 0.819$).

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin’s (1985) satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (score = 1) to strongly agree (score = 7). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”, “The conditions of my life are excellent”, “I am satisfied with my life”, “So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life”, and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing” ($M = 4.627$, $SD = 1.307$, $\alpha = 0.85$).

DATA ANALYSIS

The following statistical methods were used in this study: chi-square test of independence, Pearson correlation, binary logistic regression, and independent samples t-test. Chi-square test was applied to H1 and H3 to analyze the relationship between self-threat (present and absent) and food choice (healthy and unhealthy) in the absence and presence of self-affirmation. Pearson correlation was used to determine variables to be included in the binary logistic regression in H1. Lastly, the independent samples t-test was used to test H2.

Chapter 4: Results

HYPOTHESIS 1.

H1 proposes that faced with self-threat, individuals are more likely to choose healthy food compared to unhealthy food. A chi-square test of independence revealed that overall, a greater proportion of individuals chose healthy food (57.8%) after receiving negative feedback on performance compared to unhealthy food (42.2%). In the no threat condition, more participants chose the unhealthy option (58.1%) compared to the healthy option (41.9%). However, the test found no significant association between threat and food choice ($X^2 = 2.228, p > 0.05; phi = 0.159, p > 0.05$).

Looking at the no affirmation condition, a chi-square test of independence revealed that the proportion of individuals who choose healthy food under threat is similar to the overall proportion (58.3% vs 57.8%). However, in the no threat condition, the proportion of individuals who chose unhealthy food (72.7%) is significantly higher than those who chose healthy food (27.3%). That is, when self-threat is introduced, a greater proportion of individuals selected the healthy option compared to when self-threat is absent (58.3% vs. 27.3%). Yet, the test found no significant association between threat and food choice in the absence of affirmation ($X^2 = 2.253, p > 0.05; phi = 0.313, p > 0.05$). However, this result should be interpreted with caution since one of the cells had an expected count of less than 5, making the test less reliable.

To test whether there is a main effect of self-threat on food choice, a binary logistic regression was conducted with food choice as the dependent variable and self-threat and affirmation as independent variables. The preexisting preference of healthy snack group was significantly correlated to food choice ($r = 0.265, p < 0.05$) and was added to the regression model. As health motivation ($r = -0.21, p < 0.05$), decision style ($r = -0.61, p < 0.001$), and life satisfaction ($r = 0.39, p < 0.001$) were significant correlates of food choice,

these variables were included in regression as control variables. Since health/diet image ($r = -0.33, p < 0.01$) and long-term orientation ($r = -0.24, p < 0.05$) were significantly correlated with health motivation, they were also included in the regression.

Additionally, the following variables were significant correlates, and thus an interaction term was created and included in the regression: decision-making style and health motivation ($r = 0.29, p < 0.01$), health motivation and life satisfaction ($r = -0.22, p < 0.05$), decision-making style and life satisfaction ($r = -0.29, p < 0.01$), health/diet image and long-term orientation ($r = 0.39, p < 0.001$), health/diet image and health motivation ($r = -0.33, p < 0.01$), long-term orientation and health motivation ($r = -0.24, p < 0.05$), and long-term orientation and healthy food preference ($r = 0.23, p < 0.05$).

The omnibus test of model coefficients revealed that the regression model was a good fit ($X^2 = 69.825, p < 0.001$). In addition, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test, where a significant test indicates the model is not a good fit, also revealed that the model was a good fit ($X^2 = 8.001, p > 0.05$). Overall, the regression model has a classification accuracy of 86.4% and no significant interaction effect was found. None of the control variables significantly influenced the likelihood of choosing the healthy snack option (all $ps > 0.05$). Importantly, the regression revealed a main effect of self-threat on food choice ($B = 1.73, Exp(B) = 5.638, p < 0.05$). That is, individuals who experience self-threat had a greater likelihood of choosing healthy food compared to the unhealthy option. $Exp(B)$, also known as the odds ratio, is interpreted as the factorial increase in odds with every unit increase in the predictor variable. Thus, when individuals experience self-threat (vs. no threat), their odds of choosing healthy food increase by a factor of 5.638. This result supports H1.

HYPOTHESIS 2.

H2 proposes that when self-competence is threatened, individuals' views of self-competence will be higher after choosing healthy food compared to unhealthy food. A comparison of the SSES means in the threat condition revealed that those who chose the healthy snack had greater feelings of self-competence ($M = 4.71, SD = 0.657$) than those who chose the unhealthy snack ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.882$). However, an independent samples t-test revealed that there is no significant difference in the means between the two groups ($t = -1.007, p > 0.05$). Thus, H2 is not supported.

HYPOTHESIS 3.

H3 suggests that when individuals are allowed to self-affirm following a self-threat, there is no difference in their likelihood of choosing healthy and unhealthy food. When allowed to self-affirm after receiving negative feedback, 42.4% of individuals chose the unhealthy snack while 57.6% of individuals chose the healthy snack. However, a chi-square test of independence revealed that there is no significant association between self-threat and food choice in the affirmation condition ($X^2 = 0.746, p > 0.05; \phi = 0.107, p > 0.05$). Thus, H3 is supported.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Decisions, motivations, and lay beliefs around food consumption have been widely studied. For instance, researchers found that people associate unhealthy food with tastiness (Raghunathan, Naylor, and Hoyer, 2006), healthy food with high cost (Haws, Reczek, and Sample, 2017), and view themselves more negatively after consuming food that is less attractive (Grewal et al. 2019). While many factors can impact food decision-making, the context in which decisions are made is crucial. In this research, the impact of self-threat on food choice was examined, and consumption of healthy food was proposed as a tactic used to restore self-integrity. Specifically, this work proposed and found support that threatened individuals had a greater propensity to choose healthy food (H1) and this difference in tendency was alleviated when they were afforded alternate affirmational resources (H3).

Thus, findings from this work suggest that individuals do, indeed, use healthy food to compensate for their bruised self-esteem. However, the results did not show a significant difference between self-esteem levels of threatened individuals who chose healthy and unhealthy snacks, which was also proposed (H2). In sum, the present research shows a significant effect of self-threat on food choice, though it is unclear whether choosing healthy food has a differential effect on repairing self-integrity compared to unhealthy food.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The findings in this research have two main theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on impression management and compensatory consumption (e.g., Gao et al. 2009; Levav and Zhu, 2009; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010), defined as “the desire for, acquisition, or use of products to respond to a psychological need or deficit” (Rucker and Galinsky 2013, p. 207). Drawing a connection to Leary’s (1996) conception

of impression management, compensatory consumption is, thus, the impression management of one's self-image. Research on compensatory consumption has largely focused on materialistic behaviors such as luxury consumption (e.g., Ma et. al, 2019; Rucker and Galinsky, 2008; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010; Wang et al. 2020) and conspicuous consumption (e.g., Christen and Morgan, 2005; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014; Zheng, Baskin, and Peng, 2018). This research extends the scope of the literature by looking at compensatory behavior within food choice.

Additionally, the findings in this research contribute to the literature on food decision-making. Specifically, prior research in this domain has shown that people have a greater preference for and consumption of indulgent food over healthy food when they experience negative moods (e.g., Aguiar-Bloemer and Diez-Garcia, 2018; Garg, Wansink, and Inman, 2007; Gardner et al. 2014). However, results from the current study pose a contradiction to these prior findings since an ego-threat can put people in a negative mood. It is possible that there may be a difference in the intensity of negative emotions, such that the one induced in the present research is less intense than those induced in prior research and thus, more short-lived and manageable through compensatory consumption.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the current study found a significant influence of self-treat on food choice, it was unclear whether choosing healthy food has a differential effect on repairing self-integrity compared to unhealthy food. Specifically, although on average, individuals who chose the healthy food option had a higher state self-esteem score than those who chose the unhealthy option ($M = 4.71$ vs $M = 4.48$), the current research did not find a significant difference in the scores. This could be attributed to the small sample size and potentially the experimental design, since participants were only asked to report on their state self-

esteem after making a choice. Future research should consider including a measure of state self-esteem after self-threat is introduced and prior to making a food choice, and after a decision is made. This would provide a better comparison measure.

Additionally, since the state self-esteem measure was taken only after the food decision was made, the present research was not able to test whether lowered self-esteem mediates the relationship between self-threat and the propensity towards healthy food. Thus, future research should consider testing the mediating factor of self-esteem. Further, though the current research did not find a significant interaction effect for health motivation, it is possible that individuals who embody a more healthful identity will see a stronger propensity towards healthy food when faced with self-threat. On the other hand, it may also be possible for individuals who are less health-conscious with their food choice to show a greater tendency in choosing healthy food when faced with self-threat. Future research could consider exploring such factors' moderating effects and identify other potential moderators.

While this research focused on the effects of self-threat on food choice, it may be interesting to see whether healthful consumption provides a psychological buffer against self-threat. For instance, would choosing or eating healthy food prior to experiencing self-threat reduce the effect of threat on self-integrity? In addition, the current research utilized food groups that are inherently deemed healthy (fruits and nuts) or unhealthy (cookies, chips, candy bars). However, it is possible that the perceived healthiness of the food, rather than its inherent nutritional value, affects food choice. Future research may consider including a diverse range of food options and account for the perceived healthiness of the food.

Lastly, the present research examined the effect of self-threat on food choice in the context free of monetary exchange. Thus, it is unclear whether self-threat would affect

people's purchase decisions. For instance, would people choose to buy a healthier meal if they receive self-threatening information prior to making the purchase decision? Alternatively, if people see an ad for "healthy" products while browsing their social media, where they are actively receiving self-threatening information, are they more susceptible to making the purchase? Future research should work to address these questions and extend the research to contexts such as social media.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides an initial examination regarding how self-image maintenance goals affect our food choices by exploring the relationship between self-threat and food choice. The results from this study indicate a potential for further research in the topic and future studies should explore the generalizability to contexts involving monetary purchases and the social media environment, as well as potential mediators and moderators.

Appendix A: The IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research Support & Compliance
Institutional Review Board
P.O. Box 7426, Campus Code A3200
Austin, Texas 78713
T: 512-232-1543 F: 512-471-8873
Email: irb@austin.utexas.edu
www.research.utexas.edu/ors

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

March 2, 2021

FWA # 00002030

Kathrynn Pounders
300 W DEAN KEETON ST
AUSTIN, TX 78712

kp25472@eid.utexas.edu

Dear Kathrynn Pounders:

On 3/2/2021, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Special Determinations:	None
Title:	Competence and food consumption
Investigator:	Kathrynn Pounders
IRB ID:	STUDY00000583
Funding:	Name: University of Texas at Austin 721 (UT)
Grant ID:	
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approval Date:	3/2/2021
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HRP-UT902-Template_IRB_Proposal_Exempt_Submission.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• HRP-UT920-Template_Informed_Consent_Form.pdf, Category: Consent Form;• MA Thesis_IRB Qualtrics Submisison.docx, Category: Other;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk).



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In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in HRP-103 - INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Modifications that involve a change in PI, increase risk, or otherwise affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as a modification. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB staff to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment.

If you have any questions, contact the RSC by phone at 512 -232-1543 or via e-mail at irb@austin.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board

University of Texas at Austin

cc:

Kathrynn Pounders (PI), Sarah Su Lin Lee (Primary Contact), Sarah Su Lin Lee (Proxy)

Appendix B: The Revised IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research Support & Compliance
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 Email: irb@austin.utexas.edu
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EXEMPT DETERMINATION

March 17, 2021

FWA # 00002030

Kathrynn Pounders
 300 W DEAN KEETON ST
 AUSTIN, TX 78712

kp25472@eid.utexas.edu

Dear Kathrynn Pounders:

On 3/17/2021, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Modification / Update
Special Determinations:	None
Title:	Competence and food consumption
Investigator:	Kathrynn Pounders
IRB ID:	STUDY0000583-MOD01
Funding:	Name: University of Texas at Austin 721 (UT)
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approval Date:	3/17/2021
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP-UT920-Template_Informed_Consent_Form.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Updated_MA_Thesis_IRB Qualtrics Submission.docx, Category: Other;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk).

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in HRP-103 - INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.



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Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Modifications that involve a change in PI, increase risk, or otherwise affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as a modification. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB staff to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment.

If you have any questions, contact the RSC by phone at 512 -232-1543 or via e-mail at irb@austin.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board

University of Texas at Austin

cc:

Kathrynn Ponders (PI)

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