

# Enjoying The Game — Enjoying The Burger? (Un)Healthy Food Choices Of Sport Spectators

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## Aim of the paper

Access to nutritious food is imperative to health. However, spectators often eat unhealthy food when visiting sport events. This seems ironic, as athletes' on-field sporting behaviors (which are of central interest to sport spectators) should be in contrast to the selection of unhealthy food. One reason for unhealthy food choices may be the activation of enjoyment goals and the compatibility of activated enjoyment goals with unhealthy eating (Raghunathan, Naylor & Hoyer, 2006). This study assesses the impact of the enjoyment goal activation context on decision-making processes in food choice (unhealthy vs. healthy foods) at event venues, considering the peculiarities of spectator sport settings.

## Theoretical background

At sport venues, marketing practices and consumers' decisions are often inconsistent with health goals. Concession stands make spectators indulge by eating unhealthy foods (Carter, Edwards, Signal & Hoek, 2011). Event visits can be considered as consumption episodes. Within such episodes, goal processes influence food choices. If a tradeoff between goals (e.g., pleasure and health) needs to be made, conflicts arise and individuals can either highlight one goal (to the detriment of the other goal) or balance goals (Dhar & Simonson, 1999). Linking decision making processes to goal pursuit theory and implicit learning (Dhar & Simonson, 2003; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005) we argue that the activation of enjoyment goals makes event visitors more (less) likely to choose unhealthy (healthy) food, and that sport event (vs. music event and control group) visitors are more (less) likely to choose unhealthy (healthy) food.

## Method

To test our hypothesis, we conducted an experimental study in which we manipulated the activation of enjoyment goals (activation vs. no activation) and event type (sport vs. music) between participants. An additional control group (flea market visit without enjoyment goal activation) was added. 240 participants were randomly assigned to one of five experimental groups.

The procedure was as follows: Participants first read an event visit description. They were asked to imagine that they visit the event. After some reaction time measurements, they were asked to rate the likeliness of consumption of 15 foods (seven healthy, eight unhealthy; 1 = would not eat this food at all, 10 = would definitely eat this food). The food items were pretested to represent healthy or unhealthy food (using a sample of 50 persons who assigned food items to healthy or unhealthy food baskets). Participants then filled out a written survey. Latent variables (enjoyment, health consciousness, self-discipline in eating; seven-point rating scales) were measured via established scales, showing satisfying validity and reliability.

## Results, discussion, and implications

The manipulation was successful: participants in the enjoyment activation condition rated their personal enjoyment higher ( $M = 5.69$ ) than in the condition without activation ( $M = 4.24$ ;  $t(238) = 8.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the effect being independent of event type.

To test our hypotheses, we ran a  $2 \times 2$  ANCOVA (without the control group). Intentions to consume unhealthy or healthy foods were used as our dependent variables. Event type and activation were used as our independent variables. As confounds, we included health consciousness and self-discipline in eating.

Both main effects for predicting the intention to consume healthy food were significant. The intention was lower in the high enjoyment activation condition ( $M = 4.78$ ) than in the condition without activation ( $M = 5.45$ ;  $F(1, 187) = 7.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Intention to eat healthy food was higher for music event ( $M = 5.34$ ) versus sport event spectators ( $M = 4.85$ ;  $F(1, 187) = 3.60$ ,  $p = .058$ ; control group:  $M = 6.11$ ). Health consciousness and self-discipline had a positive impact on healthy food choice.

For unhealthy foods, there were no significant main or interaction effects. Thus, while our hypotheses are supported with regard to intended consumption of healthy food, they are not supported for unhealthy food.

To conclude, we can state that, when enjoyment goals are active, event visitors have lower intentions to choose healthy foods, an indicator of highlighting the enjoyment goal within the consumption episode.

Sport (vs. music) event spectators disfavor healthy foods, a potential indicator of implicit learning processes to particularly not eat healthy foods at sport events.

Our work provides some important implications for caterers and sport event organizers. Compared to other settings of leisure events (here music and flea market), sport marketers have to put in more effort to influence attendees' decision-making processes toward healthy food choices. The results may indicate that the provision of healthy food only results in healthier food choices at sport events if vendors can satisfy enjoyment goals with healthy food options.

## References

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