

Unhealthy snacks play on our unconscious

January 24 2011, by Astrid Smit

Chances are small that young people will exchange the Mars bar or bag of chips in their hands for an apple or an orange. Even when they know that fruit is healthier and this is widely reported. That unhealthy snacks exert a big pull on the youth in an unconscious manner is the conclusion drawn by Wageningen consumer researchers in this month's *Food Quality and Preference* magazine.

It has already been known that people attach more value to products in their possession than to products which they do not yet have. If they could sell a coffee mug given to them, they would charge two euros for it although they would have paid only a euro for the same mug. People seem to get easily attached to something they have received. The researchers from the Economics of Consumers and Households Group of Wageningen University (the Netherlands) wanted to find out if this behaviour also extends to food substances. And if there are differences between the attachment to an unhealthy and to a healthy snack.

Unhealthy and healthy snacks were distributed in about forty schools over a period of two years. Half the students in a class received fruits while the other half received a bag of chips or a Mars bar. Afterwards, the students were given time to form an attachment to a given item by filling in a questionnaire about the product. They were then asked to switch their items. Students with the unhealthy snacks appeared to be less willing to do so than students with an apple or an orange.

If the [students](#) were allowed to choose a product for themselves, sixty percent chose a Mars bar or a bag of chips. Aside from this preference,

the attachment to an unhealthy snack is still bigger than the attachment to a healthy snack, says researcher Leonie Cramer.

'Apparently, all sorts of unconscious emotional processes are at play in a big way.' To stimulate a [healthy food](#) choice, it is important to consider this attachment effect, says Cramer. 'Canteens should, for example, try to offer a standard healthy menu or a standard healthy snack, so that the choice for the consumer is easy and healthy at the same time.'

Provided by Wageningen University

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