

Psychologists investigate the broccoli paradox

May 5 2017



Credit: Aston University

If we think our friends really enjoy eating broccoli, we are less likely to consume it ourselves.

That is one of the conclusions of research being presented today, Friday 5 May 2017, by Dr Jason Michael Thomas from Aston University to the annual conference of the British Psychological Society in Brighton.

In their research, psychologist Dr Thomas and his colleagues asked 227 participants (145 women, 80 men and 2 other) aged between 17 and 63 (average age 32) about the foods and drinks they liked and about both which foods and drinks their friends liked and how much of them they consumed. The foods discussed were vegetables, fruit and [junk food](#), and the drinks were [sugar-sweetened beverages](#) and alcohol.

The results showed that how much of a particular food or drink someone consumes is linked to how much of it they think their friends consume (the more our friends consume, the more we consume). This reinforces what psychologists have learnt about [social norms](#) being a key influence on our eating and drinking behaviour.

But they also found a paradoxical effect: if we think our friends like vegetables we are less likely to eat them ourselves.

Jason said: "It is possible that the perception of particularly low or high enjoyment of vegetables by our peers produces such counterintuitive effects. For instance, if we think our friends like vegetables greatly, it might drive down our consumption if this differs from our own experience."

The researchers also found that we are bad at judging how much our friends like different foods and drinks.

He added: "We tend to think that we like healthy foods more and [unhealthy food](#) and drinks less than our peers. Maybe it's a bit like driving: We all think we are better than average at it."

More information: Poster title: 'Do we eat and drink like others or drink and eat what others like? Misperceptions of social norms.' The study was sponsored by Direct Line Insurance Group and Charlton House & Company. www.bps.org.uk/ac2017

Provided by Aston University

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