

When can ads intensify unhealthy cravings?

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The obesity epidemic is no longer strictly an American problem. Statistics suggest that many populations around the world are increasingly prone to overeating and excessive weight gain.

Eager to understand the reasons for this growing crisis, marketing researchers explored whether holistic thinking patterns—which are generally more common in Eastern countries—could make consumers in these parts of the world more susceptible to certain types of advertisements for unhealthy foods. Their findings were recently published online in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Holistic thinkers tend to believe that everything in the world is somehow interconnected, and they are more likely to consider the context of a situation, says Utah Valley University assistant professor Dustin Harding, one of the authors. An advertisement showing a bag of popcorn in the context of a movie theater would likely evoke feelings related to enjoying popcorn while watching a good flick—feelings that increase craving for the snack. Analytical thinkers, however, are less likely to consider the context because they view the universe as independent objects that are not connected. They would probably see the popcorn in isolation from the theater—and experience fewer cravings than their holistic counterparts.

To test whether certain advertisements induced higher levels of cravings in holistic thinkers, Harding's team conducted several experiments. In one study, participants placed cotton dental rolls in their mouths to measure salivary responses while they viewed one of two images: a

chocolate bar in a movie theater or against a solid grey background. The researchers discovered that holistic thinkers salivated more than analytical thinkers when they saw the chocolate bar in the context of the movie theater, but there was no difference between the groups when the [chocolate bar](#) was shown on a grey background.

The investigators conducted another experiment in which participants saw a healthy choice (arugula pizza) or unhealthy choice (cheese pizza) in the context of either a pizzeria or a plain, white background. Other participants viewed a healthy taco salad or unhealthy burrito in a Mexican restaurant or against a white background. Then the participants were asked to rate the extent to which they craved the foods and how likely they would be to buy the foods. Again, holistic thinkers were more likely than analytical thinkers to crave and want to buy the [unhealthy foods](#) shown in the context of a restaurant.

The researchers hope their findings will help countries that are battling with obesity epidemics. "Regulations on advertisements could be a strategy in countries that are trying to help people make healthier [food](#) decisions," Harding says. "Consumers could also become more aware of their thinking styles and make informed choices."

Holistic thinkers could consider avoiding television commercials or magazines that are rife with advertisements that induce cravings, he says. "We aren't claiming to solve the obesity problem in Eastern countries, but we hope this research can be one part of the solution," he says.

More information: Diogo Hildebrand et al. Culturally Contingent Cravings: How Holistic Thinking Influences Consumer Responses to Food Appeals, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1049](#)

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