Burgers
Make Me Happy

The Link between How We Feel and What We Eat

By Robin Roenker

Blair Kidwell, an affable, young assistant professor of marketing at UK, shows a group of undergraduates a picture of a Big Mac and asks, “How does this make you feel?”

Hungry, some say. But others, as he would predict, say it makes them feel happy.

The latter response gets at the emotional connections we all have to food, and how those emotions play a role—often without our being aware of it—in the types of foods we choose each day.

If losing weight or maintaining a healthy lifestyle is your goal, then feeling happy at the sight of McDonald’s signature sandwich is “perhaps the worst thing you can feel,” says Kidwell, who earned a Ph.D. at Virginia Tech in 2004 and came to UK in 2005 after a short stint at Kansas State University. It’s a sign that, consciously or not, you desire that Big Mac not just for its nutritional content but for the emotional high you think it will serve up.
Kidwell, along with colleagues Terry Childers and David Hardesty, is conducting research on emotional intelligence and its role in consumer decision making. The idea of “emotional intelligence”—the ability to understand and manage your emotions when making decisions—caught fire among psychology researchers doing relationship studies in the late 1990s. The UK research team is among the first to apply the idea to consumers.

“We need to understand that sometimes those emotions can help us in terms of avoiding things that are dangerous, but sometimes they can propel us toward behaviors that we regret later,” says Childers, the Gatton Endowed Chair in Electronic Marketing and an expert in how consumers process information. “Our main focus in this work is helping people learn to make better decisions about what to eat and drink.”

As a starting point in accomplishing this goal, the team has spent three years refining a measurement tool—an 18-question survey called the Consumer Emotional Intelligence Scale (CEIS)—that aims to assess a consumer’s ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions. Their current work, following two publications in the Journal of Consumer Research, will establish connections between emotion and food choice.

But in our food-happy, health-conscious society, why haven’t these connections already been determined? Part of the reason, Kidwell says, is the difficulty of measuring something as abstract and shifting as emotional ability. But since the team has used this scale, the preliminary results have been revealing.

In 2008 respondents, mostly UK undergrads, were asked to identify on a computer-generated menu the foods they might typically eat in an average day. The menu included an array of healthy and not-so-healthy food choices, from salads and wraps to pizza and beer. Those who scored low on the CEIS scale, meaning that they had below-average emotional intelligence, reported consuming nearly 3,500 calories in an average day, while those who showed above-average emotional intelligence consumed 1,800 calories on average.

“The premise of the approach,” Kidwell says, “is this: people who tend to be less aware of their emotions when making a decision rely more on implicit assumptions when selecting a product, in this case food. They’re more swayed by the attractiveness of the foods in pictures. Rather than rationally thinking through that food choice—how good it is for them—they’re driven by impulses, emotion, and a tendency to unconsciously associate unhealthy food with tasty food. That’s particularly the case with people who are obese.” The result is a diet that’s chock full of feel-good comfort foods high in fat.

But perhaps the best news, Childers emphasizes, is that emotional intelligence is not innate—it can be learned. The team is currently conducting a study in which the respondents who had a low CEIS score participate in a one-day training session that involves learning how to better perceive and identify emotional responses.

Hardesty, an associate professor of marketing, explains that by teaching people to be more aware of the emotions at play in their decision making, you can equip people to make better choices. Instead of an emotional response to a Twinkie, based on memories of childhood fun, the consumer will think: “If I eat this Twinkie now, how will I feel about it later?”

After the training session, the respondents kept a food diary, detailing everything they ate for three days. The goal, of course, was to show that their caloric intake after the training dropped.

Significantly, the research team has also shown that it’s not just how in tune you are to your emotions, it’s equally as important that you have confidence in your ability to respond appropriately to those emotions. In each study, the respondents who report the most healthy food choices are those who not only score highly on the CEIS, but who also self-report a high estimation of their emotional ability.

The team has shown that boosting respondents’ confidence through training in turn leads them to make better choices. “There are people who have the emotional ability to make good choices, but they just aren’t sure they can make the right choice. If you boost their confidence, then they’re more apt to use that ability,” Childers contends. “Ultimately, that’s our goal: finding ways to enhance consumers’ decision-making skills so that they can make the best possible choices.”