

Trying to stay on a strict diet? Focus on the details

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Repetition usually makes people enjoy things less. Such satiation causes our favorites to lose their sheen, makes it hard to follow a diet, and pushes us to escalate our spending on novelty. Life has even been called a “hedonic treadmill” where we must find better and better experiences just to stay happy. However, new research from the February issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* finds that paying attention to details can help us avoid becoming bored with the same old thing.

“It has long been said that ‘the devil is in the details.’ This research finds that the details may be the key to slowing the hedonic treadmill,” writes Joseph P. Redden (University of Minnesota).

In one of three studies conducted at the University of Pennsylvania, Redden had participants eat 22 fruit-flavored jelly beans (cherry, orange, strawberry, peach, tangerine) while rating their enjoyment. At the end, participants were asked to indicate how well they could distinguish the flavors, how much they noticed the different flavors, how repetitive the eating task felt, how similar the jelly beans seemed to each other, and how much variety they perceived.

“People given specific flavor labels (e.g., cherry) became less satiated and kept enjoying the jellybeans longer than people given the general label of ‘jellybean’,” Redden reveals. In other words, though everyone ate the same variety of jellybeans, people who were just given “jellybeans” to eat as opposed to “tangerine jellybeans” and “strawberry jellybeans” gave lower assessments as the experiment wore on, though both groups

rated the jellybeans about equally toward the beginning of the experiment.

“Many people see satiation as an unavoidable, physiological consequence of consumption. This research shows that satiation, or the decline in enjoyment, depends on how much repetition people perceive,” Redden explains. “The current findings have several implications for consumers. Notably, consumers can enjoy themselves more by focusing on the details during their experiences.”

The study also has implications for our understandings of expertise, or how people who devote themselves to a particular field can maintain interest over many years. However, Redden cautions that countering satiation may also potentially have a negative effect by reducing one deterrent to mindless over-consumption.

“Subcategorization reduced satiation for experiences that were more cognitive (e.g., studying) as well as more sensory (e.g., eating snacks),” Redden says.

He continues: “Consumers should find subcategorization especially useful when facing limited options, developing expertise, or following a repetitive regimen. Regardless of how they use the findings, the current research establishes that subcategorization offers people the potential to make their lives more enjoyable.”

Source: University of Chicago

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