

When do consumers try to increase social standing by eating too much?

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Consumers who feel powerless will choose larger size food portions in an attempt to gain status, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. But there is hope for convincing them that a Big Gulp won't translate to higher ranking.

"An ongoing trend in [food consumption](#) is consumers' tendency to eat more and more," write authors David Dubois (HEC Paris), Derek D. Rucker, and Adam D. Galinsky (both Northwestern University). "Even more worrisome, the increase in food consumption is particularly prevalent among vulnerable populations such as lower [socioeconomic status consumers](#)."

Many cultural norms associate larger products with greater status—for instance, the size of a vehicle, house, or TV. The authors tested whether or not consumers used the size of food products to express their status. "Because vulnerable consumers are prone to express their status in order to compensate for their undesirable position and respond to daily threats, this research further proposes that the [tendency](#) to use the size of [food options](#) within an assortment will be particularly strong among those consumers who feel powerless," the authors write.

In one of the authors' experiments, they confirmed that consumers equate larger sizes of food options with greater status. For example, participants perceived that consumers who chose a large coffee had more status than someone who chose medium or small, even when the price was the same.

In other experiments, powerless consumers chose larger pieces of bagels than baseline participants. And the authors found that participants chose larger smoothies when they were at a social event than when they were alone.

But there is hope for our expanding waistlines, according to the authors. When powerless participants in one study were told that smaller hors d'oeuvres were served at prestigious events, they chose smaller items that had fewer calories.

"Understanding and monitoring the size-to-status relationship of food options within an assortment is an important tool at the disposal of policy makers to effectively fight against overconsumption," the authors conclude.

More information: David Dubois, Derek D. Rucker, and Adam D. Galinsky. "Super Size Me: Product Size as a Signal of Status." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2012 (published online August 17, 2011). www.ejcr.org/

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