

For Immediate Release: December 14, 2009

Contact: Mary-Ann Twist / 608-255-5582 / JCR@bus.wisc.edu

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Killer Cookies: To Resist Temptation, Exaggerate the Threat

Your ability to resist that tempting cookie depends on how big a threat you perceive it to be, according to a new study in the [*Journal of Consumer Research*](#)

Authors Ying Zhang, Szu-Chi Huang and Susan M. Broniarczyk (all University of Texas at Austin) studied techniques that enable us resist food and other temptations. “Four experiments show that when consumers encounter temptations that conflict with their long-term goals, one self-control mechanism is to exaggerate the negativity of the temptation as a way to resist, a process we call counteractive construal,” the researchers write.

For example, in one study, female participants were asked to estimate the calories in a cookie. Half the participants were told that they have the option of receiving the cookie as a complimentary gift for participation and half were not. The results showed that consumers with a strong dieting goal construed the cookie as having more calories and being more damaging to the attainment of their long-term goal of losing weight.

Another study demonstrated that counteractive construal is helpful in situations that involve a self-control conflict. In a study of 93 college students, the researchers found that students with a high grade-point average were more likely than other participants to estimate an upcoming party to last longer and take more time away from studying. Those students consequently reported lower intent to attend the party, but only when their academic goal was made salient.

The authors also found that environmental stimuli such as posters could subtly activate people’s long-term diet goals and lead them to engage in counteractive construal. In one study, female participants entered a room that either had posters depicting fit models or nature scenery. “Participants who were exposed to posters depicting fit models (goal-priming stimuli) were more likely to exaggerate the calories in a tempting drink that they expected to consume later on, and consequently consumed less when offered the drink,” the authors write.

“The mental construal of temptations may be distorted when people experience a self-control conflict, and such distorted construal, rather than accurate representations, determines consumers’ actual consumption, helping them resist the temptation and maintaining their long-term goal,” the authors conclude

Ying Zhang, Szu-Chi Huang and Susan M. Broniarczyk. “Counteractive Construal in Consumer Goal Pursuit.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2010. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at <http://journals.uchicago.edu/jcr>.



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