ADOLESCENT FOOD CHOICES AND THE THEORY OF REASONED ACTION

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We report here a study of dietary motivations in Tasmanian high school students. The model we tested was the Ajzen-Fishbein Theory of Reasoned Action. This postulates that a person's behavioural decisions are determined mainly by his/her attitudes to that behaviour and her/his perceived social norms for the behaviour. It has been widely and successfully used in analysing a variety of human behaviours, including health-related behaviours. However, it has almost never been used to analyse food choices.

We randomly selected 25 of the schools offering grades 7-10 in Tasmania. At each school, one class group - of mixed ability, and not atypical in their exposure to nutrition education - was selected from each of the four grades. Total sample size was 2082 (excluding 17 whose data were not reliably interpretable). By several criteria, our sample appeared representative of Tasmanian students in these grades.

Preliminary research had identified two major food attitudes (liking for the food, and its perceived healthiness) and two major reference groups for food social norms (parents, friends). Hence, we devised a printed questionnaire that asked students, for each of 22 foods: their frequency of consumption of the food (as days/week); their liking for the food, and how healthy they considered the food; and frequency of usage of the food by their parents and their friends (all on 5-point scales). The foods comprised four cereal products (bread, breakfast cereals, biscuits, cakes), four fruits & vegetables (apple, tomato, orange juice, boiled potato), four meats (steak, lamb, sausages, chicken), three dairy products (cheese, full-cream milk, low-fat milk), three spreads (butter, polyunsaturated margarine, non-polyunsaturated margarine) and four 'snack' items (meat pie, hot chips, ice-cream and soft drinks).

All the foods studied were consumed by more than 50% of respondents in an average week, except non-polyunsaturated margarine (47%) and low-fat milk (39%).

Mean liking ratings, on a 5-point scale (1 = 'hate it', 5 = 'love it'), ranged from 2.6 for non-polyunsaturated margarine to 4.4 for orange juice. Mean ratings for perceived healthiness (1 = 'very unhealthy'; 5 = 'very healthy') ranged from 1.9 for hot chips to 4.8 for apple. Mean ratings for parental usage (1 = 'very rarely' to 5 = 'very often') ranged from 2.2 for meat pie to 4.3 for bread; those for friends' usage (same scale) from 2.7 for low-fat milk to 4.3 for bread.

Multiple regression analyses were used to establish how adequately a respondent's frequency of consumption of a food could be predicted from his/her ratings, for that food, of the two attitudes and two norms studied. These regressions were significant at the $P<0.001$ level for all foods.

Inspection of the fitted equations indicated that liking and parental usage were significant predictors for all foods studied: greater liking and greater parental usage were associated with more frequent usage of the food by students. Friends' usage was a significant predictor for the four cereals, the four snack items, and butter: greater usage by friends was associated with greater personal usage of these foods. Perceived healthiness was a significant predictor for only a few foods (cakes, full-cream milk, soft drinks, hot chips): those who considered these foods healthier consumed them more often.

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