EATING HEALTHIER: HOW MINIMALISM CHANGES FOOD CONSUMPTION BEHAVIORS?

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Description
In four main studies and two supplementary studies, we demonstrate that minimalist lifestyles promote healthier food choices through the dual process of self-control – reducing the strength of desire and increasing the internal conflict for unhealthy foods, irrespective of an individual's dietary habits or demographics.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question
Nearly one billion people worldwide live with obesity, with adult obesity rates having doubled and adolescent obesity rates quadrupled since 1990. Excessive consumption of unhealthy foods is a major contributor to obesity, which, in-turn, has been shown to increase the risk of non-communicable diseases (WHO, 2022). This research proposes that adopting a minimalist lifestyle can mitigate unhealthy food consumption by shifting consumer preferences toward healthier options. Using various methodologies and food contexts, our study examines the effect of minimalism on food-related decisions and underlying psychological mechanisms. Specifically, we examine: whether, how, and under what conditions consumer minimalism influences unhealthy versus healthy food consumption behaviors?

Method And Data
Across four main (N = 1,101) and two supplementary studies, this research examines the effect of minimalism on consumption behaviors for unhealthy versus healthy foods. Study 1 uses the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003) to examine the "*minimalism = healthy*" association. In Study 2, we conduct a scenario-based experiment using the perspective-taking approach (Galinsky et al., 2005; Ku et al., 2010). This approach helps mitigate the possibility of socially desirable responses likely in self-reports of minimalism and unhealthy/ healthy food consumption. Study 3A and 3B explore the dual processes of self-control - specifically, the interplay between 'strength of desire' and 'experienced conflict' - in driving the effect of minimalism on food preferences. These studies test the hypothesized effects while controlling for individual's dietary restraint

(Herman et al., 1978), dietary restrictions, time since last meal (as a proxy for hunger), age, and gender. Then, the first supplementary study examines the correlation between measured levels of minimalism and food preferences. Finally, the second supplementary study investigates the influence of minimalism on the consumption amount for different food-types. Together, these studies provide consistent evidence using different research methodologies, choice contexts, and food categories.

Summary of Findings

Our research finds that minimalism is cognitively related to healthiness through the "*minimalism = healthy*" implicit belief. We show that consumers explicitly acknowledge this association and are likely to reflect it in their daily consumption behaviors. Our studies show that adopting a minimalist lifestyle increases the preference for healthy foods while correspondingly reducing the preference for unhealthy foods. These effects are driven by the dual processes of self-control that minimalism helps shift – by strengthening an individual's desire and reducing their experienced conflict for healthy (versus unhealthy) foods. Finally, we demonstrate that minimalism not only leads to a shift in food preference patterns but also facilitates a reduction in the amount of food consumed, particularly for the unhealthy options.

Statement of Key Contributions

This research provides novel empirical evidence on the impact of minimalism on food consumption behaviors and identifies the underlying mechanisms at play. From a theoretical standpoint, our work contributes to the limited yet growing research exploring how minimalism influences consumer behavior (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022), particularly in terms of food consumption and preferences. The research also adds to the literature on food-related intuitions, lay-beliefs, and learned associations (e.g., Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006; Niu, You, Ran, & Liu, 2023) by demonstrating the "*minimalism = healthy*" association and its consequences for everyday food behaviors. Furthermore, we expand the literature on responsible sustainable consumer behavior (RSCB; White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019; Hosta & Zabkar, 2021) by identifying the minimalist lifestyle as a significant driver of sustainable food behaviors. These findings have implications for sustainability, providing insights towards healthier food consumption (related to SDG 3.4; United Nations, 2017). Our research proposes that minimalism and its virtues could serve as a theme for targeted initiatives and media campaigns. For example, policy makers and socially responsible marketers (including food brands marketing healthy and wholesome products) may incorporate minimalism in their messaging to nudge consumers toward more sustainable food choices.

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