

Vicarious Goal Fulfillment: When the Mere Presence of a Healthy Option Leads to an Ironically Indulgent Decision

Keith Wilcox

Beth Vallen

Lauren Block

Gavan J. Fitzsimons*

This research examines how consumers' food choices differ when healthy items are included in a choice set compared with when they are not available. Results demonstrate that individuals are, ironically, more likely to make indulgent food choices when a healthy item is available compared to when it is not available. The influence of the healthy item on indulgent choice is stronger for those with higher levels of self-control. Support is found for a goal-activation-based explanation for these findings, whereby the mere presence of the healthy food option vicariously fulfills nutrition-related goals and provides consumers with a license to indulge.

Electronically published April 9, 2009

John Deighton served as editor and Baba Shiv served as associate editor for this article.

- *Keith Wilcox is a doctoral candidate in marketing at Baruch College, City University of New York, One Bernard Baruch Way, New York, NY 10010 (keith.wilcox@baruch.cuny.edu). Beth Vallen is assistant professor of marketing at the Sellinger School of Business, Loyola College in Maryland, 4501 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21210 (bevallen@loyola.edu). Lauren Block is the Lippert Professor of Marketing at Baruch College, City University of New York, One Bernard Baruch Way, New York, NY 10010 (Lauren.block@baruch.cuny.edu). Gavan J. Fitzsimons is professor of marketing and psychology at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, One Towerview Drive, Durham, NC 27708 (gavan@duke.edu). All authors contributed equally

See Salad, Eat Fries: When Healthy Menus Backfire



In one study, participants chose from a menu that included French fries, chicken nuggets, and a baked potato or these items plus a side salad. (Credit: iStockphoto/Pela Letonja)

ScienceDaily (Apr. 21, 2009) — More restaurants and vending machines offer healthy choices these days, so why do Americans' waistlines continue to expand? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that some efforts to control eating may backfire.

Just seeing a salad on the menu seems to push some consumers to make a less healthy meal choice, according to a Duke University researcher.

It's an effect called "vicarious goal fulfillment," in which a person can feel a goal has been met if they have taken some small action, like considering the salad without ordering it, said Gavan Fitzsimons, professor of marketing and psychology at Duke's Fuqua School of Business, who led the research.

Consumers may feel they have fulfilled a healthy eating goal even if they choose an unhealthy food, and the presence of a healthy option among food choices may draw their attention to the least-healthy choice available, according to authors Keith Wilcox (City University of New York), Beth Vallen (Loyola College), Lauren Block (City University of New York), and Gavan J. Fitzsimons (Duke University).

"Just because we consumers want to see healthier items available does not mean that we are going to choose them," write the authors. "We present evidence that for many consumers, the addition of healthy alternatives to food choice sets can, ironically, increase the consumption of very indulgent food items."

In a series of four studies, the researchers examined how consumers' food choices differed when a healthy item was included in a set compared to when it was not available. The study results showed that the mere presence of a healthy item vicariously fulfills health-related eating goals, drives attention to the least-healthy choice, and provides people with license to indulge in

tempting foods. They also demonstrated that these effects were more pronounced in people with relatively high levels of self-control.

In one study, participants chose from a menu that included French fries, chicken nuggets, and a baked potato or these items plus a side salad. After being told that each item cost the same amount of money, respondents were instructed to choose a side dish for their lunch. "As we predicted, when given the choice of fries, chicken nuggets, or a baked potato, people high in self-control rarely chose the fries, which are considered the least-healthy option in the set. However, add the salad to the set and what happens? High self-control individuals were significantly more likely to choose the French fries." The authors found the opposite was true for people with low self-control.

Journal reference:

1. Wilcox et al. **Vicarious Goal Fulfillment: When the Mere Presence of a Healthy Option Leads to an Ironically Indulgent Decision.** *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2009; 090409080957062 DOI: [10.1086/599219](https://doi.org/10.1086/599219)