

11-2008

## Is Bigger Better or is Less More? : American Compared to Non-American Consumption Habits

Amanda Bratcher  
*Lindenwood University*

Sofia Aneas  
*Lindenwood University*

Jesus Lopez  
*Lindenwood University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych\\_journals](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych_journals)



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bratcher, Amanda; Aneas, Sofia; and Lopez, Jesus (2008) "Is Bigger Better or is Less More? : American Compared to Non-American Consumption Habits," *Undergraduate Psychology Research Methods Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 8 , Article 6.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych\\_journals/vol1/iss8/6](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych_journals/vol1/iss8/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Sociology, and Public Health Department at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Psychology Research Methods Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Is Bigger Better or is Less More? :****American Compared to Non-American Consumption Habits**

Amanda Bratcher, Sofia Aneas, & Jesus Lopez

*The purpose of this experiment was to determine if American participants compared to non-Americans participants would choose a bigger consumable item regardless of its cost when asked to choose between a smaller and larger item. Participants were shown a series of items that consisted of five pairings of two different-sized consumable items and asked to state their preference after each set of items was presented. This process was administered one time with pricing information of the items made known to the participants and one time without pricing information, counterbalancing of pricing information was utilized. The results concluded that price did in fact have an effect on American participant's choices; however, overall non-Americans made more large choices than Americans.*

The purpose of this experiment was to examine the consumption habits of Americans compared to the consumption habits of Non-Americans. The reason for choosing this experiment was to investigate the influence of American culture. Hellofs (1995) suggested that there is a sense that bigger is better in America, and that believing the more you have of something the better it is. The experimenters believe that a culture saturated with plus size value meals and all you can eat buffets instill within its citizens the notion that the larger something is the better it must be. In cultures outside of America, people are used to standard sizes and are more conservative in how they spend their money. For example, getting a supersized meal in Honduras means a significant

raise in the cost of the meal and a portion of food larger than most people could eat (J. Lopez, personal communication, September 5, 2008).

We believed that American participants would choose the bigger consumable item regardless of cost to them because they have been immersed in a culture where more of something has a larger appeal than the fact it costs more money (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). The experimenters believed that participants of non-American background, not born and raised in the United States, would be more conservative in their choices and would choose the smaller options compared to the American participants. We hoped that an objective look at the choices people make in regards to the size of things they choose will help them be more consciously deliberate in their choices. Experimenters believed that although there is much diversity in cultural values with respect to size, the bigger is better attitude is unique to the American culture.

Morgan Spurlock (2004) conducted an experiment for his documentary “Supersize Me” where he, as the participant, would conform as much as he could to American society and their fast food consumption habits. The participant was a 32 year old man in good physical condition and practices healthy eating habits. The experiment involved the participant in consuming all three meals of the day from McDonalds for 30 days. In addition to this, the participant would always agree to “super size” his meal if offered by the cashier at McDonald’s. The participant was to stick in a strict manner to this diet; no exercise, food from different sources, or skipping a meal. The main reason for this was to follow the stereotyped American citizen who eats fast food most of the time and has little or no exercise habits and find out how much damage is being done to the person physically and health wise. Morgan Spurlock gained 24.5 pounds in a 30 day

period. His cholesterol went up 65 points, reaching 230 as well as his body fat increasing from 11 percent to 18 percent. He increased his chances of coronary heart disease and heart failure times two, and suffered of depression, mood swings, exhaustion, lack of sex drive, and a craving for the fast food according to three medical doctors.

Kopelman (2005) states that because the obesity rates in the United States, especially in children, are rising at an alarming rate; obesity now needs to be considered a primary concern for everyone. According to Hendrick (2008) diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease which are more commonly found in adults are beginning to appear more often in children. This concern is gaining much attention especially because research shows obesity to be a lifelong problem and its treatment is not as simple as taking medicine or following a simple diet. According to Boyles (2008) implementing treatments to reduce obesity are easier to achieve at a younger age than in adulthood. For this reason, issues such as cultural influences from an individual's childhood should be closely looked. It takes more than a school district deciding to remove soda machines from school campuses or parents sending their kid to fat camp to combat these weighty issues. If instead we can find a way as a society to instill healthier decision making values in our children in even the subtlest of ways we will in turn find ourselves with healthier children in future generations.

### Method

#### *Participants*

One hundred participants consisting of 60 women and 40 men took part in this study. All participants were recruited through the Human Subject Pool. All the participants attended school at Lindenwood University and were offered bonus points for

their participation in their Psychology 100, Psychology 101, Sociology 102, Sociology 214 or Anthropology 112 class.

### *Materials and Procedure*

A questionnaire including demographic information was used. The demographic questionnaire included questions about where the participants grew up, their exercise frequency, their hunger level at the time of the experiment, and whether or not money was a contributing factor in their consumption habits (see Appendix A). We gathered or created the materials needed for the experiment. Perishable consumable items were purchased the day of the experiment so they would not spoil. This study also used pens, 3"x 5" index cards with the prices of items printed on them, two chairs, and a table to sit at. The day before the experiment, we called each participant to remind them of their sign-up time. When participants arrived to Young 105, they were asked to sign the experimenters' list of participants, fill out participant receipts, the list of participants, two consent forms (see Appendix B), one for the experimenter and one for the participant to keep, and then verbally instructed about the experiment. Once the participants felt they understood the verbal instructions, we proceeded with the experiment. Next, the experimenters briefly explained that they would be shown the actual item series that consisted of five pairings of two different sized consumable items. Experimenters used a notebook, pen, and pencil to record the results.

The first set of items were a small and a large double-quarter pounder value meal from McDonald's in which the small value meal had a regular size burger with small fries and a 24 oz drink and the large value meal had a regular size burger with large fries and a 32 oz drink; the second set of items were a 12 oz cup and 20 oz cup from

Starbucks, the third set of items were a large five oz and small 2.5 oz bag of potato chips, the fourth set of items were a 23.4 oz large and 16.9 oz small water bottles, and the fifth set of items were a 12 inch and a six inch subway sandwich.

Participants were then asked to state their preference after each set of items was presented. The first participant was asked to state their preference assuming the cost between items was the same and then was informed of the real-life prices of the items and asked again to state their preference as each set of items was presented a second time. The second participant was informed at the beginning of the series of the real-life prices and asked to state their preference. The second time through the items the participant was asked to choose assuming the cost between items was the same. We continued this pattern of counterbalancing the pricing information in our presentation of items to the participants through our experiment with the hope that a within-subject design would prove more statistically powerful in its capability to detect any effects of the independent variable.

Participants were asked to assume responsibility for any extra costs if they choose the larger item. After the sets of items were completed participants were given a short questionnaire asking them about their nationality, how long they had lived in the United States of America, exercise habits (it could be possible that a person that exercises regularly needs to consume more food or drink on daily basis than a person that does not exercise), gender, how hungry they were, and if money was a factor in their food or drink size selections. Participants were verbally debriefed and asked if they had any questions. They were then given a feedback letter (see Appendix C for feedback letter) which explained the purpose of the study, and contact information of the experimenters, in case

the participant had future questions or was interested in the results of the completed study.

### Results

We hypothesized that American participant's compared to non-American participants would choose the bigger item regardless of cost. We conducted a mix analysis of variance (ANOVA); our independent variables were the participant's origin and cost of items. The dependant variable was the participant's choice.

The results of this study using a 2(origin) X 2(cost) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant interaction that showed American participants would choose the bigger consumable item regardless of cost,  $F(1, 98) = .410, p > .05$ . We did find significant findings in regard to the main effects of cost,  $F(1, 98) = 40.824, p < .05$ , and origin,  $F(1, 98) p < .05$ . This means the participants origin did influence the participant's choice of items as well as the cost of the item influencing participant's selection of a larger or smaller item.

### Discussion

Although we did not find significant interaction in our study, we did find significant interaction inversely to our original hypothesis. This means that non-American participants did actually choose larger items regardless of cost. The experimenters discussed this and found relevant information that attributed to the obtained results. Berk (2008) stated, "Parents pressure their children to eat, a practice common among immigrant parents and grandparents, who as children themselves lived through deadly famines or periods of food deprivation due to poverty" (p. 418). Many of the non-American participants were from developing countries, implying an

economically poor culture. Therefore, choosing a larger item seems more profitable considering the item is larger and would be more fulfilling. This perception of poverty-stricken culture contradicts the experimenter's initial belief that because their origin is such culture, their size selection would be small. According to McCracken (2005), characteristics of this culture include not taking for granted free items and a concept of better full than hungry. It was more common for an American participant to justify his small selection because of their inability to finish the whole product whereas non-Americans were already considering saving it for later especially if the item was free.

The experimenters believe there are a few contributing factors of why they were unable to prove their hypothesis. First, all 100 participants in the study were Lindenwood University students. The reason this is a strong factor to be considered is because the data retrieved from the experiment suggested money was an influence in their choice of items (See Table 4). Based on information from Liechty, Freeman & Zabriskie (2006), the experimenters also believed that because all participants were students, they were overly concerned about what the experimenters might think about them if they made a perceived unhealthy choice. An example that lead us to reach this conclusion is the fact that when conducting the experiment more than a few participants asked if they had to choose one of the items of McDonald's because they had no interest in consuming it. Another factor the experimenters thought would be worth considering is the hesitant action several female participants showed when choosing between the larger and smaller item in the presence of the male experimenter. This lead the participants to have an inclination in choosing smaller items which directly affected results of men vs. women, where men would have no objection to choosing the larger items.



Another possible contributing factor is the possibility of participants not being able to follow instructions correctly. Instructions were verbally given to participants; this could have affected participants understanding of the instructions and the apparent ease of the experiment itself neglected their need of asking any questions. A few participants showed confusion when going through the experiment a second time, while others unexpectedly chose smaller items when there was no cost and larger items when there was a cost. However, the experimenters also contemplated this to be somewhat of a humble characteristic of the participant: choose the smaller item because it's "free".

The experimenters also conducted an independent t-test to compare the difference between male and female choice of items. The results of an independent t-test adjusting for the degrees of freedom to account for heterogeneity of variance in the two samples showed that men chose bigger items overall than women did,  $t(67.637) = 4.012, p < .05$ .

In light of this important data, the experimenters believe that the high percentage of American women that participated in the experiment (71%) highly influenced the original experiment, as well as the 65% of non-American participants.

Although the original research hypothesis of the experimenters was not proven, it is important to note that the experiment did lead to results that lend significant insight into the different consumption habits people from varying cultures have according to the environment they live in. The fascinating information gathered that non-Americans seemed to fit the profile of the "bigger is better" culture suggests further research would be constructive and informative. Are these results the product of non-Americans living in this critically acclaimed culture or are there other underlying components to these perplexing results that are awaiting investigation? Research that explicitly focuses on

non-American participants, and takes into account their depth of immersion into American culture and possibly amount of time here could possibly provide insight into this area.

#### References

Berk, L.E. (2008). *Infants and Children (6<sup>th</sup> Ed)*. Illinois, IL: Pearson Education Inc.

Boyles, S. (2008, Aug.5). *Kids & Cholesterol: Call for Early Action*. Retrieved November 23, 2008, from Web MD Web site:  
<http://www.webmd.com/cholesterol-management/news/20080805/kids-cholesterol-call-for-early-action>.

Hellofs, L.L. (1995). *Market share and customers' perceptions of quality: Is bigger better?* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 1995)

Hendricks, B. (2008, Nov. 3). *More Kids Taking Medication; Obesity Blamed*. Retrieved November 23, 2008, from Web MD Web site:  
<http://www.webmd.com/parenting/news/20081103/more-kids-taking-medication-obesity-blamed>

Kopelman, P.G. (2005). *Clinical obesity in adults and children: In adults and children*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Liechty, T., Freeman, P., & Zabriskie, R. (2006, July). Body image and beliefs about appearance: Constraints on the leisure of college-age and middle-age women. *Leisure Sciences*, 28(4), 311-330.

McCracken, G. (2005). *Culture and Consumption II*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Spurlock, M. (Producer), Spurlock, M. (Director), 2008 *Super Size Me* [Motion Picture].

99

United States: Showtime Networks Inc.

Zukin S., & Maguire J.(2004). Consumers and consumption. *Annual Review of*

*Sociology*, 30, 173-197.

Author Note

100

Sofia Aneas, Amanda E. Bratcher and Jesus A. Lopez, Department of Psychology, Lindenwood University. We thank Dr. Ray Scupin for his collaboration and guidance with our research material. We thank the Psychology staff at Lindenwood University for their ongoing encouragement in helping us reach our goals.

Last but not least, we thank Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair for her tireless effort in providing feedback and leadership in our endeavors.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amanda Bratcher, 1220 Park Ashwood Dr., Saint Charles Missouri, 63304.

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

SUBJECT ID NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ (Assigned by Researcher)

1) Are you        MALE        FEMALE?

2) Were you raised in America? YES        NO

If no, how long have you lived here?

1 day-1year    1year-2yrs    2yrs-3yrs    3yrs-4yrs    4yrs-5+

3) Are you        AMERICAN        NON-AMERICAN?

4) How many hours a week do you exercise?

0 hours        1-6 hours        6-12 hours        13+ hours

5) How hungry are you right now?

NOT HUNGRY        HUNGRY        VERY HUNGRY

6) Is money a factor in your consumption habits?    YES    NO

## Appendix B

## Informed Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete a short questionnaire asking about my nationality, how long I have lived in America, exercise habits, gender, and financial availability. To the best of my knowledge, I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 15 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher(s) involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent or that I am under the age of 18 but have on file with the HSP office, a completed parental consent form that allows me to give consent as a minor.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Signature of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

Student Researchers' Names and Numbers:

Sofia Aneas                      636.541.8669

[sofianeas@hotmail.com](mailto:sofianeas@hotmail.com)

Amanda Bratcher                      636.577.1961

[mambo217@yahoo.com](mailto:mambo217@yahoo.com)

Jesus Lopez                      636.219.2405

[jesuslopezc@gmail.com](mailto:jesuslopezc@gmail.com)

Supervisor:

Dr. Nohara-LeClair

Course Instructor

(636)-949-4371

[mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu](mailto:mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu)

## Appendix C

## Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in our study. The questionnaire was used in order to obtain information about people's nationality, how long they have lived in America, their exercise habits, gender, and financial availability. The experiment was conducted to determine if American participants, compared to non-Americans, would choose the larger item when given a choice between two.

Please note that we are not interested in your individual results; rather, we are only interested in the results of a large group of consumers, of which you are now a part. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. Our contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact us and we will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

## Principal Investigators:

Sofia Aneas                      636.541.8669    sofianeas@hotmail.com

Amanda Bratcher                      636.577.1961    [mambo217@yahoo.com](mailto:mambo217@yahoo.com)

Jesus Lopez                      636.219.2405    jesuslopezc@gmail.com

## Supervisor:

Dr. Nohara-LeClair    636-949-4371                      mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

Appendix D

Recruitment Description

Description:

In this study, you will be presented with 5 sets of different consumable items and asked to state your preference. Then, you will be given a short questionnaire designed to assess information of your race, how long you have lived in the United States of America, exercise habits, gender, how hungry you are and if money is a factor in your food or drinks size selections. The entire procedure should take no more than 15 minutes of your time.