



Sports Defeat Can Make You Fat

Watching your favourite sports team suffer defeat can turn you into an unhealthy eater, unless you step back and remember what's important to you.

The thrill of seeing your sports team enter the field on a Sunday night, the anticipation and hope of victory and the nail-biting jostling for supremacy all incite passion in sports fans. Jerseys are worn, scarfs and flags waved and camaraderie is shared. Jubilation or sadness meet victory or defeat and Monday dawns, the night before wears off. Or does it?

Are You at Risk?: Take the Fan-to-Fat Challenge

Sceptical that the agony of vicarious defeat can lead to unhealthy eating? Try out Professor Chandon and doctoral student Yann Cornil's research methodology for yourself. (It helps if you're French.

If you support Italy's Squadra Azzura, expect the opposite effects). In the last of three experiments in this study, Chandon and Cornil convened an online panel of 157 French people (35 percent female, 65 percent male) to watch seven-minute clips of football games. One group was shown the following video of the 2006 World Cup Final (France: 3 – Italy: 5, on penalty): Another group was shown this video of the 2000 Euro Final (France: 2 – Italy: 1, after extra time): A control group was shown part of a match between two Belgian teams: Half of the participants in all three groups were then asked to do a self-affirmation exercise requiring them to rank the following values (friends and family,

personal integrity, religion, sense of humour, work, politics, money) in order of importance and to write one sentence about their top value. Finally, all participants were shown four pictures of different foods and asked to rank their cravings for each on a scale from one to five. (In other studies, participants actually ate the food).



“The French participants who were not self-affirmed preferred mostly unhealthy foods after watching the defeat, had more balanced preferences in the control condition, and turned to healthy foods in the victory condition,” Chandon and Cornil write. “In contrast, all the participants in the self-affirmation condition preferred healthy foods regardless of which game they watched.” A strong sense of self, the authors suggest, allows fans to weather the worst of their favourite squad's

slumps without sacrificing their waistlines.

In a new research paper entitled **From Fan to Fat? Vicarious Losing Increases Unhealthy Eating, but Self-Affirmation Is an Effective Remedy**, INSEAD Marketing Professor **Pierre Chandon** and doctoral student **Yann Cornil**, discovered that the outcome of a big game can have major effects on your eating habits the day after, for better and for worse.

“In this study, we looked at the slippery slope from ‘Fan to Fat’. And we found that after a defeat of their favourite football team, people eat more, and [what they choose to eat are] more fatty foods. But after a victory of their favourite football team, people eat less, and healthier foods,” Chandon told INSEAD Knowledge in an interview.

These findings have important consequences for understanding the effects of sporting victories or defeats, given the huge and growing fan base worldwide for football, whether of the American or the European variety. The Super Bowl is the most watched sporting event in America, while in soccer, over two billion people tuned into the last World Cup in 2010.

The findings of this new study also expand understanding of underlying eating habits, which can have huge global health consequences. According to the Global Burden of Disease 2010 study, poor eating habits, such as consuming too much saturated fat, salt and sugar, and lack of exercise, are leading to a worldwide epidemic of chronic illnesses, such as obesity and diabetes.

Exploring the food-football nexus

The INSEAD study is the first look at the aftereffects on eating habits of a victory or a defeat. Previous studies have demonstrated that football and soccer losses lead to an increase in fatal car accidents, alcohol-related crime, cardiac illness, and domestic violence.

Cornil and Chandon compared the outcomes from two seasons of National Football League (NFL) games with the food consumption habits of people, not just fans, in 30 U.S. cities. They then gauged their results against ‘control’ groups of cities where matches did not take place on the same day or which do not have a home NFL team. Overall, the results were very consistent. Chandon said: “One day after a defeat, Americans eat 16 percent more saturated fat, and 10 percent more calories. But on the day after a victory of their favourite team, then it’s the opposite. They eat more healthily. They eat 9 percent less saturated fat, and 5 percent fewer calories. There was no effect in cities without a team or with a team that didn’t play.”

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The study also overturned the assumption of a gender divide, that the biggest football fanatics being men, would be more adversely affected. “Very interestingly, we found the effects were the same for men and women,” Chandon added.

The results were even starker for people living in the most NFL-obsessed cities, who consumed 28 percent more saturated fat after their team lost, when a team suffered a narrow defeat and when the two teams were evenly matched.

What is more, the study’s outcomes were also the same for football fans outside the U.S. Even in France, with its reputation for its citizenry of highly discerning gourmands. Chandon’s research found that after watching the 2006 World Cup Final in which France lost to Italy, the French asked for more chips and candy, whereas after viewing the 2000 French Euro final victory, also against Italy, they opted for more grapes and tomatoes.

From mindless to mindful

Why fans tend to scarf down potato chips instead of celery sticks comes down to a simple reason – if you are a fan, a defeat of your team is a threat to your personal identity. “If you’re the fan of a team, you don’t say they lost, you say *we* lost,” Chandon said.

While most die-hard football fans would probably throw up their hands, and say, they really don’t know how to curb their cravings in the valley of defeat, the study proved one technique was able to offset this urge to splurge.

“Fortunately, there is a solution, that doesn’t involve switching allegiance to a winning team,” Chandon quipped. “Simply listing all the things that are important to you in life, such as family, religion, or maybe another sports team, eliminates the effects of defeats on consumption of fats.” The study demonstrated that this simple technique was able to eliminate the downside from watching a defeat.

Enlisting the ‘enemy’: emotions

But as in disease, where a small amount of a virus is used in a vaccine, Chandon sees emotions as a trigger for eating that can be the cure rather than the illness.

Pleasure is often seen as the enemy, and trying to get rid of pleasure in food is what the nutritionists have always done, Chandon said.

Now, as a follow-up to this study, he plans to look at the equation the other way around: the aim of his future research will be to understand the role of pleasure and emotions, and how to leverage both so consumers make healthier food choices.



Pierre

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