

**Impulsive, but still positive: when a visceral food experience can contribute to psychological consumers' well-being.**

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**Abstract**

Previous literature has described visceral food experience as unitary and characterized by a negative valence in terms of consumers' well-being. Through a qualitative approach the present work challenges this idea founding that visceral experiences can be also positive and able to improve consumers' psychological well-being. These results contribute to both consumer behaviour and food literature and offer at the same time useful insights to food practitioners.

**Keywords:** visceral eating, food well-being, food pleasure, qualitative research.

**Introduction and Research Question.**

Consumers confer to food consumption symbolic significance that affects their appreciation of life, their mood, life judgment, social relationships and well-being (Ares *et al.*, 2015). Despite there is not a unique definition (Dodge *et al.*, 2012), according to Kahneman *et al.*, (1999) well-being consists of a cognitive component of evaluation in terms of life satisfaction and an affective component characterized by the prevalence of positive emotions rather than negative emotions. In terms of food consumption, Block *et al.*, (2011, p. 6) defined well-being as the “*positive psychological, physical, emotional and social relationship with food at both the individual and societal levels*”.

However, in modern society, eating is associate not always with positive feelings. In fact, it is very easy to find associations fluctuating from pleasure and enjoyment to worry, guilt and concern. Worries, guilt and concerns are mainly related to food overconsumption, which can generate weight gain and adverse health effects. In fact, according to a survey conducted in 142 countries in the second half of 2019, up to 60 per cent of people worldwide are worried about the food they eat (FSN, 2020<sup>1</sup>). Possible factors that highlight food worries and anxiety can be related to negative self-talk (i.e., “fat-talk”, Arroyo and Harwood, 2012), personality traits (i.e., “perfectionism”, Rikani *et al.*, 2013), or negative messages about eating or appearance coming from social media (i.e., “fat-shaming”, Ravary *et al.*, 2019).

On the other hand, a continuous emphasis placed on self-control can reduce eating enjoyment and food well-being (Cornil and Chandon, 2016a). In fact, Rozin Bauer and Catanese (2003) noted that worry and concerns related to food consumption might not only compromise people’s quality of life but – paradoxically – can also be unproductive in terms of health and weight control.

Considering food well-being as a state of eating in moderation or eating healthy food only, as described by Levy (1996), can limit people from enjoying the pleasantries of food, as comfort, pleasure, and love are often significant antecedents of food consumption (Block *et al.*, 2011).

In this regard, Ares *et al.*, (2014) investigated consumers’ perception of well-being in a food-related context finding not only the association of food well-being with physical health, but also the relevance of emotional, psychological and intellectual aspects related to food consumption as quietness, happiness, rest, pleasure, comfort, and equilibrium. More interestingly, previous research found that satiety is a relevant contributor to well-being, in agreement that satiety is one of the key determinants of consumers’ dietary patterns (French *et al.*, 2012).

Consequently, several authors (e.g., Batat *et al.*, 2019; Block *et al.*, 2011; Bublitz *et al.*, 2013; Cornil and Chandon, 2016b) pointed out the importance of underlying the pleasure connected to food consumption, rather than just focusing on food control, as a way to develop consumer well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foodsafetynews.com>

In that sense, Cornil and Chandon (2016a) distinguished between two opposite approaches related to food pleasure: an epicurean and a visceral approach. Epicurean eating pleasure is defined as “*the enduring pleasure derived from the aesthetic appreciation of the sensory and symbolic value of the food*”. In contrast, visceral eating pleasure is defined as “*the short-lived hedonic relief created by the satisfaction of eating impulses*” (Cornil and Chandon, 2016a, p. 52). According to the authors, epicurean eating tendencies are associated with a preference for smaller food portions and higher well-being. In contrast, visceral pleasure eating is associated with maladaptive food habits, as overconsumption and low well-being.

In practice, this contraposition can be reflected by two different types of food offers: a highly experiential service offered by luxury restaurants connected with epicurean food consumption (Batat, 2021) on the one hand, and a more pragmatic service focused on speediness instead of experience, offered by fast-food restaurants connected with visceral food consumption (Dunn *et al.*, 2011; Rosenheck, 2008) on the other.

In that sense, it seems that only luxury food restaurants can offer foods able to increase consumers’ well-being and health. In contrast, other food restaurants often chosen because of lower prices (Dunn *et al.*, 2011) risk to be stigmatized as those offering only foods lowering consumers’ psychological well-being and health.

However, regardless of their price range, all restaurants – even fast foods – present some healthy options, such as McDonald's<sup>2</sup> and Burger King<sup>3</sup>, which recently launched salads and organic (i.e., high-quality) ingredients in their burgers. Additionally, the objective of all restaurants is not only to serve food, but also to transfer positive emotions and experiences to their consumers (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Food, in fact, consumed in a renowned restaurant or in the tavern in the neighbourhoods, is the occasion to get out of our daily routine trying a new experience, meeting new people, seeing new places: all those elements can contribute to psychological well-being.

In this perspective, as already noted by Bodunrin and Stone (2019), epicurean and visceral experiences do not exist in isolation, but both factors exist as a continuum. This finding is particularly relevant as it suggests that even a visceral experience could contain some “epicurean” or positive elements, such as the consumption of high-quality food and/or some factors that might contribute to consumers’ well-being. However, previous literature on food and consumer research so far did not clarify the presence of conditions that could positively frame visceral food experiences.

Therefore, this paper aims fill this gap by finding an answer to the following research questions “Do visceral experiences have positive valence? If that is the case, what are the features of positive visceral experiences?”.

## Method

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tasteofhome.com/article/healthiest-things-you-can-eat-at-mcdonalds/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/burger-king-healthy-options#Breakfast>

To answer our research question, we adopted a qualitative approach. In particular, we used the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). 87 Italian respondents (57% males, 43% females,  $M_{age}=32.37$ ,  $SD=12.02$ ) were provided with the definition of visceral food adapted by Cornil and Chandon (2016a) and then asked to think about an experience they had and to report it mentioning details about the episode and their feelings and sensations. In order to not influence respondents in their recollection of memory, we didn't specified the valence of the experience, collecting either a negative or positive experience. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed.

Understanding the visceral experiences reported by the respondents required three types of interpretation of the data, all following the procedure set by Gioia et al., (2013).

In the first step, we read the transcript line by line and analyzed it at a level of analysis as close as possible to the way they were voiced by the participants. This process led to the identification of 16 first-order codes.

In the second phase, we grouped first-order categories according to prior research about food consumption (e.g., Bennett *et al.*, 2013; Bodunrin and Stone, 2019; Cornil and Chandon, 2016a). Then, we merged conceptually overlapping first-order categories into second-order themes (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

In the last step, we compared our second-order themes with theoretical insights in extant literature about visceral experiences and food consumption. We observed the extent to which the insights emerging from the data were similar or different from extant research. We repeated this process until we were able to aggregate our second-order themes into new dimensions that reflect an even higher level of abstraction. In particular, we noticed that there are different types of visceral experiences, and that they do not necessarily lead to negative emotions but, instead, they can even lead to (positive) emotional well-being. Therefore, the final aggregate constructs represent different valences of visceral experiences: the negative visceral experience (already examined in literature) and the positive visceral experience (so far unexplored)

## **Results**

In literature, visceral experiences are defined as negative. Our results challenge this assumption. Indeed, our data show that people perceived visceral experiences also positively. In order to have a more holistic view to the landscape of visceral experiences, in the next section we report the characteristics of both negative and positive visceral experiences. In order to better explain both types of episodes, examples from the data will be provided with fictional names.

### *Negative Visceral Experience*

Literature so far has identified and labeled visceral experiences as negative. Indeed, our data confirm that this can be the case. People in our sample reported negative experiences. These experiences mostly dealt with respondents' hunger. Everything else was just in the background. For this reason, the features of the negative experiences are quite heterogeneous, with people experiencing negative episodes in ceremonies, at a casual dinner or randomly during the day. The company or the place has no importance since the only

matter is the idea of satisfy the hunger. People can be satisfied at first, but, after the satisfaction, negative emotions emerge. People feel guilt, shame, embarrassment and even disgust. People feel that way because they feel that in that particular episode they have eaten outside of the standard they consider normal and healthy. Also, they feel embarrassed by the greed in the way they have eaten that in some case is reported in animal-like terms. In more extreme cases, the guilt is further exacerbated by the fact that people eat to cope with stress, creating a vicious circle made of visceral eating and negative emotions.

An example of negative visceral episode is the one experienced by Rachel. Rachel was at dinner with her husband to eat pizza. She ate her pizza so voraciously that she also wanted a second one. She felt satisfied by the eating process, however after the episode, negative emotions emerged. This is quite typical of most negative experiences in our sample. As people satisfy their impulse they experience positive relief. However, after the relief they feel guilty and ashamed by their behaviour and greed. This was also the case of Rachel.

#### *Positive Visceral Experience*

Even if negative experiences are present in our dataset, our sample reported also positive visceral experiences. The valence was mainly based on the emotional outcome that the episode produced. After the episode people did not feel guilt or other negative emotions. Rather they felt pleasure happiness and nostalgia. Differently from negative valenced episodes, positive visceral experiences are characterized by contextual cues. If negative episodes were all about satisfying hunger with everything else in the background, in the positive episodes the contrary happens. Even though positive episodes are characterized by strong hunger and impulse to eat, there are contextual cues that take the stage and become the most important aspect of the episodes. People reported how delighted they were to share the meal with an old friend, or how they gave themselves a food treat to celebrate an achievement. This makes people elaborate the episode differently and the emotional and psychological outcome changes. The negative emotions and guilt are not present, leaving room for emotional pleasure, and, eventually, psychological well-being. Bruce's experience is an example of this. Bruce ate a McDonald burger that he also recognized that was low quality. However, that day Bruce was going through a really intense day of study. Therefore, Bruce did not feel guilty or embarrassed, because for him the main aspect of the episode was the fact that he thought he deserved that treat. Therefore, even if it was unhealthy or "too much", it did not bother him. Bruce had a positive memory of the experience, to the extent of reporting of wanting to repeat it when there will be the occasion. Examples like this challenge the idea that visceral experiences can be only negative. Indeed, in cases like Bruce's one, the episode contributes to consumer positive emotional and psychological well-being. This is also demonstrated by the willingness to repeat the experience (which is not isolated in our sample in case of positive visceral episodes).

#### **Discussion**

Conversely of Cornil and Chandon (2016a) conceptualization, through a qualitative approach we found that visceral food consumption is not a unitary experience as we identified two different forms of visceral food consumption (i.e., positive and negative). The results contribute both to the food and consumer behaviour literature by identifying boundary conditions that can mitigate the implicit negative association between visceral food consumption and consumers' well-being.

From a managerial perspective, restaurants offering visceral food have to put particular emphases on contextual cues (e.g., invite people to eat with friends) that can induce a positive visceral experience recalled positively with the objective of increasing both customer satisfaction and retention. Moreover, positive visceral experiences can also increase the tendency of customers to engage in positive evaluations on reviews websites (e.g., TripAdvisor) or simply trigger a positive word of mouth.

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