

Evolutionary Motives and Consumer Food Choice in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Considerable research has focused on understanding unhealthy eating, yet much of our eating behaviors involve social relationships – eating with friends, romantic partners, relatives, and colleagues. Further research is needed to better understand food choices relative to the people we know. Prior food research has typically focused on eating decisions made in isolation (Redden and Haws 2013) or when eating with strangers (McFerran et al 2010).

In this research, I draw on emerging literature that suggests that behavior in social relationships is guided by evolutionary motives (Li et al 2012). I focus on romantic relationships and examine how evolutionary motives drive romantic partners to adopt unhealthy eating patterns. I hypothesize that evolutionary motives for *mate acquisition* and *mate retention* create pressure for romantic partners to match one another's eating styles at different relationship stages.

In two studies, I demonstrate that evolutionary motives of *mate acquisition* and *mate retention* drive eating patterns for relationship partners relative to their gender. I show that females match the eating habits of males at early stages in the relationship but are more independent later in the relationship, while males match eating habits of females in later stages in the relationships but are more independent early in relationships.

In study 1, undergraduates were asked to elaborate on how opposite sex others influence them to eat unhealthy foods. Responses were coded if the participant mentioned matching the unhealthiness or healthiness of the opposite sex. Cross tabulations (2 x 2) were used to determine if responses differed based on stage of a romantic relationship status (in a short-term vs. long-term romantic relationship). For males, more long-term relationship participants and fewer short-term relationship participants mentioned matching the eating style of the opposite sex. Females mentioned matching as well, but there was not a significant difference based on relationship stage.

For study 2, I conducted a 2 (male, female) x 2 (hypothetical opposite sex partner's eating style: unhealthy, healthy) x 4 (primed evolutionary motive: Mate Acquisition, Mate Retention, Commitment/Parenting, control) between-subjects experiment. Participants were primed with an evolutionary motive using vignettes adapted from Griskevicius, Cialdini, and Kenrick (2006). Then participants imagined themselves at a restaurant eating with an opposite sex person. The eating partner was either eating a hamburger (unhealthy) or a chef salad (healthy). Participants selected what they would order from a menu. The dependent variable was the sum of the calories from all items selected.

The matching hypotheses were supported (see figures 1 and 2). In the Mate Acquisition condition, females in the unhealthy partner group chose more calories than females in the healthy partner group. There were no differences between the unhealthy and healthy groups under the Mate Retention, Commitment/Parenting, or control conditions. For males in the Mate Retention condition, the unhealthy partner group chose more calories than the healthy partner group. For males, there were no differences between the unhealthy and healthy partner groups in the Mate Acquisition, Commitment/Parenting, or control conditions.

The findings highlight a pattern of matching in romantic relationships. Females match males early in a relationship, while males match females later in relationships. While pressures to match fade when a relationship stabilizes, patterns of eating together may be so ingrained that they may be difficult to change.

FIGURE 1
STUDY 2: FEMALES - MEAN CALORIES SELECTED

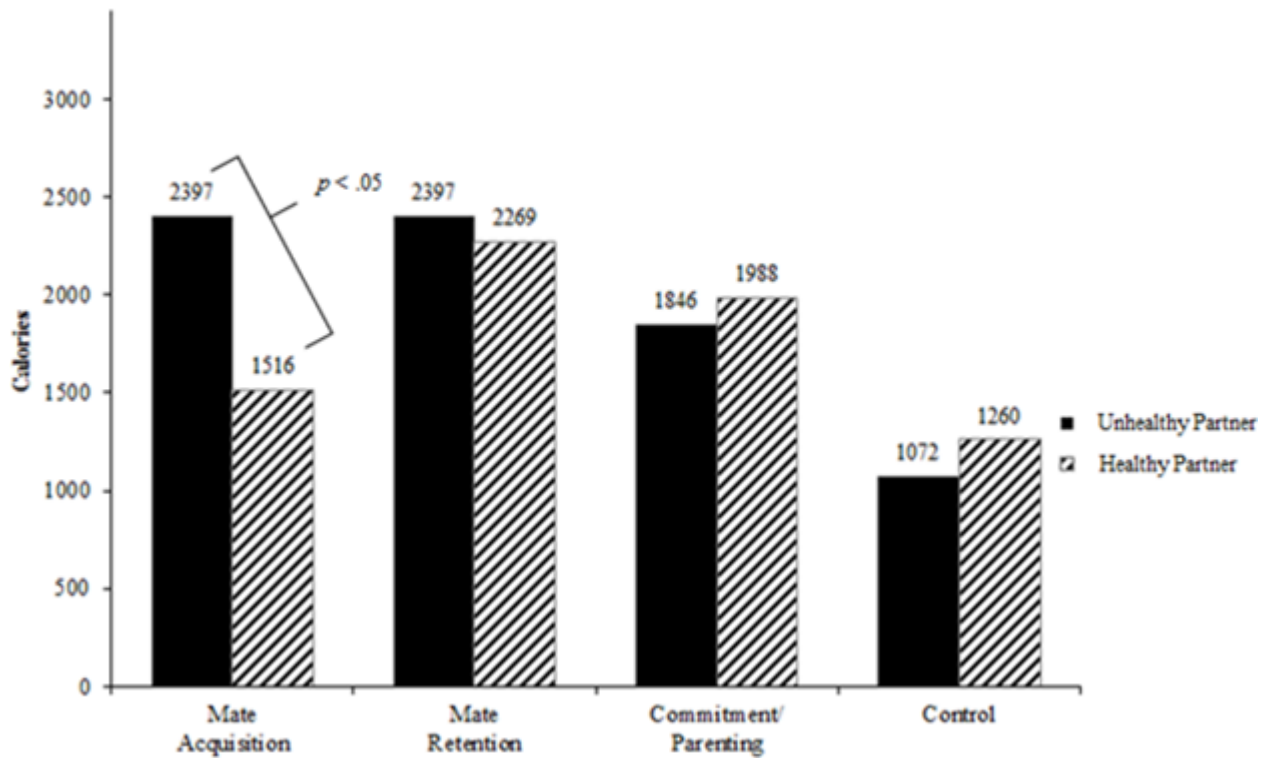
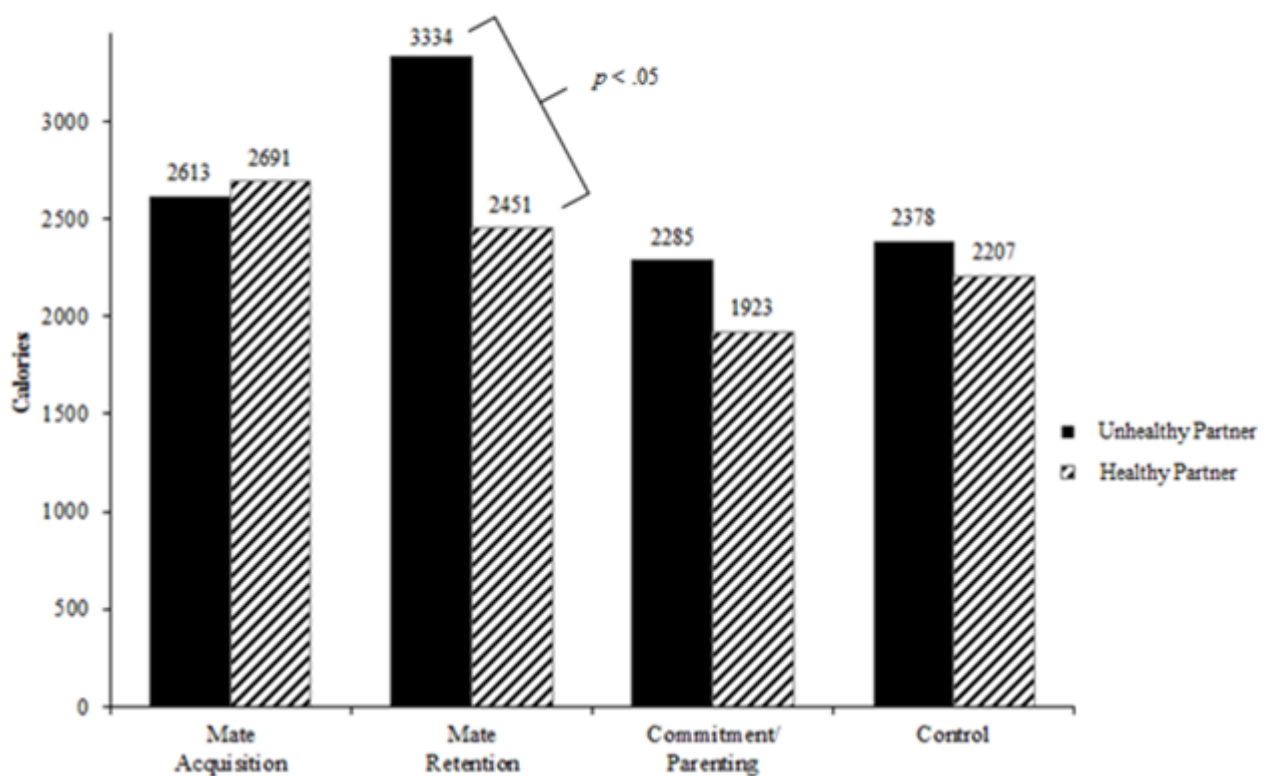


FIGURE 2
STUDY 2: MALES - MEAN CALORIES SELECTED



References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: Using insights from evolutionary motives theory, consumers and marketers can better understand eating patterns, and policymakers and marketers can design more effective healthy eating promotions.

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TRACK: Consumer Behavior