Consumers May Super-Size Meals in Search of Higher Social Status

October 28, 2011

Food portions are getting bigger, and the cause may be the eaters' desire to convince others of their lofty social standing, according to a study by researchers at Northwestern University in Illinois and the French business school École des Hautes Études Commerciales de Paris, to be published in the Journal of Consumer Research.

For the study, researchers performed several experiments to learn why people of lower social status overeat despite the unhealthy consequences of doing so. In one experiment, participants at a café judged others who bought larger-sized coffees as being of higher status, even when all coffee sizes had the same price. In other experiments, participants who felt powerless chose larger-sized bagel pieces than others who didn't—similarly, they drank larger smoothies when at a social event than when dining alone.

Study authors speculated that since Western culture associates bigger houses, cars and televisions with prosperity and high social status, people have come to make the same association with food.

What's more, vulnerable consumers tend to pump up their status in order to compensate for their undesirable social standing and as a way to respond to daily threats, researchers explained. "This research further proposes that the tendency to use the size of food options within an assortment will be particularly strong among those consumers who feel powerless," they added.

But the good news is the phenomenon can be manipulated in positive directions. For example, in one experiment, when researchers informed powerless-feeling participants that high-society events served smaller hors d'oeuvres, these folks picked out smaller portions of food with fewer calories.

Did you know that feeling more or less hunger can be a symptom of depression? Click here to read more.

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