

For Immediate Release: March 17, 2011

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Cranky? On a Diet? How Self-Control Leads to Anger

People who make an effort to exert self-control are attracted to aggressive art and public policy appeals, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#). They also don't appreciate messages that nag them to control their behavior.

"We set out to examine whether exerting self-control can indeed lead to a wide range of angry behaviors and preferences subsequently, even in situations where such behaviors are quite subtle," write authors David Gal (Northwestern University) and Wendy Liu (University of California San Diego).

"Research has shown that exerting self-control makes people more likely to behave aggressively toward others and people on diets are known to be irritable and quick to anger," the authors explain. The researchers found that people who exerted self-control were more likely to prefer anger-themed movies, were more interested in looking at angry facial expressions, were more persuaded by anger-framed appeals, and expressed more irritation at a message that used controlling language to convince them to change their exercise habits.

In one study, people who choose an apple instead of a chocolate bar were more likely to choose movies with anger and revenge themes than milder movies.

In another study, participants who exerted financial restraint by choosing a gift certificate for groceries over one for a spa service showed more interest in looking at angry faces rather than at fearful ones.

In a third experiment, dieters had more favorable opinions toward a public policy message that used an anger-framed appeal (if funds are not increased for police training, more criminals will escape prison) than they did toward a sad message.

Finally, participants who chose a healthy snack over a tastier, less-healthy one were more irritated by a marketer's message that included controlling language (words such as "you ought to," "need to," and "must").

"Public policy makers need to be more aware of the potential negative emotions resulting from encouraging the public to exert more self control in daily choices," the authors write. "Instead behavioral interventions might rely on a broader range of methods to foster positive behaviors toward long-term goals."

David Gal and Wendy Liu. "Grapes of Wrath: The Angry Effects of Exerting Self-Control." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2011. Further information: <http://ejcr.org>.

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