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Pay attention! Small packages may lead to overeating

Tempting treats are being offered in small package sizes these days, presumably to help consumers reduce portion sizes. Yet new research in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that people actually consume more high-calorie snacks when they are in small packages than large ones. And smaller packages make people more likely to give in to temptation in the first place.

Authors Rita Coelho do Vale (Technical University of Lisbon), Rik Pieters, and Marcel Zeelenberg (both Tilburg University, the Netherlands) found that large packages triggered concern of overeating and conscious efforts to avoid doing so, while small packages were perceived as innocent pleasures, leaving the consumers unaware that they were overindulging.

"The increasing availability of single-serve and multi-packs may not serve consumers in the long-run, but—because they are considered to be innocent pleasures—may turn out to be sneaky small sins," write the authors.

One fascinating aspect of the research is the difference between belief and reality. In an initial study, researchers found that consumers believe that small packages help them regulate "hedonistic consumption," where self-restraint is at stake. When participants were asked to choose phone plans, those who thought the plan was for social rather than work purposes tended to choose smaller plans.

The researchers then moved on to food. Participants in one group had their "dietary concerns" activated by completing a "Body Satisfaction scale," a "Drive for Thinness scale," and a "Concern for Dieting scale." They were then weighed and measured, in front of a mirror, to fully activate their awareness. Then those participants (and a control group, which didn't have its "dietary concerns" activated) watched episodes of *Friends* interspersed with commercials. They believed they were there to evaluate the ads. But researchers were really monitoring their consumption of potato chips. Chips were available to participants in large packages or small ones. The study found that consumption was lowest when dieting concerns were activated and

package size was large. People were less likely to open large packages, and participants deliberated longer before consuming from the larger packages.

"Maybe the answer lies in consumers taking responsibility for their consumption and monitoring internal cues of sufficiency, rather than letting package size take control," conclude the authors.

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Rita Coelho do Vale, Rik Pieters, and Marcel Zeelenberg. "Flying under the Radar: Perverse Package Size Effects on Consumption Self-Regulation" *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2008.
