

The Fat Suit Study:

When Skinny Companions Lead Us to Eat Healthier

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Introduction

-Many social factors influence our food intake. The present research examines if the body type of an eating companion and what she eats influences what people eat.

-Given that obese people typically consume a large amount of calorically-dense foods, people may simply mimic them and eat more when they are eating with obese people. On the other hand, because people tend to emulate behaviors associated with non-stigmatized groups of people, people may engage in eating behaviors that are consistent with what normal weight companions do.

Methods

-We had 42 male and 40 female participants serve and eat relatively healthy food (i.e., salad) and unhealthy food (i.e., pasta) after they observed a female confederate in a buffet style situation.

-The confederate wore a fat suit in the obese companion condition. The same confederate without the fat suit served as a normal weight companion in the control condition. The confederate ate a small amount of pasta and large amount of salad (healthy eating condition) versus a large amount of pasta and small amount of salad (unhealthy eating condition).

-While the participants were completing the questionnaire, the leftover salad and pasta were collected and weighed by the research assistants.



Abstract

Does what an eating companion eats determine what you eat? The answer may depend on their size. After watching a female confederate in an inflatable fat suit serve herself and eat very large amounts of either a healthy (salad) or less healthy (pasta) food, 82 college undergraduates were given the opportunity to serve and eat lunch from the same buffet. When the confederate was wearing the fat suit, participants ate more pasta and less salad regardless of what and how much the woman served. When she was normal weight, participants ate more salad when the confederate ate more salad.

Results

-We conducted a series of 2 (body type: control or overweight) X 2 (eating style: healthy or unhealthy) analysis of covariance in which the dependent variables are the amount of served and consumed of pasta and salad, respectively, and the covariate was participants' hunger prior to the experiment.

-As indicated in Table 1, there were significant main effects of the body type of the eating companion on the pasta served and consumed, $F(1, 77) = 4.23, p = .04$, and $F(1, 77) = 6.12, p = .02$, respectively. However, there was neither the main effect of the eating style nor the interaction effect, $ps > .22$.

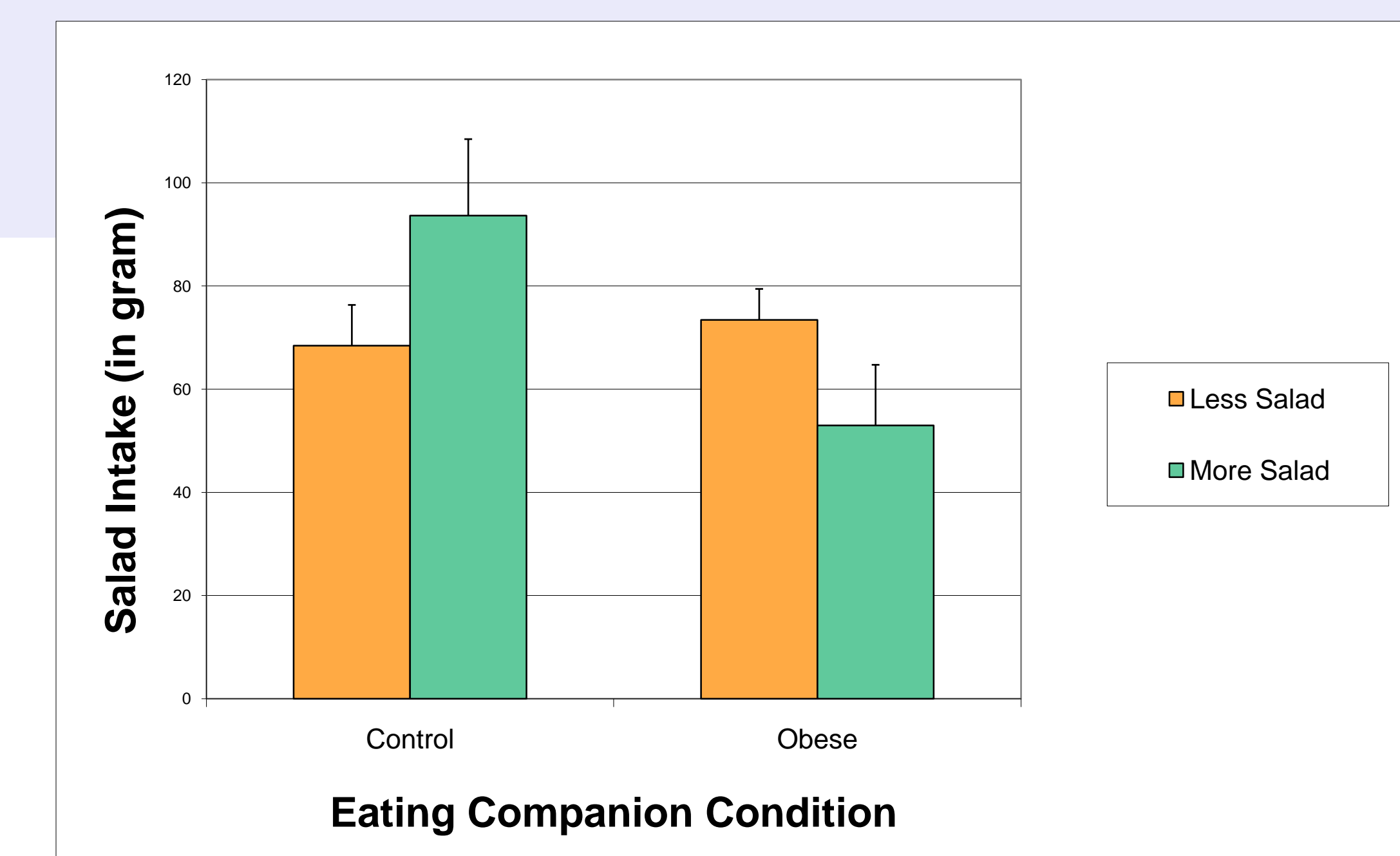
Table 1. Mean (SD) of amount of pasta and salad served and consumed. Participants ate more pasta and less salad when the confederate was obese.

	Normal Weight (n=37)	Obese (n=45)	P- value
Pasta served (grams)	212.7 (80.6)	256.9 (104.1)	<.05
Pasta consumed (grams)	171.1 (84.3)	225.1 (107.5)	<.05
% eaten	80.4	87.6	
Salad served (grams)	109.8 (45.6)	99.0 (38.0)	=.16
Salad consumed (grams)	80.0 (49.8)	64.8 (41.4)	=.07
% eaten	72.9	65.5	

Results (Cont.)

-There was a marginally significant main effect on salad intake, $F(1, 77) = 3.37, p = .07$, which was qualified with a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 77) = 5.28, p = .02$. As indicated in Figure 1, participants ate more salad when the normal confederate ate a large amount of salad ($M = 93.65, SD = 61.09$) than when the normal weight confederate ate small amount of salad ($M = 68.45, SD = 35.26$).

Figure 1. The salad intake as a function of the body type of the confederate and how healthy she ate. Error bars represent standard errors. Participants ate more salad especially when the normal weight confederate ate more salad.



Conclusions

-Participants ate more pasta and less salad when the confederate was obese. This means that simply eating with obese people increases unhealthy eating.

-The effect of body type on salad intake was qualified with how much the eating companion ate. When the normal weight confederate ate more salad, participants ate more salad. This means that, if we want to eat healthily, we should eat with normal weight people who eat healthily.