

NTU study: Watching people eat candy makes you want to eat less candy

It's science.

Julia Yee | 🕒 August 29, 2023, 11:51 AM



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Never underestimate the ability of the human mind to live vicariously through others.

Researchers at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) found that people who have watched repeated immersive videos of others consuming candy, subsequently have a significantly decreased craving for it.

Immersive video viewing, with its heightened realism, transports the viewer into the video itself, allowing them to feel like an active participant rather than a passive observer.

The researchers said the study was inspired by *mukbang* videos, which originated in South Korea and are known for showcasing excessive food consumption.

Such videos have attracted mass audiences.



Gif via Sulgi/YouTube.

Is it merely a sense of morbid fascination at someone wolfing down unbelievable servings of food in one sitting?

Or is it the oddly satisfying autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) elicited by mindless lip-smacking?

Immersive candy-eating videos

The study involved exposing subjects to "immersive" videos, whereby they were turned into "active participants" with the use of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) headsets, 360-degree videos, and motion tracking.

This scenario situated the viewer at a desk, eating from a bowl of M&M'S in front of them.



Gif via NTU Singapore.

They were made to watch it 30 times.

This wasn't some sort of sadistic punishment via boredom, but a way to see if the repeated behaviour would be enough to trick the mind into believing that they'd actually ingested the candy in reality.

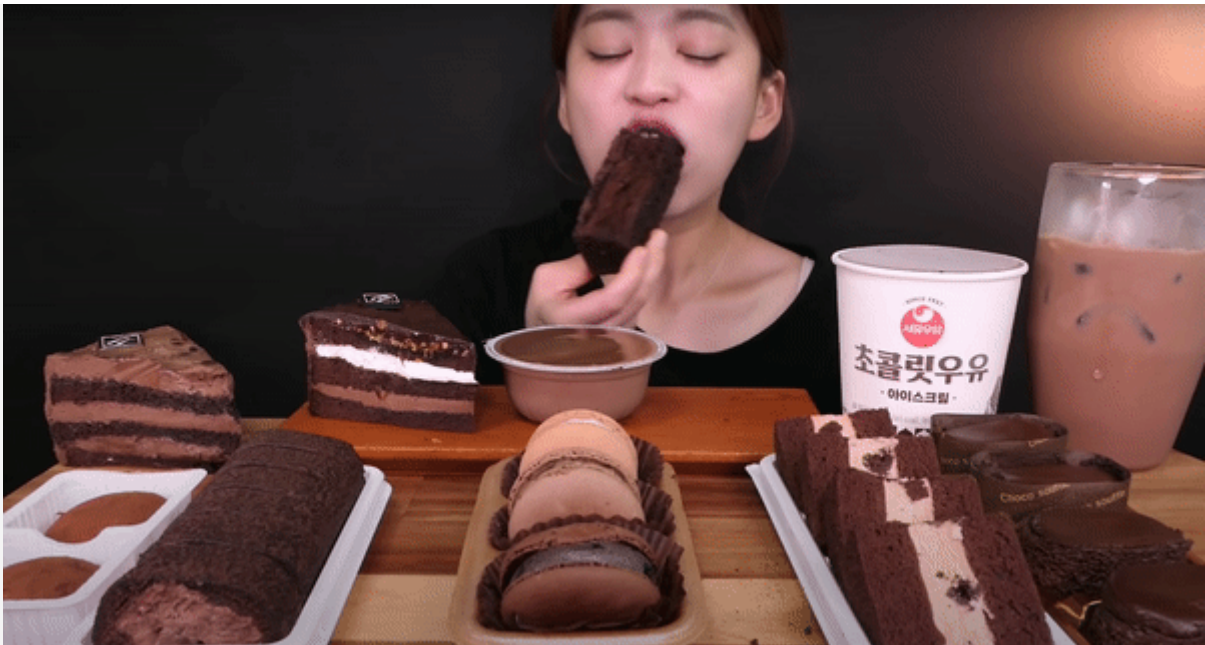
Previous studies have found links between watching an immersive video once and then reporting a decreased appetite, but have not investigated the impact of repeated exposure to the videos.

Repeat it to believe it

Results found that viewers who watched the candy-eating video 30 times subsequently consumed an average of a third less candy compared to those who ate an average of 10 pieces of candy after watching the control video, which showed a single coin being inserted into a laundry machine 30 times.

The researchers deduced that the reduced desire for candy was caused by an effect called "habituation", a "decrease in one's physiological and behavioural response resulting from repeated stimulation".

In essence, repeatedly watching a candy-eating surrogate stuff their face fools your brain into believing that you yourself have done so, dampening your desire for a sugar high in real life.



Gif via Sinae Eats/YouTube.

"The immersive nature of these videos, combined with their visual and auditory stimuli, sparked interest in understanding how watching such content could potentially impact binge-eating habits," explained Assistant Professor Benjamin Li Junting, from NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication.

He added that their findings could contribute to a deeper understanding of how immersive videos impact binge eating habits and inform strategies for designing interventions or guidelines to promote healthier eating behaviours in media consumption contexts.

Adding the element of scent

Wanting to see if their technique could be further refined, the researchers introduced a new factor into play: Smell.

They repeated the experiment, this time holding a chocolate-dipped cotton bud in front of the participants' noses.



Image via NTU Singapore.

They found that the smell of chocolate caused the subjects to consume fewer M&Ms — one less piece of candy — than if they watched the same videos without the scent.

The combination of scent and visual cues led to people being able to "taste" the food — something the scientists called "embodied cognition".

"This makes sense as the experience of food consumption typically involves more than one sense, and the addition of a food scent appears to enhance the effect of one feeling satiated, or full," Li said.

Pretty sweet stuff.

Top images via Sinae Eats and Zach Choi ASMR on YouTube