

Can You Trust Yourself to Make Healthful Food Choices When You're Ordering on a Touchscreen?

By L.V. Anderson



A new study suggests that ordering food on touchscreen makes us feel like we're reaching for the actual food—which makes us more likely to choose unhealthy food.

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If you've eaten at a Chili's, Uno Pizzeria, or Applebee's in recent years, you might have encountered a touchscreen menu: a tablet from which you can select your order instead of talking to a server. Uno found that installing touchscreen menus in some restaurants **pushed their dessert sales up by 30 percent**, Planet Money reported last year. "One theory is that customers feel like waiters will judge them if they order dessert right after they've eaten a huge pizza," said reporter Stacey Vanek Smith, whereas a machine won't judge them.

In a paper soon to be published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, a trio of researchers offer an alternate explanation: Using touchscreens to select food makes us feel like we are actually reaching toward that food to grab it, which makes us more likely to select "affect-laden products" (like cheesecake) than "cognitively superior products" (like fruit salad). Hao Shen and Meng Zhang of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Aradhna Krishna of the University of Michigan found that university students in Hong Kong were more likely to choose hypothetical junk food over hypothetical healthier options when they used a touchscreen than when they used a desktop computer with a mouse. Interestingly, the effect also held when the researchers compared touching a touchscreen to using a stylus on a touchscreen. It was the act of touching the screen that apparently triggered hedonistic choices, rather than the convenience or interface of the touchscreen.

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A few caveats are necessary: The studies used a small sample size in each phase of the study, between 85 and 228 students. Some of the students participated for extra credit, and the others were paid the equivalent of \$1.30, which means they might not have had much of an incentive to take the study seriously. And the effect of touching the touchscreen was not huge: 95 percent of people using a touchpad selected hypothetical cheesecake over hypothetical fruit salad, but so did 73 percent of people using a desktop computer. Yes, the touchscreen apparently lowered people's resistance to the cheesecake, but most people were going to choose cheesecake no matter what.

This isn't the first (or last) study to attempt to tease out how external factors can affect what and how much we eat. Think of all those studies on **whether plate size affects consumption**, or a **recent study** showing that people make healthier food choices when they eat under bright lights. These kinds of studies are useful for the food service industry, which can use findings like this to bolster sales of items with a high profit margin. (It's no coincidence that the researchers behind the touchscreen study are professors of marketing.) These studies are also useful for regulators who want to understand how food manufacturers and vendors exploit consumers' unconscious weaknesses. They're also arguably just plain interesting, even if their conclusions ought to be taken with a grain of salt.

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But I worry that studies like this play into a larger cultural narrative—one that also gets pushed by the diet industry, often onto women—that people just can't trust themselves around food, that our instincts will lead us astray. A person who is concerned about his or her eating habits or weight might read about this study and conclude, "Oh god, I won't be able to control myself if I follow my gut; my intuition is trying to undermine me." This is the harmful notion that underpins most eating disorders. It's self-evident that external factors affect what one eats, but that doesn't mean that eating healthfully requires rigidly counting every calorie so that you don't fall prey to touchscreens or big plates or dim lighting. People can trust your gut if they eat when they're hungry, stop eating when they're full, and pay attention to how different foods make them feel. If you're not used to eating intuitively, this is really hard, and even scary, at first—but once you get the hang of it, the possibility that a touchscreen might have a small influence on your order won't freak you out. And neither will the possibility that you might sometimes choose cheesecake over fruit salad.

POLITICS WHO'S WINNING, WHO'S LOSING, AND WHY.

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Why the Democrats Need Keith Ellison

The candidate for DNC chairman wants to lead an anti-Trump resistance, not search for areas of cooperation.

By Michelle Goldberg



Rep. Keith Ellison speaks to members of the media as Sen. Bernie Sanders looks on during a news conference on Sept. 17, 2015, on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

Alex Wong/Getty Images

Three days after the calamity of Donald Trump's election, Bernie Sanders took to the *New York Times* to say I told you so. "I am saddened, but not surprised, by the outcome," he wrote. "It is no shock to me that millions of people who voted for Mr. Trump did so because they are sick and tired of the economic, political and media status quo." Treating Trump's victory as a repudiation of neoliberalism—rather than a repudiation of cosmopolitanism—he offered to collaborate with the president-elect. "I will keep an open mind to see what ideas Mr. Trump offers and when and how we can work together," Sanders wrote, adding, "If the president-elect is serious about pursuing policies that improve the lives of working families, I'm going to present some very real opportunities for him to earn my support."



MICHELLE GOLDBERG

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It's easy to see why Sanders feels vindicated right now. The election did not prove he could have beaten Trump, but it proved that Clinton, who made her case partly on electability, could not. Nevertheless, it was shocking to see him take this conciliatory tone toward Trump, treating him as a man with a common set of values. As much as Sanders wants to represent the beleaguered white working

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class, the people who really need a champion now are those under direct and imminent threat from Trump and Trumpism. So far Sanders has shown himself unable or unwilling to lead the anti-Trump opposition, except in one way: by pushing Keith Ellison for Democratic National Committee chairman. [CONTINUE READING](#)

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