Hot under the collar: how spicy food influences emotion perception

Research Paper

Chen, D., Zhang, S., Wu, Q., & Ren, M. (2024). You see what you eat: effects of spicy food on emotion perception. Current Psychology, 43(4), 3275-3291.

Overview

This research explores the intriguing relationship between spicy food preferences and the perception of emotions, focusing on anger and disgust. The study hypothesises that the consumption of spicy foods, especially those containing capsaicin, influences emotional responses and perceptions through pathways of aggression and pathogen avoidance.

Key Findings

Spicy Food and Aggression: Individuals who prefer spicy food display heightened sensitivity to anger, mediated by an increase in trait aggression. Consuming spicy food was found to boost state aggression, which subsequently enhances the perception of angry facial expressions.

Pathogen Avoidance and Disgust: Spicy food preference is also linked to higher sensitivity in detecting disgust, likely due to increased trait pathogen avoidance. This relationship underscores the behavioural immune system's role in emotion perception.

Emotion Specificity: The effects of spicy food were particularly evident in perceptions of anger and disgust, with less pronounced effects on other emotions like happiness and fear.

Methods

The study involved several experiments using facial expression tasks to measure emotional perception. Participants' preferences for spicy food were quantified, and their responses to morphing facial images showing various emotions were recorded. Additional analyses were conducted to understand the mediating roles of aggression and pathogen avoidance.

Insight

The findings offer a deeper understanding of the embodied cognition processes, linking sensory experiences with emotional and behavioural responses. This has implications for the food industry and policymakers, suggesting that dietary habits are linked with emotion modulation and social behaviours.

The study enriches the dialogue on how our sensory environment, including the food we eat, shapes not only our physiological responses but also our psychological and social experiences.





