How hand cleansing shapes eating decisions: Psychological reset as a route to moral self-perception or self-permission

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Abstract

Hand cleansing is ubiquitous and carries symbolic meanings beyond hygiene. As it often occurs immediately before eating, it is proximal to food decisions. However, its implications for food-related responses remain unclear. Across two experiments, we examine how cleansing shapes willingness to eat (WTE) healthy and unhealthy foods and identify the underlying processes. Study 1 (N = 565) revealed that cleansing did not shift forced-choice between salad and chips, but increased WTE for both. Cleansing elevated state moral self-perception, which increased WTE for healthy but not unhealthy food. Study 2 (N = 580) tested an alternative mechanism for unhealthy food and revealed a significant serial mediation: cleansing heightened psychological reset, which increased self-permission and, in turn, WTE for unhealthy foods (donut and French fries). Together, the findings support a dual-translation account in which cleansing-induced reset yields distinct regulatory outcomes depending on whether the food option is perceived as virtuous or indulgent.

Keywords: Hand cleansing, Psychological reset, Moral self-perception, Self-permission, Food decision-making