

Eating too much? 'Law & Order' may be guilty

Must-bleed TV fans consumed with thoughts of death — and groceries?

By Diane Mapes
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Crime TV has become a staple of the typical American viewer's diet. From "Law & Order" and "CSI" — both of which come in three separate flavors — to "Criminal Minds," "Cold Case" and "The Closer," it's hard to avoid the banquet of brutality offered up each week, each day or even each hour if you happen to have cable.

But a new study published in the Journal of Consumer Research may give viewers pause about all the death they're routinely letting into their living rooms. Apparently, must-bleed-TV may just make you eat and shop more.

In the study, titled "The Sweet Escape," researchers conducted four experiments revealing that "consumers who have been recently reminded of their own impending mortality" spend more on groceries — and actually eat more of those groceries.

"We found that when people think about the fact that they're going to die someday — not now, but someday — they want to consume more of everything," says Naomi Mandel, co-author of the study and an associate professor of marketing at Arizona State University. "We find this with snacks and drinks but also all kinds of different foods: frozen foods, meats, vegetables, everything."

Shopping, snacking for comfort

Struck by the spike in shopping following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Mandel and her colleagues designed experiments to measure consumers' response to "mortality salience" — that is, the awareness they will die.

In one experiment, the "mortality" group wrote about their own impending deaths while the control group wrote about going to the dentist. Afterward, when each group was given a grocery list for a hypothetical party and asked to check off items they needed to purchase, members of the mortality salience group selected significantly more items than their counterparts in a control group.

In another experiment, two groups were asked to write about either their own deaths or a painful medical procedure and then instructed to taste-test cookies. As before, the mortality salience group consumed more, eating 25 percent more cookies than the control group.

What does this have to do with "Law & Order"?

"Consumers, especially those with a lower self-esteem, may be more susceptible to overconsumption when confronted with images of death during the news or their favorite crime scene investigation shows," Mandel concludes in her study.

"If people are watching and thinking something like this could happen to them, it's likely to cause them to overconsume."

Dov Eisenberger, a 37-year-old insurance company president from Englewood, N.J., says Mandel's study might help explain his wife's summer shopping hiatus.

"My wife is a 'Law & Order' junkie plus she watches 'The Closer,' 'Criminal Minds' and every 'CSI' out there," he says. "And she would dispute this, but I find that her spending habits increase during the regular season and then drop off during the summer. I don't know for sure that I can connect it to 'Law & Order,' but she does watch a lot of shows full of blood and guts during the year and then in the summer, there's nothing."

Overconsumption can be complicated

Could other factors be at play? Experts point out that the reasons for overconsumption can be as convoluted as the plots on some of TV's outlandish crime shows.

Nancy Molitor, a clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Northwestern University, says that while it's interesting to link eating and shopping to a fear of impending death — a fear that's been with humans for thousands of years — there are many reasons why people overconsume.

"Overspending can be a sign of mania or part of a bipolar disease condition and there are lots of psychological reasons why people overspend too — anxiety, feeling deprived in their emotional life," Molitor says. "People spend to distract themselves, to fill themselves up. And overeating is complicated, as well. We know that people who are obese have a long history of overeating that starts in their childhood. It could be anxiety but it's also a learned habit. They're bored so they turn on the TV and reach for the potato chips."

Cindy Rankin, a 46-year-old Seattle writer, says it's not crime shows that "ring her death bell," but the evening news.

"The crime shows don't make me anxious, they're entertainment," she says. "There's not a whole lot of chance that I'm going to pass out at some chichi party in Miami and get eaten by a 40-foot boa constrictor. But when I'm watching the news or thinking of people who have died in my family, it brings up real fears of death. And then, yeah, I might go shopping online or eat things I wouldn't eat normally or eat more of what I have around."

Should crime shows come with a warning that the contents may make consumers fat (and/or broke)?

"I wouldn't suggest that," says Mandel. "But retailers might think about installing TVs and playing the news in their stores. There's always something on about murder or terrorism or car crashes. And it might cause people to put more things in their cart. I wouldn't encourage it, but it might work."

Diane Mapes is a Seattle freelance writer and author of "How to Date in a Post-Dating World."