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“So Cute I Could Eat It Up”: Priming Effects of Cute Products on Indulgent Consumption

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This article examines the extent to which consumers engage in more indulgent consumption when they are exposed to whimsically cute products and explores the process by which such products affect indulgence. Prior research on *kindchenschema* (baby schema) has found that exposure to cute babies or baby animals leads to more careful behavior (see the study by Sherman, Haidt, and Coan), suggesting restraint. The present research uncovers the opposite: consumers become more indulgent in their behavior after exposure to whimsically cute products. Drawing from research on cognitive priming, *kindchenschema*, anthropomorphization, indulgence, and regulatory focus, this research posits that exposure to whimsically cute products primes mental representations of fun, increasing consumers' focus on approaching self-rewards and making consumers more likely to choose indulgent options. These effects do not emerge for *kindchenschema* cute stimuli, since they prime mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking. Four empirical studies provide evidence for the proposed effects and their underlying process.

Companies market a rapidly increasing number and variety of cute products across numerous categories, targeting not only children but also adult consumers. The marketplace is replete with cute clothing, utensils, appliances, foods, office supplies, and even automobiles, which are quite popular among adult consumers (Marcus 2002; Taylor 2011; Yano 2004). For example, Etsy, an online marketplace for handmade products, which sells a wide variety of cute products (e.g., crocheted R2-D2s, dog-inspired pillows, and painted wooden figurines), had revenues of \$895 million in 2012 (Wolverson 2013) and the Lilly Pulitzer fashion brand, which incorporates rounded shapes, tropical colors, and lighthearted designs to create cute clothing and accessories, had sales of \$122 million in 2012 (Wilson 2013). Despite the abundance of cute products in the marketplace, academic

research on consumers' evaluation of cute products and its downstream effects on consumer decision making and behavior is limited.

Cuteness is generally defined as being attractive in an adorable or endearing way (Hellen and Sääksjärvi 2011; <http://oxforddictionaries.com>). Cute products might include anthropomorphized features (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007), since some humanlike characteristics can potentially enhance perceived cuteness (Lorenz 1943). However, cuteness is a broad concept, and other characteristics, such as size, shape, design, or marketing positioning, might also influence products' perceived cuteness (Norman 2004).

To date, most scholarly research on cuteness has examined the *kindchenschema* (baby schema) dimension of cuteness, which centers on the collection of cute features in newborns (e.g., bulging forehead, large eyes, rounded cheeks). Since it relates to the vulnerable nature of a living entity, *kindchenschema* elicits responses from adults that increase the infant's chance of survival. These include increased attention to and protection of the helpless infant (Brosch, Sander, and Scherer 2007; Lorenz 1943) and increased carefulness and caretaking behavior (Sherman, Haidt, and Coan 2009). Even though prior research has only examined *kindchenschema* cuteness in the context of living entities (babies, children), the characteristics of *kindchenschema* cuteness are often embodied in inanimate objects, like products, which feature representations of a cute vulnerable living entity (e.g., *Earth's Best* baby food and baby care products fea-

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turing pictures of cute babies and *Precious Moments* products featuring characters with kindchenschema features of bulging forehead and rounded cheeks).

Going beyond the idea of kindchenschema cuteness, we propose that cute products may trigger certain consumer responses as a function of a second, novel dimension: *whimsical* cuteness. Specifically, we put forth the idea that cute products (e.g., an ice-cream scoop shaped like a miniature person or a dress with tropical colors and pink flamingos) can have whimsical nature, which is associated with capricious humor and playful disposition (<http://oxforddictionaries.com>). Whimsical cuteness is not characterized by the vulnerable nature inherent in the cuteness of a helpless baby or child; it is instead associated with fun and playfulness. Whimsical cuteness has been largely overlooked, which leaves a void in consumer behavior research, because—as this research will demonstrate—whimsical cuteness can substantially influence indulgent consumption behaviors and the effects of whimsical (vs. kindchenschema) cuteness trigger a different underlying process. Thus, cuteness is a multifaceted construct with two underlying dimensions—kindchenschema and whimsical cuteness (Carver 1989; Nenkov, Inman, and Hulland 2008). The two dimensions are subsets of the latent variable of general cuteness and represent different aspects of the construct: while the kindchenschema dimension relates to aspects of a cute infant or child and their vulnerable nature, the whimsical cuteness dimension relates to the fun and playfulness of an inanimate object.

Prior research has shown that the perception of kindchenschema in human faces is associated with naiveté, vulnerability, kindness, warmth (Berry and McArthur 1985), and honesty (Gorn, Jiang, and Johar 2008), captures attention (Brosch et al. 2007), and triggers caretaking motivation and behavior (Glocker et al. 2008; Lorenz 1943). Furthermore, exposure to kindchenschema cuteness (i.e., a cute baby) triggers both the physical embodiment of care (increased physical carefulness in a manual precision task; Sherman et al. 2013) and the phenomenological and motivational correlates of care (feelings of tenderness and desire to protect; Sherman et al. 2009). Similar careful and caretaking responses emerge with exposure to cute baby animals, such as puppies and kittens (Hiroshi et al. 2012; Sherman et al. 2009). The tenderness that kindchenschema cuteness elicits “is more than just a positive affective feeling state” (Sherman et al. 2009, 285); it also affects people’s cognitive processes and behaviors (Lehmann, Veld, and Vingerhoets 2013) and may be linked to a hormonal response in adults to protect a cute living entity (Sprenghelmeyer et al. 2009). Exposure to cute stimuli that emphasize kindchenschema (e.g., babies, baby-like facial features, baby animals) seems to trigger protective, caretaking, attentive, and careful behavior. As such, this literature stream would suggest that exposure to cute products in the marketplace should lead to less indulgent behavior.

In contrast, we put forth the possibility that products emphasizing the *whimsical* dimension of cuteness, particularly those intended for adults, have the opposite effect of trig-

gering more indulgent behavior. We propose that this opposing effect is driven by the distinct mental representations primed by whimsically cute products, which direct consumers’ focus on the rewards they can obtain from indulging. Specifically, we theorize that exposure to whimsically cute products (i.e., evaluating, using, or consuming such products) primes mental representations of fun. We show that this priming effect increases consumers’ self-reward focus (i.e., focus on approaching desirable outcomes and rewards for the self; Carver and White 1994; Higgins 1998; Pham and Higgins 2005), which results in subsequent indulgent consumption choices. Notably, we would not expect this effect for kindchenschema cute products. Exposure to kindchenschema cute products should prime mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking (Berry and McArthur 1985) and should not focus consumers on potential self-rewards or increase indulgence.

The current research makes four important contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on kindchenschema and anthropomorphization by extending research on cuteness beyond cute living stimuli (e.g., babies) to cute *products*. We introduce a novel dimension of cuteness—whimsical cuteness—and demonstrate that exposure to whimsically cute products leads to more indulgent downstream consumer behavior. This differs from exposure to stimuli reflecting kindchenschema cuteness (which could be both living entities, like babies, and inanimate objects, like products), which leads to more careful and caretaking behavior.

Second, this research contributes to the cognitive priming literature (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001) by establishing a previously unexplored priming effect, in which exposure to whimsically cute products leads consumers to mirror the whimsical nature of these products. We argue that whereas exposure to a cute *baby* leads to automatic trait inferences of “vulnerable” and “caretaking,” which should not increase indulgence in subsequent behavior, exposure to a cute *product* should lead consumers to infer the traits “whimsical” and “fun” and subsequently choose corresponding behavior that is more indulgent.

Third, we add to the indulgence and self-control literature (Baumeister 2002; Kivetz and Simonson 2002) by proposing exposure to whimsically cute products as a previously unexplored determinant of indulgence and by identifying self-reward focus as the process underlying these effects. We demonstrate that the differential mental representations primed by whimsically cute versus kindchenschema cute stimuli change consumers’ self-reward focus, thus driving the differential effects on indulgence. This explains why our results run counter to existing literature (Lorenz 1943; Sherman et al. 2009) and adds to prior literature on self-rewards in marketing contexts (Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2009).

Fourth, we demonstrate how the dimensions in our proposed model of cuteness—kindchenschema and whimsicalness—function independently and can interact with each other. For example, whimsically cute products that are positioned for use by babies or children—or kindchenschema cute products

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positioned for use by adults—may reflect elements of both whimsical and kindchenschema cuteness. Next, we develop our hypotheses and present four empirical studies that test our predicted effects of cute products on indulgent consumption and establish the process through which these effects occur.

CUTE PRODUCTS AND INDULGENT CONSUMPTION

Cute Cognitive Priming

Research on the perception-behavior link has shown that mental representations responsible for perception and behavior are intimately linked so that perceptions have direct and often unconscious effects on a wide range of behaviors, from simple motor movements to elaborate behavioral patterns (Dijksterhuis et al. 2005). As such, people sometimes infer underlying traits based on others' actions (Dijksterhuis et al. 2005) and exhibit behaviors they associate with other individuals, social groups, and even brands (Aggarwal and McGill 2012; Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008; Kay et al. 2004). A significant amount of research has replicated the direct activation of a mental construct through exposure to words related to that construct (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996) or to environmental cues encountered in everyday life (e.g., stereotyped group members, Bargh et al. 1996; or brands, Fitzsimons et al. 2008).

We suggest that similar to individuals, social groups, symbols, and brands, product attributes can also activate perceptions that have important influences on subsequent behavior. Whereas exposure to kindchenschema cuteness (e.g., cute babies or products featuring such images) and its vulnerable nature should trigger mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking (Berry and McArthur 1985; Lorenz 1943), exposure to cute products with whimsical nature should trigger distinct mental representations. A cute, whimsical product is adorable and endearing, but it is not associated with the vulnerability or caretaking characteristics of kindchenschema cuteness. Instead, we argue that because of cute products' whimsical nature, which as discussed above, is by definition associated with capricious humor and playfulness, consumers' mental representations activated by whimsically cute stimuli are linked to the constructs of playfulness and fun. This leads to an increased likelihood of consumers engaging in the corresponding indulgent behavior (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001; Fitzsimons et al. 2008). We thus propose a previously unexplored priming effect—exposure to products that score high on whimsical cuteness activates mental representations of fun.

Displaying behaviors of a primed concept or category has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts (Aggarwal and McGill 2012; Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg 1998). Thus, the activation of a particular construct should lead to a greater likelihood of corresponding nonconscious behavior associated with this construct (Aggarwal and McGill 2012). We argue that in the case of whimsically cute product priming, the corresponding behavior will be determined by men-

tal representations of fun and playfulness, which, as discussed below, should result in choices of more indulgent consumption options.

In summary, we expect that exposure to whimsically cute products primes mental representations of fun, leading consumers to display behaviors consistent with these representations, resulting in more indulgent consumption. Our research differs from prior work, which finds that kindchenschema cuteness leads to behavioral carefulness, as one is primed to protect and care for a vulnerable and innocent entity. Past research does not account for the whimsical dimension of cuteness, a gap that we strive to address by examining the whimsical nature of some cute products, and its downstream effect on consumer behavior.

H1a: Exposure to whimsically cute (vs. neutral or vs. kindchenschema cute) stimuli increases consumers' indulgent consumption.

H1b: Exposure to whimsically cute (vs. neutral or vs. kindchenschema cute) stimuli primes mental representations of fun.

Cute Priming and Self-Reward Focus

Prior research has revealed that consumers may indulge as a self-reward (e.g., Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2009). For example, Mick and DeMoss (1990) showed that respondents might reward themselves with an indulgence when they think it is deserved. Mukhopadhyay and Johar (2009) found that consumers might reward themselves by choosing indulgence over nonindulgence when they have previously exercised restraint. Building on this notion, we argue that exposure to whimsically cute stimuli, which prime mental representations of fun and playfulness, affects consumers' indulgence through a process of increased self-reward focus. We define self-reward focus as a focus on approaching desirable outcomes and rewarding experiences (Carver and White 1994; Higgins 1998; Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002).

Prior research has established a link between fun and reward sensitivity (Carver and White 1994). In addition, recent research has revealed that people associate the concept of fun with intrinsic rewards and happiness (McManus and Furnham 2010). Fun and playfulness have also been shown to provide consumers with hedonic value in rewarding situations (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). Based on that, we expect that perceptions of fun would raise consumers' focus on and responsiveness to the signals of an impending self-reward that indulgent opportunities provide. Such enhanced self-reward focus should increase consumers' tendency to seek out and engage in rewarding experiences like indulgent consumption (Carver and White 1994; Higgins 2002).

In contrast to the self-reward focus associated with fun and playfulness, kindchenschema cuteness is associated with a more *other-directed* focus on a vulnerable entity (Lorenz

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1943). Notably, this relatively more other-directed focus on a vulnerable target should *not* encourage an increased approach toward self-rewards. As such, exposure to kindchenschema cute stimuli, which primes mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking and has been linked to protective and careful behavior in prior research, is not expected to produce an increase in self-reward focus and indulgence. We note that it is possible that kindchenschema cuteness could encourage a focus on *avoiding undesirable outcomes*. However, such an avoidance focus is not predictive of responsiveness to impending rewards (Carver and White 1994) and is not expected to affect consumers' likelihood to indulge. Given our focus on indulgent consumption, our conceptual model examines the extent to which whimsically cute stimuli leads to *approaching self-rewards*.

In sum, we argue that whimsically cute stimuli prime mental representations of fun, which leads to an enhanced focus on approaching self-rewards and an increase in indulgence, whereas kindchenschema cute stimuli, which prime mental representations of vulnerability, are not expected to produce such effects.

H2: The fun priming resulting from exposure to whimsically cute (vs. neutral or vs. kindchenschema cute) stimuli triggers an increased self-reward focus, which mediates the effects of whimsically cute priming on indulgence.

EMPIRICAL OVERVIEW

We present four studies in which we test our hypotheses, establish the proposed effect of whimsically cute products on indulgent consumer behavior, and provide insight into the underlying process, explaining why consumer behaviors differ depending on the type of cute stimuli (whimsical vs. kindchenschema). Study 1 demonstrates the effects of exposure to a whimsically cute food utensil on actual food self-serving and food consumption. Study 2 generalizes the effects to a utilitarian nonfood context and provides initial evidence of the underlying process driving the increased indulgence effect by showing that whimsically cute product exposure primes spontaneous mental representations of fun.

Studies 3 and 4 directly contrast the newly uncovered whimsical cuteness priming effect on indulgence to prior literature on kindchenschema cuteness by showing that this effect disappears when the cuteness of the product is based on kindchenschema characteristics. We examine kindchenschema cuteness in two ways. First, in study 3, which examines actual indulgent consumption choices, we manipulate kindchenschema cuteness directly by employing cute products that explicitly feature kindchenschema elements (i.e., representations of cute babies). Importantly, study 3 illuminates the underlying process driving the increased indulgence effect by demonstrating that the differential mental representations primed by whimsically cute versus kindchenschema cute stimuli change consumers' self-reward focus, which drives the differential effects on indulgence. Sec-

ond, in study 4 we employ a subtle kindchenschema cuteness prime by changing the designation of the same cute product (for adults vs. for children) and study indulgent consumption choices that are unrelated to the cute primes.

STUDY 1

Our first study tests hypothesis 1a by exploring the effects of exposure to whimsically cute products on actual indulgent consumption. Participants in this experiment used either a neutral or a whimsically cute ice-cream scoop to serve their ice cream.

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky ($N = 33$, 36% female) were invited to participate in an "ice-cream taste test" in exchange for course credit. Participants individually entered a private room and were randomly given one of two ice-cream scoops: a neutral or a whimsically cute one (fig. 1).

Cuteness Manipulation. We conducted a pretest of the cuteness manipulation (online pool; $N = 60$; 25% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.8$). Participants viewed either the cute or neutral scoop and rated the extent to which the scoops were cute (cute, adorable, endearing; $\alpha = .92$), reflected whimsical cuteness (whimsical, playful, fun; $\alpha = .85$), reflected kindchenschema cuteness (vulnerable, naive, caretaking; $\alpha = .76$), and were likable (likable, attractive; $r = .74$). All items were measured on a 6-point scale (0 = not at all, 5 = extremely). Participants rated the cute scoop as significantly cuter and more whimsical than the neutral scoop (see table 1 for detailed results). The cute and neutral scoops were not significantly different in terms of kindchenschema cuteness and overall likability. Both scoops held comparable amounts of ice cream (cute scoop = 1.31 ounces; neutral scoop = 1.48 ounces).

Indulgent Consumption. Participants individually entered a private room in which they were instructed to scoop as much vanilla ice cream as they wanted using one of the two randomly assigned scoops, from a 48-ounce container labeled "Test Flavor A." After participants scooped their ice cream, a scale was revealed, and their ice cream was weighed. Participants then went to a computer station to view a 10-minute nature video as they consumed the ice cream. After participants were thanked and debriefed, their remaining ice cream was weighed.

Control Variables. On arrival, participants indicated their hunger level (1 = not at all hungry, 7 = extremely hungry) and how much they liked vanilla ice cream (1 = dislike extremely, 7 = like extremely). To support the cover story, they evaluated the ice cream on seven dimensions, such as color and texture. None of the participants guessed the study's purpose.

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FIGURE 1

ICE-CREAM SCOOP STIMULI (STUDY 1)

Cute Ice Cream Scoop**Neutral Ice Cream Scoop****Results**

We ran an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on the amount scooped, with hunger level and vanilla ice cream liking as covariates. Analysis revealed that participants scooped more ice cream when using the cute scoop ($M = 2.01$ ounces) than when using the neutral scoop ($M = 1.53$; $F(1, 29) = 4.18, p < .05$), even though the neutral scoop held slightly more ice cream. Next, an ANCOVA on the amount of ice cream eaten, with hunger level and vanilla ice cream liking as covariates, revealed that participants ate marginally more ice cream when using the cute scoop ($M = 1.88$) than when using the neutral scoop ($M = 1.47$

ounces; $F(1, 29) = 3.03, p < .10$). The covariates did not have a significant effect in the models. These results demonstrate that exposure to cute products has downstream implications for consumers' indulgent consumption, in support of hypothesis 1a.

Because the ice-cream scoop can be considered a utilitarian product, these findings provide evidence that our predicted effects of cute products on indulgence extend to utilitarian products (scoop) used for hedonic consumption (ice cream), even though indulgence is usually associated with hedonic product categories (Khan, Dhar, and Wertenbroch 2005). Our next studies continue to examine this boundary effect and show that the effects of cute products on indulgent

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TABLE 1
CUTE STIMULI PRETESTS, STUDIES 1–4

	N	Cute rating [^]	Whimsical rating ⁻	Kindchenschema rating [#]	Liking rating [*]
Study 1: Ice-cream scoop ($n = 60$; 25% female; $M_{age} = 27.8$)					
Cute ice-cream scoop	27	3.78	4.36	2.29	3.78
Neutral ice-cream scoop	33	3.01	3.60	2.08	3.91
		$t(58) = 2.43, p < .05$	$t(58) = 2.44, p < .05$	$t(58) = .84, p > .50$	$t(58) = .42, p > .80$
Study 2: Stapler ($n = 53$; 38% female, $M_{age} = 27$)					
Cute stapler	30	4.30	4.69	2.36	4.12
Neutral stapler	23	2.68	3.31	2.00	3.59
		$t(51) = 5.17, p < .001$	$t(51) = 4.18, p < .001$	$t(51) = 1.25, p > .30$	$t(51) = 1.58, p > .20$
Study 3: Gift card* ($n = 92$; 28% female, $M_{age} = 30.1$)					
Whimsical card	32	4.38 ^a	3.97 ^a	2.88 ^a	4.56
Kindchenschema card	28	5.14 ^b	3.40 ^b	3.68 ^b	4.48
Neutral card	32	2.49 ^c	2.70 ^c	1.70 ^c	4.13
		$F(2, 89) = 45.59, p < .001$	$F(2, 89) = 12.89, p < .001$	$F(2, 89) = 32.46, p < .001$	$F(2, 89) = 1.42, p > .24$
Study 4: Cookie ($n = 47$, 19% female; $M_{age} = 28.8$)					
Whimsically cute cookie	26	4.88	4.69	2.48	4.94
Neutral cookie	21	3.11	3.58	2.33	4.64
		$t(45) = 6.52, p < .001$	$t(45) = 3.77, p < .001$	$t(45) = .50, p > .70$	$t(45) = 1.85, p > .10$
Study 4: Store name ($n = 40$; 13% female; $M_{age} = 28.1$)					
Kindchenschema cute name (The Kid's Cookie Shop)	18	4.43	4.08	2.87	4.27
Neutral name (The Cookie Shop)	22	3.83	3.60	2.25	4.11
		$t(53) = 1.98, p = .05$	$t(53) = 1.68, p > .10$	$t(53) = 2.23, p < .05$	$t(53) = .49, p > .60$

NOTE.—Superscript letters denote differences at $p < .05$ or better.

[^]Ratings are cute, adorable, and endearing.

⁻Ratings are whimsical, fun, and playful.

[#]Ratings are vulnerable, naive, and caretaking.

^{*}Ratings are likable and attractive.

consumption can also emerge in hedonic food domains (cookies, study 4) and in nonfood domains, for both utilitarian product use (office supplies: staplers, study 2) and hedonic product choice (entertainment products: movies, study 3).

STUDY 2

The purpose of this study is to test the effects of a whimsically cute functional product on indulgent behavior, providing further support for hypothesis 1a. In addition, this study generalizes our findings to a different assessment of indulgent behavior: using the focal cute (or neutral) product itself. This study also provides initial evidence of the underlying process driving the increased indulgence effect by showing that whimsically cute product exposure primes spontaneous mental representations of fun, testing hypothesis 1b.

Participants and Procedure

Eighty-five undergraduates at the University of Kentucky participated in exchange for course credit (51% female). Participants were randomly assigned to view either a whimsically cute or a neutral stapler (see fig. 2).

Cuteness Manipulation. We conducted a pretest of the cuteness manipulation. Participants viewed either the cute or

neutral stapler and rated the staplers on the same four indices (overall cuteness, whimsically cute, kindchenschema cute, and likability) as in study 1. Participants rated the cute stapler as significantly cuter and more whimsical than the neutral stapler. The cute and neutral staplers were not significantly different in terms of kindchenschema cuteness and overall likability (for detailed results see table 1).

Fun Priming. When participants first viewed the stapler, they were asked to list the top five words that come to mind. To test if the cute stapler primes mental representations of fun, we had a student worker, blind to the study hypothesis, count the number of times participants listed the word “fun” in each condition. The worker coded participants’ word lists as either featuring a mention of fun (1) or not featuring such a mention (0).

Indulgent Consumption. Our dependent variable focused on the extent to which consumers indicated their intent to use the product for indulgent purposes. We asked “What do you think you would use this stapler for if you owned it?” and presented in randomized order indulgent uses (play, fun projects, art projects; $\alpha = .72$) and nonindulgent uses (work, serious projects, homework; $\alpha = .87$), which we combined to form indulgent and nonindulgent usage indexes. We measured all items on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = not at all, 6 = extremely).

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FIGURE 2

STAPLER STIMULI (STUDY 2)

Cute Stapler**Neutral Stapler**

Control Variables. To rule out alternative explanations for our findings and ensure that the cute effects were not due to a differential amount of cognitive elaboration or issue involvement, we measured these as potential confounds for our effects. We measured cognitive elaboration by asking participants to report how much attention they paid when evaluating the stapler (1 = paid little attention, 7 = paid a lot of attention). We measured involvement by asking participants to indicate, on a 7-point scale, the extent to which the material in the study was involving (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990). We then collected demographic information. We confirmed that no differences emerged in the control variables across experimental conditions (all $p > .10$) and that including these variables in the analysis did not change our results.

Results

Fun Priming. In support of hypothesis 1b, an ANOVA on participants' fun mentions ($F(1, 83) = 23.71, p < .001$) revealed that a significantly greater proportion of participants mentioned the word "fun" in the cute stapler condition ($M = .39$) than in the neutral stapler condition ($M = .00$; $t(83) = 4.87, p < .001$).

Indulgent and Nonindulgent Usage. An ANOVA on the indulgent uses index revealed that consumers were more likely to use the stapler for indulgent tasks when they were exposed to the cute stapler ($M = 4.66$) rather than the neutral one ($M = 3.70$; $F(1, 83) = 9.53, p < .01$). An ANOVA on the nonindulgent uses index revealed that consumers were less likely to use the stapler for nonindulgent tasks when they were exposed to the cute stapler ($M = 4.77$) rather than the neutral one ($M = 5.56$; $F(1, 83) = 4.71, p$

$< .05$). These results provide further support for hypothesis 1a. (We note that we did not test the mediational role of fun mental representations, because there were no mentions of fun in the neutral condition (i.e., $M = 0$). We conduct a comprehensive mediation analysis in the next study.)

Discussion

This study tested the effects of cute products on indulgence using a new context (i.e., intended usage of a utilitarian product) and demonstrated that consumers' behavioral intentions toward using a product for indulgent or nonindulgent purposes can vary depending on how cute the product is. We found that when consumers were exposed to a whimsically cute (vs. neutral) stapler, they were more likely to use the stapler for indulgent purposes, such as for play or fun projects, and were less likely to use the stapler for nonindulgent purposes, such as work or homework projects. Furthermore, this study provides initial insight into the underlying process, by showing that whimsically cute products prime spontaneous mental representations of fun.

The stimuli used in studies 1 and 2 (cute vs. neutral ice-cream scoops and staplers) did not differ in terms of the extent to which they reflected kindchenschema but did differ in the extent to which they were perceived as whimsically cute. In the next two studies, we more fully examine our conceptual framework by contrasting the effects of cute products that vary in terms of the extent to which they reflect kindchenschema cuteness or whimsical cuteness.

STUDY 3

The purpose of this study is to test our full conceptual model. First, we examine whether consumers make more

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indulgent movie choices when they are shopping with a kindchenschema cute, whimsically cute, or neutral Amazon.com gift card, testing hypothesis 1a. Moreover, this study tests the process underlying the effects of whimsical cuteness on indulgence. We show that whimsically cute products prime mental representations of fun, resulting in an increased focus on approaching self-rewards and greater indulgence. These effects, however, do not emerge for kindchenschema cute products, which prime mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 119 paid adults recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (44% females; $M_{age} = 32.72$). After completing a neutral filler task that entailed writing about their day (Garg, Inman, and Mittal 2005), participants were informed that they would be entered in a drawing to win a \$25 Amazon.com gift card that could be redeemed for five downloadable movie rentals of their choice. Participants were randomly assigned to see one of three gift cards: neutral, whimsically cute (dots), and kindchenschema cute (baby) design, which we created using the Amazon.com logo (see fig. 3). In this study we chose a colorful circular pattern for the whimsically cute gift card, consistent with prior research, which has shown that circular geometrical shapes and patterns are associated with playfulness and joy (Lundholm 1921) and that circular shapes can prime fundamental human needs and increase the instances of prime-consistent judgments and choices (Maimaran and Wheeler 2008; Zhu and Argo 2013). After all responses were collected, one participant won the \$25 card drawing.

Cuteness Manipulation. We conducted a pretest of the cuteness manipulation. Participants viewed either the whimsically cute (dots), the kindchenschema cute (baby), or neutral gift card and rated the cards on the same four measures as in studies 1 and 2. Results confirmed that the cute baby and dots cards were both significantly cuter than the neutral card (the cute baby card was also significantly cuter than the dots cards, providing a conservative test of our hypoth-

eses). Furthermore, participants perceived the cute dots design card as significantly more whimsical than the cute baby and neutral cards; and they perceived the cute baby card as significantly more reflective of kindchenschema cuteness than the dots and the neutral card. The three cards were not different in terms of likability (for detailed results, see table 1).

Indulgent Choice Measure. To assess indulgent choices, we used an approach (adapted from Read, Loewenstein, and Kalyanaraman 1999) in which participants selected among a set of highbrow or lowbrow movies. Participants selected the five movies they would like to rent if they won the gift card from a heterogeneous list of 22 highbrow and lowbrow movies (listed in table 2). Movies were presented in a random order, and the list contained titles, movie poster pictures, years of release, and brief synopses. Consistent with Read et al. (1999), we chose lowbrow movies that were big box office hits, with attractive and popular stars and an emphasis on action, comedy, or romance, and highbrow movies, which often had less familiar stars, subtitles, and were intellectually challenging. Because we anticipated that participants would have already seen many of the lowbrow movies, we included 13 of these and only 9 highbrow ones.

A pretest (online panel, $N = 40$; 48% female; $M_{age} = 31.5$) confirmed that the movies we classified as highbrow (highbrow, serious, responsible, and educational) and lowbrow (lowbrow, indulgent, fun, and frivolous) were indeed perceived as such by a similar participant population (Read et al. 1999; see table 2 for details). As a measure of indulgence, we assessed the percentage of the five movies participants selected that were lowbrow and indulgent.

Fun versus Vulnerability Priming. After making their movie choices, participants indicated the extent to which the picture of the gift card primed mental representations of fun or vulnerability by rating the extent to which they felt that the image on the gift card represents or makes them think of words indicative of fun priming (fun, whimsical, playful; $\alpha = .78$) or vulnerability priming (vulnerability, innocence, caretaking; $\alpha = .88$). Items were randomly pre-

FIGURE 3

GIFT CARD STIMULI (STUDY 3)



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TABLE 2
MOVIES PRETEST—STUDY 3

Title (year)	Lowbrow rating [^]
Lowbrow movies:	
<i>Bridesmaids</i> (2011)	5.08 ^a
<i>Snow White and the Huntsman</i> (2012)	4.03 ^b
<i>The Avengers</i> (2012)	4.35 ^b
<i>The Five-Year Engagement</i> (2012)	4.88 ^a
<i>Men in Black 2</i> (2012)	4.60 ^a
<i>Life as We Know It</i> (2010)	4.23 ^b
<i>Horrible Bosses</i> (2011)	5.15 ^a
<i>Hangover II</i> (2011)	5.25 ^a
<i>Zach and Miri Make a Porno</i> (2008)	5.30 ^a
<i>American Reunion</i> (2012)	5.55 ^a
<i>That's My Boy</i> (2012)	5.40 ^a
<i>The Campaign</i> (2012)	5.38 ^a
<i>Ted</i> (2012)	5.28 ^a
Highbrow movies:	
<i>In the Land of Blood and Honey</i> (2011); subtitled	1.62 ^c
<i>The Secret in Their Eyes</i> (2009); subtitled	1.52 ^c
<i>End of Love</i> (2009)	1.50 ^c
<i>The King's Speech</i> (2010)	1.05 ^d
<i>The Artist</i> (2011); silent; black and white	1.23 ^d
<i>The Help</i> (2011)	1.45 ^c
<i>Jane Eyre</i> (2011)	1.57 ^c
<i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i> (2012)	1.43 ^c
<i>Anna Karenina</i> (2012)	1.63 ^c

Sample synopses

In the Land of Blood and Honey (2011) (subtitled)



Director: Angelina Jolie
 Writer: Angelina Jolie
 Music: Gabriel Yared
 Length: 2:08
 Cast: Zana Marjanovic, Goran Kostic and Rade Serbedzija
 Synopsis: Set against the backdrop of the Bosnian War, Danijel (Goran Kostic), a soldier fighting for the Serbs, re-encounters Aja (Zana Marjanovic), a Bosnian woman he knew before the war. She is now a captive in the camp he oversees. While the two could have found love with each other, the armed conflict takes hold of their lives and traps them in a complex relationship where their motives to one another are ambiguous and their allegiances are uncertain.

The Avengers (2012)



Director: Joss Whedon
 Writer: Zak Penn and Joss Whedon
 Music: Alan Silvestri
 Length: 2:23
 Cast: Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Scarlett Johansson, Chris Hemsworth, Jeremy Renner, Tom Hiddleston, Samuel L. Jackson
 Synopsis: Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) recruits a group of Marvel Superheroes, Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr., The Incredible Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), Captain America (Chris Evans), Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) to fight Thor's (Chris Hemsworth) evil step-brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston), who global security. Can these superheroes put their differences and egos aside to save the world from disaster?

NOTE.—Superscript letters indicate that the means are significantly different at $p < .05$.

[^]Lowbrow rating: 1 = highbrow (less pleasurable to watch but memorable); 7 = lowbrow (fun and pleasurable to watch but quickly forgotten).

sented and measured on a 6-point scale (0 = not at all; 5 = extremely).

Self-Reward Focus. Next, to measure the extent to which participants focus on approaching self-rewards as a function of exposure to cute products, we adapted items from prior literature, which reflect a focus on approaching desirable outcomes and rewards (Lockwood et al. 2002), responsiveness to rewards (Carver and White 1994), and a tendency to seek out rewarding experiences (Carver and White 1994). After participants made their movie choices, they were asked

to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that, when deciding which movies to rent, they focused on achieving positive outcomes from their movie choice, imagined themselves experiencing good things that they hope will happen, focused on the success they hope to achieve in the future, imagined how they will achieve their hopes and aspirations, thought about the person they would ideally like to be in the future (adapted from Lockwood et al. 2002), were strongly affected by the prospect of renting the movies they want, got excited right away at the opportunity to rent the movies they want, and selected the movies to rent for no other reason than that they might be fun (adapted from Carver and White 1994). All items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .82$).

Control Variables. Next, to rule out any mood- or nostalgia-based explanation, we used a version of the positive and negative affect scale (PANAS; Townsend and Sood 2012; Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) with 7-point bipolar scales anchored by sad/happy, bad mood/good mood, irritable/pleased, and depressed/cheerful; for nostalgia the bipolar anchors were not nostalgic/nostalgic. (In the results discussed below, there were no differences in mood [$p > .23$] or nostalgia [$F < 1$] across experimental conditions; furthermore, including mood or nostalgia in the analysis did not change our results.)

In addition, we asked participants to indicate what type of movies they usually watched, on a 7-point bipolar scale, anchored by *fun and entertaining* and *serious and thought provoking*. Finally, participants provided demographic information.

Results

Because we were interested in participants' willingness to consider a variety of movies, we excluded 10 participants who indicated that they *only* watch fun and entertaining or serious and thought-provoking movies (i.e., participants who scored 1 and 7 on this variable). This resulted in 109 participants (46% females; $M_{age} = 32.39$), who served as the basis for the analyses.

Indulgent Consumption. To assess whether participants' movie choices differed across the three gift card conditions, we ran an ANCOVA ($F(4, 104) = 3.84, p < .01$) on the percentage of lowbrow movies participants selected in their set of five (sum of lowbrow movies selected divided by five), with the gift card condition as an independent variable, and age and gender as covariates. There was a marginal main effect of card type ($F(2, 104) = 2.49, p < .10$); as covariates, gender was significant ($p < .05$) and age was marginally significant ($p < .10$). Contrasts revealed that participants selected a higher percentage of lowbrow movies when shopping with the whimsically cute (i.e., dots design) gift card than when shopping with the kindschenschema cute (i.e., baby design) gift card ($M_{Dots} = 70.31\%$ vs. $M_{Baby} = 56.91\%$; $t(107) = 2.07, p < .05$) and the neutral card (M_{Dots}

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= 70.31% vs. $M_{\text{plain}} = 58.43\%$; $t(107) = 1.82$, $p = .07$). There was no difference across the kindschenschema cute and neutral conditions ($p > .80$).

Fun Priming. We ran an ANCOVA ($F(4, 104) = 2.83$, $p < .05$) on the fun priming index (fun, whimsical, playful), with the gift card condition as an independent variable, and age and gender as covariates. There was a significant main effect of card type ($F(2, 104) = 4.85$, $p < .05$); gender and age were nonsignificant covariates (all $p > .37$). Contrasts revealed that shopping with the whimsically cute gift card primed fun mental representations to a greater extent than shopping with the kindschenschema cute gift card ($M_{\text{Dots}} = 3.89$ vs. $M_{\text{Baby}} = 3.23$; $t(107) = 2.33$, $p < .05$) and the neutral one ($M_{\text{Dots}} = 3.89$ vs. $M_{\text{plain}} = 3.03$; $t(107) = 2.99$, $p < .01$). There was no difference across the kindschenschema baby and neutral gift card conditions ($p > .47$).

Vulnerability Priming. We ran an ANCOVA ($F(4, 104) = 13.07$, $p < .001$) on the vulnerability index (vulnerability, innocence, caretaking), with the gift card condition as an independent variable, and age and gender as covariates. There was a main effect of card type ($F(2, 106) = 24.09$, $p < .001$); gender and age were nonsignificant covariates (all $p > .25$). Contrasts revealed that shopping with the kindschenschema cute gift card primed mental representations of vulnerability to a greater extent than shopping with the whimsically cute card ($M_{\text{Baby}} = 3.65$ vs. $M_{\text{Dots}} = 2.14$; $t(107) = 5.21$, $p < .001$) and the neutral card ($M_{\text{Baby}} = 3.65$ vs. $M_{\text{plain}} = 1.82$; $t(107) = 6.50$, $p < .001$). There was no difference between the whimsically cute and neutral gift card conditions ($p > .27$).

Self-Reward Focus. We ran an ANCOVA ($F(4, 104) = 3.86$, $p < .01$) on the self-reward index, with gift card condition as the independent variable, and age and gender as covariates. There was a significant card type main effect ($F(2, 106) = 7.07$, $p < .001$); gender and age were nonsignificant covariates (all $p > .33$). Contrasts revealed that shopping with the whimsically cute gift card resulted in greater self-reward focus than either the kindschenschema cute card ($M_{\text{Dots}} = 4.45$ vs. $M_{\text{Baby}} = 3.54$; $t(107) = 3.67$, $p < .001$) or the neutral card ($M_{\text{Dots}} = 4.45$ vs. $M_{\text{plain}} = 3.94$; $t(107) = 1.98$, $p < .05$). In addition, self-reward focus was marginally lower when shopping with the kindschenschema cute card than the neutral card ($M_{\text{Baby}} = 3.54$ vs. $M_{\text{plain}} = 3.94$; $t(107) = 1.76$, $p < .10$).

Mediation Analysis. To further test the underlying process in our conceptual framework, we ran mediation models (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007, process model 6; see also Scott and Nowlis 2013). To test our conceptual framework we tested whether whimsical cuteness primes mental representations of fun, which increases consumers' self-reward focus, resulting in more indulgent consumption. Thus, when the whimsically cute gift card is included in the model with either the kindschenschema cute card or the neutral card, we expect mediation, that is, we expect an indirect effect via fun priming and increased self-reward focus on

indulgence. We first examine the relationship between the *whimsically cute* and the *kindchenschema cute* gift cards. In the model, the independent variable was card type (whimsical vs. kindchenschema), the first mediator was fun priming, and the first mediator led to the second mediator, self-reward focus. The dependent variable was indulgent consumption (movie choice), and the control variables were gender and age. Bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples excluded zero for the proposed indirect mediation path (effect = $-.0054$, 95% confidence interval: $-.0227$ to $-.0002$), supporting our model.

Next, we examined the relationship between the *whimsically cute* and the *neutral* gift cards. We used card type (whimsical vs. neutral) as the independent variable and used the same mediators, dependent variable, and control variables as listed above. Bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples excluded zero for the proposed indirect mediation path (effect = $-.0042$, 95% confidence interval: $-.0180$ to $-.0001$), also supporting our model. Taken together, the two analyses provide strong meditational evidence in support of hypothesis 2.

Discussion

Results from this study provided evidence that whimsically cute stimuli lead to more indulgent (lowbrow) movie choices, compared to both neutral and kindchenschema cute stimuli, supporting hypothesis 1a. In addition, the study showed that whimsically cute stimuli prime mental representations of fun (supporting hypothesis 1b) and increase consumers' focus on approaching self-rewards. Importantly, the study provided support for hypothesis 2 as it explicated the underlying mediational process and showed that whimsically cute products prime mental representations of fun, which cause consumers to approach self-rewards, leading to more indulgent choices.

Results revealed that kindchenschema cute stimuli, which prime mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking, did not significantly reduce consumers' likelihood to indulge, as compared to neutral stimuli. As discussed earlier, prior research has linked exposure to cute kindchenschema stimuli (e.g., cute babies) to motivations and behaviors that are protective, caretaking, attentive, and careful (e.g., Glocker et al. 2008; Lorenz 1943; Sherman et al. 2009, 2013). These findings would suggest that exposure to cute products in the marketplace should lead to more careful (hence less indulgent) behavior. Our article is the first to examine the effects of exposure to cute kindchenschema products on downstream behavioral indulgence, and our findings did not reveal a significant decline in indulgence after exposure to kindchenschema cute (vs. neutral) stimuli. One reason why shopping with a kindchenschema cute gift card did not lead to a significant decline in indulgence, even though it primed mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking, could be related to prior research, which has shown that the self-relevance of the prime can influence the magnitude of the impact of priming on behavior (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001). According to the activation-striving

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model, priming is more likely to affect behavior when the prime is relevant to consumers' self-concept (Sela and Shiv 2009). Although priming effects may ensue even when the prime is perceived as self-discrepant (Bargh et al. 1996), they will tend to be stronger and more likely to manifest in detectable behavioral effects, when the prime is perceived as self-consistent (Sela and Shiv 2009). The prime activated by kindchenschema is less self-relevant and focuses consumers on another entity (e.g., taking care of another vulnerable entity), rather than the self (e.g., an object for one's own enjoyment), which might explain why there was no detectable decline in indulgent behavior when exposed to a kindchenschema cute option as compared to a neutral one. Some support for this contention comes from a post-test (online panel, $N = 50$; 44% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.16$), in which participants rated either the whimsical dots gift card or the kindchenschema baby gift card on self-relevance ("This gift card is for someone like me" and "The gift card design fits my needs well"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The pretest revealed that the whimsical-dots gift card design is perceived as significantly more self-relevant than the kindchenschema-baby design ($M_{\text{Dots}} = 4.10$ vs. $M_{\text{Baby}} = 3.16$; $t(48) = 3.62$, $p < .05$).

In our final study, we continue to explore the effects of kindchenschema versus whimsical cuteness on indulgence by introducing kindchenschema cuteness as a moderator in the study design. We manipulate the two cuteness dimensions independently and examine whether introducing kindchenschema associations can mitigate the effects of whimsical cuteness on indulgence.

STUDY 4

In our studies thus far, we have demonstrated that exposure to whimsically cute (vs. neutral and kindchenschema cute) stimuli leads to more indulgent behavior. This new finding runs counter to existing literature that shows that kindchenschema cuteness leads to increased behavioral carefulness (Sherman et al. 2013) and caretaking (Glocker et al. 2008; Lorenz 1943), which would suggest that cute stimuli should lead to less indulgent behavior. This study is designed to further examine the relationship between kindchenschema cuteness and whimsical cuteness, and how their interplay influences indulgence. We do so by manipulating kindchenschema and whimsical cuteness as two independent factors in a 2 (whimsical cuteness: yes, no) \times 2 (kindchenschema cuteness: yes, no) between subjects experiment.

As discussed earlier, kindchenschema relates to features in children or baby animals, which create associations with attributions such as vulnerability, naiveté, and innocence and triggers carefulness and caretaking behaviors (Berry and McArthur 1985; Glocker et al. 2008; Lorenz 1943; Sherman et al. 2013). In study 3 we also found that kindchenschema cuteness (i.e., picture of a cute baby) primes mental representations of vulnerability and caretaking in a gift card-shopping context. In this study, we examine whether cute products with a *marketing positioning* that is specifically for use by babies or children may also prime mental represen-

tations associated with kindchenschema (i.e., innocence, vulnerability, caretaking).

Furthermore, we expect an interaction between the kindchenschema and whimsical cuteness factors, such that the effects of whimsically cute products on indulgent behavior would be reduced by the introduction of a kindchenschema cute element, in this case the marketing positioning of the product (i.e., for children). Specifically, in this study, we show that the observed effects of whimsically cute products on consumers' indulgent consumption (hypothesis 1a) only occur when the product is positioned in a way that is consistent with its whimsical cuteness, allowing for mental representations of fun (i.e., a neutral product positioning, not for children). However, when the product is positioned in a way that brings to mind kindchenschema associations (i.e., designated specifically for child use), the effect disappears.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 127 adults recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (paid online panel; 43% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 28$). They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (whimsical cuteness manipulation: whimsical cookie vs. neutral cookie) \times 2 (kindchenschema cuteness manipulation: child product positioning vs. neutral product positioning) between subjects design. In this study participants evaluated a cookie that varied in whimsical cuteness (whimsically cute vs. neutral cookie; see fig. 4). In addition, we manipulated kindchenschema cuteness using a subtle manipulation: by varying the brand name of the retailer offering the cookie ("The Kid's Cookie Shop" vs. "The Cookie Shop").

Whimsical Cuteness Manipulation Pretest. Participants viewed either the whimsically cute cookie or neutral cookie and rated the cookies on the same four indices as in previous studies. Participants rated the whimsically cute cookie as significantly higher in overall cuteness and as significantly more whimsical than the neutral cookie. The whimsically cute and neutral cookies were not significantly different in terms of kindchenschema cuteness or overall likability (see table 1).

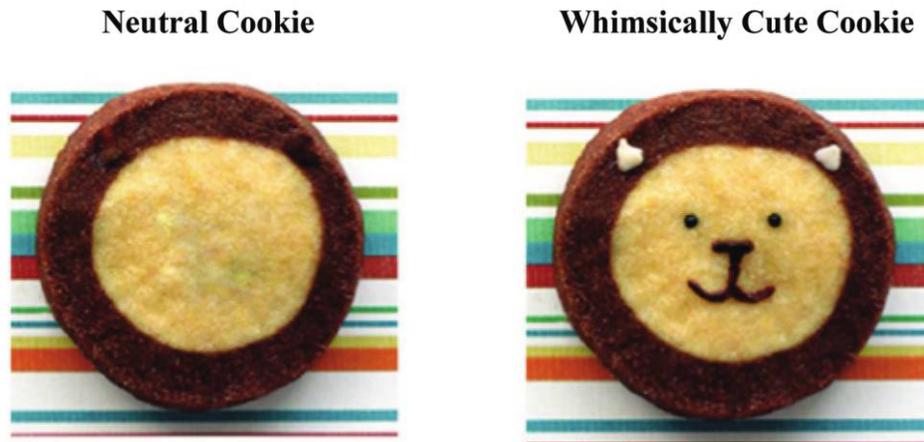
Kindchenschema Cuteness Manipulation Pretest. Participants rated "The Kid's Cookie Shop" as significantly higher in overall cuteness and as significantly more reflective of kindchenschema cuteness as compared to the "The Cookie Shop." The two shop names were not significantly different in terms of whimsical cuteness and likability (see table 1).

In addition, in a different pretest (online panel; $N = 56$; 38% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 29$), participants rated the brand name "The Kid's Cookie Shop" (vs. "The Cookie Shop") as more child appropriate versus adult appropriate ($M_{\text{Kids Shop}} = 2.58$ vs. $M_{\text{Cookie Shop}} = 4.23$; $t(54) = 3.99$, $p < .001$; 1 = child appropriate, 9 = adult appropriate) and childish ($M_{\text{Kids Shop}} = 4.69$ vs. $M_{\text{Cookie Shop}} = 4.07$; $t(54) = 2.29$, $p < .05$; childish, childlike; $r = .42$; 0 = not at all, 5 = extremely).

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FIGURE 4

COOKIE STIMULI (STUDY 4)



In the main study, participants were told to imagine that there was a new retail shop in their neighborhood. They were shown the name of the retail shop and a sample product. The name of the retail store was “The Kid’s Cookie Shop” (kindchenschema positioning) or “The Cookie Shop” (neutral positioning), depending on kindchenschema cuteness condition. The sample product was the whimsically cute or neutral cookie, depending on whimsical cuteness condition.

Indulgent Consumption. In this study we wanted to examine the extent to which the cute stimuli would affect a subsequent different indulgence decision. After viewing the cookie, in an ostensibly unrelated study, participants were asked to read a hypothetical scenario and imagine themselves in this situation. The scenario asked them to imagine that they were attending a dinner with some friends, and because they were watching their weight and were concerned about health-related issues, they were carefully evaluating their entrée options. One option was rich and delicious but much more fattening, while the other option was more healthy but not quite as tasty as the richer option. They were then asked to indicate their preference for the rich versus healthy entrée on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (will definitely have the rich entrée) to 7 (will definitely have the healthy entrée).

Control Variables. We measured individual differences in self-control using a 13-item short version ($\alpha = .88$) of Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone’s (2004) Trait Self Control scale. We measured cognitive elaboration with both self-reports (amount of time spent evaluating the cookie; 1 = little time, 5 = a lot of time) and actual time spent evaluating the cookie (measured in seconds). We also measured involvement using the same measure as in study 2 ($r = .55$). Finally, we measured how hungry participants felt at the moment (1 = not hungry, 5 = very hungry), as well as

their gender and age. We again confirmed that no differences emerged in the control variables across experimental conditions (all $p > .1$) and that including these variables in the analysis did not change our results.

Results

Indulgent Consumption. To assess whether participants’ subsequent dinner entrée decisions differed across the four experimental conditions, we ran an ANOVA ($F(3, 123) = 2.51, p < .06$) on their entrée preferences, with the whimsical and kindchenschema experimental conditions and their interaction as independent variables. The results revealed no main effects of either the whimsically cute manipulation ($F(1, 125) = 1.52, p > .30$) or the kindchenschema cute manipulation ($F(1, 125) = 1.70, p > .20$). Importantly, as predicted, there was a significant interaction between the two factors ($F(1, 125) = 4.31, p < .05$).

In the neutral product designation (i.e., nonkindchenschema positioning) condition, participants indicated significantly weaker preference for the healthy entrée when they had earlier viewed the whimsically cute cookie ($M = 4.03$) than when they had viewed the neutral cookie ($M = 4.97$; $t(125) = 2.34, p < .05$), supporting hypothesis 1a, and consistent with our previous findings. No such differences occurred in the child product designation (i.e., kindchenschema positioning) condition ($M_{\text{Whimsical}} = 4.76$ vs. $M_{\text{Neutral}} = 5.00$; $t(125) = .58, p > .60$; see fig. 5).

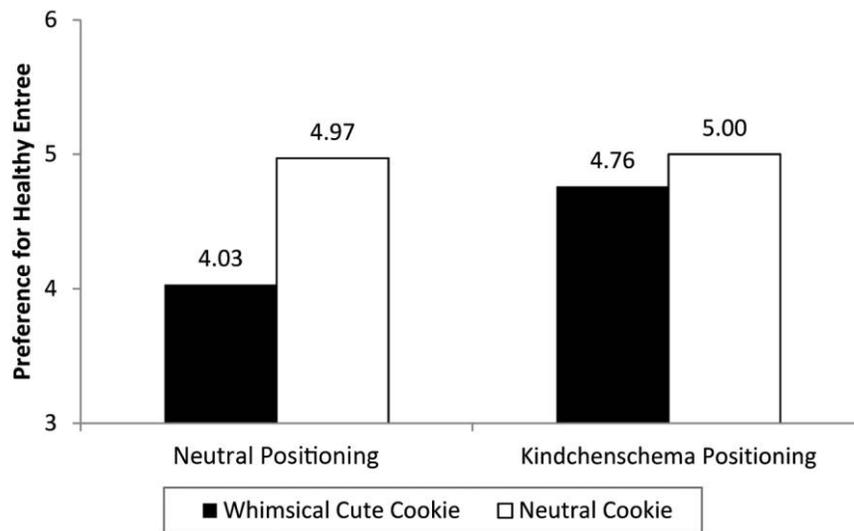
Discussion

In this study, consumers made more indulgent choices when viewing a whimsically cute (vs. neutral) cookie when it had a neutral marketing positioning, replicating our previous findings. However, this increased indulgence effect did not emerge when the whimsical cookie had a kind-

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FIGURE 5

STUDY 4: PREFERENCE FOR HEALTHY ENTREE AS A FUNCTION OF WHIMSICAL CUTENESS AND KINDCHENSHEMA CUTENESS



chenschema positioning and was designated for children. Taken together, the results from studies 3 and 4 help further explain why consumers’ indulgence levels in response to whimsical versus kindchenschema cute products can vary. Our results reveal that whimsically cute products lead to more indulgent consumption choices, but that—consistent with prior research (e.g., Sherman et al. 2009)—introducing kindchenschema elements to the whimsically cute offering (in this case, a child designation for the same whimsically cute product), eliminates the indulgence effect.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Human, kindchenschema cuteness and its connection with the vulnerability of children triggers fundamental behaviors in adults, such as protectiveness and responsibility (Lorenz 1943; Sherman et al. 2009). Our research examined cuteness in nonhuman entities (products) and showed that cute products’ whimsical nature triggers indulgent behavior in adult consumers. Consumers are surrounded by a variety of cute products, such as cute kitchen gadgets and even cute automobiles. This research uncovered several important insights into how consumers respond to exposure to cute products.

First, we establish the fundamental importance of a previously unexplored dimension of cuteness. Whereas previous research on cuteness has focused on kindchenschema cuteness, our research expands the concept of cuteness by introducing the *whimsical dimension* of cuteness. We find that exposure to whimsically cute (vs. neutral or kindchenschema cute) products results in increased indulgent consumer behavior; we demonstrated similar effects with cute

food utensils (study 1), office supplies (study 2), gift cards (study 3), and cookies (study 4). Across all studies, we demonstrate robust effects of consumers engaging in more indulgent consumption with exposure to whimsically cute products, whether the indulgent behavior was related to the cute product itself (indulgent uses of a stapler), was not directly related to the cute product (exposure to a cute cookie influences a subsequent unhealthy entrée choice), or the cute product (ice-cream scoop, gift card) was a delivery system of the indulgence (ice cream, movies). Our research shows that the uncovered effect of whimsically cute products on indulgent behavior is influenced by the fact that whimsically cute products prime mental representations of fun (studies 2 and 3), whereas kindchenschema cute products prime mental representations of vulnerability (study 3).

Second, we showed that the uncovered whimsically cute product priming effect is mediated by consumers’ focus on approaching self-rewards after exposure to whimsically cute stimuli (study 3). The opposing effects of whimsical versus kindchenschema cuteness emerged because the whimsical nature of cute products increased consumers’ self-reward focus (focus on approaching desirable outcomes and self-rewards), whereas the vulnerable nature of kindchenschema cuteness decreases it. It is possible that kindchenschema cuteness, due to the priming of mental representations related to taking care of vulnerable others increases self-restraint focus (focus on preventing undesirable outcomes) and future research should explore this issue.

Third, we independently manipulated whimsical cuteness and kindchenschema cuteness to demonstrate that some cute objects can encompass both dimensions. We found that in-

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roducing kindchenschema cuteness via marketing positioning can eliminate the effects of whimsical cuteness on indulgence. It may be that the mental representations of vulnerability that emerge from kindchenschema cuteness reduce consumers' self-reward focus by interrupting or overriding the mental representations of fun stemming from the whimsical cuteness aspect. Future research should explore this possibility.

The insights from this research make important contributions to theory. Our findings contribute to the literature on cute products and anthropomorphization by introducing a novel dimension of cuteness—whimsical cuteness. Prior research has shown that exposure to infants or infantile physical features can lead to more caretaking and careful behaviors (Lorenz 1943; Sherman et al. 2009). We find that the opposite occurs when consumers are exposed to cute products, whose whimsical nature primes fun, leading to a tendency to approach self-rewards, and ultimately more indulgent consumption in domains that are both related and unrelated to the cute products. Furthermore, this research contributes to the cognitive priming literature (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001) by establishing a previously unexplored priming effect—exposure to products that score high on whimsical cuteness leads consumers to mirror the fun nature of the cute products. This research also adds to the indulgence and self-control literature (Baumeister 2002; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Wilcox, Kramer, and Sen 2011) by proposing a previously unexplored determinant of indulgence—exposure to cute products with a whimsical nature—and demonstrating that the effects of cute products on indulgence can be reduced when kindchenschema elements are also present. Finally, this research adds to prior literature on self-rewards in marketing contexts (Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2009), since the differential effects of whimsical cuteness, as compared to kindchenschema cuteness, occurred because of an increase in consumers' self-reward focus after exposure to whimsically cute stimuli.

This research also has important implications for marketers and policy makers. On the one hand, our findings suggest that the marketing of cute products can have potentially detrimental long-term effects by encouraging impulsive buying and increasing indulgent consumption. On the other hand, there are times when adults may not consume beneficial products to the extent that they should (e.g., health-related products), and our findings could be leveraged to suggest that a cute version of such products can increase their consumption, leading to a potentially positive outcome. For example, cute adult “gummy bear” multivitamins are a popular product that may have downstream benefits insofar as their cuteness creates mental representations of fun, causing consumers to indulge in a beneficial way and consume the vitamins more often.

Recent reports have indicated increased use of cute anthropomorphized brand characters by companies employing mascots and characters to interact with consumers on social media (Vranica 2012). Because these brand characters are

part of the extended product, our findings provide some insights into their potential downstream effects on the brand. That is, the use of cute characters to personify corporate brands could be advantageous for some companies, for which indulgent choices on the part of consumers are beneficial (e.g., Kellogg's talking granola bar Mel promoting the MilkBite line) but could backfire for others, for which indulgence could result in spending on some pleasurable consumption alternative, rather than on the intended, utilitarian consumption choice (e.g., Aflac's whimsical duck selling insurance).

The current findings offer several avenues for further research. An important question is whether the presence of other people (e.g., cute children or adults) would affect consumers' indulgent choices. For example, research could examine how the presence of a cute child might influence indulgent behavior when the cute product is intended for either the adult consumer or a child. Our results show that the effect of cute products on indulgence is greater when the cute product is not designated specifically for children, as a child designation leads to kindchenschema associations such as vulnerability, innocence, and caretaking. Research could also examine the specificity of the designation. Would a more specific designation such as “adult female” or seeing other adult women consuming the focal cute product (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2012) further amplify the effect of cute products on consumer indulgent behavior?

Across our studies, indulgence manifested in indulgent product choices (movies), increased usage of the cute product (eating more ice cream), indulgent use of the cute product (for fun, rather than work), and indulging in unrelated food choices (tasty, unhealthy entrée). Further research could also examine how indulgent consumption manifests itself in different domains and product categories and which individual differences might influence this process. For example, *CNN Money* rated the Fiat 500 as the cutest car for 2011 (Taylor 2011). So, would driving the cute Fiat 500 lead to more reckless driving behavior and more traffic violations, or would it lead simply to more frequent driving? Relatedly, the cute products examined herein were mostly low-involvement, frequently used items (e.g., cookies, office supplies, movies), but it is likely that the uncovered cute product priming effects will replicate for more important, higher stakes decisions (e.g., buying a car). This question presents a worthwhile avenue for further research.

Our studies revealed that the effects of whimsically cute products on indulgence occur in product categories that are both hedonic (e.g., ice cream, cookies) and utilitarian (e.g., office supplies, gift cards). An important question is whether the strength of the indulgence effect would differ if there were a match (vs. mismatch) between the whimsical nature of the cute product and the whimsical or serious nature of the hedonic versus utilitarian product category. Future research could examine the moderating role of matching or mismatching the whimsically cute product to the product category or the task at hand, and its effect on downstream preferences and behaviors.

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Adult consumers may be increasingly stressed with responsibilities of daily life and may be attracted to cute products that allow them to reward themselves and let go of being restrained and responsible. Findings from this research about the implications of such choices are important because consumers are likely unaware of such effects. Given the rich evidence of the important impact of implicit processes on consumer behavior (Johar, Maheswaran, and Peracchio 2006), exposure to cute products might have inadvertent negative effects on consumers in domains in which avoiding indulgent consumer behavior is important.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

For study 1, the second author collected these data with the assistance of research assistants at the University of Kentucky in November 2012. For study 2, the second author supervised the collection of data by research assistants at the University of Kentucky in February 2013.

For studies 3 and 4, the first and second authors jointly managed the data collection using Amazon MTurk panels, in October 2013 and July 2012, respectively. All studies were jointly developed by the first and second authors. Data from all four studies were jointly analyzed by the first and second authors.

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