Eating disorder-specific rumination moderates the association between attentional bias to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms: Evidence from a reliable free-viewing eye-tracking task.

Ali Soleymani^a, Mahdi Mazidi^b, Renate Neimeijer^c, Peter J. de Jong^c,

^a Erasmus-Leiden-Delft Center of Education and Learning, TU Delft, Delft, The Netherlands

^b Centre for the Advancement of Research on Emotion, The University of Western Australia, Crawley, WA, Australia.

^c Department of Clinical Psychology & Experimental Psychopathology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Corresponding author.

E-mail address: a.soleymani@tudelft.nl (Ali Soleymani).

Address; Centre for Education and Learning, Building 36, Mekelweg 4, 2628 CD, Delft, Netherlands

Abstract

Cognitive theories of eating disorders implicate Attentional Bias (AB) towards food-related information in the development and maintenance of eating disorders. Empirical evidence for this proposal, however, has been inconsistent and the measures used to examine AB to food-related stimuli typically showed poor reliability. The aim of the current study was twofold. Firstly, we aimed to examine the psychometric properties of a newly devised eye-tracking task for the assessment of AB in the context of eating disorders. Secondly, we examined the role of Eating Disorder-specific (ED-specific) rumination as a potential moderator of the association between attentional bias to food images and eating disorder symptoms. One hundred and three female students were recruited and completed an eye-tracking task comprising 21 matrices that each contained 8 low-caloric and 8 high-caloric food images. Each matrix was presented for 6 s. First fixation location, first fixation latency and total dwell time were assessed for low and high-caloric food images and the dwell-time based AB measure showed good reliability based on Cronbach's alpha and split-half method. In addition, the results revealed that the ED-specific rumination plays the hypothesized moderating role. Specifically, while participants with high levels of ED-specific rumination exhibited a positive association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms, this association was eliminated among participants with lower levels of ED-specific rumination. The employed free-viewing task seems a reliable measure of AB to food-related stimuli and the moderation analysis emphasizes the critical role of ED-specific rumination for eating disorder symptoms. Implications, limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Attentional bias; Reliability, Eating disorder specific rumination; Eating disorders

1. Introduction

Attentional bias (AB) is a tendency to preferentially attend to emotionally and motivationally relevant information (Cisler & Koster, 2010). Cognitive theories of eating disorders propose that attentional bias to food-related information plays a critical role in weight-related behaviors and eating disorders (Field et al., 2016; Higgs, 2016; Werthmann, Jansen, & Roefs, 2015). However, not all studies have observed an association between this attentional bias and eating disorder symptoms. While some have found eating disorder symptoms to be positively associated with attentional biases towards food-related information (Blechert, Feige, Joos, Zeeck, & Tuschen-Caffier, 2011; Giel et al., 2011), others have not found this eating disorder-linked attentional bias (see Aspen, Darcy, & Lock, 2013). This inconsistency suggests the importance of identifying potential moderators of the association between eating disorder symptoms and attentional bias to food-related information. The present study was therefore designed to examine the potential role of Eating Disorder-specific (ED-specific) rumination as a candidate moderator.

ED-specific rumination is characterized by preoccupation with food, eating, weight and their control (Dondzilo, Rieger, Palermo, Byrne, & Bell, 2016). Several previous studies have shown the association between elevated ED-specific rumination and heightened eating disorder symptoms (Grafton, Southworth, Watkins, & MacLeod, 2016; Joormann, Dkane, & Gotlib, 2006; Morrison & O'Connor, 2008). There is also evidence about the role of ED-specific rumination in AB to thin body images (Dondzilo, Rieger, Palermo, Byrne, & Bell, 2017), but to the best of our knowledge, no research to date has investigated the potential moderating role of ED-specific rumination in the association between eating disorder symptoms and *food-related* stimuli. However, hypothesizing this association is plausible considering the theoretical and experimental evidence for an association between general ruminative thinking and AB to negative self-referent information, which suggests the existence of a potential association between ED-specific rumination and AB to food related information. For example, Donaldson et al. (2007) showed that

AB toward negative information is more pronounced among individuals with higher ruminative thinking. Therefore, as a preoccupation with one's emotional concerns increases AB toward related emotional information, it can be hypothesized that the relationship between eating disorder symptoms and AB to high-caloric foods might be especially pronounced or restricted to individuals with higher levels of ED-specific rumination. It must be recognized that ED-specific rumination is correlated with the general form of ruminative thinking (Smith, Mason, & Lavender, 2018). Therefore, to enable conclusions concerning ED-specific rumination specifically rather than ruminative thinking in general, the general ruminative tendency needs to be assessed and controlled in the proposed moderation model.

To date, most of the studies that examined AB to food have used Reaction Time (RT)-based tasks such as the Emotional Stroop task and the Dot-Probe paradigm (Kerr-Gaffney, Harrison, & Tchanturia, 2018; Ralph-Nearman, Achee, Lapidus, Stewart, & Filik, 2019). These tasks rely on Reaction Time (RT) to infer the allocation of attention to different stimuli. The RT-based tasks have been criticized for their limitations such as poor reliability, non-continuous measurement of attention, and ecological validity of the stimuli display (Hagan, Alasmar, Exum, Chinn, & Forbush, 2020).

The available RT-based tasks have shown very poor reliability scores (Mazidi, Vig, Ranjbar, Ebrahimi, & Khatibi, 2019; Rodebaugh et al., 2016; Staugaard, 2009). Poor reliability has statistical and conceptual implications such as decreasing statistical power and reproducibility of findings (Loken & Gelman, 2017; MacLeod, Grafton, & Notebaert, 2019). In addition to reliability problems, the RT-based tasks give only a snapshot of where attention is oriented and they cannot measure attentional bias in a direct and continuous way, which has significant implications for its theoretical understanding (see Cisler & Koster, 2010). There are also serious concerns about confounding elements of motor preparation and response execution in RT-based paradigms (Armstrong & Olatunji, 2012). Finally, the very limited number of stimuli that RT-

1 based tasks can present in each trial – typically just a pair of images or words – has raised the
2 concern about their task representativeness of the complexity and richness of the real-life food
3 relevant situations (Hertel & Mathews, 2011; Richards, Benson, Donnelly, & Hadwin, 2014). A
4 way to overcome this limitation is by employing tasks with a more complex stimulus
5 configuration and various competing stimuli to reflect the complexity of the world in a more
6 ecologically valid approach (Lazarov, Abend, & Bar-Haim, 2016; Richards et al., 2014;
7 Soleymani, Ivanov, Mathot, & de Jong, 2020).

17 To address the above-mentioned shortcomings, eye-tracking has been increasingly used as
18 a method that does not suffer from the limitations caused by the indirect AB assessment tasks.
19 Eye-Tracking method applies a continuous assessment of attention as a dynamic phenomenon
20 (Armstrong & Olatunji, 2012). Reliability of eye-tracking indices also have shown to be greater
21 than RT-based measures (Christiansen, Mansfield, Duckworth, Field, & Jones, 2015; Skinner et
22 al., 2017). For example, van Ens et al. (2019) investigated the reliability of eye-tracking within a
23 dot-probe task that presented food and non-food images for 3000 ms in each trial. The internal
24 consistency coefficients for bias in the proportion of first fixation were low (-.07 to .41), whereas
25 dwell time bias indices had excellent reliability (.82 to .92). Other studies also recorded
26 participants' eye-movements while completing a dot-probe task, but they did not report reliability
27 indices (Doolan, Breslin, Hanna, Murphy, & Gallagher, 2014; Monem & Fillmore, 2019;
28 Werthmann et al., 2019). All of these studies used a relatively simple visual display with
29 presenting only two stimuli in each trial, which does not address the criticism about the low
30 ecological validity of attentional bias tasks.

51 A free-viewing approach combined with eye-tracking provides the potential to tackle the
52 drawback of presenting a limited number of stimuli. In such paradigm, stimuli are presented on a
53 screen with no instruction for participants to attend to a particular type of stimuli or perform any
54 task other than simply looking at the images in a way they prefer. Previous studies applied the

1 free-viewing paradigm for measuring AB towards various food-related stimuli (Baldofski,
2 Lüthold, Sperling, & Hilbert, 2018; Giel et al., 2011; Graham, Hoover, Ceballos, & Komogortsev,
3 2011; Horndasch et al., 2020; Hummel, Ehret, Zerweck, Winter, & Stroebele-Benschop, 2018;
4
5 Nijs, Muris, Euser, & Franken, 2010; Potthoff & Schienle, 2020; Schäfer, Schmidt, Müller,
6
7 Dietrich, & Hilbert, 2020; Schag et al., 2013; Sperling, Baldofski, Lüthold, & Hilbert, 2017).
8
9 These studies were however compromised by presenting only a pair of images in each trial and not
10
11 reporting reliability of AB indices.
12
13
14
15

16
17 The current study applied the free-viewing paradigm to present a complex set of stimulus
18
19 configuration of high and low caloric foods. Previous studies in the area of alcohol and affective
20
21 disorders have successfully employed this paradigm with more complex stimuli displays and
22
23 found promising results in terms of reliability. For example, Soleymani et al. (2020) recorded
24
25 participants' eye-movements while they freely looking at an array of 16 images consisting of eight
26
27 alcoholic and eight non-alcoholic beverages that were presented for 6 s during each trial. First
28
29 fixation location, first fixation latency, and dwell time on alcoholic and non-alcoholic images were
30
31 computed to index AB to alcoholic drinks. Internal consistency of attentional bias indices
32
33 extracted from dwell time was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$). Significant positive correlations
34
35 were also found between attentional bias and craving, and problematic behaviours related to
36
37 alcohol use. Specifically, participants with greater craving and alcohol problems dwelt longer and
38
39 more frequently fixated on the alcohol stimuli. The same paradigm was employed in the context of
40
41 social anxiety and major depression with matrices of 16 threatening and neutral faces and
42
43 satisfactory internal consistency was reported for the attentional bias index based on the total
44
45 dwell time (Lazarov et al., 2016; Lazarov, Ben-Zion, Shamai, Pine, & Bar-Haim, 2018).
46
47
48
49
50
51
52

53 The aim of the current study was twofold. Firstly, we examined the reliability of a
54
55 modified version of the free-viewing task originally designed by Lazarov et al. (2016) as a
56
57 measure of attentional bias to food pictures. Consistent with previous studies (Lazarov et al., 2016,
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

2018; Soleymani et al., 2020), we computed eye-tracking measures of both early (first fixation location and latency) and later attention (total dwell time), and examined their relationships with measures of several relevant constructs i.e. self-report measures of hunger, dietary restraint, general and eating-related rumination, eating disorder symptoms, and subjective attitudes towards food images. Secondly, we examined the hypothesis that ED-specific rumination moderates the association between eating disorder symptoms and AB to high-caloric food images. To ensure that we examined the role of ED-specific rumination alone, rather than ruminative thinking in general, we also assessed general rumination, in order that its variation could be statistically controlled for when examining the moderating role of ED-specific rumination.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

To reach a statistical power of at least .80 to reliably detect a correlation of medium effect size, we headed for at least 64 participants (Cohen, 1992). In order to have a homogeneous sample, eventually, 103 first-year psychology female students took part in the study. Only women were included because gender might play a key role in the relation between attention to food cues and eating behavior (Hummel et al., 2018), and dieting behavior is more common in women (de Ridder, Adriaanse, Evers, & Verhoeven, 2014; Wardle, Haase, & Steptoe, 2006). The only condition for enrollment in the study was uncorrected eyesight to prevent eye-tracking calibration difficulties. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the psychology department of the University of Groningen (ECP approval code = 18820-S).

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Questionnaires

Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q; Fairburn & Beglin, 1994)

The EDE-Q consists of 33 items and provides a measure of the range and severity of eating disorders. It comprises four subscales (i.e., restraint, eating concern, weight concern, and shape concern) and also provides a global score from all items. Each item is rated on a 7-point rating scale (i.e., 0-6) indicating the number of days out of 28 on which specific behaviours, feelings or attitudes occurred. For the current study, we used the global score only. The internal consistency was excellent for the global score ($\alpha = .94$).

Ruminative Response Scale for Eating Disorders (RRS-ES; Cowdrey & Park, 2011)

The RRS-ES consists of 9 items, measuring brooding and reflection tendencies regarding undesired eating behavior and concerns with food consumption. The items were scored on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (almost never) to 3 (almost always). The total score ranges from 0-27, with a higher score corresponding with a higher level of ruminative disposition. Past findings have found the scale to be sufficiently reliable (Cowdrey & Park, 2011). In the current sample, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency with $\alpha = .91$.

Ruminative Response Scale-short form (RRS; Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003)

The RRS consists of 10 items from the original 22-item form (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991) and measures brooding and reflection tendencies (Treynor et al., 2003). Each item is scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). Previous research incorporating the scale reported good reliability ($\alpha = .84$; Parola et al., 2017). Also in the present sample, the scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .82$).

Hunger Scale (Grand, 1968)

The item “please indicate the number of hours since your last meal (to the nearest 15 minutes)” from the Hunger Scale (Grand, 1968) was used to measure participants’ satiation (cf. Jonker et al., 2020). The more time has elapsed since the last meal, the lower the level of satiation was assumed to be.

The Restraint Scale (Herman & Polivy, 1980)

The restraint scale (RS) is a 10-item assessment tool to evaluate concern for dieting and weight fluctuations. The RS is often used to identify individuals who have troubles dieting effectively and tend to overeat. The RS has been validated for female population of both normal and excessive weight (van Strien, Herman, Engels, Larsen, & van Leeuwe, 2007). Estimated internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$) and test re-test reliability ($r = 0.95$) evaluated by Herman and Polivy (1980) showed the suitable psychometric quality of this tool to measure dietary restraint. In the current investigation, internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) for the RS was 0.79.

Items for Rating Image Stimuli

Each stimulus picture was rated on the dimensions of appeal (“How favorable do you find this picture”), salience (“How much does this picture grab your attention?”) and distress (“How distressing do you find this picture?”). Each question was rated on a five-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very strongly). There were 56 unique images in each image category i.e., high and low-caloric images. Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) of each dimension was computed for high and low-caloric food images separately. The Cronbach’s alpha scores were as follows: salience high-caloric: .91, salience low-caloric: .90, distress high-caloric: .98, distress low-caloric: .97, appeal high-caloric: .86, appeal low-caloric: .86. To gain a score of relative salience, appeal and distress for high-caloric foods, a difference score was computed by subtracting scores for low-caloric foods from high-caloric foods for each dimension.

2.2.2. The free viewing eye-tracking task

The free viewing AB assessment task was designed in OpenSesame (Mathôt, Schreij, & Theeuwes, 2012). Eye-gaze data was collected with an Eyetribe ET1000 eye-tracker. Areas of Interest (AOI) were defined as the area in pixels of each of the displayed images. Thus, in our task we had 16 AOIs per trial. The eye-tracking plugin collected eye-gaze position (i.e., x, y coordinates) at 30 Hz, and determined whether the current eye-gaze position falls within an AOI, or not. Before the start of each session, a 9-point eye-gaze calibration was performed. During each trial, a 4 x 4 matrix was presented for 6 seconds (see Fig. 1). Each matrix consisted of 8 low-caloric food pictures and 8 high-caloric pictures. These pictures were taken from the Image Sciences Institute, UMC Utrecht (Charbonnier, van Meer, van der Laan, Viergever, & Smeets, 2016). The four inner pictures always consisted of two low-caloric and two high-caloric pictures.

Figure 1. Example of a single matrix, depicting eight high-caloric food items and 8 low-caloric food items

2.3. Procedure

The participants were tested individually in a quiet room. After signing the informed consent, the Hunger Scale was administered. Then, the participants were instructed to place their chin on the rest in front of them. Prior to each trial, the gaze drift was checked. For each matrix, participants had to gaze at a fixation dot in the center of the screen for 100 ms for that matrix to appear to ensure a fixed starting point of participants' viewing of the matrix. Each matrix was visible for 6000 ms. After a subsequent 2000 ms interval, the next fixation dot appeared. There were 21 trials in total. After each seven matrices, the participant was prompted to move on the next set of matrices by pressing any key on the keyboard. This allowed them to take a break if they wanted. The same order of matrix presentation was used for all participants to optimize the measurement procedure to index individual differences (Goodhew & Edwards, 2019). The set of pictures used in the eye tracking task was evaluated in terms of salience, appeal, and distress by the participants immediately after completing the attentional task. Then, the restraint scale, and the EDE-Q were administered, followed by the RRS, and the RRS-ED. All measures were administered digitally. Then, participants gave their best estimate of their weight and height. Last, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

2.4. Data reduction and analysis plan

A custom-built plugin for OpenSesame was used to calculate for each trial the time a participant spent looking at each of the predefined AOI (i.e., each picture). A fixation was defined as a gaze of over 100 ms in an AOI. The total amount of time that participants fixate within an AOI was defined as dwell time. Three variables were of interest when analyzing the output of the AOI analysis plugin: 1) First fixation location on high-caloric pictures. This variable indicates the number of trials that the first fixation occurred for high-caloric pictures. 2) Latency bias index was computed using the latency to first fixation scores, which is the time (in ms) between the onset of

stimuli presentation and the first fixation recorded within one of the defined AOIs. The mean latency to first fixation for high-caloric pictures was subtracted from the mean latency to first fixation to low-caloric pictures. Hence, positive scores of latency bias index are indicative of vigilance to high-caloric pictures. 3) Dwell time bias index was computed using the dwell time scores, which is the total amount of time a participant attended to each AOI categories. The mean dwell time on high-caloric pictures was subtracted from the mean dwell time on low-caloric pictures. Higher scores in dwell time bias thus indicate stronger AB for high-caloric foods.

As an estimate of reliability, we computed Cronbach's alpha for the 21 trial-level AB scores. As a second (and often used) index of reliability, we calculated the Spearman Brown corrected correlation between the AB scores of the odd and even trials of the task (split half reliability). To estimate the reliability of first fixation location (on high or low caloric picture) we also computed Cronbach's alpha for all trials and assessed split half reliability as indexed by the Spearman Brown corrected correlation of the number of first high-caloric fixations between odd and even trials.

Relationships between variables were examined using Pearson's correlation method. For moderation analysis the Hayes and Preacher method (Hayes & Preacher, 2014), and the PROCESS syntax were employed (Hayes, 2009). PROCESS model 1 was applied that estimates a moderation model with a single moderator of the effect of an independent variable (AB to high-caloric foods) on a dependent variable (eating disorders symptoms) by virtue of a moderating variable (ED-specific rumination). To control for the shared variance between ED-specific rumination and the general tendency to engage in rumination, scores on the RRS were entered as covariates. Moreover, the time since the last meal was also covariated. Interpretation of moderator effects was facilitated through a simple slopes' analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptives

Table 1 presents a summary of the means (SDs) of all variables that were assessed.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the results

Variables	Mean (SD)	Range
First fixation location (high-caloric) *	11.16 (2.66)	2 – 18
Latency bias score (ms)	-9.57 (269.84)	-941.93 – 722.74
Dwell time bias score (ms)	-8.10 (911)	-2647.22 – 1888.42
Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q)	1.64 (1.39)	0.06 – 6.19
Ruminative Response Scale for Eating Disorder (RRS-ED)	12.88 (5.46)	0 – 21
Ruminative Response Scale – short form (RRS)	5.58 (5.60)	1 – 26
Restraint Scale (RS)	12.39 (5.54)	3 – 27
Self-reported BMI	22.21 (2.83)	16.85 – 30.11

*number of trials

3.2. Internal consistency

Internal consistency for the dwell-time bias score as indexed by Cronbach's alpha was good ($\alpha = .78$). In addition, results of the Spearman-Brown corrected correlation indicated that there was a strong positive association between first and second half of the task's dwell-time bias scores of a medium to large effect size: [$r_s(103) = .60, p < .001$]. Internal consistency for the first fixation location as indexed by Cronbach's alpha scores was .32. The Spearman-Brown corrected correlation of the number of first fixations on high-caloric foods between odd and even trials was [$r_s(103) = .08, p > .20$], which shows a weak, non-significant correlation.

3.3. Correlation Analyses

Table 2 presents a summary of the bivariate correlations. No significant bivariate correlations were found between attentional indices (dwell-time bias, latency bias, and frequency of first fixation on high-caloric foods) and indices of eating disorder symptoms, dieting, rumination, level of satiation, subjective stimulus ratings, and BMI.

Table 2

Bivariate correlation between attentional indices and other measures

	EDEQ	RRS-ED	RRS	RS	Time since last meal	Salience	Appeal	Distress	Self- reported BMI
Dwell-time bias	.04	-.07	.11	-.10	.14	.01	-.07	-.13	.001
Latency Bias	-.17	-.12	-.19	-.11	.07	-.05	-.03	.01	-.14
First fixation location High- caloric foods	-.03	-.06	.06	-.04	0.7	-.07	-.13	.01	-.12

3.4. Moderation analyses

To test the hypothesis that ED-specific rumination moderates the association between dwell-time bias to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms, a moderation model analysis was conducted across all participants. The dependent variable in this model was EDEQ scores, the independent variable was dwell-time bias index, and the RRS-ED was incorporated as a continuous moderator variable. The RRS scores and the time since the last meal were entered as a covariate.

The moderation effect was significant ($B = 0.0001$, 95% CI [0.00001 , 0.0001], $t = 2.56$, $p = 0.012$). Exploration of the conditional effects revealed no significant relationship between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms at *low* and *average* levels of ED-specific rumination with [$B = -0.0001$, $se = 0.0001$, 95% CI [-0.0003 , 0.0001], $t = -0.79$, $p = 0.43$] and

[$B = 0.0001$, $se = 0.0001$, 95% CI $[-0.0001, 0.0003]$, $t = 1.12$, $p = 0.26$], respectively. However, at higher levels of RRS-ED, there was a significant positive relationship between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms [$B = 0.003$, $se = 0.0001$, 95% CI $[0.0001, 0.0005]$, $t = 2.72$, $p = 0.008$].

Figure 2 demonstrates the conditional effects described above.

Figure 2. Simple slope of ED-specific rumination moderation effect on eating disorder symptoms and AB to high-caloric foods

Discussion

The current study was designed to measure the reliability of a new paradigm to measure attention to food-related stimuli. We also addressed the hypothesis that ED-specific rumination

moderates the association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms. The reliability analyses showed the task as a reliable paradigm for measuring AB to food-related stimuli. The results also supported the hypothesis, by confirming that the strength of the association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms varied as a function of participants' ED-specific rumination. Specifically, there was a significant positive correlation between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms only among those with higher ED-specific rumination. No such association was observed among participants with relatively lower ED-specific rumination. In what follows, the results relevant to reliability and moderation analyses will be discussed in turn.

A serious limitation with the currently available RT-based AB measures is their low reliability as estimated by indices of internal consistency and stability (e.g., Cisler, Bacon, & Williams, 2009; Field et al., 2016). This poor reliability poses serious limitations in conducting robust research and hinders the scientific progress in this field of research (see Jones, Christiansen, & Field, 2018; Rodebaugh et al., 2016). Therefore, the present study examined the reliability indices of a recently developed free-viewing eye-tracking paradigm within the eating disorder context. The same free-viewing paradigm has been employed within the context of social anxiety (Lazarov et al., 2016), depression (Lazarov et al., 2018), and alcohol consumption (Soleymani et al., 2020) and has shown good to excellent internal consistency for the dwell-time based indices. The current study was the first that examined the reliability of this paradigm in the eating-disorder context using food-related stimuli. The results were in line with the previous findings of Lazarov et al. (2016, 2018), and Soleymani et al. (2020). Specifically, the AB measure based on the dwell-time showed good reliability while the measures based on the first fixation i.e., first fixation location and latency bias to high-caloric foods indicated low internal consistency. The pattern of low reliability for the outcome measures based on the early attention such as the first fixation location and latency bias has shown in numerous studies (e.g., Price et al., 2015; Skinner et al.,

2017; Soleymani et al., 2020; Waechter, Nelson, Wright, Hyatt, & Oakman, 2014). The low reliability of the early attention outcome measures has been attributed to the fact that less data of the available stimuli presentation time is used to compute them, which in turn leads to less variance between participants for these measures compared to measures based on the late attention outcome such as total dwell-time (Skinner et al., 2017).

The present study also extends our knowledge of the eating disorder literature in important ways, by empirically showing for the first time that ED-specific rumination moderates the association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms. Specifically, while participants with high levels of ED-specific rumination exhibited a positive association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms, this association was eliminated among participants with relatively lower levels of ED-specific rumination. It is appropriate to consider how higher ED-specific rumination might result a positive association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms. ED-specific rumination has been theorized as an emotion regulation strategy that characterized by repetitive thinking and introspective focus on negative eating-related thoughts and feelings (Dondzilo et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, those who excessively engage in rumination specific to eating disorders might find it more difficult to disengage from food-related stimuli such as high-caloric foods that is associated with their concerns and this in turn may increase their eating disorder symptoms (Donaldson et al., 2007).

Our finding that ED-specific rumination moderates the association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms, even when general rumination is controlled for, does not exclude the possibility that this general form of rumination might itself also play a role in moderating the association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder symptoms. To assess this possibility, post-hoc analysis was conducted, in which we replaced our measure of ED-specific rumination within the moderation analysis with our measure of general rumination. The alternative model was non-significant. This indicates that the moderation was carried specifically

1 by ED-specific rumination rather than by the general form of rumination and emphasizes the
2 critical role of ED-specific rumination in eating disorder symptoms.
3

4 The present study was the first that examined the reliability of an ecologically valid free-
5 viewing task to assess AB to food-related stimuli and the first that showed the moderating role of
6 ED-specific rumination in the association between AB to high-caloric foods and eating disorder
7 symptoms. A large sample size was used for the study, however, there are some limitations that
8 should also be noted. First, our participants were unselected female students. It is critical that
9 future studies test whether the current findings replicate among both genders and individuals with
10 a clinically diagnosed eating disorder. Second, our reliability analyses were restricted to internal
11 consistency, therefore the test-retest reliability of the task remains to be determined by future
12 studies. Finally, some studies have shown that a preferential attentional allocation to a particular
13 stimuli type could be due to different AB components i.e. increased attentional engagement or
14 difficulty disengagement from those stimuli (see Dondzilo, Mills, & Rodgers, 2021; Jonker,
15 Bennik, de Lang, & de Jong, 2020). The current study was not designed to distinct between these
16 different components; however, an AB toward high-caloric foods could be due to increased
17 attentional engagement with high-caloric food images, reduced attentional disengagement from
18 high-caloric food images, or both. Future studies can address the question about the specific
19 component(s) of AB that may contribute to elevated eating disorder symptoms. The paradigm
20 used in the current study can be modified to optimally examine different AB components (see
21 Chen, Clarke, MacLeod, Hickie, & Guastella, 2016).
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

48 In conclusion, the current findings add to the growing body of empirical work about the
49 reliability of the AB measures derived from the new free-viewing paradigm. The present study
50 replicated and extended the findings of previous studies about this paradigm by indicating good
51 internal consistency of the dwell-time based AB measures in the context of eating disorders. In
52 addition, it contributed to the literature by showing the critical role of ED-specific rumination in
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 eating disorder symptoms. Specifically, the current findings suggested for the first time that
2 elevated ED-specific rumination might be the risk factor for the adverse effects of AB to high-
3 caloric foods on eating disorder symptoms. As such, we hope the present findings pave the way
4 for future research that further extends our understanding of the role of ED-specific rumination
5 and AB in eating disorder symptomatology, by using reliable measures for the assessment of the
6 relevant constructs.
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 **Acknowledgement**

20 Author's wish to acknowledge the extensive help and support provided by master students of
21 psychology department of Groningen University who were involved in this project. Author's
22 would like to thank Prof. Sebastiaan Mathot and Yavor Ivanov who helped us designing the eye
23 tracking task and provided us their valuable feedbacks. And finally, Author's would like to express
24 their deep and sincere gratitude to Fatemeh Kazempourmofrad who supported and helped us in
25 data collection and analysis.
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 **Author contributions**

38 All authors have been involved throughout the research process, including the conceptualisation,
39 analysis and discussion of the work. AS and RN also contribute to data collection. All authors
40 have approved the final version of this study.
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 **Funding**

52 This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial,
53 or not-for-profit sectors.
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

Declarations of interest: none

Data accessibility

All data used in the study is available under request and the lead author has full access to the data reported in the manuscript.

References:

- Armstrong, T., & Olatunji, B. O. (2012). Eye tracking of attention in the affective disorders: A meta-analytic review and synthesis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 32(8), 704–723.
<https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2012.09.004>
- Aspen, V., Darcy, A. M., & Lock, J. (2013). A review of attention biases in women with eating disorders. *Cognition and Emotion*, 27(5), 820–838.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2012.749777>
- Baldofski, S., Lüthold, P., Sperling, I., & Hilbert, A. (2018). Visual Attention to Pictorial Food Stimuli in Individuals With Night Eating Syndrome: An Eye-Tracking Study. *Behavior Therapy*, 49(2), 262–272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2017.07.005>
- Blechert, J., Feige, B., Joos, A., Zeeck, A., & Tuschen-Caffier, B. (2011). Electrocortical processing of food and emotional pictures in anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 73(5), 415–421. <https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0b013e318211b871>
- Charbonnier, L., van Meer, F., van der Laan, L. N., Viergever, M. A., & Smeets, P. A. M. (2016).

- Standardized food images: A photographing protocol and image database. *Appetite*, 96, 166–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.08.041>
- Chen, N. T. M., Clarke, P. J. F., MacLeod, C., Hickie, I. B., & Guastella, A. J. (2016). Aberrant gaze patterns in social anxiety disorder: An eye movement assessment during public speaking. *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology*, 7(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5127/jep.040313>
- Christiansen, P., Mansfield, R., Duckworth, J., Field, M., & Jones, A. (2015). Internal reliability of the alcohol-related visual probe task is increased by utilising personalised stimuli and eye-tracking. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 155, 170–174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2015.07.672>
- Cisler, J. M., Bacon, A. K., & Williams, N. L. (2009). Phenomenological Characteristics of Attentional Biases Towards Threat: A Critical Review. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 33(2), 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-007-9161-y>
- Cisler, J. M., & Koster, E. H. W. (2010). Mechanisms of Attentional Biases towards Threat in the Anxiety Disorders: An Integrative Review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(2), 203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.11.003>
- Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*. US: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.155>
- Cowdrey, F. A., & Park, R. J. (2011). Assessing rumination in eating disorders: principal component analysis of a minimally modified ruminative response scale. *Eating Behaviors*, 12(4), 321–324. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2011.08.001>
- de Ridder, D., Adriaanse, M., Evers, C., & Verhoeven, A. (2014). Who diets? Most people and especially when they worry about food. *Appetite*, 80, 103–108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2014.05.011>
- Donaldson, C., Lam, D., & Mathews, A. (2007). Rumination and attention in major depression.

Behaviour Research and Therapy, 45(11), 2664–2678.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2007.07.002>

Dondzilo, L., Mills, C., & Rodgers, R. F. (2021). Attentional engagement, appearance comparisons, and rumination as predictors of body dissatisfaction: Evaluation of a serial mediation model in men. *Body Image*, 36, 180–184.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.11.008>

Dondzilo, L., Rieger, E., Palermo, R., Byrne, S., & Bell, J. (2016). Association between rumination factors and eating disorder behaviours in young women. *Advances in Eating Disorders*, 4(1), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21662630.2015.1118642>

Dondzilo, L., Rieger, E., Palermo, R., Byrne, S., & Bell, J. (2017). The mediating role of rumination in the relation between attentional bias towards thin female bodies and eating disorder symptomatology. *PLoS ONE*. 13(4): e0196143.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0177870>

Doolan, K. J., Breslin, G., Hanna, D., Murphy, K., & Gallagher, A. M. (2014). Visual attention to food cues in obesity: An eye-tracking study. *Obesity*, 22(12), 2501–2507.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.20884>

Fairburn, C. G., & Beglin, S. J. (1994). Assessment of eating disorders: interview or self-report questionnaire? *The International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 16(4), 363–370.

Field, M., Werthmann, J., Franken, I., Hofmann, W., Hogarth, L., & Roefs, A. (2016). The role of attentional bias in obesity and addiction. *Health Psychology : Official Journal of the Division of Health Psychology, American Psychological Association*, 35(8), 767–780.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000405>

Giel, K. E., Friederich, H. C., Teufel, M., Hautzinger, M., Enck, P., & Zipfel, S. (2011). Attentional processing of food pictures in individuals with anorexia nervosa--an eye-tracking study. *Biological Psychiatry*, 69(7), 661–667. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2010.09.047>

- Goodhew, S. C., & Edwards, M. (2019). Translating experimental paradigms into individual-differences research: Contributions, challenges, and practical recommendations. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 69, 14–25.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2019.01.008>
- Grafton, B., Southworth, F., Watkins, E., & MacLeod, C. (2016). Stuck in a sad place: Biased attentional disengagement in rumination. *Emotion*, 16, 63–72.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000103>
- Graham, R., Hoover, A., Ceballos, N. A., & Komogortsev, O. (2011). Body mass index moderates gaze orienting biases and pupil diameter to high and low calorie food images. *Appetite*, 56(3), 577–586. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2011.01.029>
- Grand, S. (1968). Color-word interference: An investigation of the role of vocal conflict and hunger in associative priming. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. US: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0025759>
- Hagan, K. E., Alasmar, A., Exum, A., Chinn, B., & Forbush, K. T. (2020). A systematic review and meta-analysis of attentional bias toward food in individuals with overweight and obesity. *Appetite*, 151(September 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104710>
- Hayes, A. F. (2009). Beyond Baron and Kenny: Statistical Mediation Analysis in the New Millennium, 76(4), 408–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750903310360>
- Hayes, A. F., & Preacher, K. J. (2014). Statistical mediation analysis with a multicategorical independent variable. *British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology*, 67(3), 451–470. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bmsp.12028>
- Herman, C. P., & Polivy, J. (1980). Restrained eating. In A. Stunkard (Ed.), *Obesity* (pp. 208–225). Philadelphia: PA: Saunders.
- Hertel, P. T., & Mathews, A. (2011). Cognitive Bias Modification: Past Perspectives, Current Findings, and Future Applications. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(6), 521–536.

- <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691611421205>
- Higgs, S. (2016). Cognitive processing of food rewards. *Appetite*, 104, 10–17.
- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.10.003>
- Horndasch, S., Oschmann, S., Graap, H., Heinrich, H., Moll, G., & Kratz, O. (2020). Attention towards food: Conflicting mechanisms in anorexia nervosa. *Appetite*, 154(February), 104800.
- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104800>
- Hummel, G., Ehret, J., Zerweck, I., Winter, S. S., & Stroebele-Benschop, N. (2018). How eating behavior, food stimuli and gender may affect visual attention – An eye tracking study. *Eating Behaviors*, 31(February), 60–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2018.08.002>
- Jones, A., Christiansen, P., & Field, M. (2018). Failed Attempts to Improve the Reliability of the Alcohol Visual Probe Task Following Empirical Recommendations. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviour*, 32(8), 922–932. <https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000414>
- Jonker, N. C., Bennik, E. C., de Lang, T. A., & de Jong, P. J. (2020). Influence of hunger on attentional engagement with and disengagement from pictorial food cues in women with a healthy weight. *Appetite*, 151, 104686.
- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104686>
- Joormann, J., Dkane, M., & Gotlib, I. H. (2006). Adaptive and Maladaptive Components of Rumination? Diagnostic Specificity and Relation to Depressive Biases. *Special Issue: Interpretive Biases and Ruminative Thought: Experimental Evidence and Clinical Implications*, 37(3), 269–280. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2006.01.002>
- Kerr-Gaffney, J., Harrison, A., & Tchanturia, K. (2018). Eye-tracking research in eating disorders: A systematic review. *The International Journal of Eating Disorders*.
- <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22998>
- Lazarov, A., Abend, R., & Bar-Haim, Y. (2016). Social anxiety is related to increased dwell time on socially threatening faces. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 193, 282–288.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.01.007>

Lazarov, A., Ben-Zion, Z., Shamai, D., Pine, D. S., & Bar-Haim, Y. (2018). Free viewing of sad and happy faces in depression: A potential target for attention bias modification. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 238, 94–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2018.05.047>

Loken, E., & Gelman, A. (2017). Measurement error and the replication crisis. *Science*, 355(6325), 584 LP – 585. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal3618>

MacLeod, C., Grafton, B., & Notebaert, L. (2019). Anxiety-Linked Attentional Bias: Is It Reliable? *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 15, 529–554. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-050718-095505>

Mathôt, S., Schreij, D., & Theeuwes, J. (2012). OpenSesame: An open-source, graphical experiment builder for the social sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 44(2), 314–324. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-011-0168-7>

Mazidi, M., Vig, K., Ranjbar, S., Ebrahimi, M.-R., & Khatibi, A. (2019). Attentional bias and its temporal dynamics among war veterans suffering from chronic pain: Investigating the contribution of post-traumatic stress symptoms. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 66, 102115. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2019.102115>

Monem, R., & Fillmore, M. T. (2019). Alcohol administration reduces attentional bias to alcohol-related but not food-related cues: Evidence for a satiety hypothesis. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 33(8), 677–684. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ad0000522>

Morrison, R., & O'Connor, R. C. (2008). The role of rumination, attentional biases and stress in psychological distress. *British Journal of Psychology (London, England : 1953)*, 99(Pt 2), 191–209. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000712607X216080>

Nijs, I. M. T., Muris, P., Euser, A. S., & Franken, I. H. A. (2010). Differences in attention to food and food intake between overweight/obese and normal-weight females under conditions of hunger and satiety. *Appetite*, 54(2), 243–254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2009.11.004>

- Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Morrow, J. (1991). A prospective study of depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms after a natural disaster: the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(1), 115–121. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.61.1.115>
- Parola, N., Zendjidian, X. Y., Alessandrini, M., Baumstarck, K., Loundou, A., Fond, G., ... Boyer, L. (2017). Psychometric properties of the Ruminative Response Scale-short form in a clinical sample of patients with major depressive disorder. *Patient Preference and Adherence*, 11, 929–937. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PPA.S125730>
- Potthoff, J., & Schienle, A. (2020). Time-course analysis of food cue processing: An eye-tracking investigation on context effects. *Food Quality and Preference*, 84(November 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2020.103936>
- Price, R. B., Kuckertz, J. M., Siegle, G. J., Ladouceur, C. D., Silk, J. S., Ryan, N. D., ... Amir, N. (2015). Empirical recommendations for improving the stability of the dot-probe task in clinical research. *Psychological Assessment*, 27(2), 365–376. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000036>
- Ralph-Nearman, C., Achee, M., Lapidus, R., Stewart, J. L., & Filik, R. (2019). A systematic and methodological review of attentional biases in eating disorders: Food, body, and perfectionism. *Brain and Behavior*, 9(12), e01458. <https://doi.org/10.1002/brb3.1458>
- Richards, H. J., Benson, V., Donnelly, N., & Hadwin, J. A. (2014). Exploring the function of selective attention and hypervigilance for threat in anxiety. *Clinical Psychology Reivew*, 34(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2013.10.006>
- Rodebaugh, T. L., Scullin, R. B., Langer, J. K., Dixon, D. J., Huppert, J. D., Bernstein, A., ... Lenze, E. J. (2016). Unreliability as a threat to understanding psychopathology: The cautionary tale of attentional bias. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 125(6), 840–851. <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000184>

- Schäfer, L., Schmidt, R., Müller, S. M., Dietrich, A., & Hilbert, A. (2020). Changes in visual attention towards food cues after obesity surgery: An eye-tracking study. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 129(February), 214–221.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.06.027>
- Schag, K., Teufel, M., Junne, F., Preissl, H., Hautzinger, M., Zipfel, S., & Giel, K. E. (2013). Impulsivity in Binge Eating Disorder: Food Cues Elicit Increased Reward Responses and Disinhibition. *PLoS ONE*, 8(10), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0076542>
- Skinner, I. W., Hübscher, M., Moseley, G. L., Lee, H., Wand, B. M., Traeger, A. C., ... McAuley, J. H. (2017). The reliability of eyetracking to assess attentional bias to threatening words in healthy individuals. *Behavior Research Methods*, 50(5), 1778–1792.
<https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-017-0946-y>
- Smith, K. E., Mason, T. B., & Lavender, J. M. (2018). Rumination and eating disorder psychopathology: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 61, 9–23.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2018.03.004>
- Soleymani, A., Ivanov, Y., Mathot, S., & de Jong, P. J. (2020). Free-viewing multi-stimulus eye tracking task to index attention bias for alcohol versus soda cues: Satisfactory reliability and criterion validity. *Addictive Behaviors*, 100, 106117.
<https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2019.106117>
- Sperling, I., Baldofski, S., Lüthold, P., & Hilbert, A. (2017). Cognitive food processing in binge-eating disorder: An eye-tracking study. *Nutrients*, 9(8), 1–13.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/nu9080903>
- Staugaard, S. R. (2009). Reliability of two versions of the dot-probe task using photographic faces. *Psychology Science Quarterly*, 51(3), 339–350.
- Treynor, W., Gonzalez, R., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2003). Rumination Reconsidered: A Psychometric Analysis. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 27(3), 247–259.

<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023910315561>

- van Ens, W., Schmidt, U., Campbell, I. C., Roefs, A., & Werthmann, J. (2019). Test-retest reliability of attention bias for food: Robust eye-tracking and reaction time indices. *Appetite*, 136(January), 86–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2019.01.020>
- van Strien, T., Herman, C. P., Engels, R. C. M. E., Larsen, J. K., & van Leeuwe, J. F. J. (2007). Construct validation of the Restraint Scale in normal-weight and overweight females. *Appetite*, 49(1), 109–121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2007.01.003>
- Waechter, S., Nelson, A. L., Wright, C., Hyatt, A., & Oakman, J. (2014). Measuring attentional bias to threat: Reliability of dot probe and eye movement indices. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 38(3), 313–333. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-013-9588-2>
- Wardle, J., Haase, A. M., & Steptoe, A. (2006). Body image and weight control in young adults: international comparisons in university students from 22 countries. *International Journal of Obesity* (2005), 30(4), 644–651. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.ijo.0803050>
- Werthmann, J., Jansen, A., & Roefs, A. (2015). Worry or craving? A selective review of evidence for food-related attention biases in obese individuals, eating-disorder patients, restrained eaters and healthy samples. *The Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 74(2), 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0029665114001451>
- Werthmann, J., Simic, M., Konstantellou, A., Mansfield, P., Mercado, D., van Ens, W., & Schmidt, U. (2019). Same, same but different: Attention bias for food cues in adults and adolescents with anorexia nervosa. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 52(6), 681–690. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23064>