Roles of Food Consumption in the Experience of Homesickness Among College Students

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Homesickness is described as a “complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state …associated with ruminations about home, an intense desire to return home, depressed mood and somatic symptoms” (Fisher and Hood 1987, 426). It is a relatively widespread phenomenon in the United States, with 50-75% of the population experiencing homesickness to varying degrees (Fisher 1989). This study explores how college students, a population that is specifically vulnerable to homesickness, experience this condition. In particular, we explore the ways food consumption shapes students’ experience of homesickness, by examining how consumption both specifically triggers homesickness and enables students to cope with it.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Homesickness is described as a “complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state... associated with ruminations about home, an intense desire to return home, depressed mood and somatic symptoms” (Fisher and Hood 1987, 426). This study explores how college students, a population that is specifically vulnerable to homesickness, experience this condition. In particular, we explore the ways food consumption shapes students’ experiences of homesickness, by examining how consumption both specifically triggers homesickness and enables students to cope with it. Focusing on food consumption within this cohort is important, both because of the increase in obesity among young people and because diet quality, eating habits, and weight control often are adversely affected in college (Conklin and Lambert 2005).

As part of a larger study on how homesickness influences consumption, we collected 209 narratives. We eliminated 12 of these due to poor quality, leaving us 197 narratives that yielded over 700 pages of data. Although we did not anticipate an overwhelming discussion of food consumption, 164 of 197 narratives mentioned food consumption as either a trigger and/or coping mechanism for homesickness.

In analyzing the text, we sought out emergent themes while engaging in dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin 1998), immersing ourselves in the interdisciplinary literature on homesickness, food consumption, and product symbolism to help illuminate our informants’ experiences. We read all narratives multiple times to identify salient and emergent themes (McCracken 1988). Although we did not initially intend to focus on how consumers use food consumption as a coping strategy for homesickness, the quantity of food discussions prompted us to concentrate on the construct.

In the consumer narratives, we find informants use food consumption in multiple ways to try to alleviate homesickness. Specifically, we describe six different food consumption patterns: (1) quintessential food consumption, (2) substitution, (3) channeling, (4) nationalistic or regional food consumption, (5) food ritual recreation, (6) binge or recreational eating.

Quintessential Food Consumption. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) describe quintessential goods as those that represent the ultimate in a product category. With quintessential food consumption, informants consume food to alleviate homesickness that they believe best represents the food they ate at home. Informants do so to immediately reconnect to their home of origin, and lessen their feelings of separation.

Substitution. Informants use substitution when they find they are unable to consume the quintessential food that would remind them of home. In substitution the informants replace the quintessential food item with something that is as similar as possible. Even if our informants cannot duplicate the exact types of foods that they would have consumed at home, substitute products allow them to transcend the limitations of space and reduce the sense of being separated from their homes (Otnes and Ruth 2008).

Channeling. With channeling, informants consume foods that are favorites of the people they have left behind at their home of origin. Interestingly, however, they themselves did not typically eat those foods. This strategy therefore reflects our informants’ use of food as a conduit to reconnect them to a particular person from their home.

Nationalistic or Regional Food Consumption. Many informants cope with their homesickness by consuming foods that they associate with their home country or region. Informants consume these types of foods even if they had never or rarely used these brands when they were at home.

Food Ritual Re-creation. Informants also may cope by attempting to recreate food rituals to preserve a connection to their home to decrease homesickness. Many informants discuss recreating special family dinner nights, such as Wednesday night barbeque or Friday night pizza. Reliving these family dinner nights help informants feel connected to their families and homes even though they cannot be with the people who originated these traditions.

Binge or Recreational Eating. Many of the informants engage in binging or recreational eating to try to alleviate their homesickness. In this case, they do not eat to establish a connection to home, but rather to take their minds off of their feelings of homesickness and to make themselves feel better. Although these foods do not remind our informants of some aspect of their home, they do help in terms of providing a short-term mood boost.

We also find three ways food consumption causes or increases homesickness. First, many informants report that the foods that reconnect them with home also increase their homesickness simply because they are such powerful reminders of home. In consuming these foods, informants often continue to dwell on their absence from these places, reinforcing the separation in their own minds.

Second, food consumption can trigger homesickness even if our informants were not experiencing this condition prior to consuming these foods. In these cases, the food consumption provokes thoughts of home. Third, eating food that is not prepared in the same manner as food at home can also trigger or exacerbate homesickness. Many informants complain that the substandard quality of dining commons food serve to remind them of their home. The substandard food acts as a trigger because of the immediate comparison informants make the superior food that was prepared at home.

The relationship between homesickness and food consumption can have both physical and emotional negative consequences on consumer welfare. Using food consumption as a coping mechanism for homesickness can be counterproductive, as it can increase homesickness and along with it the feelings of loneliness, stress, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, several informants report that they gained weight from using food as a coping mechanism which significantly affects their overall health. Others report a lack of energy and increased feelings of sluggishness.

The negative ramifications of using food consumption to cope with homesickness make it extremely important to assist college students in coping with this condition. By educating students about the psychological effects of homesickness, they will be better prepared to cope with it. Furthermore, we believe that public policy makers could use the findings in this study to help develop nutritional information and messages that are aimed at helping college students realize the deleterious effects of using food consumption as a coping strategy for homesickness.

References available from the authors.