You Are What (And How, and With Whom) You Eat: Effects of Food Identity on Preferences, Choice and Consumption

Lauren Grewal, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Cait Lamberton, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Nicole Coleman, University of Pittsburgh, USA

Though the bulk of consumer research in the food domain has focused on peoples’ indulgent or restriction behavior, we propose that variance on this dimension does not capture the totality of consumers’ food relationships. To provide a richer conceptualization of individuals’ experiences with food, we propose four distinct food identities.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
A look at the way food is incorporated into consumers’ lives suggests that our relationship with food may go far beyond the decision to eat more or less, indulgently or virtuously, as has been the focus of most prior research (e.g., Christakis and Fowler, 2007; Fedoroff, Polivy, & Herman, 2003; McFerran et al. 2010). Rather, food is a way for people to organize, signify, and legitimize a sense of self that is in tandem and distinguished from others (Xu, 2007). Accordingly, in this research, we propose that individuals have, “food identities”: a systematic tendency to think about and interact with food in ways that shapes their perceptions, preferences, and consumption.

We have run studies for scale creation and validation, social categorization, and predictive validity. Our first measurement study was designed to capture a wide range of attitudes toward food to see if distinct constructs emerged. We collected 23 items to tap into different aspects of food identities. EFA suggested that 18 of these items loaded into four indices. These indices suggest that food identities may have two major elements: one’s attitude toward food for the social experience it facilitates, and one’s interest in the inherent hedonic nature of food. The four identities we found were “Value Seekers” (low social, low hedonic), “Community Focused” (high social, low hedonic), “Independent Gourmets” (low social, high hedonic), and “Social Connoisseurs” (high social, high hedonic).

Study two was designed to refine and further validate these measures through a confirmatory factor analysis. Trying new items in addition to the 18 from the EFA, only 31 items with loadings of above α= .5 were used. We observed that the items loaded into the same four distinct factors with α > .75. A k-means cluster analysis suggests that all four distinct clusters of consumers can be identified with substantial numbers (i.e. 60-90).

Measurement study three looked at construct validity. Here we used the top 16 items from the CFA and compared the four indices to items that should theoretically be similar to some but not to others. Across the different food identity indices, we found consistent evidence for items that were theoretically similar were positively correlated to indices while measures that should not have been correlated were not (i.e. frugality correlated with value seekers, but not with independent gourmets). None of the identities correlated with self-control. Looking at the test-retest results of the scale taken two weeks apart, the correlations between time 1 and time 2 were always greater than α= .82.

We then explored if individuals could accurately categorize these identities for themselves and others, following Aquino and Reed’s (2002) procedure for establishing identity. When given descriptions of all four identities, people were more likely to self-identify with the label that corresponded to their highest index score (p<.002). Food identity also impacted how many individuals from each identity they said defined their social groups. For example, those with higher scores on the community-focused index knew significantly more community focused individuals compared to the other three identities, suggesting that individuals may also cluster together with others of similar food identity – making it an important element in their relationships and experiences. Our last categorization task was for social others. This study tested whether individuals could reliably recognize the identities that matched other individu-

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