

JUST EAT IT: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE EATING HABITS OF COLLEGE
STUDENTS

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in the Department of Sociology,
College of Sciences
and the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring 2014

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ABSTRACT

Young adults 18-25 years of age in the United States are experiencing a new world as they transition to young adulthood in college. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the eating behaviors of the young college population. The present study will examine the kinds of foods college students eat and how they make decisions regarding food consumption. The methodology of the present study consists of a quantitative survey, which includes questions about gender, living arrangements, convenience, and student eating habits. The sample size is comprised of 228 students at the University of Central Florida.

A regression model is used to explore the influence of the independent variables, which include gender; living arrangement; convenience; and health have on eating habits. Findings indicated that convenience significantly influence eating habits ($p < .001$). Gender, living arrangements, and health, however, did not significantly influence the eating habits of the college student respondents. A second regression model examined the potential effects of gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health- weight gain on eating habits. Again, convenience was the only significant independent variable that has an influence on eating habits ($p < .001$) while gender, living arrangements, and health-weight gain were not significant predictors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Lin Huff-Corzine, Dr. Fernando Rivera, and Dr. Maria Christina Santana who have supported this project with their guidance, experience, and knowledge. Thank you to my parents for teaching me the meaning of hard work and determination. Thank you to Michelle and Bob for all their support and encouragement. A special thank you goes to Dr. Lin Huff-Corzine for being the greatest mentor in foodways and the research process.

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INTRODUCTION

Young adults 18-25 years of age in the United States are experiencing a new world as they transition to young adulthood in college. During this time, young adults become more independent, more often eat away from home, have an increased desire to gain peer acceptance, experience greater constraints on their time, and have a growing concern with their physical appearance and body weight (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French, 2002). Most college students in the United States have more responsibilities compared to when they were in high school, which may lead to a disregard for their eating habits. Eating habits are the attitudes implicit in the dietary pattern, particularly those that which become explicit with change of the dietary pattern by the individual in a group (Mead, 1943)¹. Humans are naturally omnivores with the predispositions in their behavior that allow them to learn to accept the foods made available to them in their particular culture. “This adaptation is more likely to evolve during the first years of life as biological and behavioral processes directed toward meeting requirements for health and growth” (Savage, Fisher, and Birch, 2007) and are likely to represent the dietary pattern characteristics of a particular group in a particular population. Food is both an object and subject of social structure (Bennett, 1943). Every day, people must select, procure, prepare and consume food to sustain life (Axelson, 1986). According to Peters and Rappoport (1988), “food is laden with diverse substantive and symbolic meanings around which people organize equally diverse activities.” Thus, eating habits are reflections of the culture (Axelson, 1986).

Nutritionists refer to characteristics of eating habits as either healthy or unhealthy while others refer to characteristics of eating habits as either good or bad. Thus, I use these terms interchangeably. The foods that college students choose to eat tend to be high in fat, cholesterol, and sodium which are generally considered unhealthy (Cason and Wenrich, 2002). Thus, if their eating habits are not improved; college students are likely to follow unhealthy eating habits for the rest of their adult lives (Story et al., 2002). Yet, many college students believe that they are too busy to worry about their food choices. In addition, there is an increasing trend in the availability and consumption of convenience “foods” that is energy-dense and inexpensive. Choices like these cause, are an alarming concern for eating habits because they do not have nutritional value. In determining how college students make decisions about consuming food, it will be helpful to understand some of the social factors that impact their eating habits.

Using a quantitative study, this study examines how four factors-gender, living arrangements, convenience and health- influence the eating habits of college students. The survey was administered to 228 students at the University of Central Florida. There are many factors that may influence eating habits, e.g., traditional culture, race, and cost that are beyond the scope of this survey. In a pilot study, however, I found that gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health had major influences on the eating habits of college students, so I chose to focus on these factors in the present work. The purpose of this investigation is to address the young adult college population 18-25 years of age in the examination of eating habits. The present study will explore the kinds of foods college students eat and how they make decisions regarding food consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Norms

Gender norms are expectations that guide how men and women are supposed to act in society influences eating habits. In a study conducted by Allen-O'Donnell, Cottingham, Nowak, and Snyder (2011), female college students eating in mixed-gender groups purchased fewer calories than the female college students eating in the same-gender groups. According to Allen-O'Donnell et al. (2011), "the diminished meal size for women college students appears to be an attempt to assert femininity in eating groups that include men." To abide by their respective gender roles, college men may want to increase their food intake when eating in mixed groups, but they also say that they want to gain muscle, whereas women claim that they want to lose fat by eating less (McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2001). Mori, Chaiken, and Pliner (1987) conclude that eating behavior is influenced by desired presentations of self in what Goffman would call one's front stage. The front stage is where the individual activity of eating is significant to others by expressing their social eating habits during the interaction what they wish to convey to others (Goffman, 1959). Thus, while women in the contemporary United States are expected to consume fewer calories than men to appear more feminine and either gain or maintain a thin body image (Jensen and Holm, 1999).

"Historically, people especially women; have tried to change their bodies to conform to the specific era's image of beauty" (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). However, contrary to modern beliefs in the U.S., thin was not always the ideal body image for women. In fact, curviness, or

even obesity was the ideal body image in many cultures around the world (Jensen and Holm, 1999). According to Whit (1995), it was during the Hoover era when the style for a female body image made the switch from fat or curvy to thin in the U.S. Thus, young adult women currently live in a culture that bombards them with messages and images of a slender body image that has become the standard or norm by which they judge themselves and others (Pesa, Syre, and Jones, 2000).

As a result, in a study conducted by LaCaille, Dauner, Krambeer, and Pedersen (2011), women college students identified fears of “getting fat,” rather than being specifically concerned about weight gain. And in attempts to prevent “getting fat,” some college women have developed behaviors related to their eating habits including making food choices that promote a healthy lifestyle, and paying attention to label information to learn about healthiness of their choices. Women also expressed a greater desire to eat healthy when compared to men in the LaCaille et al. Study. Consistent with LaCaille et.al, Levi et al. (2006) found that female college students generally viewed their food decisions as personally important and relevant.

Men also exhibit specific behaviors towards food and behavior. Levi et al. (2006), for example, found that college men held significantly lower levels of involvement and interest in their food choices than did women. And LaCaille et al. (2011) indicated that “men tended to emphasize the role of personal responsibility over food choices and did not seem particularly concerned about eating in a healthy manner.” Specifically, Bryant and Dundes (2008) indicated that 29% of American college men were much less apt to consider the nutritional value of their food choices as an essential factor in meals compared to American female college students.

According to Levi, Chan, and Pence (2006), “as long as low involvement in food decisions is rooted in masculinity, “real” men will not read product labels or consistently make healthy food choices.”

Compared to women, therefore, men are less likely to worry about food intake, but they are also more likely to want a lean, muscular physique; the contemporary ideal body image for men. “Historically, it was the male body that was idealized in the art of Ancient Greece and Rome, but during the mid-1800s, attention shifted to the female body” Labre, 2005). The focus on the male body did not re-emerge until the 1980s when images of the idealized half-naked men began appearing in magazines and advertisements (Pesa et al., 2000). An example of half-dressed ideal male body image is seen in many male action figures that have become more muscular (Labre, 2005).

Allen-O’Donnell et al. (2011) revealed that men attending college appear to increase their calories purchased in an attempt to assert masculinity in groups that include women. Also, work conducted by LaCaille et al. (2011) found that men in college said that they ate unhealthy foods to gain weight, even though they were interested in adding muscle mass. Perhaps in an attempt to meet the ideal male body image, once consumed, they would then attempt to convert these foods with added calories into muscles by working out and lifting weights. In fact, consistent with this assertion, a study conducted by Vartanian, Giant, and Passino (2001) revealed that 85% of the undergraduate college men indicated that they wanted to be more muscular.

Living Arrangements

Living arrangements is defined as the primary physical environment in which a person resides. College students normally live either on campus in residence halls or dorms or off-campus in an apartment or house and usually with roommates or family. A study conducted by Cluskey and Grobe (2009) found that environmental influences, such as a student's living arrangement, impact eating behaviors and that the challenge of establishing or maintaining healthy lifestyles were completely unanticipated by students. The intake of particular foods, either healthy or unhealthy, depends on the amounts, types and availability of food that are present at the residence. Therefore, college student living arrangements may influence their eating habits. In addition, it is likely that they will relocate away from their parents for the first time to attend school, which will require that they must also learn how to conform to the demands of college life without daily oversight from parents and other adults. As a result, the eating habits of college students suffer from inattention or lack of availability. Sometimes, the foods that students' desire simply cannot be obtained because of their new location, absence of food storage, lack of preparation facilities, and so on. This is a particular problem in most on-campus housing which has more restricted facilities for food preparation and storage than off-campus housing. On-campus students may have a mini-fridge which allows limited quantities of food that can be stored, and a microwave, but little else. In fact, LaCaille et al. (2011) reveal that women students reported that the dorms were poorly equipped for cooking. Specifically, LaCaille et al. (2011) found that many students did not have access to an oven or freezer which made food storage, thus availability, an issue. Nelson et al. (2009) also conclude that "students generally do not have access to a full kitchen in their residence halls, and that they frequently

used microwaves in their rooms to prepare convenience food items, e.g., Ramen noodles, soup, and other easily available, microwaveable food items.”

The food available in the dorm rooms is likely to also affect the eating habits of students living on campus. A study conducted by Nelson and Story (2009) concluded that the average number of calories from food stored per dorm room at any time was 22,888 with 70% of college students reporting that they had food items in their rooms, such as salty snacks, cereal or granola bars, main dishes, desserts, candy, and sugar-sweetened beverages. The campus food environment including on-campus cafeterias and restaurants may also affect the eating habits of students living on-campus as well. Nelson, Kocos, Lytle, and Perry (2009) agree and argue that the readily available abundance of food in residence hall cafeterias and restaurants were major causes for weight gain among college students. More specifically, Levitsky, Halbmaier, and Mrdjenovic (2004) report that eating in all-you-can-eat dining halls and eating junk food contributed as much as 20% each to the well-known freshman weight gain syndrome. Many on-campus college students reported that they snack and/or eat quite frequently throughout the day as well (Nelson and Story, 2009). Alternatively, Brunt and Rhee (2008) found that those who live on-campus consume a larger variety of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products compared to students who live off-campus.

According to a study conducted by Brevard and Ricketts (1996), “living arrangements of college students were found to affect dietary intake and physical activity with off-campus students having healthier diets with a higher level of energy from protein and healthier serum lipid levels than those students living on-campus.” In addition, LaCaille et al. (2011) revealed

that “living off-campus and cooking for oneself either contributed to healthy eating or hindered it, depending on the person.”

Convenience

Studies have found that convenience defined as foods that are easily available, low cost, easy, and require little time to prepare, (Rappoport, Peters, Huff-Corzine and Downey, 1992) influences the eating habits and food choices of college students. Marquis (2005) notes that “convenience appears to be the most important food motivation for college students followed by price, pleasure, health, and concern about weight.” Going a step further, LaCaille et al. (2011) reveal that “college students often forgo exercise and look for foods that are fast, convenient, and inexpensive, which usually means high-fat, calorie-dense foods that are prepackaged or fast foods that are readily available in the university’s food court or vending machines.” College students often perceive that fast foods such as hotdogs, hamburgers, or pizza and familiar snacks, such as cookies, milk, candy bars, or cola to be both convenient and traditional(Rappoport et. al, 1992)- a perception that can easily result in weight gain. The trend of choosing convenience over cooking has been on the rise for the last few decades. The shift away from food prepared at home is a notable change in the eating habits of Americans. “The perception of time scarcity might influence several aspects of meal structure including organization, preparation, and context of meals” (Larson et. al, 2009). Childers, Haley and Jahns (2011) found that college students struggle with time management because they maintain busy schedules with coursework, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and memberships in student organizations that often hinder healthy eating habits. According to Greaney et al. (2009), participants felt that time

constraints associated with being a college student makes it difficult to eat healthy and maintain a healthy weight. Marquis (2005) showed that “the more convenience-oriented students are, the more they affirm that lack of time is a difficulty associated with living in residence halls and the less time they spend cooking.” In support of Marquis’ findings, LaCaille et al. (2011) found that “a perceived lack of time due to the busy nature of college life hindered a student’s ability to spend time preparing, cooking, and cleaning up after a meal, so students turned to convenience foods.” Likewise, Marquis (2005) obtained positive correlations between convenience and- 1) deciding what to eat,- 2) having a varied diet, and, -3) lack of time, all that were considered by students to be difficulties associated with living in a residence hall or dorm on campus. Additionally, Neumark-Sztainev, Story, Perry, and Casey (1999) found that young adults eat at fast food restaurants because the food is served quickly just as they will choose foods to fix at their residence that can be prepared quickly.

Given that students seek out convenient foods, the growth of fast food establishments makes them the perfect attraction for college students. Research has shown that fast food establishments were particularly important to the dietary intake of young adults (Guthrie, Lin, and Frazao, 2002). However, Greaney et al. (2009) conclude that participants in their research felt that ready access to unhealthy food, including fast-food and sit-down restaurants, was making it difficult to maintain a healthy weight. Sit-down restaurants or casual-dining provides young adults with an alternative to fast food establishments while normally providing a clean, friendly, brightly lit atmosphere, and a socially-acceptable place to spend time with friends (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French, 2002). Still, the food choices made in these establishments may be no healthier than those from fast food restaurants. There is also an increasing trend to purchase

meals from a sit-down restaurants or fast-food chains and then consume them at home, so eating at home becomes no healthier than eating out. The fast food industry and many sit-down restaurants as well -haves become highly sophisticated making offerings of convenient, affordable food that can be purchased to eat at the restaurant or consumed at home after purchasing it to -take-out , -from a drive-thru window, or -called in to be delivered to a residence. In summary, research has shown that fast food s, whether from fast-food or sit-down – establishments, are particularly important to the dietary intake of young adults (Guthrie et. al, 2002). As noted above, fast food establishment appeal to young adults because they offer quick, good-tasting, convenient, low cost meals (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French, 2002).

Health

Health is another factor that can have an influence on eating habits. Obesity is increasing in young adults at an alarming rate, which has been shown to increase the risks of chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes. Students, however, may find it hard to eat healthy in college. A study conducted by Greaney, Less, White, Drayton, Riebe, Blissmer, Shoff, Walsh, and Greene (2009) found that unhealthy foods served at university cafeterias contributed to their overeating and made it difficult to eat healthy to maintain a healthy weight. The consumption of fruits and vegetables are important to maintain a healthy diet, but fast food and fried foods, which are more often part of a college student’s food intake, are not part of a healthy diet. Healthy diet. In a study conducted by Racette, Deusinger, Strube, Highstein, and Deusinger (2008), “only 29% of freshman college students consumed at least 5 servings of fruits, and vegetables daily and 50%

of college students had consumed fried foods at least twice and high-fat fast foods at least twice during the previous week.”

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Gatekeeping theory was developed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1943 when he was serving on the board of the Committee on Food Habits during WWII. Applied to food choices, gatekeeping theory explains how gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health influence the eating habits of college students. Lewin (1943) explained that “food moved through channels and that the person who is primarily responsible for the food in a household could be viewed as the gatekeeper.” A gatekeeper is someone who monitors and controls actions, and as such, the gatekeeper is responsible for channels of buying, cooking, and choosing what they want to eat, or will serve to those for which they serve as gatekeepers. “Cooks still serve as the primary nutritional gatekeepers, and they influence what their family considers nutritious and appropriate to eat” (Pliner & Stallberg-White, 2000). The gatekeeper controls the food that reaches the table through various channels. Gate keeping theory looks at identifying the individual college student in this context as the current gatekeeper who is in charge of their eating habits. College students, especially those living on-campus, are likely to have lost their previous gatekeeper. The loss; for themselves; a role for which they may not be well prepared to assume. The loss of their previous gatekeeper forces the college student to assume the role of gatekeeper for themselves. “The social and psychological characteristics of the gatekeeper should be examined to understand food acceptance because once the food was through the gate and on the table, it would be eaten by the household members” (Lewin, 1943). “The role of the gatekeeper has expanded beyond the stay-at-home housewife notion” (McIntosh & Zey, 1989) to encompass a more diverse demographic who shop, cook, and control consumption for the family (Wansink, 2003). “While the individual who purchases the majority of food, is not always the

individual who does the majority of the cooking or serving, 92% of the time they still are regardless of -whether the gatekeeper is male or female, young or old, parent or relative”(Wansink, 2005).

Living arrangements are dominated by our gatekeeping abilities in food choices, the availability of food, and the storage of food in the residence. There is a trend changing from the traditional gatekeeping patterns of the past where cooking and homemade meals were dominant to the contemporary gatekeeping patterns where eating out and fast food purchasing is increasing. Specifically, American college students are eating out and purchasing more fast and prepared foods than ever before. “Population trends of fewer family-prepared meals as well as the increasing popularity of fast food, dining out, and demand for convenient, prepared foods are likely to be related to the shifts in family composition and the work schedules primarily of mothers” (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French, 2002). “Yet, with all that has changed in who does the cooking, ordering, or carry-out, every home still has a nutritional gatekeeper” (Wansink, 2003).

The changes in employment patterns and family structure may leave women and men, who are their family gatekeepers, with less time to devote to the preparing home-cooked meals for the family (Savage, Fisher and Birch, 2007). As a result, families spend less time eating meals together and children more frequently fend for themselves. “Gatekeepers have both a direct and indirect impact on what their children ate outside the home every time they made their children’s lunches and every time they gave them enough money to afford whatever lunch or snack they wanted” (Wansink, 2006). Once they reach college, the student studied by Hertzler and Bruce

(2002) claimed that time constraints and their dependence on fast and prepared food has only increased further. People learn their gendered eating habits from their social environment and significant others with whom they interact in society, but especially from the gatekeepers within their family of orientation. Culture may ascribe food patterns based on gender because of its physiological state (Axelson, 1986). Examples of physiological states include height, weight, and body structure. “Children learn about food through the direct experience of eating and by observing the eating behavior of others, especially their parents” (Savage, Fisher, and Birch, 2007). Culture is transmitted from generation to generation, which means that culture is learned (Axelson, 1986). Men have learned to eat in a masculine way while women have learned how to eat in a feminine way through the process of observation, imitation, and experimentation.²

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the sociological factors that influence the eating habits of college students?

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: It is expected that gender will significantly influence the eating habits of college students.

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no relationship between gender and eating habits of college students.

Hypothesis 2: Living Arrangements are expected to significantly influence the eating habits of college students.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no relationship between living arrangements and eating habits of college students.

Hypothesis 3: It is expected that the convenience of obtaining food will significantly influence the eating habits of college students.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no relationship between convenience and eating habits of college students.

Hypothesis 4: It is expected that respondent's interest in health-related food information will significantly influence the eating habits of college students.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no relationship between health and eating habits of college students.

DATA AND METHODS

The investigation takes a closer look at what kinds of foods college students eat and how they make decisions regarding food consumption. The current work measures how gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health may influence eating behavior of college students using a set of survey questions that provide quantitative data. The dependent variable in the study is eating habits. The independent variables measured in the study are gender, living arrangements, convenience and health. The survey is available in Appendix One.

Independent Variables

Gender

The gender of the participant was assessed using a dichotomous response where (1) = Male and (2) = Female (Q32). Three questions (Q4, Q5, and Q6) examine how respondents report that they express their gender-related food behavior. Each set of responses were recoded from a 5 point scale to a 3 point Likert Scale where (1) = Large, (2) = Same, (3) = Small to make the statistical results more understandable. The first of these statements was constructed to determine how much food college students consume when on a date (Q4). If Large is chosen as a response, the college student is reporting that s/he consumes a larger than normal amount of food when on a date. If Small is chosen as a response, the college student reports that s/he consumes a smaller than normal amount of food when on a date. The second statement was constructed to determine how much food college students consume when eating in a same gender group (Q6 in Appendix). If Large is chosen as a response, the college student reports that s/he consumes a

larger than normal amount of food when eating in a same gender group. If Small is chosen as a response, the college student reports that s/he consumes a smaller than normal amount of food when eating in the same gender group. The third statement was constructed to determine how much food college students consume when eating in a mixed gender group (Q5). If Large is chosen as a response, the college students is reporting that s/he consume a larger than normal amount of food when eating in a mixed gender group. If Small is chosen as a response, the college student is reporting that s/he consumes a smaller than normal amount of food when eating in a mixed gender group.

Living Arrangements

Living Arrangements was measured by the location of student's residence. The responses that were constructed for the location of a student's residence were (1) = On-Campus or (2) Off-Campus (Q38).

Convenience

Convenience is defined as food that is easy to prepare, fast, or takes little time. The following three statements were based on a 5 point Likert scale where (1) =Never, (2) = Rarely, (3) = Sometimes, (4) = Often, and (5) = Always. The first statement was constructed to determine the frequency of consumption of snacks (Q9). If Never is chosen as a response, the college student claims that s/he never consumes snacks. If Always is chosen as a response, the college student claims that s/he always consumes snacks. The second statement was constructed to determine the frequency of consumption of prepackaged or prepared foods (Q12). If Never is chosen as a response, the college student is saying that s/he never consumes prepackaged or

prepared foods. If Always is chosen as a response, the college student is reporting that s/he always consumes prepackaged or prepared foods. The third statement was constructed to determine the frequency of going out to eat at sit-down restaurants (Q16). If Never is chosen as a response, the college student is saying that s/he never goes out to eat at sit-down restaurants while if Always is chosen as a response, the college student claims that s/he always goes out to eat at sit-down restaurants.

Health

The following two statements were assessed to examine the health of students using a dichotomous response categories of (1) = Yes and (2) = No. The first statement was constructed to determine whether the college student has gained weight since attending college (Q33). If Yes is chosen as a response, the college student has gained weight since attending college while if No is chosen as a response, the college student has not gained weight since attending college. The second statement was constructed to determine whether the college student has lost weight since attending college (Q32). If Yes is chosen as a response, the college student has lost weight since attending college but if No is chosen as a response, the college student has not lost weight since attending college.

Dependent Variable

Eating Habits

The following statement was based on a 5 point Likert Scale where (1) =Excellent, (2) = Good, (3) = Average, (4) = Poor, and (5) = Awful to determine the perception college students

have of their eating habits. If Excellent is chosen as a response, the college student perceives his/her eating habits as excellent, whereas if Awful is chosen as a response, the college student perceives his/her eating habits as awful.

Demographic Variables

The demographic variables in this study are class standing, socioeconomic status (SES), and race/ethnicity. Class standing of the participant was assessed by five response categories: (1) = freshman, (2) = sophomore, (3) = junior, (4) = senior and (5) = graduate student. Socioeconomic Status (SES) of the participant was assessed by three response categories: (1) = lower class, (2) = middle class and (3) = upper class. Race/ethnicity of the participant was assessed by (1) =White/Caucasian, (2) = Latino/Hispanic, (3) =Black/African American, and (4) = Other.

In this study, the participants self-reported the data. The survey questionnaire consists of 42 questions which I developed and had reviewed and approved by the University of Central Florida (UCF) Institutional Review Board. A random convenience sample consisting of students between 18-25 years of age was examined to study eating habits at the individual level. The population that I am trying to generalize my research study is the population of students at the University of Central Florida between the ages of 18-25 years old. The unit of analysis that is examined in the study is on the individual level. The participants at UCF are between the ages of 18 - 25 years old. Participants at University of Central Florida were emailed a link to an online survey questionnaire, which they were asked to complete after reviewing the voluntary agreement form. The participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. There was no incentive or reward for participation in the research study. The sample size consists of 228

students at the University of Central Florida. Of the 450 students contacted, 228 students responded-yielding a response rate of 50.6%. The survey was administered and the data collected using the online surveying system, Qualtrics. The data were coded and analyzed in SPSS. The statistical techniques used to analyze the data included frequencies, means, and multiple regressions. Frequencies, and means describe individual variables whereas multiple regressions are models that explain any significant causal relationships between the independent and dependent variables

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics summarize and interpret the properties of the survey sample. These figures illustrate a frequency conducted between gendered eating situations and the amount of food consumed.

| | On a Date | Eating with The Same Gender Group | Eating With a Mixed Gender Group |
|----------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Amount of Food | | | |
| Larger | 11.3% | 26.3% | 15.1% |
| Same | 49.8% | 63.4% | 69.8% |
| Small | 39.0% | 10.3% | 15.1% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

On a date, results indicated that 49.8% of college students ate the same amount of food, 39% of college students ate a smaller amount of food, and 11.3% of college students ate a larger amount of food. In mixed gender groups, results showed that 69.8% of college students ate the same amount of food, 15.1% of college students ate a smaller amount of food, and 15.1% of college students ate larger amount of food. In same gender groups, results found that 26.3% of college students ate a larger amount of food, 64.3% of college students ate the same amount of food, and 10.3% of college students ate a smaller amount of food.

Table 2a. illustrates a frequency table of the location of student’s housing. Results showed that 90.3% of college students lived off-campus while 9.7% of college students lived on-campus.

| Table 2a. Location of Student’s Housing (Living Arrangements) | | |
|--|------------|-------|
| On Campus | Off Campus | Total |
| 9.7% | 90.3% | 100% |

Table 3 illustrates a frequency table of the consumption of convenience foods by college students. Results found that 1.9% of college students never ate snacks, 14.9% of college students rarely ate snacks, 33.8% of college students sometimes ate snacks, 39.4% of college students often ate snacks, and 9.3% of college students always ate snacks. Results indicated that 8.8% of college students never ate prepackaged foods or frozen foods, 28.6% of college students rarely ate prepackaged or frozen foods, 30.4% of college students sometimes ate prepackaged or frozen foods, 29.0% of college students often ate prepackaged or frozen foods, and 3.2% of college students always ate prepackaged or frozen foods. Results showed that 2.8% of college students never eat out at restaurants, 44.2% of college students rarely eat out at restaurants, 41.0% of college students sometimes eat out at restaurants, 10.6% of college students often eat out at restaurants, and 1.4% of college students always eat out at restaurants.

| | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | Total |
|---|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
| Frequency of Eating Snacks | 1.9% | 15.7% | 33.8% | 39.4% | 9.3% | 100% |
| Frequency of Eating Prepackaged Foods or Frozen Foods | 8.8% | 28.6% | 30.4% | 29.0% | 3.2% | 100% |
| Frequency of Eating out at Restaurants | 2.8% | 44.2% | 41.0% | 10.6% | 1.4% | 100% |

Table 4 illustrates a frequency table of whether college students have lost weight or gained weight since attending college. Results revealed that 35.4% of college students have lost weight since attending college while 64.6% of college students have not lost weight since attending college. Results indicated that 57.6% of college students have gained weight since attending college and 42.4% of college students have not gained weight since attending college.

| | Yes | No | Total |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Weight Loss | 35.4% | 64.6% | 100% |
| Weight Gain | 57.6% | 42.4% | 100% |

Table 5 illustrates a multiple regression model of the independent variables (gender, living arrangements location, convenience, and health) on the dependent variable of eating habits. Health in this OLS regression model is defined as weight loss. Results indicated that

convenience ($p < .001$) was the only significant independent variable showing an influence on eating habits. Thus, as the use of convenience foods decreased, respondents were significantly more likely to view their eating habits as good to excellent. Gender, living arrangements and health associated with weight loss were found not significant-however, the model is significant at the $p < .001$, and it explains over 15% of the variance in eating habits.

Table 5. OLS Regression Model Examining Respondent’s Perception of Eating Habits(N=228)

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | T | Sig. | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | |
| Gender | .009 | .040 | .016 | .236 | .813 | |
| Living Arrangements | .234 | .192 | .083 | 1.217 | .225 | |
| Convenience | -.198 | .036 | -.370 | -5.500 | .000*** | |
| Health-Weight Loss | -.118 | .112 | -0.71 | -1.057 | .292 | |
| | | | | | | |
| R Square: .154 | F Change: 8.569 | Sig.: .000 | | | | |

*** $p < .001$

Table 6 illustrates a multiple regression model of the independent variables (gender, living arrangements location, convenience, and health) on the dependent variable of eating habits. Health in this OLS regression model is defined as weight gain. Results indicated that convenience ($p < .001$) was the only significant independent variable showing an influence on eating habits. Thus, as the use of convenience foods decreased, respondents were more likely to view their eating habits as good to excellent. Gender, living arrangements, and health associated

with weight gain were found not significant, however, the model is significant at the $p < .001$ and it explains over 15% of the variance in eating habits.

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | T | Sig. | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | |
| Gender | .016 | .041 | .027 | .391 | .696 | |
| Living Arrangements | .231 | .194 | .082 | 1.191 | .235 | |
| Convenience | -.198 | .036 | -.368 | -5.422 | .000*** | |
| Health-Weight Gain | .082 | .112 | .050 | .736 | .463 | |
| | | | | | | |
| R Square: .151 | F Change: 8.252 | Sig.: .000 | | | | |

*** $p < .001$

The demographic characteristics examined in this study were class standing, socioeconomic status (SES), and race/ethnicity. The majority of the participants were female. Three percent of the participants were freshman, 12.8% of the participants were sophomore, 27.6% of participants were junior, 40.4% of participants were senior, and 19.2% of participants were graduate students. The SES breakdowns of the participants indicate that 15.5% as lower class, 75.5% as middle class and 8.7% as upper class. Sixty-Nine percent of participants were

White/Caucasian, 11.5% were Latino/Hispanic, 6.7% were Black/African American, and 4.8% were Other.

DISCUSSION

The present work examined how gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health influence the eating habits of college students. Of the four hypotheses, only one was supported. Hypothesis 1 states that it is expected that gender will significantly influence the eating habits of college students, but the results did not support this assertion. Hypothesis 2 states that living arrangements are expected to significantly influence the eating habits of college students, however, the findings did not support this hypothesis. Hypothesis 3 states that it is expected that the convenience of obtaining food will significantly influence the eating habits of college students, and findings supported this statement. The findings about convenience support past research. Hypothesis 4 states that it is expected that respondent's interest in health-related food information will significantly influence the eating habits of college students, but the results did not support this assertion.

In Table 5, the regression model explored whether the independent variables of gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health-weight loss have an influence on eating habits. Consistent with past findings (Rappoport et. al., 1992; LaCaille et.al, 2011; Marquis, 2005) indicated that convenience had a significant influence on eating habits with a $p < .001$. Gender, living arrangements, and health were not significant independent variables. The regression model in Table 6 examined if the independent variables of gender, living arrangements, convenience, and health- weight gain. Again, consistent with Rappoport et. al, 1992; LaCaille et. al, 2011; Marquis, 2005), the current findings show that convenience significantly influenced eating habits

with a $p < .001$. Gender, living arrangements, and health- weight gain were not significant independent variables. Findings from Table 1 indicated that on average, 49.8% of college students ate the same amount of food they usually do when eating out on a date, on average, 69.8% of college students ate the same amount of food they usually do when eating out in mixed gender groups, and 64.3% of college students ate the same amount of food they usually do in same gender groups. Findings from Table 2 showed that 90.3% of college students lived off-campus while 9.7% of college students lived on-campus. Findings from Table 3 showed that on average, 44.2% of college students rarely eat out at restaurants. Findings revealed that on average, 30.4% of college students sometimes eat prepackaged or frozen foods. Findings indicated that on average, 39.4% of college students often ate snacks. Findings from Table 4 revealed that 50.4% of college student perceive their eating habits as average.

The present investigation has several strengths. First, the analysis of the data is based on a sample size of 228 students randomly selected which exceeded my original goal of obtaining a sample size of 200 students. Second, the survey questions are original. Third, the study sheds light and adds knowledge about the eating habits of students who live off-campus. Lastly, the study focuses on what people eat and how they make decisions about their food consumption rather than why they eat.

There are a few limitations of the study. First, my sample size is based on one university not multiple universities. Second, the sample size is based largely on students who live off-campus which is not equally representative to students who live on-campus. Lastly, my sample size is based on a large urban university campus which creates diversity which is strength, but at the

same time, there is a limitation that the results may not exactly reflect smaller rural college settings.

There is a trend changing from the traditional gatekeeping patterns of the past where cooking and homemade meals were prevalent to the contemporary gatekeeping patterns where eating out and fast food purchasing is increasing. Specifically, American college students are eating out and purchasing more fast and prepared foods than ever before. In my theoretical orientation section, gate keeping theory was the premise for my study and the findings support gatekeeping theory. I would like to see more future research on examining further how childhood has an impact on the eating habits of college students.

The purpose of this investigation is to address the young adult college population 18-25 years of age in the examination of eating habits. The present study will examine what kinds of foods college students eat and how they make decisions regarding food consumption. The research about off-campus living of college students has been limited but this study adds knowledge about off-campus living of college students and its influence on eating habits. Future studies can also aid university officials in designing programs to teach students how to eat healthy on a budget and have better decision making skills with regards to food choices.

Footnotes:

- 1.) Mead, Margaret. 1943. "The Factor of Food Habits." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 225: 136-141. Eating habits are the attitudes implicit in the dietary pattern, particularly those that which become explicit with change of the dietary pattern by the individual in a group.
- 2.) People of different races, social classes, regions of the country, and etc. are cultural factors but that in this study, the focus is on gender.

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Appendix One

Survey Questionnaire

Participation in the survey requires that the participant must be 18 years or older. This is a voluntary survey that is entirely anonymous. Please fill in the circle that best answers the question.

1.) Who was primarily in charge of food preparation in your household when you were growing up?

- Mother
- Father
- Other_____

2.) How would you describe your current eating habits?

- Excellent
- Good
- Average
- Poor
- Awful

3.) How would you compare your current eating habits to your eating habits while you were in high school?

- My eating habits have strongly improved overall.
- My eating habits have slightly improved overall
- My eating habits have stayed the same overall.
- My eating habits have slightly declined overall.

- My eating habits have strongly declined overall

4.) If you are on a date, how would you describe your food intake?

- I eat a larger amount of food.
- I eat a slightly larger amount of food
- I eat about the same amount of food.
- I eat a slightly smaller amount of food.
- I eat a small amount of food.
- N/A

5.) When you are eating out with both male and female friends, how would you describe your food intake?

- I eat a larger amount of food.
- I eat a slightly larger amount of food
- I eat about the same amount of food.
- I eat a slightly smaller amount of food/
- I eat a smaller amount of food.
- N/A

6.) When you are eating out with friends of the same gender, how would you describe your food intake?

- I eat a larger amount of food
- I eat a slightly larger amount of food

- I eat about the same amount of food
- I eat a slightly smaller amount of food
- I eat a smaller amount of food
- N/A

7.) When you are eating at your current residence, how often do you eat alone?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

8.) How often do you cook most of your meals?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

9.) How often do you eat snacks?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes

- Often
- Always

10.) Do you look at the Nutrition Facts label on the package when you are buying a food product for the first time?

- Never(Skip number 11)
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

11.) If you ever read the Nutrition Food Label before you eat a food, do you use the information provided to help you fit that food into your daily diet?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

12.) How often do you eat prepackaged or prepared food such as frozen, canned, or microwave dinners?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

13.) How often do you choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugar?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

14.) How often do you eat reduced calorie food products?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

15.) How often does convenience impact on your eating behavior? Definition: Convenience means the food is easy to prepare, fast, or takes little or no effort.

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

16.) How often do you eat at sit down restaurants (e.g., Olive Garden, Red Lobster, Logan's Steakhouse, etc.)?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

17.) How often do you eat fast food (e.g., McDonald's, Taco Bell, Wendy's, etc.)?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

18.) When ordering fast food at a restaurant like McDonalds, what is your preferred method?

- Drive thru
- Park and go inside to order your meal to-go
- Go inside, order, and eat in the dining room
- Do not eat fast food

19.) What facilities for food preparation do you use at your residence or dorm room? (Check all that apply). Minor Note: If you live in a dorm, the common room down the hall is not applicable in the question. I am focusing on your personal room.

- Microwave
- Stove/Oven
- Toaster/Toaster Oven
- Hot Plate

20.) How often are you concerned about what you eat?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

21.) There is an ideal body image for your gender.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree

- Neither Disagree Nor Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

22.) Thinking in regards to your weight, how important is obtaining or trying to obtain a physical appearance that you feel is attractive in our society?

- Very Important
- Somewhat Important
- Neutral
- Somewhat Not Important
- Not Important

23.) Do you want to be more muscular?

14.) Yes, please explain_____

15.) No

24.) Do you want to gain weight?

- Yes, please explain_____
- No

25.) Do you want to lose weight?

- Yes, please explain_____
- No

26.) How often do social pressures (e.g., grades, job, extracurricular activities, relationships, finances, etc.) influence your eating behavior?

- Never(skip 26b. and 26c.)
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

26b. Do you tend to eat more or less snacks when social pressures influence your eating behavior?

- More
- Less

26c. If you had your choice of snack, would you prefer to eat a candy bar(sweet) or chips(salty)?

- Candy Bar
- Chips
- Both

27.) How many servings of vegetables do you eat daily? Minor Note: A serving consists of either 1 cup of raw or cooked vegetables, or 1 cup of vegetable juice, or 2 cups of raw, leafy vegetables.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

28.) How many servings of fruit do you eat daily? Minor Note: A serving consists of 1 cup of fruit juice, or ½ cup of dried fruit, or one whole fruit(1 small or 1 medium size). If it is a large fruit it is considered 2 servings.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

29.) How many servings of grains do you eat daily? Minor Note: A serving consists of either ½ ounce of nuts, 1 slice of whole grain bread, ½ cup cooked oatmeal, 1 cup of whole grain cereal, ½ cup whole grain pasta, etc.

- 0

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 or more

30.) How many servings of dairy do you eat/drink daily? Minor Note: A serving consists of either 1 cup of milk, 1 cup yogurt, and 2 ounces of American Cheese(2 Slices)

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

31.) How many servings of meat do you eat daily? Minor Note: A serving consists of either 1 ounce of meat, 1 ounce of poultry or 1 ounce of fish.

- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 or more

32.) Since starting college, have you lost weight?

- Yes
- No

32b.) If yes, How much? _____

33.) Since starting college, have you gained weight?

- Yes
- No

33b.) If yes, How much? _____

34.) Sex:

- Male
- Female

35.) What was your Age at your Last Birthday: _____

36.) What is your race/ethnicity?(Check all that apply)

- White/Caucasian
- Latino(a)/ Hispanic
- Black/African-American
- Other _____

37.) What is your class standing in college?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student

38.) What is the location of your housing?

- On-Campus (Skip #38)
- Off-Campus

39.) If you live off-campus, with who/whom specifically do you live with?

- Family

- Friends
- Roommates assigned by housing authorities

40.) Which of the following do you think best describes your parents' socioeconomic status?

- Lower Class
- Middle Class
- Upper Class

41.) How many hours do you work for pay each week?

- 5-10
- 10-20
- 20-30
- 30-40
- I do not have a job (skip #42)

42.) Do you work in a food service industry?

- Yes
- No

