The Impact of Social Groups on the Formation of Eating Identities

Emeran Irby
Hanover College
Department of Communication
1408 Kirkwood Road
Austin, TX 78722
emeronirby@gmail.com
Impact of Social Groups on Eating Identities

Abstract

This paper examines how social interactions influence eating behaviors and identities. It examines the influences of peer groups on identity formation within individuals, relating specifically to their food identities. Through a social constructionist lens, food identity can be understood as the value and importance an individual attach to food. Discourse analysis is used to analyze the norms and dialogue within multiple focus groups of close peers yielding results that show gender, age, and longevity of relationship as key influences in the cultivation of food identity. The findings highlight the fact that social norms and ideals surrounding an individual’s food choices are directly influenced by the language and ideas that exist within each peer group. The implications of positive food ideals are discussed.

Keywords: food identity, peer group socialization, food choices, eating behaviors, college students
The Impact of Social Groups on the Formation of Eating Identities

Food plays an irrefutable role in modern society. Not only is it a necessity for survival, but it is also the medium for many important social interactions. Food is present at almost every important life event: weddings, graduations, first dates, and baby showers. It is a part of celebrations, times of grief, and seemingly insignificant moments of daily interactions. Meals have become a time for sustenance and indulgence. The act of eating is, in many ways, a defining characteristic of the identity of an individual. Meals are social constructions that differ across cultures—from the typical fast food meal that is a token of American culture, to the slow-paced, relaxed style that is essential to European and Asian cultures. The connection between food and interpersonal communication introduces questions about the role that these social interactions play on the food consumed.

One influence on food identity can be seen in peer groups, or close relationships. Peer groups play an increasingly important role during adolescence and can decrease feelings of anxiety and alienation that are common in these years (Stead, McDermott, Mackintosh, & Adamson, 2011). Many young adults will cultivate the most important elements of their identity based on social interactions with their peers, making it extremely important to understand how these social ties can be beneficial to positive health behaviors. With obesity at an all-time high in the United States, research has found that all of the focus should not be on an individual’s genes, but rather, on environmental influences, which play a large role in this epidemic (Cornier, Salzberg, Endly, Besses, Rojas & Tregellas, 2009). Given simultaneous peer pressure to incorporate food into social interactions based on gender, age, and longevity of relationships, what role does the dinner table discourse play on the translation of health eating ideals? If an individual’s interpersonal relationships teach and instill ideals and norms, what ability do they have to influence eating be-
Impact of Social Groups on Eating Identities

haviors? This connection between eating behaviors and interpersonal communication is relevant to the current study. Understanding this connection and the role it plays in cultivating opinions and identity will expand into realms of health communication and food choice. Through a social constructionist lens, this study identifies the influence that peer groups have on the eating behaviors within the group, and how these influences can be used to define an individual’s food identity.

Social Constructionism

A theoretical framework based on social constructionism provides the basis for investigating the coupling of food and social interaction. The theory of social constructionism derives from the idea that things that exist within the social world are constructed to be there. If an ideal or a perspective exists, it has been brought into existence through communication. Social constructionism believes that “objects exist only after they enter communicative space” (Keaton & Bodie, 2011, p.192). This theory has been used in modern study as a way to better understand social influence, and the role that it plays in the cultivation of ideals and norms. The confusion with social construction lies in the distinction that it is not describing an object’s physical characteristic, but rather an object’s existence within a social context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). There is no denying that communication can change the existing meaning of an object, or how it is perceived within society. This phenomenon is seen often in social media trends or popular culture icons. The meaning of a hashtag or a popular phrase can change rapidly depending on the communication techniques surrounding it.

Social constructionism is especially useful in qualitative research studies because it seeks to understand an object, event, or action holistically. It is a constantly changing theory that adapts to relevance within society or situations. Social constructionism is effective in the current
study by focusing on the social process of prescribing meaning to food choices and eating behaviors, similar to the way in which individuals cultivate ideals and opinions.

**The social construction of food and eating.** Social constructionism focuses on the idea that every object is made up of a social composition and the ideas that define that object within a social context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). When describing food, this accounts for the multiple factors that go into the development of an individual’s “taste.” The process of selecting and consuming foods encompasses psychological, social, economic, cultural, and biological factors, all of which play a role in the cultivation of identity surrounding the consumption of food (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). An individual with a family history of diabetes, heart disease, or obesity will likely have a different food identity than that of an individual who does not suffer from these concerns. In the same way that humans form opinions based upon family history, experiences, or personal choice, food identity is an extension of identity that focuses on how they define their food choices or culture.

Social constructionist thinking posits that the social process is the defining factor in enabling something to exist and have meaning (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). An individual’s food identity cannot be complete without influence from social groups. The psychosocial characteristics of food choice become an integral part of how a person describes themselves or their friends. This can be seen in the use of simple phrases such as “I’m a meat and potatoes person,” or the choices individuals make to become vegan or vegetarian. Communication plays an essential role in framing and expressing food preferences for an individual and for a group. The communication of food choices describes a person’s identity, defining the mental self-image that individuals form based upon everyday interactions with people, groups, and objects (Bisogni et al., 2002). The reality created by these interactions is tied directly to the social constructionist premise that
communication changes how objects are perceived and the meanings they can embody. These findings build upon previous scholarship showing that negative health perceptions are socially distributed, leaving some groups at increased risk (Ball, Mishra, & Crawford, 2003). The goal of the current project is to gain an understanding of the influence of peer groups on the identity of food.

Health perceptions and behaviors continue to shift as cultural norms and expectations progress. The ideas surrounding the term “healthy” can be vastly different depending on the society within which it is defined. Understanding these expectations and the influence society has on healthy eating habits will serve to create a more unified understanding of what it means to be “healthy.” The ideals surrounding body image have been increasingly scrutinized within the past few decades. Lupton (2000) explains that body image can be seen as a “complex intertwining of traditional and novel understandings of the ways the body functions as related to other bodies, objects, and spaces that produces possible ways of thinking about and living in the body” (p. 56). Making a healthy body image such an integral element of social identity assumes that individuals know what a healthy diet consists of and have a personal knowledge of their own body.

Health perceptions of eating behaviors often create restraints or expectations that can be perpetuated within peer groups. These perceptions are expressed through media platforms and outline body image ideals and characteristics. By making a healthy body a symbol of personal achievement (Lupton, 2000), individuals in a mediated society, such as the United States, likely feel social pressures to live up to those standards. The association between looking fit and being attractive often weighs heavy on young adolescents when the majority of social engagements include unhealthy food items. Since young adults are so often presented with unhealthy foods, they must make an active choice to not eat them, a decision that many do not make for fear of
exclusion or isolation from social groups. Though research has found that fruit and vegetable consumption is associated with reduction in multiple health threats such as obesity and cardiovascular disease (Kwon, Yoo, & Aguilar, 2013), that does not mean adolescents will orient themselves toward eating fruits and vegetables. In fact, many previous studies have found that adolescents associated choosing to eat healthily as “geeky,” “nerdy,” or an untrendy image which could attract teasing and marginalization (Stead et al., 2011). In order to change this perception, researchers have applied specific behavioral models to reflect the decisions. In a study done on the decision-making process of women towards fruit and vegetable consumption, researchers applied the trans-theoretical model to conceptualize the stages in an individual’s decision-making process regarding fruits and vegetable intake (Chung, Hoerr, Levine, & Coleman, 2006). The first five stages of the model are cognitive-affective processes and are used primarily by those in the pre-action stage (pre-contemplation, contemplation, and preparation) for behavior change. The last six are behavioral and used by those in the action and maintenance stages (Chung et al., 2006). This model shows the processes an individual undergoes in order to cultivate ideals, and can be an important guide for health opinions when paired with an individual’s level of readiness to change. Results of the study show that though there is a connection between social pressure and the consumption of fruits and vegetables, the level of influence varies by individual readiness and placement within the stages of action (Chung et al., 2006). Therefore, an individual in the beginning stages of identity development is significantly more vulnerable to social pressures. By understanding the process of how people make food decisions, the research will be able to better identify areas where the individual may be more likely to give in to societal pressures. In understanding how society constructs an individual’s food identity, the role of social interactions will be highlighted in the process of ideal development and implementation.
This multi textual approach of examining both personal and group mentalities surrounding food identity will benefit both current and future research.

**Interpersonal Relationships and Eating Behaviors**

Social groups play a central role in the formation of ideals and norms surrounding healthy eating habits. Throughout early adolescent years, peer groups serve as a comfort zone or a point of reference for the individual’s identity. Research has found it effective to link social constructionist ideas to the formation of opinions regarding health (Lupton, 2000). Social constructionists believe that the shared notions of reality within a culture are created through acculturation and social relationships (Lupton, 2000). This can be seen in almost all adolescent age groups, even extending into adulthood. In a study done on 279 adolescents, it is found that there was a direct effect of peer influence on saturated fat intake (Kalavana, Maes, & de Gucht, 2010). This study exemplifies the need for more research on how peer groups impact individuals, especially regarding eating identities. Food is a central element of many social interactions, giving ample evidence to support further in-depth research on how eating behaviors are influenced by social groups.

Individuals may feel social pressure to conform to the behaviors of peer groups, influencing the choices they make towards eating or health behaviors. Lupton (2000) explains that humans and their world exist in a dialectical relationship in which each one is created by the other. This idea creates a cycle of imbalance that will continue unless research is done to understand effective ways to stop it. Lupton’s research went on to assert that each individual voluntarily internalizes the norms that govern appropriate behavior in the hopes of achieving the best possible version of themselves (Lupton, 2000). In regards to diet, this suggests that individuals will emulate the actions of the peer group they are in, or wish to be in, because they believe it will solidify
their identity as a valuable member of the group (Lupton, 2000). One study found that teenagers eating together in a social setting expressed friendship and identity through their food choices (Sylow & Holm, 2009), exemplifying the possibility for individuals to attach deeper and more permeated meanings to food. By examining the peer influence level of food identities, meals will be understood as more than simply the act of consumption, but the cultivation of identities.

Meals are social activities that help create connections and memories for individuals. These memories are often pivotal to the lives of adolescents and young adults as they transition into adulthood and independence. Peer groups often influence the eating behaviors within different individuals, and can be defining factors in the identity that is created surrounding food. Research suggests that the way a given human group eats aids in the assertion of its diversity, hierarchy and organization (Sylow & Holm, 2009). Each peer group has their own distinct eating habits that are adopted and influenced by the members. The stages of life where these examples are seen most prevalently are late adolescence and early adulthood, times in which an individual diverges from family life and becomes independent in their dietary choices. Consumption of junk food can sometimes even be seen as a way for young people to demonstrate their independence from their family, and their increasing loyalty to their friends (Sylow & Holm, 2009). In a school setting, young adults may have the first opportunity to make independent choices regarding their food. With this independence, adolescents feel liberated in choosing to consume junk food. This is especially prevalent in adolescents who feel pressure from family members to maintain a specific diet, or may simply be the result of experimentation with new forms of food. Whatever the circumstances may be, humans are social beings and meals are social acts, making meals a significant medium for how social groups are produced and maintained. The current study will fo-
cus on the elements of a social group that have the most influence on the healthy eating choices made by an individual.

RQ1: How do social groups and interpersonal relationships influence the cultivation of personal food identity?

RQ2: How do individuals within peer groups positively and negatively influence one another’s eating behaviors?

RQ3: How does this food identity represent ideals about what is a healthy and unhealthy eating habit?

Methods

This study uses a social constructionist perspective grounded in discourse analysis to understand how the participants create meaning and ideals surrounding food. Discourse analysis is closely tied to the social constructionist perspective in that they both focus on the cultivation of meaning in some way. Discourse analysis takes a more focused approach to the cultivation of meaning through the study of spoken or written discourse, and the meaning that is constructed from them (Davis, Gallardo, & Lachlan, 2013). Food ideals and perceptions are created based upon many factors that change with each individual. A qualitative approach to these factors will allow the researcher to understand how people create meaning around food, and how this meaning changes based upon an individual’s peer group.

Participants

To get a broad variety of responses, participants were chosen from a non-random convenience sample of students eating in a public area of a campus dining hall. Individuals and their friends were asked to participate in focus groups during meal times. Peer groups were approached based upon observations of how often they were seen eating together. The focus was
on peer groups who regularly ate meals together and would be willing to participate in the focus group style research. Seven peer groups were selected to participate, with a range of three to seven individuals within each group. The sample age range was from 19-22 and all respondents were currently enrolled students at the college of the author. This demographic was chosen because of convenience, and also because many college age students are able to make independent decisions when it comes to food, sometimes for the first time, and peer groups can be extremely influential in this process.

**Data collection, transcription and translation.** The focus groups were conducted throughout the month of March 2014 in designated campus cafeterias. Each focus group was made up of close friends to capture the realistic interactions and discourse that occurred. By doing so, a deeper understanding of the communication techniques surrounding eating habits, and the realities created around food was gained. Because discourse analysis focuses on the context of the discourse and the meaning that arises from the exchange, smaller samples of focus groups allowed for more persuasive strategies and language use to arise.

The semi-structured interview format was guided by a series of questions centralized in food identities and peer group mentalities. Respondents were asked to first answer how often they ate together during the week to establish the connection within the group. Subsequently, respondents were asked to identify similarities between their dietary choices, describe their own food identity, define “good food”, and build a plate of food that described their peer groups (see appendix for full list of questions). Follow-up questions were asked to increase the depth of the responses.

Each focus group was held in a cafeteria setting to incorporate the food choices in a visual way. Questions were asked to spark conversation around the perceptions of food that existed
within that peer group. Each interview lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes, depending on the flow of conversation. The focus groups were audio recorded to allow the researcher to participate in the conversation and code focus group responses. The interview questions were paraphrased from previous research done by Bisogni et al., (2011), who asked questions such as: “How would you describe the kind of eater you are?” “How would you describe your group’s eating patterns”, “How often do you eat together?” etc. (Bisogni et al, 2011, p.130). Each question was framed to encourage the individuals to utilize collaboration and groupthink when discussing the implications of their eating behaviors. The combination of self-report and focus group conversations allowed for a well-rounded understanding of each peer group’s ideals surrounding food.

**Discourse Analysis**

The analysis of focus group responses utilized discourse analysis, which focuses on the epistemological assumptions that exists behind a research question (Davis, Gallardo, & Lachlan, 2013). This method allowed for a better understanding of how the realities surrounding food are created and maintained within a given peer group. Discourse analysis closely follows social constructionist ideas by focusing on situated reality, or how the way in which an individual speaks about food will shape the way that they eat. Expanding this idea, discourse analysis helps to describe the way in which peer groups collaboratively speak about food, and how their conversations shape the eating habits or behaviors within that group. A discourse-analytic perspective does not aim to determine the truth-value of participants’ process of making sense of healthful eating and contextual influences, but rather focuses on the actions speakers try to accomplish by talking about it in a particular way (Bouwman, Molder, Koelen, & Woerkum, 2009).
The data was analyzed based on techniques from previous research in order to increase reliability. Data was first coded from the audio recording for themes and similarities that arose around identity. Because the coding process looks for discourse that directly relates to how an individual, or the group as a whole defines themselves as “eaters,” or how they describe “healthy eating” (Bisogni et al, 2011), certain patterns emerged within the conversations. By using discourse analysis, the focus groups were analyzed to seek out these similarities and differences, and create a useful way to understand the socially constructed language that occurred within them. Final observations of the data focused on applied discourse theory. The results were examined to understand how the overall language constructed social realities within different peer groups. Findings suggest that each group had their own “language” when it came to food, and the language of each group was used as the basis for the cultivation of ideals and opinions. The themes that emerged will help the researcher draw conclusions about the social constructions of food, and the influences that peer groups have upon them.

Results

Peer groups did not define “food identity” in the same way. The language created within each peer group was a direct response to the food identity of that group, allowing for multiple personalities and opinions to exist. The major distinctions within the peer groups were seen in the difference between independent and dependent eaters. Independent eaters were classified as those who were not directly influenced by their friends, making choices regarding food based upon their own tastes and opinions. Dependent eaters were those who relied on their friend group to define the choices they made around food, and whose choices were often directly influenced by their peer groups. Results from this study showed the direct influence that peer groups have on eating behaviors not only within an individual, but also within the group as a whole. Each
peer group can be made up of both independent and dependent eaters. Within these two distinctions, patterns existed surrounding age, gender, and length of friendship. The conclusions drawn from the results are based upon theoretical understandings as well as existing research that parallels the topic.

**Independent Eaters**

Individuals whose eating behaviors were not directly affected by their peer groups were labeled “independent eaters.” These individuals make choices regarding eating behaviors based on their own taste or existing food ideals. Independent eaters were characteristically older, or existed within peer groups that had increased longevity in their friendships. Gender did not play a significant role within the independent eater category.

**Age**

Age played a significant role in the cultivation of independent eating behaviors. The ages of the participants, varied from 19-23, allow for a wide range of information. In many cases, the independent eaters arose out of peer groups made up of primarily upper division students, especially seniors. When asked how they defined “good food,” one group made up primarily of senior women, all answered the question independently, and were open to disagreeing with each other’s responses. This showed a group cohesion that allowed for individual thought without worry of group isolation. Similar examples were shown in a group made up of two seniors and one junior, who were able to attach certain memories to their friends, both present and not present, that were rooted in food. This supports the idea that food ideals are cultivated within groups, and shows that many important interactions occur over meals. The same group went on to describe their group food identity as innovative, allowing for each individual to have their own independent role within the group instead of having to be defined by the group. This trend was
only seen within one of the groups that were not upper-division students. A peer group of five men and three women who were mostly first-year students described their food identity as a collaboration between each individual’s opinions. They described their group of friends as “a lot of different colors and flavors because my group of friends are all their own thing,” allowing every individual to feel empowered within their food identity. However, not all individuals within the group were classified as independent eaters, showing the mix of both that can occur within groups of friends. Overall, age played an influential role in some groups’ independent eating behaviors. Upper division students were more likely to participate in independent eating because of their maturity level, and had an increased understanding of what is healthy and unhealthy.

**Gender**

The voluntary sample was mostly made up of women, with the exception of a few mixed gender peer groups. This allowed for limited data to be collected surrounding gender, but showed a trend for independent eating to occur in both upper-division women, and the majority of men. Of all of the seven groups interviewed, five spoke at one point or the other about gender and the link to eating behaviors. When asked how they would build a plate of food to represent their group of friends, one peer group began speaking about how different it would be for males to do this. “To guys, it’s not something they would talk about,” said a woman in one peer group as she ate a salad. The group, made up primarily of women, went on to synthesize that “society doesn’t put the same pressure on guys…” This observation highlights the social constructionist trends that exist within society. That peer group believes it is more socially acceptable for men to make independent choices surrounding food. Male respondents more often responded with “I just get whatever looks good” or “I just eat whatever I feel like” when asked about their food choices than women. One male respondent answered this way, and when asked if his friends ever influ-
ence his decisions, he described that he will often get the same things that his friends are eating but only if it “looks good.” He said he felt no pressure to eat in the same way as his friends. This example illustrates that the influence of gender does, in fact, play a significant role within all peer groups, but that those individuals described as independent eaters are able to process the influence in a self-focused, gender neutral, way.

**Longevity of Friendship**

The last characteristic of independent eating was seen in the longevity of the friendship. Peer groups that had been friends for an extended period of time showcased more characteristics of independent eating. Groups who had known each other for over one year exhibited more cohesion and comfort within their peer groups. One group made up of exclusively seniors mentioned that they had “learned a lot from my friends” about eating, but did not always eat what their friends ate. Many respondents remarked on how they had grown in their eating behaviors since freshman year, and were less influenced by their friends in their eating choices, as they got older. One of the groups of older students even spoke about having specific foods attached to memories of their friends, a trait only possible in a friendship with longevity. Friend groups with increased longevity also displayed a higher level of understanding about the dynamic of the friend group. Many of these groups were able to identify favorite foods for other members of the group, or were able to recall certain dislikes that one individual had. The interpersonal relationships grew stronger as the time increased due to more opportunities for disclosure, and more moments of vulnerability with food. In one focus group made up of affiliated women, they identified the influence they have on one another saying, “we are all influenced whether it is good or bad.” This same group admitted to moments of vulnerability when it came to getting seconds, but felt “confirmation (from others) that I can eat whatever I want to eat,” When an individual
addresses an uncomfortable food encounter and feels no judgment from the group, they feel more security within their food identity. Independent eating within friendships with increased longevity was characterized by higher levels of cohesion and understanding of the group dynamic as a whole, as well as a fully formed individual opinion about eating behaviors.

**Dependent Eaters**

Dependent eaters can be described as individuals who rely upon the opinions of others for the cultivation of their own ideals. In regards to food, these individuals are more likely to fall in line with what their friends are eating, or are less able to define their own likes or dislikes without the validation of their peers. Results found that dependent eaters were characteristically younger females who existed in newer friend groups.

**Age**

Within the sample, three focus groups were comprised of younger individuals, with a mix between first-year students and second-year students. Within all of these groups, dependency was seen particularly in the group dynamics. In all cases the groups employed self-affirmation techniques such as interruption or agreement with something said by another individual within the group. One’s group dynamic was consistently defined by how each individual would add “yeah” or some form of agreement after a claim was made surrounding food. There were many different conversations going on at once, decreasing the cohesiveness and connectedness of the group. Younger individuals are still closely connected to their family eating habits, and are still discovering how those habits translate into their college identity. Younger peer groups typically had a clear group leader, or someone who was quick to answer the questions for the whole group. Within one of the focus groups, made up of first-year women between the ages of 19 and 20, there was much more focus on the group mentality of eating. Throughout the interview, the
respondents would answer the questions by saying “if they have nothing else, we eat…” putting emphasis on the “we” to create a groupthink mentality. Ultimately, age was a reflection of dependent eaters through increased peer influence and decreased group cohesiveness.

**Gender**

Gender was another theme of dependent eaters, and was most often seen in female respondents. In a focus group made up of 10 females, the influence of peers was said to play a clear role in what they ate. “I think we all influence each other, whether that is good or bad”, was said by one female, followed by connecting eating seconds during meals with increased levels of affirmation from others in her peer group, saying “…it’s confirmation that I can eat whatever I want”. Females felt a responsibility to hold each other accountable for what they were eating, mentioning feeling “guilty for eating… around some friends.” This was further justified in the female respondent’s belief that dieting or eating healthy is easier when done as a group, “If someone else is eating healthy; I am going to eat healthy.” The increased pressure on females to fit into a certain definition is both constructed by society, and perpetuated by individuals. In every peer group made up of only females, weight was brought up at some point, from a respondent saying she “didn’t want to be that kid that everyone says went to college and got fat”, to the fact that one respondent would not have more than two plates in front of her in fear of looking “fat”. The definition of the word “fat” has become so skewed, that many of the female respondents believed that others were constantly judging their body type. This belief further instilled the dependent eating behaviors that occurred within the female respondents. Having a group mentality of looking a certain way, or fitting into a certain frame of society, caused the individuals to have more similar eating habits.

**Longevity of Friendship**
Respondents in newly formed peer groups, or groups that had existed for a year or less showed more characteristics of dependent eating through decreased comfort and consolation within the group dynamic. Individuals within these peer groups often equated their own eating habits to that of their friends by admitting that “you eat when you are with your friends”. By attaching the action of eating to the action of being with your friends, the individuals are melting together the two experiences, making one just as important as the other. In doing this, the distinctiveness of food identity becomes lost in groupthink. One focus group described their “food identity” as reliant on each other because “the more you are around certain eating behaviors, the more accepting you are of them.” Dependent eaters often morph into the types of eaters they are surrounded by as a way of constructing their own identities. The discourse of the majority of the peer groups, independent and dependent eaters, centered on the idea that this college cultivated the food identities of the students. Dependent eaters would see this as comforting because they would not have to make tough decisions for themselves. Security plays a role in what the individuals will choose by giving the dependent eaters a safe zone from which they would not have to leave to make choices. One individual said she would often eat what her friends were eating simply because she had “someone to talk to while you are waiting in line.” These individuals were less likely to contribute to group conversations, instead simply agreeing with what was already said, or not saying anything at all. As with any new friendship, dependent eaters are still trying to discover their place within their peer group, making it more understandable for them to make choices that closely mimic those of their friends.

Conclusions

Results from this study show the distinct influence of peer groups on eating behaviors not only within an individual, but within the group as a whole. The comparison between independent
and dependent eaters emerged throughout the results, and supported the initial question of influence that peer groups have on food identity. In most cases, peer groups are made up of both independent and dependent eaters, allowing for a breadth of responses and opinions about food. These conclusions will be examined based upon theoretical understandings and existing research on the topic.

**The Social Construction of Independent and Dependent Eaters**

The ways in which varying individuals conceptualized their food identities in relation to what they were eating brought forth new ideas, as well as ways of thinking about the cognitions and feelings that people experience while eating. By constructing different meanings to eating behaviors, individuals are building an identity that is reflexive but not definitive to social interactions (Bisogini et al., 2005). Individuals construct and maintain their own self-image based on how they judge themselves and how they feel others judge them. In an environment devoted to consumption, social pressures have immense influence. Several different themes related to eating emerged in the interviews, but the most prevalent were categorized as either dependent or independent eaters. Within these identities, other themes existed relating to either eating practices or personal characteristics.

The social constructionist theory characterizes how many of the respondents’ defined “good food” and their own “food identity” by presenting them with the opportunity to speak openly about their opinions on diet. The responses highlighted the influence that conversations about food have on individuals and vice versa. Food is an idea that can only continue to be constructed by how it exists within a social realm. By understanding the implications that food identity has within a social context, future research will be able to identify techniques for prevention. The results will show that age, gender, and longevity of friendship all influence food identity in
varying degrees.

Independent eaters were characterized as those who were able to make choices regarding diet that were individualistic and based upon their own ideals and tastes. These individuals were characteristically older, with longer existing peer groups, and saw meals as vital social interactions, but not defining characteristics of their identity. These eaters were able to distinguish between peer influence and peer pressure, allowing them to make decisions about food that were free from the ties of social expectations. General understandings of “healthy eating” were consistent throughout the focus groups showcasing the results of previous research, which found that adolescents attach situational determinants to healthy eating behaviors (Piko, 2007).

In a culture with heavy exposure to messages outlining the model of a “perfect diet,” independent eating can often be a difficult avenue to take. It is found that independent eating was most often seen in older individuals who existed in peer groups that had known each other for longer amounts of time. This finding aligns with previous research in the idea that individuals construct meaning surrounding food and eating based on what they need from the situation (Lupton, 2000). Independent eaters, being characteristically older with longevity in their peer groups, show that as individuals age, they begin to need less from the interactions that they have over meals because they have already cultivated their own identity surrounding food. Further research should focus on if this pattern exists within all individuals, or if it is a characteristic of new relationships.

Dependent eaters were defined as individuals whose food identity was cultivated by their peers. These individuals were more often young females in newer friend groups, who were still struggling to understand their role within the group. Dependent eaters chose foods and partook in eating behaviors collaboratively, often eating whatever the rest of the group were eating or be-
lieving in certain eating ideals that existed throughout the group. Previous research has touched upon this style of eaters by identifying the concept of “social contagion” and its relation to eating behaviors, describing it as the spread of ideals through existing social standards (Eisenberg et al., 2005). Within this study dependent eaters were the most prevalent form of eater, but could exist within a peer group of independent eaters and vice versa.

Dependent eaters were characterized by gender in that they were most often young females. These results support many previous studies in the idea that eating behaviors are somewhat homogenous throughout close peer connections, and that there is also a certain level of weight-related behaviors throughout (Eisenberg et al., 2005). Eisenberg found this to be true in her study on peer influence on weight within teenage girls. The results showed that not only do peers influence the dieting behaviors of an individual, but are directly related to the types of conversations that are had about weight and food as well (Eisenberg et al., 2005). The peer groups made up of predominantly dependent female eaters brought up weight or body image at least once within a meal, characterizing the impact it has on their thought process. In a society where female eating behaviors are much more restricted than males’, dependent eating behaviors become increasingly common.

Within the realm of dependent and independent eaters, gender arose as an unexpected yet unsurprising area of findings. Gender is seen as an increasingly important characteristic of identity by creating and solidifying a group association (Bisogini et al., 2005). By giving individuals a basis from which to make choices surrounding eating behaviors, the fear of uncertainty and isolation decreases. Previous research surrounding the influence of gender and eating behaviors supports this belief and the findings in this research. In a study of adolescents, results show that males are more likely to report eating unhealthy products than girls (Kalavana, Maes, & de
Eating Identities

Gucht, 2010). This willingness can be associated with the predetermined ideals surrounding gendered eating behaviors, such as that females should eat to remain thin and males should eat to become strong. Within the research, female respondents exhibited a much higher tendency to eat according to their peer groups, characterizing them as dependent eaters. While males did exhibit some characteristically peer influenced eating behaviors, most were likely to be defined as independent eaters as a whole.

The idea of independent and dependent eaters will play an important role in the future of food identity cultivation. Food plays an integral role in the cultivation of identity, but has not been taken as seriously in this process. In identifying the characteristics of independent and dependent eaters, society will be given a better understanding of when health messages are the most influential within an individual’s life.

**Future Implications**

The findings of this research will be beneficial to the future of communication research by building a bridge between the interpersonal and health communication fields. This research will continue to build upon previous studies while simultaneously increasing the credibility of the results. Understanding how society views food and how social relationships influence eating behaviors could lead to improvements in obesity prevention campaigns and promotion of healthy eating behaviors. Many individuals may not have thought twice about the food that they put on their plate, and asking them to examine these seemingly mundane moments will introduce many new ideals surrounding food identity. By studying college age individuals in their natural setting, more power was given to the topic and the research was able to play a direct role in their lives. When the respondents could see the traits that characterized them as independent and dependent eaters, they were more likely to continue to remain conscious about their eating behaviors. For
something that plays such a significant role in life, food has not been examined for the role it plays in an individual’s identity. The results from this research shed more light on the importance of understanding food identity both through the data collected, and the epistemological ideals created. In a social setting, food becomes more than a means for sustenance; it becomes a catalyst for identification and mutual understanding. Not only is an individual defined by the food choices they make, but also by the way these choices affect their role with a peer group, and society as a whole.
References


Appendix: Interview Questions

1. How often do you eat together during the week?
2. Do you often spend more time eating when you are with a group of people?
3. When eating as a group, do you ever notice certain patterns or similarities when it comes to the food that you eat?
4. Do you find it hard to find good food when you are eating in the Campus Center?
5. How would you define “good food”?
6. If you could design a plate of food that represents your group of friends, what would it look like and why?
7. How would you define your food identity or food culture since you have been at Hanover?
8. Do you see any differences in what you eat alone compared to what you eat when you eat as a group?