



What makes meals ‘memorable’? A consumer-centric exploration



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ABSTRACT

The remembered satisfaction and enjoyment of eating occasions can influence future meal choice decisions, but past research into how meals are positively and emotionally remembered and what contributes to such memorability is scarce. The aim of the present study was to draw on the tripartite conceptualisation of ‘the food’, ‘the context’ and ‘the person’ as the major factors underlying food choice/behaviour decisions, and explore what are memorable meals through a retrospective approach of real life eating occasions. Through online survey research with 886 consumers living in the United Kingdom, this research established a typology of different eating occasions that tend to be spontaneously remembered positively. A common denominator was the dual influence of the company and what was consumed as key determinants of memorable meals, with the context (physical and social) of the meal as a third important determinant. Convergence of qualitative and quantitative data suggested that a memorable meal typically involves family/friends, a positive emotional state, cooked food, and wine. The importance given to a range of meal aspects and the positive attitudes towards memorable meals were aligned with the positive emotional intensity and food involvement traits’ scores. In contrast, differences between male/female respondents and younger/older respondents were minor. Future research is needed to replicate and extend this investigation and more fully establish linkages between enjoyment, memorability, and food choice decisions.

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1. Introduction

Engrained meal patterns and practices have yielded to new ways of eating in response to changing work roles, family organization, household structures, lifestyles, and food systems (Devine, Connors, Sobal, & Bisogni, 2003). Indeed, the question of what a meal is today elicits a range of responses including snacks and eating occasions that occur beyond the boundaries of the domestic table. The ways in which people construct and form subjective understandings of food and eating through their personal experiences has been a topic of much past research (e.g., Bisogni et al., 2007; Blake, 2008; Blake, Bisogni, Sobal, Devine, & Jastran, 2007; Jaeger, Bava, Worch, Dawson, & Marshall, 2011; Jaeger, Marshall, & Dawson, 2009; Jaeger & Meiselman, 2004; Marshall & Bell, 2003; Mueller Loose & Jaeger, 2012). The overarching insight from this stream of research is that context and personal experience are significant determinants of food choice behaviours, in addition to the food/drink itself. Recently, Haugaard and Lähteenmäki (2014) explored meal satisfaction at work places. Consumers explained meal satisfaction as a holistic meal experience, and four factors were identified as influencing their perception of meal satisfaction: the food related experience, the physiological outcome, the social interaction, and the

physical environment and ambience. However, it appears that this body of research has not paid much attention to the emotional dimension or enjoyment of meals and the emotional memories created naturally during eating and drinking occasions.

Consumer-centric investigations of ‘meal memorability’ are lacking and no consumer-driven definition of meal memorability has been established. Why are certain eating occasions positively remembered and others not? What communalities do some meals share whereby positive emotions are stirred when recalling them? In previous research when participants were asked to recall past food experiences, they generated more examples of pleasant than of unpleasant previous experiences (see Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008, Study 1). In addition, the term ‘memorable’ is popularly used with a positive connotation, meaning ‘positively/emotionally remembered’. With this as our point of departure we therefore refer to ‘memorability’ and ‘memorable’ in the context of positive experiences, and not to memory in the classical psychology sense (i.e., ability/ease to remember or incidental food memory, Mojet & Köster, 2005) or to forced recalls of their last eating episodes. Determinants of memorable meals go beyond the sensory and hedonic experiences elicited by the food/drink itself; to encompass, among other aspects of meals, the location, the particular atmospherics, the company, one’s mood or mind set (and that of others), the (dis)confirmation of expectations held about that eating occasion, etc. (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Indeed, the emergence of ‘the experience economy’ (Hanefors & Mossberg, 2003; Jacobsen, 2008) has resulted in some

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restaurateurs or marketers giving equal importance to tangible and intangible elements of the eating experience (e.g., Goldstein, 2005; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 99). In addition, the constitution of a memorable meal might well depend on the individual's personal traits (e.g., culture, gender, age, marital status, lifestyle, emotional character, involvement with foods).

For this paper, in light of the infancy of research into meal memorability, we adopted an explorative research strategy that would deliver descriptive insights. Drawing upon the tripartite framework that has previously been used in the food choice literature (i.e., food, person, context; e.g., Meiselman, 2000) this work aimed to address the following questions: RQ1) What types of meals are spontaneously and positively remembered? RQ2) What makes a meal positively memorable? RQ3) Do people of different gender and ages think similarly about positively remembered meals? RQ4) Do people who are emotionally positive/negative think differently about positively remembered meals? and RQ5) Do people varying in their involvement with food think differently about positively remembered meals?

In this initial investigation we excluded meals that take place for a specific reason which contributes to the memorability of the occasion (e.g., Christmas, weddings, birthdays, and other rituals; Rook, 1985). While such meals are likely to be highly memorable, they are also far removed from daily life and therefore less likely to contribute to a broad initial understanding of 'meal memorability'. It was also a deliberate decision to obtain self-reported memories that participants had incidentally acquired during their everyday life and make no particular effort to remember. As Laureati et al. (2008, p. 273) stated: "When eating a pizza or drinking coffee during breakfast, it is extremely unusual to consciously decide "I have to remember this food." Hence, this approach was deemed to contribute to the external validity of the research.

2. Materials and methods

Data collection was through questionnaires administered online (Study 1 and Study 2), using a combination of open and closed questions.

Table 1
Summary demographic information about the respondents in Studies 1 and 2.

Variable	Categories	% Study 1	% Study 2
Total (N)	–	487	399
Gender	Female	59	52
	Male	41	48
Age group	Younger adult (19–34 y.o.)	33	33
	Adult (35–49 y.o.)	39	33
	Older adult (50–70 y.o.)	28	34
Marital status	Single	16	21
	Married	61	60
	Living with partner	17	16
	Divorced/separated	5	4
	Widowed	1	0
Number of people living in the household (excluding the respondent)	0	3	6
	1	20	17
	2	24	30
	3	26	23
	4 or more	27	28
Household gross annual income	£20–60,000	77	82
	£60–100,000	17	14
	£ + 100,000	6	4
Food Involvement Scale group	Low: 18–59 ($M = 52, SD = 6.3$) ^a	34	–
	Medium: 60–69 ($M = 64.8, SD = 2.9$) ^b	34	–
	High: 70–84 ($M = 74.7, SD = 3.7$) ^c	32	–
Emotional Intensity Scale group—positive	Low: 1.6–3.2 ($M = 2.87, SD = 0.3$) ^a	–	31
	Medium: 3.3–3.7 ($M = 3.5, SD = 0.1$) ^b	–	36
	High: 3.8–4.9 ($M = 4.0, SD = 0.2$) ^c	–	33
Emotional Intensity Scale group—negative	Low: 1.3–2.9 ($M = 2.4, SD = 0.4$) ^a	–	35
	Medium: 3–3.4 ($M = 3.1, SD = 0.1$) ^b	–	30
	High: 3.5–5 ($M = 3.9, SD = 0.4$) ^c	–	36

Values with different superscript letters within each scale significantly differ at $p < .0001$ according to Tukey's test.

2.1. Participants

Participants (Study 1 and 2) were registered on a database maintained by a market research agency (OnePoll, UK). Varying household compositions, income levels, educational attainment, etc. were represented (Table 1). In Study 1, 500 people took part, but the data of 13 respondents were discarded since they completed the questionnaire in less than 10 min, suggesting that their answers might have been provided randomly or unthoughtfully (the questionnaire was designed to be completed in around 20 min). The data from 399 respondents was used in Study 2 (discarding one respondent who had obviously provided random answers). Thus, in total, 886 participants completed the online survey from a private location.

2.2. Study 1 questionnaire

In Study 1, to address RQ1 and RQ2 respondents were instructed to recall as vividly as possible a specific memorable eating experience that they were fond of (avoiding special occasions such as Christmas, birthdays, and weddings), and to write about this eating occasion and why it was memorable in max. 10 short sentences. Based on Schifferstein (2009), ratings of the vividness with which participants recalled that experience were obtained (e.g., "how vivid was the occasion in your mind?" 1 = not at all vivid; 7 = extremely vivid).

To further address RQ1 and RQ2, a list of 9 meal aspects (based on the eight dimensions of meals defined by Bisogni et al., 2007) was presented and rated for importance: The company (alone, the specific people whom you were with); the food and drink (its quality, specific sensory attributes); your feelings (how you felt emotionally during that occasion); the location (outdoors, at home, in a restaurant...); the context (service, atmosphere, price...); your physical condition (how you felt physically during that occasion); the time dimension (moment of the day, year...); parallel activities (other activities happening during that occasion); and the recurrence of the event (the frequency with which it happens). The importance ratings given to each meal aspect were obtained using the bulls-eye approach (Thomson & Crocker, 2014). This required respondents to drag each of the nine aspects into a circular

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