



## Emotions associated to mealtimes: Memorable meals and typical evening meals



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### ABSTRACT

This research contributes to the current interest in food-related emotions in eating occasions. Previous research has studied contextual influences on food-related emotions, but the food products used as stimuli were single food items (i.e., chocolate brownie, fruit, potato crisps) and not meals. In addition, the contexts were established and evoked by the researchers. The present work combines and extends previous approaches by focusing on the emotions associated with past real-life memorable meals as experienced by consumers. To further explore the relationship between meal emotions, memorability, and contextual dimensions, this work aimed to: (1) compare emotions associated to a memorable meal, as opposed to a routine meal occasion (typical evening meal); (2) establish relationships between emotion associations and the contextual factors of a memorable meal; and (3) explain heterogeneity in emotions associated to memorable and typical meals in terms of personal characteristics (gender, age, emotional intensity, and private body consciousness). Through online surveys with 1358 adult British participants, emotions associated with memorable meals were found to be more positive than negative; and more positive than those associated with a typical evening meal. Contextual characteristics of memorable meals exerted many influences on the emotional associations, and seemed to contribute the most in making that meal occasion memorable. On average, men and older consumers had more positive emotional associations, which may be related to life experiences and gender roles. Participants who scored higher on the positive scale of the emotional intensity questionnaire (EIS-R POS) had on average more positive emotional associations than those with lower scores on this personality trait, whereas respondents' Private Body Consciousness scale scores were in alignment with the intensity ratings for positive and negative emotion terms. Suggestions for future research linked to harnessing the positive experiences of meal time emotions to healthful eating behaviour are outlined.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Related literature and past research

Evaluative judgements made prior to, during, and after meals extend beyond liking and preference for specific food/beverage items. In a meal occasion, the interaction between the consumer, the consumption context, and the food/beverage components of the meal gives rise to an array of emotions and feelings that influence food choices and modulate the enjoyment of the consumption experience/eating occasion (Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008; Macht, Meininger, & Roth, 2005; Richins, 1997). By taking into account the emotional and contextual aspects of meals, a better understanding of people's eating experiences and enjoyment of these is gained. (Piqueras-Fiszman & Jaeger, 2014a,b,c).

The majority of studies investigating food-related emotions have either focused on collecting emotion-related responses after providing

participants with single food items as stimuli in laboratory conditions or online (with or without an evoked context; Piqueras-Fiszman & Jaeger, 2014a,b,c), or have taken place in a natural setting (e.g., a canteen), where the data were collected during the course of a meal or right after (Edwards, Hartwell, & Brown, 2013; Hartwell, Edwards, & Brown, 2013; Haugaard & Lähteenmäki, 2014). However, in all of these studies, the individuals are aware that they will be observed or that they will have to provide responses about their meal experience. Therefore the responses obtained (specifically emotion associations, or measures of satisfaction, enjoyment, etc.) are based on a "controlled" eating occasion (i.e., participants know it is part of a study). den Uijl, Jager, de Graaf, Waddell, and Kremer (2014) opted for collecting this emotion information, namely associated with routine mealtimes, via online surveys. The present work combines and extends previous approaches (Piqueras-Fiszman & Jaeger, 2015) by taking a retrospective perspective focusing on emotions associated with natural (not study-based) meals experienced by consumers, namely those positive ones that are remembered spontaneously and vividly (what we will refer to as 'memorable'). This focus allows us to explore many different meal occasions beyond routine ones.

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Furthermore, it is relevant to consider salient memories of meal events because when making decisions concerning eating and drinking, consumers are referring to their memories and not their actual experiences (to which they have no direct access after the event; Higgs, 2008; Robinson, Blissett, & Higgs, 2011, 2012). Therefore, aiming for a positive memory of an eating experience is crucial for food developers and those delivering food services, and certainly for the consumers themselves. However, memorable meals have been under-investigated. To date, not much literature can be found about how people remember these eating experiences (note that we are not referring to incidental food memory, Mojet & Köster, 2005; or to forced recalls of their last eating episodes) and what emotions are associated to them. It is worth highlighting that when participants are asked to recall past general food experiences, pleasant emotions are reported to be experienced more often than unpleasant ones. In addition, when asked to recall, people tend to generate more examples of pleasant than of unpleasant previous experiences (see Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008, Study 1). These results indicate that healthy individuals have a predominantly positive affective disposition towards eating (see also Piqueras-Fiszman & Jaeger, 2015). This hedonic asymmetry may be due to the fact that, in general, people eat products that they expect to have a neutral to pleasant immediate emotional impact or will provide a long-term benefit.

The cited literature represents only a first step in understanding how meals are positively remembered and, more generally, how pleasure associated with eating/drinking is represented in memory. Questions that warrant more research are: what constitutes 'meal memorability' in people's everyday life; why are certain eating occasions positively remembered (memorable) and others not? What emotions are associated with those eating occasions? And are these emotional associations unique or largely similar to emotions experienced during other types of meals, such as routine evening meals? Piqueras-Fiszman and Jaeger (2015) shed some light on the first two questions by means of qualitative and quantitative methods and reported that recalled memorable meals cover much more than the sensory and hedonic experiences elicited by the food. They encompass, among other aspects, the company, the location, the particular atmospherics (Jacobsen, 2008; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014), and one's mood or mindset (and that of others). Thus exploring which specific emotions are associated with which contextual factors of memorable meals seems relevant.

### 1.2. Aims of the present research

To disentangle the relationship between emotions, contextual characteristics of eating and drinking, and consumers' meal memorability, this work addressed the following research questions: (RQ1) What emotions do people associate with memorable meals (MM) and how do these emotions differ from those associated with more routine meals such as a typical evening meal (TM)? (RQ2) To what extent are the emotional associations specific to the characteristics of the memorable meal's contextual dimensions? And considering the heterogeneity in consumer responses, (RQ3) to what extent are these emotional associations (towards MM) specific to the characteristics of the individual? Although personality may be broadly analysed into five main factors/dimensions: extra/introversion; friendliness/hostility; conscientiousness (or will); emotional stability; and openness (Digman, 1990), in light of the strong interplay between emotions and memories (e.g., Philippot & Schaefer, 2001) it was thought important to focus and explore particularly participants' emotional intensity character. Hereby, RQ2 and RQ3 extend RQ1 in providing more detailed insight regarding the factors that influence emotional associations with eating experiences. Three online studies were conducted with each study contributing to one or more of the stated research questions. Focus was directed to meals that are positively remembered not because they took place during a special occasion where the meal takes place for a specific memorable reason, but rather for the meal situation itself and the contextual factors intervening. The experimental procedures are described next.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants (United Kingdom residents), who took part in either Study 1, 2 or 3, were registered on a database maintained by a market research agency (OnePoll, UK) and completed the online survey from a private location. The only inclusion criterion was that respondents ate dinner at home most weekdays; thus, the vast majority of people were eligible. Varying age, gender, household compositions, income levels, educational attainment, etc. were represented (Table 1). The data of respondents were discarded if they completed the questionnaire in less than 10 min and if the answers seemed to have been provided randomly or unthoughtfully (i.e., rating all items from a battery of questions with the same score). The data from 472 respondents (out of 500) were considered in Study 1; while the data from 399 respondents (out of 400) were considered in Study 2; and 487 (out of 500) respondents were considered in Study 3.

### 2.2. Study 1 questionnaire

In Study 1, to address the first research question (RQ1: What emotions do people associate with memorable meals and how do these emotions differ from those associated with routine evening meals?),

**Table 1**

Summary of the demographic information, and emotion-related personal traits, of the respondents in the three studies.

Variable	Categories	% Study 1	% Study 2	% Study 3
Total (n)	–	472	399	487
Gender	Female	53	52	59
	Male	47	48	41
Age group	Younger (19–34 y.o.)	33	33	33
	Middle (35–49 y.o.)	33	33	39
	Older (50–70 y.o.)	34	34	28
	Single	17	21	16
Marital status	Married	61	60	61
	Living with partner	17	16	17
	Divorced/separated	4	4	5
	Widowed	1	0	1
Number of people living in the household (excluding the respondent)	0	6	6	3
	1	22	17	20
	2	28	30	24
	3	24	23	26
	4 or more	20	28	27
Household gross annual income	£20–60,000	79	82	77
	£60–100,000	16	14	17
	£100,000+	5	4	6
Emotion Intensity Scale group – positive	Low: 2.1–3.2; M = 3 (0.2) <sup>a</sup>	27	31	
	Med.: 3.3–3.7; M = 3.5 (0.1) <sup>b</sup>	37	36	
	High: 3.8–5; M = 4 (0.2) <sup>c</sup>	36	33	
Emotion Intensity Scale group – negative	Low: 1.3–2.9; M = 2.4 (0.4) <sup>a</sup>	35	35	
	Med.: 3–3.4; M = 3.1 (0.1) <sup>b</sup>	33	30	
	High: 3.5–5; M = 3.9 (0.4) <sup>c</sup>	32	36	
Private Body Consciousness	Low: 1.2–3.1; M = 2.7 (0.4) <sup>a</sup>	33		
	Med.: 3.2–3.8; M = 3.5 (0.2) <sup>b</sup>	31		
	High: 3.9–5; M = 4.2 (0.3) <sup>c</sup>	36		

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

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