

College Students' Perceived Differences Between the Terms *Real Meal*, *Meal*, and *Snack*

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess qualitatively and quantitatively college students' perceived differences between a real meal, meal, and snack.

Design: A descriptive study design was used to administer an 11-item online survey to college students.

Setting: Two university campuses in the western US.

Participants: Pilot testing was conducted with 20 students. The final survey was completed by 628 ethnically diverse students.

Main Outcome Measures: Students' perceptions of the terms *real meal*, *meal*, and *snack*.

Analysis: Three researchers coded the data independently, reconciled differences via conference calls, and agreed on a final coding scheme. Data were reevaluated based on the coding scheme. Means, frequencies, Pearson chi-square, and *t* test statistics were used.

Results: More than half of students perceived a difference between the terms *real meal* and *meal*. Most (97.6%) perceived a difference between the terms *meal* and *snack*. A marked difference in the way students defined these terms was evident, with a *real meal* deemed nutritious and healthy and meeting dietary recommendations, compared with meals, which were considered anything to eat.

Conclusions and Implications: These findings suggest that the term *real meal* may provide nutrition educators with a simple phrase to use in educational campaigns to promote healthful food intake among college students.

Key Words: college students, meal, snacks, nutrition survey, qualitative (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2016; ■:1-8.)

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INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood is a life stage marked by increased independence and decision making and a period in which long-term health behavior patterns are established.¹ During the transition from adolescence to adulthood, changes in dietary intake and other health-related behaviors may lead to decreased diet quality and increased weight, which makes young adults an important

target for nutrition education interventions.²⁻⁷ Previous studies showed that the dietary habits of young adults need improvement, because many do not adhere to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and fall short of the recommendations for essential nutrients, perhaps with detrimental effects on long-term health.^{4,5,8} Because habits developed during this time of life may persist into adulthood and have lasting consequences, health professionals

must work to influence the practices of young adults positively.

In promoting health behavior change in young adults, it is important to determine the ways in which this group understands terms and concepts that may be presented in nutrition education interventions. Interventions that effectively target young adults using vocabulary appropriate to this audience were shown to influence behavior and led to more healthful choices.⁹ Previous research suggested that college students differentiate between the terms *real meal* and *meal*, with *real meal* described as being more nutritious, more psychologically satisfying, more filling, including more food groups, and being prepared with more thought and effort (L. B. Brown, unpublished data, 2010 and 2011). To the authors' knowledge, only 1 other study revealed a similar definition of *real meal*.¹⁰ The authors of that qualitative study in an urban Finnish city found that consumption of a single food, a small amount of food, or a meal missing specific foods was not considered by subjects to be a

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real meal.¹⁰ Prättälä et al¹⁰ noted that subjects considered real meals to be eating occasions that specifically included social interactions rather than eating meals in isolation. This concept of social interactions constituting real meals was described by Sobal¹¹ and Sobal and Nelson.¹²

The authors' earlier work with college students (L. B. Brown, unpublished data, 2010 and 2011) provided a much broader definition of real meals than the work by Prättälä¹⁰ and Sobal¹¹ and Sobal and Nelson.¹² This previous work indicated that college students equated real meals with healthfulness, which might be useful in health promotion campaigns addressing college students' poor dietary habits (L. B. Brown, unpublished data, 2010 and 2011). However, this research was reported as preliminary findings and was limited to convenience samples of students enrolled in introductory and intermediate nutrition courses at 1 university, which limited the ability to determine whether these terms were commonly used and similarly defined by a wide range of college students. Thus, the current study's purpose was to determine perceived differences among *real meals*, *meals*, and *snacks* among an academically (not limited to nutrition-related majors) and ethnically diverse sample of college students at 2 western US universities. The authors anticipated that the findings from the current study might provide nutrition educators with useful terminology to promote healthful eating patterns among college students.

METHODS

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study were undergraduate students at 2 universities in the western US. University A is The University of Hawai'i at Manoa, a public university with approximately 19,000 students, 36% of whom were Asian, 23% were Caucasian, 17% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 14% were multiracial, and a smaller number were other races.¹³ Females made up 57% of the student body.¹³ University B is Brigham Young University, a private university with approximately 33,000 students, 83% of whom were Caucasian/white, 6% were Hispanic, 5% were unknown/other, 4% were multiethnic, 3% were Asian/Pacific Islander,

and <1% each were black and Native American.¹⁴ Females made up 47% of the student body.¹⁴ For the pilot study (phase 1) conducted between May and July, 2014, a convenience sample of 20 students (university A, n = 10; university B, n = 10) was recruited via an e-mail sent through department listservs to food science, dietetics, and nutrition students, who were asked to share the e-mail with roommates or friends in other departments. At university A, 7 students were from majors in the same college as nutrition, dietetics, and food science students, and 3 were from majors in other colleges. At university B, 3 students were food science, dietetics, or nutrition majors, and 7 were from outside these majors. The e-mail message stated that the research team was seeking feedback on survey items about how college students describe eating occasions. For phase 2, 628 undergraduate students (university A, n = 287; university B, n = 341) completed the survey between October and December, 2014. Students were recruited by randomly selecting 15 courses with more than 30 students enrolled from each college across each campus, and e-mailing the instructors with the request to forward the recruitment e-mail to all students in their courses. The Institutional Review Boards at The University of Hawai'i at Manoa and Brigham Young University approved the study protocol before recruitment.

Procedures

The [Figure](#) summarizes the research procedures.

Survey creation. All authors participated in creating survey items using online survey software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). The survey consisted of 11 items (4 open-ended and 7 close-ended questions) developed based on an existing survey (L. B. Brown, unpublished data, 2010 and 2011). It included questions about students' familiarity with the term *real meal*, perceived differences among the terms *real meal*, *meal*, and *snack*, and demographic characteristics.

Phase 1. Before progressing to the actual survey, students completed an online consent form. To obtain feedback on the survey questions, 14 students (university A, n = 7; university

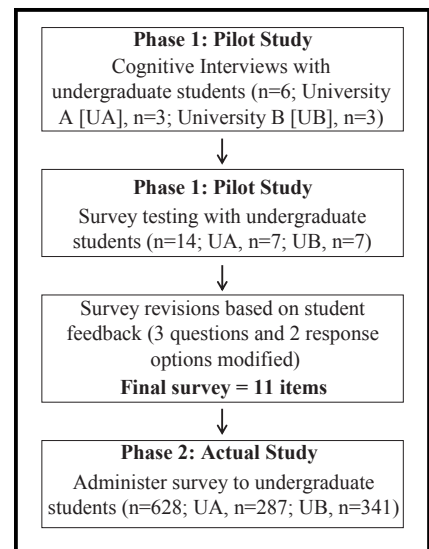


Figure. Flowchart outlining the research procedures.

B, n = 7) were asked to take the survey and comment on question clarity. A separate set of 6 students (university A, n = 3; university B, n = 3) were asked to participate in cognitive interviews, which provided more in-depth question analysis. Cognitive interviewing allows the researcher to determine whether people from the target population understand items as intended.¹⁵ In interviews, researchers trained in qualitative techniques asked students to respond to each question and then describe what each item meant to them and offer suggestions for modifying items for clarity.¹⁵ Specific questions posed included, Can you think of a better way to ask this question to make it clearer for another college student? and Are there any words in the question that other college students may find confusing? Field notes were taken during all interviews performed in the pilot study. Students who offered general feedback on the survey were sent a \$2 Amazon mp3 download gift card as compensation for their time; those who participated in cognitive interviews were sent a \$5 card. The survey was modified in response to participant suggestions before phase 2. Specifically, 3 questions and response options for 2 questions were modified for clarity. For example, the question, What is your current age in years? was changed to How old are you (in years)?

Phase 2. Students completed an informed consent form before proceeding

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