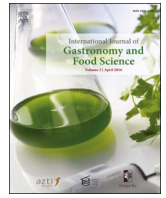




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Review Article

Comfort food: A review

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ABSTRACT

Everyone has heard of comfort foods, but what exactly are they, and what influence, if any, do they actually have over our mood? In this review, I summarize the literature on this important topic, highlighting the role that comfort foods play in alleviating loneliness by priming positive thoughts of previous social interactions, at least amongst those who are securely attached. The evidence concerning individual differences in the kinds of food that are likely to constitute comfort food for different sections of the population is also highlighted. Intriguingly, while most people believe that comfort foods elevate their mood, robust empirical findings in support of such claims are somewhat harder to come by. Such results have led to some influential headlines suggesting that the very notion of comfort food is nothing more than a myth. While this may be overstating matters somewhat, it is clear that many uncertainties still surround if, when, and for whom, the consumption of comfort food really does provide some sort of psychological benefit. This represents something of a challenge for all those marketers out there waiting to associate their products with the appealing notion of comfort food.

What is comfort food?

The term *comfort food* refers to those foods whose consumption provides consolation or a feeling of well-being. Foods, in other words, that offer some sort of psychological, specifically emotional, comfort.¹ It is often suggested that comfort foods have a high calorie content (that they are high in sugar and/or carbohydrates; e.g., Fearnley-Whittingstall, 2012; Wagner et al., 2014),² and that they tend to be associated with childhood and/or home cooking. Indeed, comfort foods are often prepared in a simple or traditional style and may have a nostalgic or sentimental appeal, perhaps reminding us of home, family, and/or friends (Locher et al., 2005).³ Nostalgia being an important aspect of many celebratory meals such as Thanksgiving in The States (Goldstein, 2016; Hirsch, 1992; Spence, 2017; Sutton, 2001; Tweedy, 2015).

Comfort foods tend to be the favourite foods from one's childhood, or else linked to a specific person, place or time with which the food has a positive association, as in: "Grandma always made the best mashed potatoes and gravy, they've become a comfort food for me."⁴ Or "We always got ice cream after we won at football as kids." (see London, 2015; Wansink and Sangerman, 2000). The suggestion is that those who are alone tend to eat more comfort foods than those who are not.

According to the results of one recent North American survey, the majority (81%) of those asked either agreed, or else strongly agreed, that eating their preferred comfort food would make them feel better (see Wagner et al., 2014). On the downside, though, many females, when questioned, report that consuming comfort food results in their feeling less healthy as well as quite possibly guilty (Dubé et al., 2005; Kandiah et al., 2006; though see also Adriaanse et al., 2016).

Although the Oxford English Dictionary traces the origins of the term comfort food back to a 1977 article that appeared in *The Washington Post*, Cari Romm (2015) recently suggested that: "The phrase 'comfort food' has been around at least as early as 1966, when the *Palm Beach Post* used it in a story on obesity: 'Adults, when under severe emotional stress, turn to what could be called 'comfort food'—food associated with the security of childhood, like mother's poached egg or famous chicken soup'." Given that regular (healthy) eating also results in a feeling of well-being, it is perhaps important here to distinguish what is special about comfort eating. The latter would seem to be different in terms of its emotional/affective associations and/or perhaps also the relatively narrow range of foods that are involved.

These days, there is growing interest in the therapeutic use of comfort foods for those older patients who may well not be consuming enough to maintain their health and/or quality of life (e.g., Stein, 2008;

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¹ Or as Geneen Roth put it in Hughes and Hughes (2007): "When people turn to food and they're not physically hungry, it means that they're using food for something else besides satisfying the needs of the body. They're using it for a different kind of hunger—an emotional hunger, a psychological hunger, or a spiritual hunger."

² Though, as we will see later, this assertion is certainly not, in fact, always correct. As Shira Gabriel, one of the researchers in the area puts it recently: "to equate 'comfort food' with 'caloric' is to misunderstand where the comfort actually comes from." (cited in Romm, 2015).

³ Neither nouvelle cuisine nor modernist cuisine would likely qualify as comfort food.

⁴ Meatloaf and mashed potato, the comfort food that comes to many people's minds (e.g., see Freedman, 2016, p. 77; Rufus, 2011).

Wood and Vogen, 1998; see also Spence, 2017, for a review). In this group, comfort foods can also serve an important role in terms of triggering nostalgia. Given the above, it should come as little surprise, to find that many of the food companies are interested in trying to engineer new “comfort foods” (e.g., Stein, 2008). However, the relatively idiosyncratic way in which foodstuffs take on their role as comfort foods means that it is probably going to be quite a challenge for the food companies to achieve this goal (see Wansink and Sangerman, 2000). That said, restaurateurs have certainly been known to put more comfort foods on the menu (e.g., Mac-and-cheese) when times are hard (Rufus, 2011; Stein, 2008). NASA, too, have become interested in the topic (see Hoffman, 2014), given the planned space mission to Mars. Comfort food probably being just what the astronauts will likely need on their undoubtedly stressful ultra-long-haul flights.

Where do our comfort food preferences come from?

Given that many comfort foods are associated with what our parents or grandparents may have given us to eat when we were ill as children,⁵ there tends to be a lot of variation across both individuals and cultures in terms of the foods that people think of as comforting (e.g., see Brown, 2016; Doré, 2015; Telegraph Food, 2015; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comfort_food for a list of comfort foods by country). That said, chicken soup often comes top-of-mind (e.g., coming in 1st place, and mentioned by 44% of the respondents in one study of older North Americans born between 1897 and 1949; Wood and Vogen, 1998; see also Troisi and Gabriel, 2011; Wansink and Sangerman, 2000).⁶

According to a survey of more than 1,000 North Americans reported by Brian Wansink and Cynthia Sangerman (2000), the top comfort foods were potato chips (24%), ice cream (14%), cookies (12%), pizza and pasta (11%), beef/steak burgers (9%), fruits/vegetables (7%), soup (4%), and other (9%). Intriguingly, however, these averages hide some striking gender differences. When asked to agree or disagree on whether particular foods were comfort foods to them, the top choices amongst females were ice cream (74%), chocolate (69%), and cookies (66%). By contrast, the top three comfort foods for men were ice cream (77%), soup (73%), and pizza/pasta (72%). Notice the place of hot main meals as comfort food for men, or as one newspaper headline put it: “*Women like sugar, men like meat*” (see Anon., 2005).

Importantly, it was not just the foods that differed by gender, differences were also identified in those situations that were likely to elicit comfort eating (see Wansink, Cheney, & Chan, 2003). Based on the results of a web-based survey of 277 participants (196 female and 81 male), loneliness, depression, and guilt were all found to be key drivers of comfort eating for women, whereas the men questioned typically reported that they ate comfort food as a reward for success (e.g., when they were feeling upbeat; see also Dubé et al., 2005). So, while the clichéd view may well be that people reach for comfort food when their mood is low, the evidence reported by Wansink and Sangerman (2000) suggests instead that comfort foods are consumed when people find themselves in a jubilant mood (86%), or else when they want to celebrate or reward themselves for something (74%). Only 39% of those questioned in this study chose to eat comfort foods when they had the blues or were feeling lonely (see Cardi et al., 2015, for a recent review).

Wansink and Sangerman (2000) also identified some interesting differences in what constitutes comfort food amongst the different age groups they polled: So, for example, while 18–34 year-olds preferred ice cream (77%) and cookies (70%), those aged 35–54 preferred soup (68%) and pasta (67%), and those aged 55 and over tended to prefer

soup (76%) and mashed potatoes (74%) instead. Wansink et al. (2003) also found that older people were more likely to report positive emotions after having eaten their favourite comfort food (than were women and younger adults). Here it is perhaps worth adding that people tend to remember/focus more on positive emotions/situations as they age (see Addis et al., 2010). But, in all cases, it was the past associations that an individual had with the foods that turned out to be key!

What exactly makes a comfort food comforting?

Here, the question is whether there are any specific sensory cues can be identified that are especially strongly associated with those foods that are typically considered as comfort foods? Are there particular tastes, textures, smells, etc., for instance, that tend to be overrepresented in the most commonly-mentioned comfort foods? Now, as we have just seen, the fact that *different* people identify *different* foods as comforting hints at the difficulty of identifying any common feature(s) across such a disparate range of foodstuffs. And while it may be true to say that many comfort foods are calorie dense that is certainly not always the case.

So, does one sense dominate over the others as far as comfort foods are concerned? Well, a large body of psychological research has shown that we are, generally-speaking, visually-dominant creatures (e.g., Posner et al., 1976; Spence et al., 2001). That is, no matter whether we want to know what something is, or where it is located, it is the input from our eyes that dominates over that from the other senses (e.g., hearing, touch, taste, and smell). It is also clear from the many studies that have been conducted over recent years that the visual appearance of food is very important to us. Indeed, as the Roman gourmand Apicius (1936) once put it: “*We eat first with our eyes.*” (see also Spence et al., 2016). So, the natural question to ask here is whether visual cues also dominate when it comes to defining those foods that we consider as comforting? I would, however, wish to argue that the answer is probably not. (Though, that said, I do struggle to identify any green comfort foods.)

One might also think that comfort food ought not to make any noise. Or, as Rufus (2011) put it: “*My comfort food must never draw attention to itself.*” However, the fact that potato chips came top of Wansink and Sangerman’s (2000) survey of comfort foods would seem to nix that idea, as the latter are amongst the noisiest of foods (see Spence, 2015, for a review). That said, across the whole range of comfort foods, I would dare to suggest that noisy foods are perhaps underrepresented as compared to what one might expect, if one had people list, say, their most preferred foods. The latter would, I guess, on average, make more noise when consumed.

Instead, in order to understand what, if anything, is special about comfort foods, one really needs to consider the role of the more emotional senses (specifically, touch, smell, and taste). In fact, it can be argued that what is common about those foods that we come to think of as comforting relates to their oral-somatosensory qualities; that is, what they feel like in the mouth (see Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman, 2016, for a review). As Rufus (2011) puts it: “*most of us are soothed by the soft, sweet, smooth, salty and unctuous.*” Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman note that comfort foods typically have a soft texture (just think, for instance, of mashed potatoes, apple sauce, and many puddings). Dornenburg and Page (1996, p. 31) suggest that those foods having this texture are seen as both comforting and nurturing.⁷ Social psychologists have reported that warmth in the hand makes other people seem warmer – that is, there appears to be a link between physical and social warmth (Williams and Bargh, 2008). As such, one

⁵ See also Birch et al. (1980) for the early development of food preferences based on their having been paired with parental attention.

⁶ Toast (33%) and milk toast (29%) were up there in 2nd and 3rd places, respectively.

⁷ In fact, more generally, it turns out that touch is an especially good sense for conveying emotional well-being – be it the warmth and pressure of a cuddle from a caregiver, or the satisfaction of a massage or hot bath (see Gallace and Spence, 2014, for a review).

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